

## Using digital storytelling to build new audiences for theatre

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Digital marketing is imperative in attracting a young audience.

Children are natural early-adopters of digital technology. When running an arts centre for children and families, we need to be speaking the same language as the digital natives we are serving. If we play it right, we can use digital technology to reach new audiences that we wouldn't otherwise reach. The key is embedding digital creative activity right through a project, like a stick of rock.

In December 2015 Manchester's specialist venue for contemporary family arts, **Z-arts** staged the UK premiere of a multi-venue co-production of **Hans Christian Andersen's SNOW QUEEN** as part of our long-term mission to use theatre and digital arts to reflect and cater for the diverse 21st century family.

Making storytelling relevant to young people and their families living in the modern world, audiences are the driving force behind all work produced at our family-focused venue. So how did young people relate to a story of make-believe, written in 1844? Through consultation with children and young people, we ended up with a version of *Snow Queen* that fast forwards nearly two centuries to reside in a world of online viruses, interactive gaming and social

media identities. The design was influenced by gaming technology, using projection mapping animation for the actors and puppets to interact with. Merging live performance with digital augmented reality, the two worlds of everyday city living and the magical land of the Snow Queen were brought together, using distinct landscapes. The digital landscape of the Snow Queen was also used to create an interactive online world where potential audience members could engage with the characters and influence their journeys in the months leading up to the performance.

Supported by the BBC Performing Arts Fellowship, we worked with Emma Hill, a digital storyteller to help bring the characters to life on digital platforms. Their role was to respond to online audience interactions, as the characters in the play. They were to use a variety of social media tools, proactively building the characters' profiles across platforms and sharing links, commenting on current topics and posts about the characters' lives.

Our audience figures show that the majority of our adult audiences are female, and our online audiences are male. We decided to use the fellowship to turn online audiences into actual audiences by creating trans-media stories to lure non-theatre-goers into the theatre; linking the onstage and online stories together.

This online world of stories was attached to the onstage play, with the intention that they would be visible on the Z-arts website as a landing site, and also be seen on other platforms including facebook, twitter, snapchat, instagram, whatsapp etc.

It was really important to me to create a piece of work that had digital creativity at its heart. I wanted a world that modern children could relate to – hence the gaming references. But it wasn't enough to just have those references in the script. They had to pervade through the whole process. That's why we worked with projection mapping animators to create the online world, as well as with a digital storyteller to make sure that there were ways before, during and after that audiences could engage with the work in the comfort of their own homes.

Families had the opportunity to flex their creative muscles, working with animators to draw up scenery for the show. We used a programme called hexels to create the digital content in the show, providing a similar effect to the game Minecraft. We obtained free keys for 15 schools to use this programme to enable children can create their own snowflakes in hexels and send them in for use in the show. This was also made available for families to use, and we ran hexels workshops to create content at our Family Fun Day.

After they had been into the world of the Snow Queen and settled back at home, families and schools were emailed a 'Zed Talk' from Gerda, reflecting on her journey and the important lessons she identified en route. They were also given a pack on how to make their own Zed talk, and encouraged to upload it to the website.

Family audiences nowadays expect much more than passively sitting and watching a performance. They want to be involved. We wanted to merge the

twenty-first century world that children recognise with a fairytale world, and give families the chance to join in.

In actuality the pre-show storytelling that was planned to work across youtube and other sites, to encourage online audiences to start to engage with the characters long before being invited to come and see them on stage, was less easy to implement. We realised that we needed to have made the show, and developed the characters for the stage, before then creating a back story which could be posted online. In the end, we had more success with the post-show Zed talk element, but what we learned about using digital storytelling to attract new audiences was invaluable.

**Creation of digital content needs to be aligned with the timeframe of the main body of creative content, with all artists collaborating throughout the process. Pre-digital storytelling is hard to achieve, unless it is brought in right from the beginning of an r&d process.**

An additional way of engaging audiences through digital technology presented itself as the project developed. Reflecting the diversity of modern family life in theatre for families is always really important to me. I liked the fact that the two protagonists, Gerda and Kai were both from adopted or foster families. I wanted to be able show looked-after children in the audience people on stage who they could relate to. So we set up a crowdfunder campaign to raise the funds to offer every looked-after child in Manchester free tickets. The campaign was supported by a youtube film which was broadcast online through social media, our website, partner websites and the Just Giving page. This also acted as an advertisement for the show.

We ended up with enough funds, and enough requests to give 356 tickets out to looked-after children and their carers. 76% of our audiences were first time bookers, with 39% never having attended theatre before. The total audience reached via Z-arts' social media channels was 13,326 – a 15% increase from the March baseline.

Lastly, we broadcast the full production on That's Manchester TV on Boxing Day. As a shared internet channel, we don't know the numbers we reached but what I can be almost certain of is that they were new audiences.

- Z-arts Snow Queen:  
<http://www.z-arts.org/snow-queen-a-digital-christmas-story/>
- Digital Storytelling case study:  
<https://emmahillwrites.com/digitalstorytelling/>
- Gerda Zed Talk:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCiAURvIHNQ&feature=youtu.be>