

Ship takes shape

Sean Davidson looks at a Canadian production outfit whose distinct vision is making waves in children's television.



Anne's Droids

Some broadcasters were not immediately sold on Anne's Droids. They liked the droids part – the robots, the junkyard setting, the science, explosions and stunts – but wouldn't the show work better, they asked, if the lead character was a boy? Don't robots skew boy-ish not girly?

The creative team at Canada's Sinking Ship Entertainment politely disagreed, though when they retell it these days the story gets peppered with a few cuss words.

"That is a shitty attitude that needs to be destroyed," says JJ Johnson, from his desk at the Toronto production shop, which also makes series including *The Roll Play*, *The Jungle Room* and the recently revived *This is...* franchise. Johnson scoffs at the theory that kids' shows should favour boys and rattles off research about the under- and mis-representation of girls, particularly in animation.

Johnson and his partners Blair Powers and Matt Bishop stuck to their guns, partly because their 50-strong firm has a light development slate and can't easily turn its back on projects. "Each show has a few things we hold fast to," he says. On *Anne*, which made its debut at Mipcom in October via Picture Box Distribution, it was having a girl who learns about science while building robots in her family's junkyard.

The CGI/live-action series is set to be shot in 2013 and has been taken by SVT in Sweden and TVO and Knowledge Network in Canada. A major over-the-top outlet in the US is also close to signing.

Sinking Ship has a history of taking risks and convincing broadcasters to do the same. Many wanted the dinosaurs on its hit *Dino Dan* to talk and perhaps be less terrifying. But by the time it aired on networks such as TVO and Nick Jr in the US the CGI creatures still uttered nothing more than bone-rattling roars. Johnson and company backed up their argument with informal research. They'd asked kids what they liked ("Dinosaurs!") and why ("Because they're scary!").

Those dinosaurs are also a key ingredient in the company's broader strategy, both online and in stores. Given its size and relative youth, Sinking Ship is notable among Canuck companies for its merchandising and digital presence. Its latest app is an experiment with augmented reality and ties into the *Dino Dan* DVDs. Run the app, point the iPad's camera at the DVD case and a dinosaur appears on the screen over

video of the real world. Tap the screen and the Tyrannosaurus Rex turns and roars in that direction. “If I were a kid and I saw that my nose would bleed,” says Johnson.



JJ Johnson, Blair Powers and Matt Bishop

The app, which recognises the packaging on the DVD, delivers on Dino’s premise of putting dinosaurs in the real world, he notes.

Given the chance and an extra million dollars or so, he’d put it all into an augmented reality app/series. “When I see that,” he points to the T-Rex, “I see the future. It makes something that was a story into something that happens right in front of you, and takes something from the screen to something that’s in the room with you. It’s incredible. And it’s such an interesting way to tell a story.”

Producers and broadcasters of kids’ programming would do well to give their audience more credit if they want to stop losing viewers to reality shows and primetime drama, he says. “Kids have a wicked aesthetic. That’s why they’re watching shows meant for people 10 years older. It’s because we’re not hitting them intellectually and we’re not providing something that matches the aesthetic they’re seeing in older programming,” he adds.

Sinking Ship keeps its business close to home. It has coproduced only one show, This is Daniel Cook, with Marblemedia, and that had much to do with the fact Ship’s Matt Bishop and Marble’s Mark Bishop are brothers.

The company’s emphasis on creative control makes it wary of copros, but the team is starting to look abroad, assessing possible territories where its shows have sold well in case it ever needs extra financing.



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