

Discours de Jeremy Ettinghausen - Digital Publisher, Penguin Books

Hello - my name is Jeremy Ettinghausen and for four years I've held what I think is probably one of the best jobs in the entire publishing industry, Digital Publisher at Penguin Books.

Why is this such a good job? Well, Penguin is a company with innovation in its DNA, founded in 1935 by Sir Allen Lane whose business was built around the sale of 'intelligent books at everyday prices' and he achieved this by marrying sound editorial judgement and progressive marketing with mass-market pricing.

So, historically, Penguin is a company that likes to take risks both in what and how it publishes and for the last few years I've been encouraged to push the envelope when it comes to digital publishing. For a big corporate publisher, Penguin has been very indulgent of ideas which sit outside regular business as usual and push the company, our authors and their readers in new directions.

So what follows is not a manifesto for digital publishing but a quick run through of some of the projects that have pushed the boat out for Penguin in recent years and some of the learnings we have taken from our experiences.

But first I wanted to spend a couple of minutes talking about why Penguin was so committed to innovation - while it is tempting to innovate for the sake of it we do believe that there are fundamental short, medium and long-term imperatives for us to be boldly going forth. I'm aware that some of the things I talk about now might not apply so directly to the French book market but believe that as digital mentality becomes a global mindset then the same challenges will face content producers the world over, not just in the UK or US.

I expected to hear an intake of breath at my use of the words 'content producers' there - and my popularity in our London office drops every time I use this phrase. We are a company made up of bibliophiles, though I am not sure whether this picture shows anyone on our editorial teams. Ironically, and perhaps a little depressingly, I found the photo on a site about obsolete technologies. With double irony, this blog has now been picked up and published in old-fashioned, not-yet-obsolete book form.

But every day it seems to be clearer that books are part of a broader entertainment and information mix and since I've been digital publisher I've been arguing that our competitors are not just other book publishers, but anyone who can reasonably claim a share of people's online or leisure time. This chart comes from Katie Salen who is a game designer and educator - she recently launched a school in New York teaching through game play and game design - and it shows everything that competes for a child's attention and time. You can see that while Harry Potter fan fiction plays a prominent role (highlighting the importance of creating rather than consuming), actual reading time outside school is pretty limited.

Today then we see our competition as Playstation and Wii, Facebook and Youtube, the BBC's iplayer and Spotify as well as the traditional leisure time activities of cinema visits, TV viewing and even reading books from other publishers. Traditional retailers of books also now carry non-book merchandise including DVDs, music and even video games. Our biggest customer, Amazon, makes the majority of its sales from non-book product. So we need to continually innovate in the design of our core product, the printed book, and innovate online to ensure that Penguin, our authors and the very activity of reading remains part of the entertainment mix of the 21st century digital consumer.

So at Penguin we do like to place our flag on the digital map, but more than this we urgently feel that we need to develop the skills, the contacts, the experience and, importantly, the network which

will enable us to continue to publish as effectively as possible across digital media. We want to be a brand not just synonymous with quality print publishing, but relevant, admired and, importantly, profitable across digital channels also and to achieve these goals we have been experimenting, testing and learning.

So the first experiment I want to talk to you about is A Million Penguins, the brave, stupid and doomed attempt to crowdsource a novel. We launched this after creating a competition called Penguin Remixed where we had invited musicians and disc jockeys to use samples of Penguin audiobooks to create original compositions. Despite the punishment of having to spend a summer listening to bad techno music the competition was a success and Penguin received accolades for being a copyright-holder and letting 'the people' play with the content it controlled. We think a lot about user generated content, but know that one of the remaining propositions we possess in the digital supply chain is that the Penguin logo bestows a mark of quality, so while crowdsourcing and UGC are interesting to us, we do feel that the only way we can legitimise and experiment with it is a little discreetly, outside our usual websites, imprints or channels.

So with a budget of £1500 and some help from students studying creative writing and new media at De Montfort University we launched a million penguins with the stated intention of discovering whether a community could write a novel together. And what did we discover? They can't. But they did try, oh how they tried. Within 24 hours of launching the site we were getting fifty database hits a second leading to the server exploding on us and over the course of 5 weeks 1700 people made over 11,000 edits and created a noodle soup of a 55,000 word novel. It transformed completely several times during this period. Characters, plotlines, even entire genres appeared, morphed and disappeared, sometimes to reappear, sometimes to vanish forever. I think our Chief Executive accurately described the wikinovel as not the most read, but the most written novel in history.

I'm not going to talk through the wikinovel in any great detail - the story is preserved in it's multiple entities for anyone who can bear to read through it, but I did want to show you the infamous Banana version of the story. About 3 weeks into the project we saw that someone was painstakingly going through the wikinovel and inserting references to bananas in the text. These were not random insertions - someone was very carefully and contextually banana-izing the novel. So in the spirit of openness and transparency we asked the community what we should do about bananaman - whether he was an artist, a terrorist or indeed an art terrorist. And it turned out we didn't need to worry - the community took care of bananaman, creating a clone of the novel where he could fruitify the novel to his hearts' content.

So what did we learn from this. We learnt that there are thousands of people there who want to write and some of them can even spell. We learnt that the narrative form is perhaps best left in the hands of a solo artist - though I do believe that given the right constraints a community can plausibly create a novel. Perhaps we learnt more about the internet than we did about writing - in the words of the Penguin editor tasked with publicly reviewing 'the novel' we learnt that 'a bunch of strangers with both nothing to lose and nothing to gain worked toward a nebulous common goal'. But I guess the major contribution we took from the wikinovel is one that we can share with everyone else in the publishing community - it's been done and nobody has to do it again.

We also learnt that Penguin has a brand that is extendable into the digital space and that the audience for the brand appreciated our enthusiasm for experimentation, our willingness to participate in the conversations about new media and our admission that we didn't have all the answers. And this is something common to all of the projects that I've been involved in - we have often described them as experiments - this is partly in recognition that there is plenty that could go wrong, but also because we use these projects to learn and develop our digital skills.

This brings me onto We Tell Stories which was our attempt to learn about gaming, gamers and interactive fiction. Just over two years ago I spoke at a marketing conference about some of the brand work we had been doing at Penguin. I was then blown off the stage by a chap called Dan Hon who introduced the audience to ARGs, alternate reality games which are basically interactive stories that operate across media and across platforms. The blur the lines between audience and

storyteller and immerse the audience by placing pieces of the story in emails, mobile phone text messages, blogs and often in real life locations. Audiences frequently collaborate to progress the story together - in the example that Dan Hon gave five members of the reader community wrote a 75,000 word novel which they self-published in order to gain access to a private library where a clue was hidden.

Sitting in the audience listening to Dan talk about the degree of involvement that players/readers of his story exhibited was a real eye-opener for me - how wonderful I thought it would be to have people so involved in the stories that we publish. And so we began talking to Dan and his brother Adrian about producing a project for Penguin, a project which became We Tell Stories.

I think it's fair to say that the eventual project we launched in March 2008 was both more and less than an ARG. There was an ARG built into it - a seventh story that could be accessed by clicking on the rabbit on the homepage - and clues to this ARG were buried throughout the other 6 stories, but really the project showcased new techniques of digital fiction. Over 6 weeks 6 Penguin authors produced, with the team at six to start, six different pieces of web-native fiction, each using different technologies and user experiences.

I'm not going to go through the details of the six stories individually - there's one that was told on blogs and twitter, one that used infographics to retell Charles' Dickens Hard Times, one that was written live so that the audience could see the words appear as the authors typed them. There was a story that could be customized by the user and a really elegant variation on the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure genre.

The first story, and the one that to this day gets by far the most traffic and discussion, was Charles Cummings the 21 steps. Told exclusively on Google Maps the reader could follow the character as he travelled around London, the UK and indeed the world. This was fiction on the move, bringing stories to a platform that web-users are becoming increasingly familiar with. More than 200,000 people have viewed some or all of this story which is more than have read all of the authors books combined - far from this upsetting him Charles is actually thrilled about this - people now know him as 'the google maps' guy and when his phone rings in the middle of the night it's now likely to be Californian or Australian journalists wanting to talk to him about his books, and of course google maps.

One interesting aspect of this particular story was how widely it got picked up on by teachers who saw this as a way of interesting children in storytelling - since the google maps API is free for anyone to use a number of teachers have introduced map-based storytelling into their classrooms and some of the results are on the screen behind me now. Of course the logical extension of this is stories that are location aware - that can only be read in precise GPS coordinates. The rise of GPS built into mobile phones means that this is a very real possibility that I'm personally incredibly excited to explore.

So what we've shown with this project is that Publishers can compete with established digital businesses when it comes to online innovation - indeed a quote that we're fond of trotting out at Penguin comes from a senior executive at ad agency BBH who says that 'Penguin is every bit as innovative as Nike'. And as I said before, we see Nike and xBox as our competitors as well as fellow publishers, so this is a comparison we're pleased to hear. We've learnt that gamers are interested in stories and storytelling and that we can publish and distribute widely in ways that are not ink on paper.

Most of all We Make Stories served our objectives in making made books and authors and penguin and stories relevant and visible in the digital culture. It took us out of the books review pages of the newspapers and into the gaming blogs and this March, a year after launch, it won the Best in Show award at the South by SouthWest Interactive awards, beating submissions by flickr and Hulu amongst others.

We've also learned that one of the best ways of marketing a book and an author is by giving away content that is shareable and conversation worthy - people loved talking about and sharing We

Make Stories and links to it are still, 18 months after launch, being exchanged dozens of times a week. The authors involved had books that were being published at around the time the game was unfolding and each of them received press for their involvement in the story that they wouldn't have received otherwise.

What we didn't discover from We Tell Stories is whether we can make money from this sort of digital publishing. While we are now selling thousands of ebooks each month - We Tell Stories was decidedly a design, technology and marketing initiative. The money from this project came from an innovations fund run by Pearson, Penguin's parent company. They were very pleased with this project and asked what I had up my sleeve next. I started suggesting some ideas that had been rattling around when they stopped me and said the dreaded words, "Jeremy, next time, there has to be a business model."

So we had to go back to the drawing board and develop a project with a business model attached. We Make Stories has been running since July of this year and is very much a live and developing site. Before I show you a short video demonstration of the site I wanted to explain a little bit about our thinking about this project.

Maybe this is not so true of publishers in France (if so, lucky you) but in the UK we spend probably too much time comparing ourselves with the music business trying to anticipate and sidestep the pitfalls that they have experienced over the last ten years. But one thing that the record companies have done more or less successfully is diversified their revenue streams. They are no longer reliant on the sales of recorded music for the bulk of their revenues. Indeed, some assert that sales of music are a loss leader and serve more to promote merchandising, videos, mobile phone ring tones and tours. Perhaps we book publishers are in danger of having all our eggs in one basket - we sell books and that's pretty much all we do.

So we asked ourselves what could we possibly sell if it wasn't books or book-shaped content and the idea we came up with was that we could try selling creativity, or more accurately, a service that actively promoted creativity. In Puffin, we have the number 1 children's publisher in the UK and one of the most trusted brands amongst parents and teachers and so, with a group of different interaction designers we developed We Make Stories which I describe as a storymaking service for children.

So, as you can see there are six tools here for children to use to create different kinds of stories. One of the tools is free for everyone to try - the others require a one-off payment which is equivalent to the price of a paperback children's book. When designing the site we thought a lot about the aesthetics of it and in the main rejected the traditional imagery of children's publishing. We wanted the site to be for children who were probably more confident computer users than storytellers. Children who are growing up gaming, but not necessarily growing up reading and writing. We want to present stories as something that are fun and easy to create because very simply, we believe that storytelling is a necessary component of literacy and our future business as publishers depends on raising a new generation of readers.

So far we've had some nice publicity and reactions to We Make Stories and what's really pleasing is seeing the same children return regularly to the site to create new stories. It's also interesting to see what sort of stories are being created - the gender divide is very apparent here. Boys stories are about heroes and villains and explosions. Girls stories are about love and marriage and babies. Though I am happy to say (and he will hate me if he finds out I am doing this) that my six year old son last week wrote his first love letter using the comic creator.

And this is the exactly the point of We Make Stories - to give children an outlet for creativity. There are lots of sites that allow children to draw or even create little movies, but I couldn't find anything about storytelling and as publishers this is a skill we have developed over decades and a skill that in this new cross-platform world we need to and should be able to sell.

Now I don't know if anyone has been counting, but so far this afternoon I've used the words games nearly as many times as I've used the word books, and I'm about to use it a whole lot more. In editorial meetings at Penguin we spend quite a bit of time looking at film and theatre and television analysing their trends to see if we can predict a publishing opportunity. But there are a few of us who think that we should be looking towards the videogame industry which has come of age in the 21st century. Increasingly videogame producers share the same concerns as a book editor - strong narrative, inspirational characters, even convincing dialogue but the difference is that games provide 21st century media consumers a huge degree of interactivity, immersion and, with the growth of online gaming, a shared experience that cannot be easily replicated by printed books.

Now I am not suggesting for a moment that we abandon paper for the Playstation, but I do think that there are opportunities for us to publish and distribute to gamers through games and in the last couple of months Penguin has both licensed content from a game company to produce a book and licensed content to a game company to produce interactive ebooks for the Nintendo DS. Our novelization of Assassin's Creed II is out in the shops now and next week Electronic Arts will be releasing four book cartridges for the Nintendo DS - two of them containing Puffin authors. For me the exciting thing about this is that we are going to be getting rich full colour ebooks with interactive extras onto devices that millions of children already carry with them - we are bringing books into their digital entertainment mix, not asking them to buy a new device or buy into a new technology.

So the idea we have more to sell than just books, is an idea that I believe at Penguin we are all willing to explore and I expect that over the next year the penguin logo might be seen on a number of digital products that are neither ebooks or audiobooks or in any way book shaped. Over the last 30 minutes I've used the word story many times more than either book or game. Book technology can, I believe, only take us so far - story technology, on the other hand, has a long way still to go.

Thank you & merci