

How Can We Fight The Giants of ACEI?

...In the Time before Time, in a far-away land, there was a Giantess called ACEI. She slept for 200 years, and when she woke, she was very, very hungry...

ACEI's full name is: American Children's Entertainment Industry. Until the very recent time there was not much profit in entertaining the children, but now there is. Listen to what I heard from the man who knew how to make money on cinema: «Grown-ups have only one wallet each, but children have six. It's Daddy's, Mummy's, two Grand-Dad's and two Grand-Ma's». He was actually wrong because some children can also count on the wallets of Step-Dads and Step-Moms and their parents too. That doubles the number, it's 12. «And that's why we are in this business!», the clever man told me.

Our children are growing up in the time of broken families, with their tired, guilt-ridden parents and several sets of consoling grand-parents. Children are shipped back and forth between them, and often there are only a few hours left for the quality-time shared by grown-up and child. We are lucky here in Norway, we can go skiing together. The rest of the world goes to the movies. It's «Family-movies», designed for children, but with snappy dialogs written to catch the grown-ups. They are full of spectacular effects which everybody love. They are made on budgets which are comparable to ours in 200:1 proportion.

...ACEI the Giantess had five giant children: Disney, Paramount, Warner Brothers, Pixar and DreamWorks. Each of them produces one or two Giant Babies a-year: animated feature-films. It's a happy, large, non-stop-growing, and very hungry family. And they all come to live with us, in Norway, in our cinemas. So, we have to learn how to live with them. We are making children's movies too, including animated features, and we want children to see them, because we have something to say to our children. So, we have to fight the Giants for space in the cinemas. The American Children's Entertainment Industry is not the Cosa-Nostra. And it's not an evil, sole-corrupting beast. And there is nothing wrong with their moral values. They are just so much alike each other, and so big, and they take all the space possible. We don't have to kill them, or beat them - WE JUST HAVE TO FIGHT THEM.

The funny thing about fighting the Giants and ACEI is the fact that THEY ARE NOT FIGHTING US. They just do what they do best: selling their movies all over the world. I'm not even sure they know that we exist: in the Giant's vocabulary «Norwegian children-film market» is only a hyphen in the sentence «Scandinavian Children-Film Market». So, it's kind of, small. But for us it's big: it's the only one we have. We are going to fight.

Market-value

Films are competing by two definitions: «Screen-value» and «Marquee-value». Screen-value is about which movie is better. Marquee-value is about: which movie is looking better from the poster and the trailer. Obviously, Screen-value is most important, but it's Marquee-value which is decisive. The fight for the public is not happening on the screens of the film theaters, but outside, in front of the ticket office. By the time the Viewer is placed in his chair in the cinema and prepared to judge the Screen-value of the movie - he has already made his choice: he bought a ticket. The fight for the public is over. The movie which our Viewer is going to see has won. And the other one, which is running next door - has lost the battle.



This is a phenomena of today's cinema-market. There are so many movies made that they don't have too much time on the screen. A movie has to make most of the money during one or two weekends, and this is it, more or less. So, our battle with the Giants has moved away from the screens. It's not the films that are competing, but their Marquee-value.

Marquee-value is not just information about the movie. It is also a STORY TOLD. An exiting and truthful story about a movie that you haven't seen yet. It has to appeal to people's feelings, to create an image of the movie, to awake expectations.

American Children's Entertainment Industry puts most efforts and resourses into the creation of Marquee-value. And this is not only about poster-design or names of the Stars, it's about the story-structure of the movies. A story that can be told in a 30-seconds trailer, but still has an emotional impact on the audience. Famous «three-lines story», the Fairytale structure. Potential Marquee-value is the main criteria for choosing the story, and it's the main aim in the story-development. The most commercially successful movies for grown-ups are Fairytales, like

Lord of the rings,

Star-Wars,

Jurassic Park,

Mummy,

Alien,

Blade, and so on. The stories are the same: bunch of friends (of a family) are fighting against one big Evil Someone, and eventually take him down. Children's Animation features tell the same stories, with the variation that sometimes Friends/Families have to search for something stolen by Evil Someone, or that Evil Someone is not really evil, but just a slightly misguided powerful individual. Animation is a better genre for this kind of stories because it can present violence in a more suitable fashion for children. Not too scary.



Some times those stories are good, sometimes not, but that doesn't matter really. They are all very good for creating great expectations and place viewers in the seats. So, to compete with ACEI-movies let's do the same, shall we? Let's see how the ACEI writers manage to re-tell the same three-line story 100.000 times in 100.000 variations.

Writing scripts

If you read the credits of an ACEI movie (I always do), you will see a lot of writers there. 20-25 people. Imagine the script-writing process; you might picture a big happy family of writers, brainstorming the turns of the story together. But it's not like that. We are watching the list of writers, fired from the production after two months highly paid, intensive work. Disney, for example, have practically no employees, only 2-months contract-workers. After two months the contract is prolonged, or not. Writers are working in two-three man-teams and there are 8-10 teams to be changed before the script is completed. The only one who holds the continuity of the script - is a producer-executive. This system is excellent for creating very fine details on once-and-for-all fixed («locked» - they call it) story. To «unlock» the story you have to go through lots of meetings where up to 50 people have to agree with you.

This is hardly a way for us to go, even if we really want to fight the Giants. We can't do that: make writers to do intensive work on the details of a primitive, but highly Marquee-effective story. Hiring, existing, and firing writers every second month, but keeping them happy anyway with a 60.000 NOK monthly salary.

So, how do we do it then?

A cunning plan

There is a plan. I don't know if it will work, but we will never know unless we try, will we? Since we don't have resources to make movies with high Marquee-value, we have to make movies with high Screen-value. Put simply - better, and more original movies. In order to do that we have to:

Stop making those 3-lines A-4 stories. Because it's boring, and because we don't have enough resources to make it so detail-polished as Americans do. Instead, we have to make more original, unusual scripts for children films. In order to do that we have to:

Support, support and support our Writers. (Norwegian Film Development does it already - great!) Make writers work in teams of two. For example: Writer A wants to write the script. Norwegian Film Development likes the idea, finances the work and plugs in writer B as dramatic adviser. Next time it's writer B who writes the script. So, writer A works for him as dramatic adviser. One is an Author, the other a Script-Doctor.

So, let's say that now the great script is written, we have to make it into a movie. In order to do that we have to:

Make our writers be heard and read by those who make movies: directors and producers. Norwegian Film Development should have monthly publications with synopsis, treatments and inserts from the scripts which are at work, so the filmmakers can follow it up and even make contact with the writer on an early stage of the work. Writers have to understand that no one can steal their ideas, on the contrary - the publications will secure the writer's copyrights of the story.



Now, do we have a good enough financing system? Can we make good enough movies with our tight budgets? Yes, we can (contrary to what people think). It would take me another long article to explain why, but for now you just have to trust me on that. So, the great children's movie is made. Now we have to put it on the screens, where our movie will meet the Giants, and successfully fight them. In order to do that we have to:

To create a special «niche» for national children's films in the national cinemas. Let those films run for a longer time than the usual 2-3 weeks. Make them independent of Marquee-value, but let the «word-of-mouth» work: People who have seen the movie will tell their neighbours, and they will come to see it too.

Our cinema managers tend to run low-cost movies at the most unpopular hours during day-time. Children can't go to the movies alone and the grown-ups are at work. Then we have to get school-classes to go and see National movies - it must be a part of the school-program. Ticket-prizes on National movies have to be reduced or compensated for schools. To have national movies be seen by children must be a question of politics, not only a commercial question.

Other European countries have the same problem as us, they are fighting the same giants. And they do it rather successfully on their national film-market. But those markets are relatively big compared to ours. Low-cost, high-quality children-films are produced in France, Germany, UK, and other European countries. We can see those films on the festivals, but not on our cinemas, because those films are made for national film-markets mostly.

So, let's fight the Giants. If we can't beat them, it will keep us fit at least. We don't have to beat them, just fight them.

...In the Time before Time, in a far-away land, there was a Giantess called ACEI. She slept for 200 years, and when she woke, she was very, very hungry. So, she went to her giant garden, picket up some giant salad, and ate it. But she didn't notice, that there was little Askeladden sleeping between the salad-leaves. So, she swallowed him too.

Askeladden woke up in her stomach and realized that he had been eaten. So, he began to fight: kicking around, shouting, and things like that. Giantess ACEI noticed that something was not right in her stomach, and spit out Askeladden.

When she saw Askeladden, she was most surprised.

«Hay, Askeladden, wassup, man?» - she said.

«You ate me!» - he answered.

«No! Really? Oh, I'm so sorry... Want some tea?»

And they had a nice cup of tea.

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Pjotr Sapegin was born in Russia, and has lived and worked in Norway since 1990. He has produced a number of animated short films which has won many prestigious national and international awards. In March 2005 Sapegin released the animated feature film *Grandpa is a Raisin*.