

Comment on Screen Australia draft program guidelines from Sandy Cameron

I should preface my comments by saying that I am a producer in interactive media, but have also worked within a state funding agency and am familiar with the general issues facing development and production across most screen genres.

Generally, the attempt at streamlining the guidelines, and the strong emphasis across the board on producer-led projects and initiatives is welcome, and has the potential to seriously bolster industrial stocks. However for this potential to be realized they need careful implementation and interpretation and also to formally link in with national strategies with the state funding bodies and Screen Development Agencies or the industry will remain systemically dysfunctional.

ELIGIBILITY, DRAFT BY DRAFT FEATURE DEVELOPMENT: The raising of the bar for experience is fine in principle, with three big caveats. Firstly, it is important that “Experienced Producers” do not necessarily have to take rights in the projects of “Less Experienced” applicants for their submissions to be eligible. Secondly, the definition of “Experienced Producers” should further specify the definition of “exceptional credits in other areas”. Does this include shorts film credits that have won prizes in Cannes, Venice, or Berlin or is official selection enough? Can a certain amount of hours of prime time documentary broadcast gain you eligibility and if so how many? Thirdly, this bar-raising will only work if the state agencies ramp up their focus in their respective Drama strategies on talented practitioners without feature credits and to significantly increase all of their short film funds. This requires a lengthy exercise in inter-agency agreement and public discussion.

ENTERPRISE PROGRAM: The Enterprise Program is a great concept that must have strict reporting, auditing and monitoring of agreed KPIs for the the scheme to work efficiently and grow the industry.

WORKSHOPS: The continuance of professional development workshops aimed at high level participants in partnership with the state agencies is good, as long as each state has its needs addressed and tailored specifically in each context rather than rolled out homogeneously, and these needs are also discussed with the appropriate industry sector.

INNOVATION PROGRAM: I like the flexible and open nature of the guidelines, but there is a point where this veers towards vagueness. Having as a chief assessment criterion “the level of innovation in a chosen medium” will be difficult for the agency to quantify, and perhaps the guidelines should flesh out further whether the innovation should lie in the narrative or technical way that a project meets its audience, or a balance of both. I would recommend that a dedicated Screen Australia Executive and team just work on this program, as staying on top of trends in Digital Media sector requires full time attention even with industry assistance in the assessment process. I am pleased to note that production funding for prototypes is possible without augmentation from the marketplace, because if Screen Australia is truly searching for projects that are

“exploring new technologies and techniques” they will find that the marketplace, as defined in the guidelines as a mixture of old and new media portals: broadcasters; telcos; and software manufacturers, will be conservative in being a “first in” investor.

CONTRACTS AND CASH FLOW: Mel Coombs makes a salient point in relation to contracting and cash flowing and it is worth reiterating. These are the most damaging issues facing producers in the current environment and any method to speed up contracting (in both development and production) and providing greater flexibility with cash flow facilitation is crucial. A suggestion of a dedicated Contracting/Cash Flow Officer within the agency would be a great place to start.

Finally, just a note on the feedback process. While it is very much appreciated to be able to make comments on the draft it is my understanding that the guidelines are to be ratified at the November 24th board meeting of Screen Australia. While I understand the required urgency in launching them for January 2009 the short turnaround time after comments are due on 14th November does not allow for extensive debate or redrafting, and could result in unsatisfactory or unpopular funding parameters being signed off.

best regards,

Sandy Cameron

Interactive Producer - Katalyst Web Design

Board Member - Media Resource Centre

SA Committee Member - Australian Interactive Media Industry Association