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SCREENING NOW: MeteoHeroes

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Cream comes true

David Brady, founder and CEO of Toronto-based Cream Productions, talks to Clive Whittingham about the company's virtual reality play, winning competitive races for IP and following the factual industry shift into premium.



David Brady

You have a diverse slate – The Dictator's Playbook for PBS alongside Wild Things with Dominic Monaghan for Animal Planet and a lot of true crime content – where next?

David Brady: We've been getting more and more premium in the last few years and we have projects in the pipeline with CNN and Netflix. The thing that excites me now is continuing the move into that territory, building on existing IP like books or working with interesting

talent.

How much pressure does developing premium factual place on an indie, particularly in the development phase?

There is a lot more effort to put into development. In general, our volume of development has shrunk but we're concentrating on fewer and better rather than a volume play. Five years ago, the industry seemed rather homogenous across the cable networks in a way – a medium level of content. Since then, television and OTT has developed so much that there is a broader spectrum of types of content they're after, including the premium.

We have decided to concentrate more on lessening the volume of our development slate by 20-30% but really focusing on making those pieces very premium, attaching the right talent and identifying the right IP. We're investing at earlier stages across fewer projects. We've got the proverbial feelers out a lot more than we did before for IP and talent, working with partners like William Morris and literary agencies to identify IP early on. I'm reading a ton of books, as is my head of development, and we identify a lot of interesting subjects out there and have a lot of conversations about books and ideas.



Cream Productions series Wild Things with Dominic Monaghan

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That competition for books, and particularly podcasts at the moment, seems really fierce among prodcos. How do you get to the front of the queue?

It's a matter of persuasion. We will directly contact an author or do it through agents, managers and publishers. It's about getting on the phone and presenting our passion and idea. You have to be articulate about it; you have to present a vision for transferring their work to the screen. There is only so much passion you can carry across 50 development projects, but if you have fewer projects and you get more passionate about them, that translates.

Track record also helps. We just finished a show called The Dictator's Playbook for PBS which got a lot of press, especially in the US, in high-end publications like The New York Times, The Washington Post, The LA Times and so on. That's been on people's radars. It had a lot of integrity to it, a lot of thought behind it and a lot of press. Having that recent track record really helps when competing with other producers pitching for IP. I try not to pay attention to competition too much. I wish everybody luck and I want success for everybody – to concentrate too much on competition isn't good for my soul. I concentrate on giving our best, passionate pitch; that's all you can do.

I listen to a lot of podcasts, far too many in fact. We haven't pursued that yet, but my development team keeps trying to talk me into identifying podcast content to go after. It hasn't been a source so far. Our sources have tended to be more talent- or book-driven up to now.

In an industry of 50 nos for every yes, does a slimmed down 'fewer, bigger, better' development slate leave you vulnerable?

It's the perennial issue for producers: the balance between volume and quality. You know if you're doing 150 projects, the quality can suffer. But if you're doing fewer, it might be better quality and still not go anywhere. We have just decided that because of the move and the trend towards premium, and that includes things like limited series and returnable series, it takes a little more depth as opposed to breadth. It's just as hard to pay attention to 70 projects in a thinner way as 30 projects in a deeper way. It's the same effort, just applied differently. We've made the decision that deeper is a better bet. We still have a lot of projects in development – it is still a volume play to a certain extent. As a production company, you cannot put all your eggs in one basket.



Cream produced BTK: A Killer Among Us for US cablenet ID

As a Canadian prodco that works a lot with US cablenets – you have Fear Thy Neighbour and BTK: A Killer Among Us with ID, for example – how are the pressures on that part of the industry affecting your business?

We have an advantage being a Canadian because we can coproduce and bring finance to the table. As budgets are being squeezed and the Canadian dollar drops, we're seen as a company that can bring money to the table and be more affordable to work with. The cablenets that are looking to medium-budget programming look to us to help finance. It's an opportunity for us; it's a good thing for Cream.

Five years ago, we had partners who would work on both models, they'd say they'll commission this or coproduce this. Now we have partners looking only for coproduction, and others that really just want to work as commissioners. It makes it easier; we know who wants to do what.

You launched a virtual reality arm of your company back in 2015, why?

It actually came about because I was happily making network television and one day a high-school teacher came into my office to pitch an idea. He put a VR headset on me in my office and transported me to a Paul McCartney concert where I was on stage with him. I remember looking around and seeing the drummer and the lights, the smoke around me. I started to walk across the stage and bashed into my desk, and had to have it pointed out that I couldn't move. I had never seen anything like it, I didn't know what it was, but I knew we had to get into it.

I hired a small team of people I had known in the industry as creative and technical who could start solving problems. We put together a research and development unit. We didn't take investment; we wanted to bootstrap it and not be hobbled by the venture capital money that was flying around at the time.

We've grown it and, although it's been largely a research division into all aspects of augmented reality and VR, we've produced products for the market. It's made money, it's in the black and it's an exciting and growing op. It's part of the business that allows me to talk a different language from TV. It's different financiers, different buyers, different business models and relationships. It's more Silicon Valley than Hollywood – it's refreshing and fun.



The company moved into virtual reality in 2015

Where do you see that technology going – will it be primarily for gaming, education or communications, or is there an entertainment play to it as well? Will we see VR docs and dramas?

It is difficult to call and is linked to the technology. As the tech develops, the business and the creative direction develop hand in hand. The way the tech is moving, I would say entertainment, other than gaming, and translating movies and TV into VR and AR, will be the most challenging. I'm sceptical about that. I don't think anybody has cracked it, and it's a long way from being cracked.

The opportunity in commercial and industrial is a given. You can use it to transport people being trained for a job, or customers who want to experience something before they buy it. There are huge opportunities there, and one vertical of our VR and AR division is commerce and industry. That is huge.

Entertainment is a question mark. We've perfected movies and TV so well and they work so well that to translate them to VR and AR would be a challenge, and I'm not sure if it's ever going to happen. But we're working on it and experimenting on it. We've got a project greenlit now called A Curious Mind with Dominic Monaghan. That's entertainment and information, and we'll see how that goes. The legacy idea of commissioning entities like networks in the TV world doesn't exist in VR and AR, so we have to find the money elsewhere.

How does an established indie like yours grow? Is it through being acquired, or are you looking to buy companies yourself?

It's two-pronged. We don't have a 'for sale' sign out on the lawn, but we have been interviewing estate agents. In the meantime, we have an aggressive plan for growth. It's about organic expansion of the existing business. We think there is a lot of room to grow in the OTT and cable markets producing television. Within that, we would like to increase our

premium and our volume and client base. We want to do some corporate acquisitions that could get us into different genres. We're developing a scripted side, but there is a great way to lose a lot of money in scripted if you're not an established scripted company. So we're looking at potential acquisitions of small, successful scripted companies, especially in Canada, where we can leverage international coproduction financing to attract high-level producers in the international market. We're also potentially interested in small tech companies to help with our VR and AR division. It's early stages, though.



Clive Whittingham
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