

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Kristin Jones: New Risks, New Media

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, October 11th, 2012

Kristin Jones was reading at home when we spoke; it's hard to work through a pile of scripts at a studio office. Vuguru.com, where Kristin has been Chief Creative Officer for two years, is one of a new breed of new media companies that's transforming the creative landscape. Situated firmly in the digital space, yet making projects that straddle traditional notions of feature films and television, Vuguru is a pure-play studio, which means they finance and make their projects, then license them for distribution to others, including Hulu and AOL. Vuguru has notched some impressive early wins in a field where winning isn't easy.



Adam Leipzig: You were at Miramax and Buena Vista international; you oversaw movies like *The Queen*, *Gone, Baby, Gone*, and *Calendar Girls*. How is this different from your studio jobs?

Kristen Jones: My biggest learning curve has been the new landscape. I'll never forget in my first meetings, hearing about all the different companies and different set-top boxes. In traditional media, there's always that beneficial friction between the legal, the creative and the financial. Here, you have that, and then you have the tech end to add. There are a lot of technologists, who don't come from our space. Everybody accepts one another, but there are very different backgrounds and incredibly different ways of thinking.

Yet it's the same because we're trying to find great stories, we're evaluating scripts, books and pitches, even though the distribution medium is different and the budgets are lower. You're constantly educating people about the digital space, it's constantly evolving. There are new players and you have to figure out what they want.

AL: Who is hardest to educate?

KJ: People who have been very successful in traditional television and features are slower to get it. It's getting easier, because digital is becoming a catch-phrase, and there are successes to point to. But, I gotta be honest. Agents and agencies have been slow on the uptake, because the money is different. When it comes to scripted content, they want to sell it at the highest price, so the best buyer for them will be a traditional network, cable company or studio. We do give out back-end profit participations, so there are other ways to make money, but definitely people who are very rooted in traditional media are scared of digital.

The rub with that, especially on the feature side, is that there are fewer movies being made, it's hard to sell to studios. On the other hand, in traditional media, if you blow it, you're going to be sitting it out for a while. In the Internet landscape, it's so new, if you make a mistake there are no consequences. That's really appealing to people who are trying to do different things.

AL: What's Vuguru's content sweet-spot?

KJ: That's a popular question! Generally we're working on projects that are 90 minutes in length, probably editable into 10 or 15 different chapters, but can also hold together as a feature. That said, we are getting into the half-hour space. We've done two seasons of *The Booth at the End*. We're doing a project with Amazon, which will be a half-hour, and we're talking to Netflix, but most of our content is in the 90-minute area.

AL: *What's your pitch?*

KJ: This is a viable means to get your project made, at a time when it is getting harder in other media. It's a place to get passion projects made, projects that probably wouldn't get made at other places. I tell agents: Do you want your clients working? They have the ability to take creative risks here.

AL: *How do you define success?*

KJ: We're trying to make these projects work monetarily within the first digital window, and so far we've been able to do that. We're not positioning itself as an incubator, but everyone's aware there are web projects that have gone to cable series, like *Children's Hospital* and *Web Therapy*, and we're not going to look those gift-horses in the mouth.

We also measure success in number of views. *The Booth at the End* was the most-watched original program on Hulu last summer. With *Little Women Big Cars* on AOL, we got 6 million views in 2 weeks. Those are better than cable numbers!

AL: *Are content creators paying their rent off your shows?*

KJ: There are definitely success stories. The upfront money is less than what people are making at the bigger networks, studios and cable companies, but it's still decent. We do pay out a sure back end; the difference is that that waterfall takes a while to start flowing. ["Waterfall" means the way money is paid out, in splashes of cash as a project cascades through its life-cycle.] We're a new enough company, and our projects are recent enough, that we're still in the waterfall phase with those first and second windows, so it's too soon to tell what those ultimate numbers are going to be. There are people who have been people we've paid out, and people we know we will pay out.

Photo: Kristin Jones, center, with director Jason Reilly on the set of Fetching.

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