

Distributed film production: Artistic experimentation or feasible alternative? – The case of “A Swarm of Angels”

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At the end of the value chain of a movie there is a *user* rather than a *consumer*; the value of a movie, like other cultural goods, stays constant (or may even increase) with time passing by. The “consumption” of a cultural product like a movie refers often to the possibility of fruition. But even in this case, the life-cycle of the consumed product is potentially endless, because after its decoding, its meaning will potentially never be lost by the consumer and it is often expected to grow over time, rather than disappear. This does not mean that a movie does not have any material dimension. The necessary condition for it to follow such an intriguing immaterial life path, is that it has to be produced. First to be considered as cultural good, the film has to be treated as an economic commodity, or as many pointed out (Pendakur, 1990; Moran, 1996; Elsaesser 2001) be treated as both a tangible product and an intangible service.

The realization cycle of a movie involves four main stages (treatment, preproduction, production, postproduction) traditionally organized in a very hierarchical and expensive structure, and the distribution could involve several channels, usually organized within the so-called ‘windows’ system (Currah, 2006; Peretti and Negro 2003). Cinema 2.0 (also called collaborative cinema, open content cinema, remixing cinema etc.) is a new approach to movie/video making, grouping a set of more than 20 independent experiments sharing some form of *openness* and distributed problem solving in phases of the realization cycle. This report has developed a detailed analysis of the case of “A Swarm of Angels” (ASOA - www.aswarmofangels.com) because ASOA is probably the most complex and important of the ongoing experiments encompassing:

- the co-creation of the content
- the co-funding of the production
- the remixing/free distribution of the results, even work-in-progress.

A Swarm of Angels is a project aiming at creating a “£1 million feature film and [giving] it away to over 1 million people, using the Internet and a global community of members”

The ASOA project began in January 2006 at the initiative of Matt Hanson, a 36-year-old visionary director from Brighton, UK. The basic idea was to gather people from around the world, who wished to take part in a film making process. The participation was supposed to be ‘creativity/passion/curiosity’ oriented, as opposed to profit and ownership focused. The distribution was expected to be free. Following the open/free approach to movie production raises the known problem of reward, dealing ultimately with the incentives to give money for the production. ASOA, as a business model, was designed to be “a valid new alternative, maybe more enlightened...” to the Hollywood entertainment world. It was not thought to be a business investment to make profit - even if this issue still remains a little bit controversial. “I didn't want A Swarm of Angels to be a massively distributed investment opportunity” Hanson says. The solution for the production money could only have come from an angel, not even a ‘business angel’ that plays an exact function in an early stage business initiative

and takes a lot of risks in front of a very high expected return. Better, a crowd of genuine angels, keen to give a little, reasonable amount of their money for sustaining altogether a groundbreaking movie-making project in which having “an unprecedented opportunity to become involved in the creative process of making a feature film”. A real “swarm of angels” was the answer.

£25 was the amount of the minimum subscription fee in order to enter the experience and to micro-fund the movie. Funders have the exclusive right to take part into the decision process (through a web-based poll system), the script editing and all other creative/advising processes (through a discussion forum); while visitors can assist in almost all the discussion and creation processes (some areas are restricted to members) but they cannot actively collaborate. “One head one vote” is the governance rule within the community, but that is the only slight resemblance to a Ltd ownership model.

However, the ASOA business model is different from previous open content distributed problem solving production experiences in software or text. The Wikimedia Foundation sustains the Wikipedia project based on donations. The contributors to the free encyclopedia do not pretend to be donors, and vice versa. The content is released with a GNU Free Documentation License, in order “to assure everyone the effective freedom to copy and redistribute it, with or without modifying it, either commercially or non commercially.... derivative works of the document must themselves be free in the same sense.” Such licences, like FLOSS (Free Libre Open Source Software) projects, are designed to radically disconnect the production of content from its distribution process. The licence associated with ASOA content and its derivatives is the Creative Commons by-nc-sa (non-commercial-share alike) 2.5. *sa* means that anyone can remix and modify the content so long as the result is released under the same sort of licence. The concept is similar to “copyleft”. *nc* means that the commercial exploitation of the product and/or its derivatives (by natural person or legal entities) is not allowed without the explicit consent of – and likely negotiation with – the author(s). In other words the authors retain exclusive rights to gain, over the content or its derivatives, and licensees can freely copy, distribute, display, and perform the work and make derivative works based on it for non-commercial purposes only. Every business and governance structure is grounded within a contractual framework, and the NC option represents a major difference from the Wikipedia and similar models. The Swarm identifies a multitude of creators *and* donors, entitled by the chosen licence to gain “from media companies and distributors who might want to broadcast or use assets from the production for their own commercial endeavours”, and from other “opportunities for the project which don't conflict with ASOA's general principles, such as sponsorship, equipment partnerships”. The ASOA project seems to have a multi producer/multi distributor structure. The openness of the product to future users' remixes is not just a statement in the Terms/Conditions agreement: it is a matter of community identity and recognition, it is a vision and a strong belief. The tagline of the project, voted for by the Swarm is “Remixing cinema”. The Creative Commons licence was chosen to protect and safeguard identity.

Matt Hanson was the first subscriber, on January 16th 2006 while the second angel joined in only on March 13th. The first milestone was reached on Saturday 6th May, 2006, when – after about 5 months from the start – the 100th person, *stevko*, joined the swarm. On 7th July 2007 Hanson said “We can call ourselves a movement now”, because the second milestone of 1000 members had been reached. In managing such a project, the main recommendation is to “be very careful how you balance and grow the community” (see Section 5 on *Governance*). That is why at that moment (Autumn 2007) the joining process was ‘frozen’ and prevented to continue virally: only invited members are accepted, until the leader decides to “open the doors”

again. In September 2007, project members were about 1200, the last 200 being invited by 'senior' angels. The first development phases have been running for about 1 year, and the main outcomes have been two draft scripts ("*The Unfold*" and "*Glitch*"), the trailer and the poster of the project and the poster of "The Unfold". The third phase re-opened in December 2007, allowing the other angels to simply register as a watcher – for free - or to contribute to the project – for paying persons.

ASOA is an ongoing experience, but the architecture of the product released so far and of the production process seems to fit the basic requirements for benefiting from a distributed collaborative production model. Our analysis shows that both are sufficiently *modular* and *granular*. Although this preliminary evaluation seems to indicate a potential for success, only further analysis and observation of the progress of this project will allow us to assess whether open distributed collaboration is applicable even to the production and post-production phases of the realization of a movie, resulting in the production of a feature film.

The analysis of the governance structure highlights the following characteristics:

- Occasional contributors are the largest part of the ASOA community, where 5% of people are doing 80% of contributions (in terms of posts in discussion forums). There seems to be a slightly higher participation than in the case of Wikipedia, and much more similar to FLOSS projects, though must be remembered that ASOA is still in its early phase of development.
- The majority of the angels surveyed stated that they joined the project for fun, because it was cool, exiting, because of "a moment of weakness", because it was nice and £25 is not too much, because they need to train their creativity and to feel a sense of community belonging. When questioned "why did you give not only money but also the cost of your time?", most of them suggested *also* more market oriented reasons, especially those involved is some specific activity of content creation: opportunity for a CV or portfolio entry, possible recognition in the film credits, visibility in a community of experienced people and visibility ex post thanks to the project reputation.
- Similarly, the top five expected benefits from the participation in the ASOA project are related to intrinsic motivations, while others, which are much more related to money or professional gains, seem to be less relevant.
- The analysis of the joining time and activity of the participants points to the fact that the motivation to join is different from the incentive to stay for a significant percentage (31%) of 'occasional joiners'. Also, some of the most active contributors left (not more active) the collaborative project; the motivations for not participating any longer seem not to be related to any rational exit strategy after having accumulated enough new competences.
- As in other OS projects the governance structure is not flat at all. There is a head, Matt Hanson (who defines himself as a "benevolent dictator"), who has real rather than formal authority: he takes care of the process life and consistency and that 'move it on'.
- However, the decision making process is supported by a poll system, organized through 'voting weeks', and Matt Hanson takes the outcome as final decision (even if different from his own personal advice). He has veto power, but he has never used it. So far, the community has had 17 polls, with an average quorum of 15% (though smaller in the second year).
- The m:n model chosen by the Swarm to deal with the massive multi-creators / multi-funders context, is in contrast to the model dominating the FLOSS environment, with a multitude of licenses adjusted to the needs of massive

collaboration and mass licensing and strong organizations, e.g. the Free Software Foundation, or the Debian Foundation, which back the license and enforce the terms of the license against infringers. Other than the well-established and codified practices in the FLOSS industry, Open Content Film is still an emerging field, which is struggling to produce an appropriate model of organization and legal structure.

ASOA is still an experiment rather than an actual innovation in making movies, Unlike the previous experiences of web cinema, which adapted the product and process architecture to the internet medium, ASOA is aiming at realizing a product comparable with the results of the established motion picture industry, taking advantage of the collaborative nature of the traditional process to realize it in a widely distributed way with self selected resources.