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Sundance 2011: Lance Weiler Brings A 'Pandemic' to Park City

Courtesy of the Sundance Institute
A scene from "Pandemic 41.410806, -75.654259″

Lance Weiler is interested in unorthodox ways of telling stories. The writer/director's film "The Last Broadcast" was the first film to be digitally distributed to theaters back in 1998 and Weiler has created ARGs — alternate reality games — for other films he's worked on.

Weiler is bringing a similarly complex storyworld experience to Sundance 2011. His short "Pandemic 41.410806, -75.654259″, about two children dealing with their mother's mysterious "sleeping sickness", is playing in the festival's narrative section and more importantly, is a key part of "Pandemic 1.0″, an immersive and multi-media project that is being showcased in the fest's New Frontiers section.

We recently spoke to Weiler about his project, which is being told via, in addition to his short film, a magazine, a koala, 5 secret locations, 12 totems, 60 story artifacts, 50 mobile phones, 5,000 bottles of water, 3.2 million points of data, and more.

The Wall Street Journal: Tell us about what Sundance attendees can expect from the "Pandemic" experience you've planned out.

Lance Weiler: In terms of the Sundance experience, "Pandemic" something that plays across the idea of changes in media consumption and changes in authorship and how audiences become collaborators. Specifically, that involves a variety of physical objects from around the world that we've hidden throughout Park City. For example, we have bottles of Pandemic water which actually have a health property to it. We also have story artifacts, which are like these golden objects which have memories associated to them. And then we have a variety of things that range from different types of info-graphic posters and a mobile application that we are running, to 50 phones with hand cranks that we're releasing in to the wild.

Why hide so many objects around Park City? What is the overall goal?

All of these things are connected to an overall vision that I have which is very much about the idea of story R&D, research and development. And how story can be used to unlock not only new kinds of engagements with an audience, but also be used as a way to identify potential new business models and to enrich the stories I want to tell.

So basically, I use the experience as a research development platform. Like what you would do with software when you push it out and people would have a beta release or something.

The overall arching goal of this, in addition to being entertainment, is that research will be derived from it to help fight actual pandemics. So overall, at the heart of the whole experience, is a mission control space [within the New Frontiers space at Sundance]. When you step into that actual mission control space, there will be a surface table that you can touch and see a map and the spread of the infection. And then on all the walls you can see different data visualizations that are directly affected by what people are doing in the real world. It all kind of shapes into a 120 hour story, where effectively you have 120 hours to fight a pandemic.

What's really kind of neat too is that there are five secret locations throughout Park City and everything culminates with a secret show in a secret location. So you kind of have a scavenger element to it. Since there are mobile check-ins, there's also a social gaming construct to it. And there's the ability for people online to actually be there. Which is kind of neat. Because at Sundance you don't get a chance to see the films unless you are really there. Or you don't get the chance to really experience it unless you are physically there.

When does the "pandemic" start?

It kicks off on the 21st, in the evening and will run all the way through to Wednesday. And then it kind of archives itself through the rest of the festival.

A lot of people would use the term "transmedia" to describe your multi-faceted approach to storytelling. What do you think of term?

I can understand and appreciate why a term is given to something, so people can have an understanding or at least a collective knowledge of what it is. But to me, 'transmedia' is a transitional term. By its very definition, all media will be trans and will move fluidly. That's why I find myself more interested in how these ideas can be R&Ded and how can stories be harnessed to create new opportunities.

How soon after the festival is over you are going to sit back and look at the data you have accumulated and apply that towards the future?

We are actually looking at the data right now. What's really amazing about the project is that it not only harnesses stuff that happens in Park City, but it also harnesses things that are happening in the real world and works across a number of different algorithms to propel and escalate the story at certain times. Looking at the data is part of the process of actually shaping the story. But at the end, yes, we will give ourselves a period to go through it and see how it potentially surprised us. A lot of the goal is to continue to document our results and share them with other storytellers.

Do you guys have failsafes built into the project, in case a garbage man accidentally dumps, say, all of your designated water bottles in the trash?

Yes, you go in and you kind of design with a lot of back up plans. You design Plan A through Plan G, and you design something that is going to have a variety of touch points so people can kind of come in contact with parts of it and experience it   at the end of the day, I think you want to ask, is this fun? Is it something that maybe somebody will want to do? Is it the best way to tell the story? The challenge of that is what excites me. It's funny, because there was a time when I lived and breathed nothing but filmmaking. I was a filmmaker, that's what I was. That defined what I did. And then it got to a point where I didn't shoot on film as much anymore. I didn't cut on film anymore. I didn't exhibit as much on film anymore. But yet that term was still trying to define what I did. And then it got to a point where it was not really about being a filmmaker; it is about wanting to make the connection to people and tell a story. So some people started calling me a story architect.

Is there any sort of revenue stream built into this project?

It's more of an experiment for myself, to see if I can actually do something with this and effectively demonstrate a different R&D model out of a festival environment. Can I actually help the fight against pandemics and natural disasters? It's a pretty lofty goal   I haven't tried to purposely put any transactional elements into it. Right now, in order to make it resonate, the story has to lead. Afterwards, we will digest that and evolve the plan for the next one.