

Nickelodeon's Alexi Wheeler on entering the age of content

By  Juanita Pienaar

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Vice president for animation production and development at Nickelodeon Alexi Wheeler represented the company for the third consecutive year at the Cape Town International Animation Festival (CTIAF) that took place from 2 to 4 March 2018 at the River Club in Observatory in Cape Town.



Alexi Wheeler, vice president, animation production and development, Nickelodeon.

Wheeler has produced over 250 hours of content aimed at pre-schoolers and 6-12-year olds both in live-action and animation. He has worked in varying areas of the children's media industry from creating/developing content, commissioning and producing programming through to the structuring of production budgets and selling in of content. Wheeler has also implemented global schemes including the very successful Nickelodeon International Shorts Program and the International Pre-School Shorts Initiative.

Here he shares more about the talk he presented at the CTIAF this past weekend, touching on the above-mentioned initiatives and upcoming projects, how he feels about the role of women in the animation industry and what he thinks the industry as a whole can still improve on.



CTIAF to showcase local and international animation

27 Feb 2018



Talk us through the talk that you presented at the CTIAF over the weekend.

I took the audience through a little bit of my background and how I sort of arrived at animation production and how this lead to my role at Nickelodeon. I also took them through, in fairly layman's terms, the exact type of projects that we like and also just a one-on-one on how we develop content. How we work with people. What it's like to produce with us. And just to perpetuate the message that we are looking for content on a global scale.

■ ***The role of women across all industries is changing but especially in creative industries such as this one. Can you comment on the themes of diversity and inclusion with regards to the animation industry and why this is so important?***

We've been working with a lot of female show creators across shows like *Shin Chan* and *Nella, the Princess Knight*. And I realise, especially within this industry, that we have to try a lot harder. It's something that we're working on improving across the board and that we're very passionate about. My wife works in film and it's a similar thing for her and she's quite senior where she works for a film company in the UK. And she's sort of in the minority because there aren't a lot of women who do what she does.



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■ ***We're just about three months into the new year. With this in mind, can you perhaps share with us some key trends for your industry for 2018 and beyond?***

We're actually entering the age of content. I think we've been in it for a little while but it's just going to get better, especially in the kids space. With the other platforms that they're on now - there's just no more content being created. It's just like a really great time to be a producer or a content developer. So, I'm excited to see what everyone's doing. Even the "Netflixes" of the world, they might be rivals per se but it is just exciting to see what everyone is coming up with and how much content they produce. It also can be quite hard to find storyboard artists because they're all just being assigned to things and I think that's fantastic. I think the more work there is, the more of an engaging industry we can create.

We also have a lot of stuff coming up this year. Right now, we're developing more shorts with Mike Scott, here in South Africa. We are producing a bunch of shorts in Singapore as well and we're really excited about the collection on a global scale. Our whole mantra is about making the world a more playful place. And I think we're literally doing it, by being out in the field producing content everywhere.



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24 Jan 2018



■ ***What animated film projects are you currently excited about?***

There's a lot of animated features coming out this year. I'm most excited about new films such as *Coco*, which is just exploring great and interesting things. The calibre of animated children's films right now is spectacular, especially now, in the last couple of years. Even compared to five or six years ago. Things have just improved and improved even more. Some of the storytelling is fantastic. So, yes, *Coco* really stands out for me and then I'm still waiting for *Toy Story 4*. That is one of my favourite franchises, so I am really looking forward to that.

And like I said we're working on a bunch of new projects, one of which is a pre-school project which is all about community and how kids fit into the community and how citizenship functions within that. I'm excited to work on projects like that but we're trying to take it in different directions and play with different themes. We're really trying to explore what's real for kids.

📊 ***What are a few pain points you think the industry can improve on?***

I think there is always room for improvement. I think there's room for more original content and exclusivity across the industry in terms of hiring. Ultimately, I think what we have to keep striving to do better and we need to celebrate stories. There's always space for brave, new stories and brave, new storytellers. So, yes, I think there's always scope for improvement and that we need to keep on trying new things to improve the industry.

ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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