M4Lit Project report

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1 Introduction

On 30 September 2009, the first mobile novel (m-novel) to be published in both English and isiXhosa was launched in South Africa (SA). Kontax, a teen mystery story, was created for the Shuttleworth Foundation’s m4Lit project, and a sequel, Kontax 2: The Big Win, has since been published. The project name m4Lit is short for “mobiles for literacy”. This ongoing project aims to explore how mobile phones might support teen reading and writing, by promoting the Kontax series of m-novels and through research into teens’ mobile literacies.

The m4Lit project aimed to research the role of mobile phones in teen reading and writing, so that educators, publishers and researchers could better understand the literacy-related opportunities and challenges offered by mobile phones, as used by many teens in SA today.

The m4Lit pilot project commissioned the Kontax story, and published it online as an accessible and interactive reading experience for teens aged 14-17 years. The novel was published on a mobisite – a website accessible from mobile phone web browsers and computer web browsers – and on MXit, a popular mobile instant messaging (IM) platform in SA.

The m4Lit pilot project ran from August to December 2009, aiming to establish the extent to which mobile phones might engage teens in leisure reading and writing. This report provides an overview of the m4Lit project, describes the use of two mobile platforms to publish the m-novel, and also reports on readership trends and some teen responses to the m-novel. Finally it reflects on the lessons learned from the m4Lit project and considers the implications of the project for mobile publishing.

The research component of the m4lit project included a study of isiXhosa-speaking teenagers in two Cape Town townships (Langa and Guguletu) which was used to gauge how teens in low-income urban areas in South Africa responded to the m-novel and how compatible it was with their usual literacy practices. The research project included surveys, focus groups and usability evaluations and also analysed data gathered from the Kontax mobisite and from MXit usage statistics, which revealed how users in general had read and interacted with the story.

In addition to this report, a summary of the project and detailed discussions of the research findings, are available from the project’s website, as detailed below:

Presentation – Summary of project findings
m4Lit Project findings by Steve Vosloo, Shuttleworth Foundation. Available at http://m4lit.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/m4lit_project_findings_svosloo_2010.pdf.

Indigenous literacies research report

Mobile literacies research report
Mobile literacies & South African teens: Leisure reading, writing, and MXit chatting for teens in Langa and Guguletu by Marion Walton, Centre for Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town. Available at http://m4lit.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/m4lit_mobile_literacies_mwalton_2010.pdf. This report accounts for teens' uptake of Kontax in relation to their access to and use of mobile internet and computers, and discusses teen mobile literacies as revealed by the research project (Walton, 2010).

It is hoped that the m4Lit project findings and lessons will contribute to the broader understanding of mobiles for literacy in SA. Insights from this context may be transferable to other developing country contexts, particularly where pricing and network access makes mobile internet affordable, and in areas where it is challenging to access books and other printed material. Mobile phones have the potential to be an alternative

1 http://m4lit.wordpress.com.
and complement to the print medium as a distribution and production medium and consequently they have considerable potential for literacy development in SA, and indeed many parts of the developing world.

2 Background

Four key factors influenced the initiation of the project: Japanese m-novels, the increase of digital literacies, the phenomenal uptake of mobile phones in SA, and the unavailability of printed books for most of the South African population.

In Japan, teens have been reading and writing novels on their mobile phones for a number of years. The trend is for regular publication of short chapters or even sentences (as opposed to one complete publication at the end of the writing process). Readers participate in the writing of the story through regular feedback to the author, with suggestions sometimes being incorporated into the story. The popularity of the m-novel is clearly evident in Japan, where five out of the top ten fiction best sellers in 2007 were first written as m-novels that had later been printed in book form (Onishi, 2008).

Secondly, the evolution of digital media has had a profound impact on the literacy practices of teenagers from east to west – in the United States of America, research in 2008 has shown that through their computers today's teens are reading and writing more than previous generations, not formally but on blogs, MySpace pages and via instant messages (Lenhart, Arafah, Smith & Macgill, 2008). Increasingly, SMSes and chats on their mobile phones also form part of the “reading” and “writing” of digital literacy for teens there. While literacy practices form part of the daily digital lives of many youth South Africans, not much research has been conducted to try to understand this space, and the school curriculum largely does not recognise it as legitimate.

Thirdly, while teens in SA are not as broadband and web-enabled as their American counterparts, mobile texting and mobile instant messaging is prolific there. MXit claims that 250 million messages (as part of chat conversations) are exchanged every day amongst it's 15 million South African subscribers, a substantial number of which is in the 18 and under age group (Phillips, 2009). In 2009, Africa was the world's fastest growing market for mobile phones (Greenwood, 2009). The continent is truly experiencing a communication revolution through mobile phones (despite excessively high tariffs), especially in SA. The ways in which youth are using their mobile phones to communicate, socialise, play, learn and even earn money, are far more innovative than in most developed countries. With computer-based broadband penetration at around 10% (Mail & Guardian Online, 2010), and mobile phone penetration around 90% amongst urban youth (Kreutzer, 2009), for many in SA the mobile phone, not the PC, is the tool for user-generated content. For many a mobile phone also means access to the Internet. While SA has high voice and SMS rates, mobile data charges are low, making mobisites and mobile instant messaging services like MXit very attractive as enabling ICTs.

Lastly, the low level of literacy amongst South African youth is a recognised problem. While it is a very complex problem, one contributing factor is that books are unaffordable, and therefore unavailable, to many learners. The lack of books extends to homes – in 2006, 51% of South African households owned no leisure books (TNS Research Surveys, 2006) – and to schools – only 7% of public schools in South Africa have functional libraries of any kind (Equal Education, 2009). Given that mobile phones are increasingly pervasive devices, the m4Lit project explores their potential for publishing and authoring. Mobile phones may represent a way to alleviate the chronic shortage of books in SA as they provide a viable content distribution solution.

3 Project objectives

The m4Lit project set out with the following objectives:

- To explore whether teens are interested in reading stories on their mobile phones.
- To see whether and how they write using their mobile phones.
- To better understand mobile literacies.
While the project is titled “mobiles for literacy” it is important to note that the field of literacy, and research of it, is complex and multifaceted. It is outside the scope of the m4Lit project – in terms of resources and time available – to determine a correlation between reading and writing on mobile phones and changes in literacy levels. For our purposes we worked on the following assumptions:

- Reading longer form texts, and comprehending and expressing opinions around those texts, is beneficial from an educational point of view. This the a key message in the 2002 Revised National Curriculum Statement for Languages for South African schools.
- In general, the literacy practices of reading and writing are positive contributors to certain aspects of literacy development. Reading (exposure to print) is “associated with vocabulary, verbal skills, and general knowledge” (Stanovich, 1993).

### 4 Developing the Kontax story

**Kontax: The story**

**Process**

In order to achieve our objectives, we had to, through mobile phones, publish a story that teens could engage with, where they could read longer form text written in conventional English and isiXhosa, and where they could write their opinions on the characters and events in the story. To this end, a story was needed.

An initial decision was around sourcing the story: should an existing Creative Commons licensed or public domain story be used; should an existing copyrighted story be used, if negotiations with the publisher meant that the story could be released openly; or should one be written from scratch with the Shuttleworth Foundation owning the copyright to the story? Given the tight deadlines of the project, and the desire to have a story that exploited the features of phones, the last option was chosen.

Clockwork Zoo was commissioned to write the story and design the visuals for the mobisite and promotional materials. Sam Wilson wrote the m-novel in English; it was translated into isiXhosa by Nkululeko Mabandla. The reason for publishing in isiXhosa is discussed by Deumert (2010).

The story brief was as follows: it must be fun, youth-focused and gritty (but not with an overt social or educational angle); it will involve a number of fictitious characters whose adventures bring them face-to-face with relevant, real-life issues; it must be aimed at 14-17 year old teenagers from LSM 3-7 (lower socio-economic bracket), who have access to GPRS-enabled mobile phones, and for whom English is not necessarily the home language.

Four story development workshops were held with two groups of teens in Langa and Khayelitsha, two low-income townships in Cape Town. The Langa group was younger (average age of 14), while the Khayelitsha group was older (average age of 17). The teens provided wonderful suggestions and themes for the story – from hip-hop to crime busters to soccer to relationships.
Sam Wilson wrote a few story beginnings which were shown to the teens for feedback on the story content, pace, language and other aspects. He then refined the story accordingly. In order to translate the story into an authentic, but appropriate, isiXhosa version, Nkululeko Mabandla and Ana Deumert held a workshop with a group of teens to determine the level of mixing at that age group.

The final story was told over 21 chapters, none longer than 400 words (total story length around 8,000 words).

**Story synopsis**

The final result was a teen mystery story with the following teaser:

> The story is about Kontax, the hottest graffiti crew in Cape Town. These four friends come from all over town, and they each have their own unique talent. Sbu has the vision, K8 (pronounced “Kate”) has the training, Songezwa has the technique, and Airtime has the creativity (and the big mouth). The Kontax hang out together making graffiti.

> The story gets going when one night Sbu hits it off with a girl at a party, but she suddenly disappears, leaving him with her mobile phone and her first name. Who is she? Where did she go? And why doesn’t anyone on her mobile phone contact list know her? Sensing she is in danger, the Kontax crew use every idea they can think of, and all their skills and connections, to track the missing girl. As they do, the Kontax discover that this mysterious girl is in more trouble than she could have possibly imagined. And, as they follow her trail, so are they…

An often heard comment from readers about why they enjoyed reading the story was that it was real – “about teenage life.” The story deliberately included some social dilemmas about which, it was clear from the workshops, teens had strong opinions. Examples included under-aged drinking at parties, xenophobia, HIV, and invasion of personal privacy. As can be seen later in the report, these moments in the story had the desired effect of eliciting reader comments.
The copyright of content and images on the mobisite and on MXit – including what users submitted – was licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike 2.5 South Africa license. The choice of this license was based on the Shuttleworth Foundation's commitment to openness and also to encourage user participation in building out the story.

5 Mobile platforms for Kontax

Kontax: The mobisite

A key decision for m-novels is the publishing technology for mobile phones – the two main options are via SMS, or via the internet, e.g. GPRS.

The SMS-based solution has a wider reach (works on all phones), but has limited functionality in terms of length of message, interface and interaction, and is very expensive (each Kontax chapter would span about 13 SMS messages). At R0.70 per SMS, the story would cost about R191.10 to read!

Using mobile data to deliver content, such as a GPRS-based solution, means publishing a story on a mobisite (which is simply a website that is formatted for viewing on mobile phones) or through a phone application such as MXit. The mobile data option provides much greater flexibility in functionality and interaction, and is much cheaper (mobile data is priced differently to SMS by the network operators). On the downside, not all phones are GPRS-enabled, so the reach is not as wide as with SMS.

However, given that many young people do have GPRS-enabled mobile phones, and that number will increase over time, a GPRS-based solution (future-oriented) was chosen for the project.

The story was initially published on a mobisite only – www.kontax.mobi – accessible via GPRS-enabled mobile phones, or from any internet-connected computer with a web browser. It was later also published on MXit (described below).

Both English and isiXhosa versions were presented on the mobisite. The site navigation was fully translated into isiXhosa, e.g. the Home link on the English version was Ekhaya on the isiXhosa version.

The m4Lit project experimented with a more interactive style of story writing and publishing that – we hoped – would hold appeal to the participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2005) of youth. Increasingly young people do not only want to consume content, they also want to create, share and remix it – characteristics of a participatory culture. Digital media and ICTs, whether blogs, videos or mobile phones, are the modern tools that empower this youth creativity. This is not only a developed world phenomenon, but also a South African youth one (Vosloo, 2009). In terms of m-novels, the implication is that stories should not just be told; they should invite some form of participation from the reader.

As a result, Kontax on the mobisite was "made for mobile" (as opposed to simply being a printed book that was published on a mobile phone) and included the following features:

- Short chapters – none longer than 400 words.
- Fast-paced and punchy writing style.
- The story was serialised: every day another chapter in the mystery plot was told, with 21 chapters rolling out over 21 days. Launch happened on 30 September, but the story will remain live on the mobisite in its entirety for some time.
- The story was embedded in a lite social network. Anyone could read the story, but to interact with it, users had to register.
- Each registered user had a profile, which included an uploadable profile picture and descriptive favourites, e.g. favourite music, books, etc. On each profile page there was also a status update and a “wall” – as on Facebook. When users register they automatically had five “friends”: the four main story characters and the Kontax Team account. At any time users could write on the wall of the main
characters, which they did, e.g. when the character Airtime went to a party in the story, a reader wrote on his wall: "u go bru hav al the fun bt becareful dnt lose focus neh." It was also possible to send messages to friends (like simple email) – this was a way for users to message the characters and the Kontax Team, and vice versa.

- As the story unfolded, the four main characters updated their status messages to reflect their personal take on the story events, e.g. on the day that Airtime got spray paint on his school clothes, his status message was "It's going to take ages to get this paint off my blazer!"

- For each chapter, registered users could vote on events in the story (to express their opinion, not determine the outcome of the story), leave chapter-specific and general comments (in the Express Yourself section), download wallpapers, and finally submit a written piece for what they thought should happen in a Kontax sequel. The best comment on the daily chapter and the best three sequel ideas all won airtime prizes. The prizes were equally awarded for English and isiXhosa submissions: R100 for the best daily comment, R2,000 for the first prize winner of the Sequel Ideas competition, R1,000 for second, and R500 for third.

- Users could also cast general votes, e.g. the site asked: “What do you think of reading a story on your mobile phone?” Responses were: "I think it’s a great idea" 95%; "I don’t read much but I’ll try this" 4%; "I think it’s a bad idea" 0%; and "I don’t know" 1% (n=76).

- Extra story features – linked to from the relevant chapters – were included, e.g. K8’s guide to graffiti and the playlist from the party in the beginning of the story.

The approach to the project was dynamic, experimental, and flexible, which allowed scope to incorporate changes throughout the project. For example, after launching the mobisite it was made possible to immediately friend someone when reading their comments, or when a user left a comment on someone else’s comment, the original commenter was notified of this through a message in his or her inbox. These features were added in response to user suggestions and by monitoring activity on the mobisite.

Lastly, as part of experimenting with storytelling in a way that exploits the possibilities of digital and communications media, the story experience was partly cross-media. In the story, when Sbu goes through the contacts on Adelle’s phone (the missing girl) to try to track her down he sees five contacts. Each of the contacts had a real number that could be SMSed or called. If called, an in-character voice message was heard.

The mobisite will be released as open-source software, which educationalists, publishers and aspiring authors can use to publish other stories.

**Cost**

To register directly on [www.kontax.mobi](http://www.kontax.mobi) was free for the user. A once-off validation SMS, sent to the user as he or she registered was paid for by the Shuttleworth Foundation. To access the mobisite, instead of entering it’s web address, users could also send an SMS with the keyword Kontax to 33039. A return SMS would then be sent with the web address of the mobisite. For this the user would pay a once-off fee of R1.50.

The user did not have to pay to read the story – the content was free. The only cost to the user was for mobile data: each chapter cost from R0.05 to R0.09 (depending on user rates and mobile packages) – a price point sensitive to lower-income groups in SA.

**Kontax on MXit**

The MXit version essentially published the story – all 21 chapters at once – and allowed users to submit their ideas to the Sequel Ideas competition. There was no need to register at all. When entering the competition users simply gave their name, mobile phone number and idea.

Kontax was marketed within the Mxit platform, which undoubtedly increased the traffic there. Marketing took the form of splash screen ads – the image seen for five seconds when logging into Mxit – and Tradepost messages – the short message seen when accessing the Tradepost directory in Mxit. The splash screens were targeted at the 11-14 and 15-18 age groups only. (When registering on Mxit, users give their date of
birth. As with all virtual communities, it is impossible to confirm that the information given by the user is true.)

6 Mobisite usage

While the mobisite and MXit usage and trends are covered in-depth in the reports by Deumert (2010) and Walton (2010), there are three points of interest that are worth covering here.

Reader trend

For both the mobisite and MXit, a clear trend emerged for the reading of chapters: high volumes in the beginning, then a sharp drop-off and stabilisation of the interested readers who completed all 21 chapters.

There may be a genre effect in the drop-off. i.e. readers don't know what kind of story Kontax is or who the characters are from the interface on either the mobisite or on MXit. So the first chapter (and to a lesser extent the first three chapters) seem to be extremely important for readers deciding whether this story is "for them" or not. After that the attrition is much more gradual. Not reminding users of the new daily chapter might have been a factor for the drop-off on the mobisite.

Mobisite comments

On the mobisite registered users could leave comments, either at the end of each chapter or in the Express Yourself section. The comments generally fall into the following categories: complimentary of m-novels; complimentary of the Kontax story and format; comments related to the story; suggestions; comments on comments; and general comments. The chapter comments were either in response to the chapter itself or to comments left by other users or the Kontax Team.

Complimentary of m-novels

Below are comments from the mobisite about m-novels and also reading on mobile phones. It is possible that the offer of a daily prize for the best comment was a primary driver for (i) readers leaving comments, as opposed to them commenting out of their own volition, and (ii) being over complimentary of the story.

*It's great ... for me it really hard to pick up a book to start readin but i don mind readin on my phone*
(16, female, Durban, home language: English)

*Already kontax biggest fan ! I must admit that i wake up extra early t0 read the chapters (blushing)i never use to go to the library but with kontax i feel like i have a library on my phone and its great , YAY ! I personally added kontax as a bookmark on all my friends phone and i just love contact , its my new bff (lol) mwah !!*
(15, female, Cape Town, home language: Afrikaans)
I think Kontax is a lifesaver because it has been a long time since I have read a short story or a novel because I have been mxiting for most of the time, so I think this will help me and others like me. I will definately tell my friends who are also mxit (17, male, Phuthaditjhaba, home language: isiZulu)

I persnly thnk that ths whle kontax thng iz gr8, whn i fst heard of it i tho... WOW, now i cn stp going 2 da library evry sat (16, female, Umthatha, home language: isiXhosa)

this is long oer due. After the evolution of mxit and fbook, this is the best site we can be hooked at. Firstly, it is educational and it encourages us 2 read. I mean, the story is even interesting and it keeps us intrigued. It's hi tym 4 us guys to stop exposing ourselves to strangers on mxit and spend our time reading someting mo intresting. (17, male, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

Awsum :) Im realy nt much of a reader but reading of my phone jst seems alot easier...and co0ler! :) (17, female, Durban, home language: English)

Am not a person who reads books, so i only dd this 2 check hw a book on da web wil b like. So its not bad, and am lookin 4ward 2 chapter 2. (14, female, Pretoria, home language: Setswana)

Wondaful, great, fabulous, fantastic! If I missed a chapter, all else needs 2 wait, readin kontax comes first. It's beta then Mxit & facebook.. (ok in a way) (15, female, Cape Town, home language: Afrikaans)

Some focus group participants also saw Kontax as an evolutionary progression of MXit to Facebook to m-novels with social networking.

Complimentary of the overall Kontax story and format

... its a little day by day which keeps us intrigued... i really do like it! Mwah keep on rockin.. (16, female, Durban, home language: English)

Yoh guys it rocks big time, i like the theme, design, downloadable images, the art, n evrythng abt it ... i also like the way u'v dividd them [the chapters], short n undastandable. (17, female, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

WHAT I LIKE IS THE FACT THAT ITS ABOUT THE THINGS HAPPENING IN A TEENAGERS LIFE. (17, female, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

Who had cme up wth ths idea tht we cn read a chapter evrday thts great of you i luv you guyz jst fr learning me 2 read evrday (17, male, Uitenhage, home language: Afrikaans)

Kontax is socially intergrative. da youth of 1976 said'education is tha key to suces thus we oath 2 beta way of doing +hings' so kontax is hlpng us to ripe +he fruit of our long lived heros by saying READING IS THE KEY TO SUCCES... (15, female, Nelspruit, home language: Siswati)

It's like they live in soap opera. Days of our kontax lives... And theres always an "adventure" waiting for them. I like it. They all have secrets or something to hide... What kind of a friendship are they having? (18, female, Johannesburg, home language: isiZulu)

Comments related to the content of the story

Most of the comments were related to the story itself, with readers engaging with it in a number of ways. On the mobisite a comment was left on each chapter by Kontax Team to prompt responses, with varying success. Sometimes readers gave advice to the characters, e.g. after Sbu and Adelle kissed at the party.

Sbu move back! This girl, adelle, sounds so beautiful but she does not reveal herself to Sbu and to
me this girl doesn't want to be known. Sbu might be getting himself into a danger zone. (17, male, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

Or when they are going through Adelle's phone to try to work out where she is:

ooSbu bamele bamfumane kuqala uAdelle kuba la ou imgrogrise ngokumbulala xa imfumene.Kwaye bamele bazame ne messagez azithumeleyo bajonge eyokugqibela ukuba iyakubani kwaye kunini, mhlawumbi bangawufumana umkhondo. (“Sbu and them should find Adelle first because that guy has threatened to kill her when he finds her. Also they should try the sent messages to see to whom the last one was sent and when, maybe they could get a lead.”) (17, male, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

There were comments from readers expressing their opinion on the behaviour of the characters, e.g.

Is S'bu a lucky man or what? I think they are both moving at their own pace and there is nothing wrong with kissing a stranger. (17, male, Phuthaditjhaba, home language: isiZulu)

Lol yeah i would say sbu is mvng to0 fast..buut adelle kissd hm 1st s0 i thnk they bth mvng at d same pace (16, female, Durban, home language: English)

Songezwa is in a hard position but atleast she must try to understand her mother, her mother is also in a hard position because she has to raise her properly. It's not a good idea to associate yourself with males especially these days where there is crime (17, male, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

Hmmm... whY would Song be spending time with Mr. Erusmus? Could be a social visit... Nah. Could be extra lessons or help with homework... Nah. Could be...hmmm, this is very dodgy. Wonder whats really happening... (14, female, Johannesburg, home language: isiZulu)

Comments responding to the moral and social dilemmas in the story, e.g. did K8’s parents over-react when she let her friends sleep over at their house without asking permission?

I think k8’s parents were right to chase out the guyz. I mean k8 didn't inform them that she was coming home with friends, on top of that her friends are boys! (17, male, Phuthaditjhaba, home language: isiZulu)

Alihlanga lingehlanga mntakwethu sbu. Noko sbu ntanga kumele ukuthi u-andastande imeko, uhlise umsindo phatsi kuba abazali bakaK8 bebezama ukunakekela ingcosi yabo kwaye yicherry so bebengacinga izinto ezininzi. Ngxe bhu ti noko awumenyekanga esidlangalaleni. (“What has befallen you my brother sbu is nothing unusual Sbu my man at least you should understand the situation, and calm down because K8’s parents were trying to look after their kid, besides she’s a girl so they were thinking about a lot of things. Sorry my brother at least you were not embarrassed in public.”) (17, female, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

Or Songezwa being judged for secretly working in a strip club. Later her friends find out that she is waitressing there to support her mother who is HIV positive:

Plz tel me ds is nt wht it luk lyk,Song is a stripper!!!but let me nt jump in conclusion without hearng d while stry 1st.I rly hpe shz outsyd d@ stripper club 4 a gud reason (17, female, Ladysmith, home language: isiZulu)

Song nidz help, it may b that shez unhapy n ran away frm hme n stripin is da only way fo her to make money ... Fightin wit song isn't helpin ryt nw..wat she nidz iz lv n suport ... So stop criticisin da poor chld n try n undastand ha situation! (16, female, Nelspruit, home language: Shangaan)
Or about Adelle kissing Sbu when she has a boyfriend:

I knew this would happen, someone getting hurt very badly. It is so bad for Sbu to think that he had something going with Adelle and now it is crushed, but it was good for her to Sbu the truth because could have continued thinking they are in love. POOR GUY. (17, male, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

For some readers, a connection seemed to develop between them and the story and its characters, e.g.

I am really scared in this Chapter that someone could die because almost every is hurt badly (17, male, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

Ayobaness!! Wow guyz, u dd rly gud bk dr. And 4me 2 thnk dat u ddnt hve bck up (shme on me). Sry i msjudgd u. Bt thnk God vry1 z owkey, inclng d celeb (lol). (17, female, Ladysmith, home language: isiZulu)

You mak me realize how important fndz are coz iam a single guy who does nt lik 2 mingle wth otha bt nw i got the guts thnx 2 the kontax fndz fr everythng u guyz r the best i wl rely lik2 meet ths characters (17, male, Uitenhage, home language: Afrikaans)

Suggestions

Some readers made suggestions:

I think the story is goin great bt how about using more descriptive and emotive words, tell us about peoples facial expression, it will let us in on what the people are thinking or feeling, it will also activate our imagination... (16, female, Johannesburg, home language: Setswana)

Enye into ukuze ibali libe nomfuthu ndingakholwa ukuba indlela abajongeka ngayo ebusweni xa besandova into(facial exprtnz) ibonakaliswe
(“Another thing which would give the story oomph, I would like to see their facial expressions whenever they discover something”) (17, female, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

Wel i like the ending chpter bt nt al of it tho, i realy realy think u should hev kept the love between sbu n the “superstar” so that the girl n sbu cn hev a lovly story to tel their children lol (16, male, Cape Town, home language: isiXhosa)

Comments on comments

In a few instances readers commented on other reader’s comments, e.g. the comment “Its not hard to believe that a girl like Song is following a wrong path-i mean, she grew up with no father ...” drew the following responses:

Personally i thnk song is emotionally involved with her teacher coz she grew up without a male figure bt only her mum so shez seeking some male companionship. N i hope im wrong! (15, female, Johannesburg, home language: isiZulu)

It rly sad wht happng in Song’s lyf. i mean shez jc a teenager hu grew up wthout a fada figa in her lyf. i rly hpe shz nt up 2smtn bad wth her teacher (17, female, Ladysmith, home language: isiZulu)

Time of comments

Comments were made at the following hours, testifying to the “anywhere, any time” nature of mobile phone usage:
The majority of user comments, wall posts, messages and competition entries contained txtspk, the language that consists of abbreviations and other techniques to craft SMS and instant messages. Txtspk often does not follow the standard rules of English grammar, nor usual word spellings. It is generally seen as a problem for children and teen literacy, negatively affecting grammar and spelling skills. However, research in the Global North into this modern phenomenon is providing an alternative perspective, that texting could be beneficial for literacy. For an overview of the research on the effects of texting on literacy, see Vosloo (2009).

In the case of Kontax, the active mobisite registrants represented a tight group of fans who read the story, engaged with it, formed opinions and expressed those – albeit in the texting and not conventional language register. At first glance, these appear to be positive literacy practices. To fully understand the relationship between texting and the literacy skills of South African teens, more research is needed.

7 Lessons learned

Below are key lessons learned along the way of the project.

- Marketing is crucial. On MXit a Tradepost message is one shown to users as they browse the menu of content provided in the Tradepost section on a particular day. Two Tradepost messages were displayed to promote Kontax, each adding 30,000 subscribers to the story. Publishing on mobile phones means competing against popular consumer brands also utilising that medium, and it is challenging to “get noticed”. Teens also have active social lives and many commitments during the day, which reduce the amount of time they could be reading m-novels. Thus marketing to this audience is crucial.

- Giving away prizes is an effective way to kick-start participation.

- Don’t assume that all users know basic web or mobisite conventions. Even knowing that a hyperlink should be clicked is something that is not naturally intuitive. After a few days we changed the link on the landing page from “Continue in English” to “Click here to continue in English”.

- In Africa, most GPRS-enabled mobile phones have a screen of 128 pixels wide. Designing a compelling interface for such a small screen is challenging, but necessary.
Registration needs to be extremely light and fool-proof. Only do it if absolutely necessary, and then only require the most essential user information. It is always easier to gather additional information from users after they have registered (and if they are finding the site valuable).

When asking for user participation, be prepared to deal with potentially large numbers of responses. For example, over 2,000 entries were submitted for the Sequel Ideas competition on MXit. Not all of these were valid entries (most were not the required 100 words or more in length), but it still took a long time to work through the valid ones. A number of messages and comments on the mobisite required responses, also taking time.

8 Reflections on m4Lit

Quality not quantity

While there weren't many comments left on the mobisite, the ones that were posted showed engagement, opinion and a sense of community amongst the readers. Comments were left very early in the morning, e.g. 4:30am, as well as very late at night. Usually there were about six comments already on the site by the time comment prompt was manually entered by Kontax Team at 7:30am. The sharp drop-off in readers after the first few chapters, followed by the comments and social networking activities of the readers who finished the story, testify to a group of interested readers. These loyal readers can be expected to be active and vocal users.

Sustainability

A key question is: How to make Kontax, or other m-novels, sustainable? After all, this particular project was donor-funded. Looking ahead for Kontax, and for other publishers using the mobisite platform, monetisation could be achieved through sponsorship, advertising, or selling Kontax merchandise, e.g. wallpapers.

While m4Lit will not charge for its content – it is an educational project – the question of whether other publishers could be profitable from selling story content is relevant. But how many people will download chapters if they have to pay for them? Globally, the question of whether users are willing to pay for content or not continues to rage. We believe that users will pay for content if it is affordable enough and has sufficient value for them.

In less than one month, it is estimated that 473,000 chapters were read on MXit, while the only other m-novels on MXit – the Emily series of books – have had 60,000 chapters sold over a six month period. Would Kontax have had such high figures if users had to pay for the chapters? It is difficult to compare the two m-novels because they are so different:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kontax:</th>
<th>Emily series:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length: Short story (21 short chapters each not longer than 400 words)</td>
<td>Length: Long story (first book 300 pages in print)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost: Free</td>
<td>Cost: 100 moola (R1.00) per chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages: English and isiXhosa</td>
<td>Language: English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre: Teen mystery</td>
<td>Genre: Fantasy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It will take some time and many initiatives to work out the business models within the m-publishing space in SA – indeed in the world – over the coming years. At the very least, the m4Lit findings indicate that there is definitely potential to get teens reading, and forming fan communities, on their mobile phones. How to capitalise on this in a financially sustainable way is a major challenge.

Risks to mobile publishing

Publishing on mobile phones can help reduce many production and distribution costs associated with the book industry. This is an advantage of the medium that needs to be further explored. However, currently, mpublishing is not a low-cost exercise: it is still difficult to attract teen users without substantial marketing, as
9 Recommendations

Based on the learnings and findings of m4Lit, the following are recommendations and ideas for future projects:

- Allow more interaction, e.g. poll voting, without having to register.
- Experiment with interactive storytelling, allowing readers to influence story outcomes (like the Choose Your Own Adventure books).
- Provide a space where teens can write their own fiction, e.g. poems, lyrics and stories. A number of teens asked for this.
- Incorporate m-novels into the curriculum. Conversations are currently being had with teachers in Cape Town who are interested in using Kontax as a classroom reading text.
- Publish public domain titles, especially those that are required reading at school.
- Continue to publish Kontax. A successful m-novel will help build the case to educationalists and publishers of the potential of m-novels. Steps should be taken to make Kontax sustainable over time, for example, through sponsorship. Chapter reminders via SMS could also be sponsored.

Some of the recommendations made by Walton (2010) include:

- Publish more story genres and in more languages.
- Explore alternative interfaces to allow multilingual expression, communication, and communities to develop (as opposed to the separate English and isiXhosa interfaces of Kontax)
- Explore formats for easily and freely sharing stories – that is transferring from one phone to another without using the mobile network, e.g. via bluetooth.
- Understand who is excluded from using the mobile internet, e.g. rural teens.

Deumert (2010) recommended that mobile publishing continue to include indigenous languages, and allow teens to self-publish on their own platform.

10 Conclusion

The m4Lit pilot project was an interesting first step into the use of mobiles for teen reading and writing of longer form texts. Digital publishing is a highly contested space right now, with the likes of Amazon’s Kindle and Apple’s iPad battling for dominance of the e-reader market in the developed world. In developing countries, those devices are simply unaffordable for the majority of the population. Mobile phones offer a potential substitute. Perhaps that is why Kontax drew a fair amount of interest from the media, including from the BBC (radio and web), SAfm, Metro FM and Business Day. It also won a Bronze Pixel in the Bookmarks Awards 2009 (the only medal in its category).

While the uptake “data suggest a substantial amount of interest [in m-novels]”, there is “plenty of room for growth” given the number of teens with mobile phones (Walton, 2010). Kontax showed that, for some teens, mobile phones are a viable platform for distributing stories and enabling reader participation.

But there is still much work to be done to better understand the role of mobile phones for literacy. For example, there is a distance and conflict between mobile literacies and school literacies. This needs to be explored and better understood because mobile literacies are so pervasive in young peoples’ lives (Walton, 2010).

It is hoped that the project has made, and will continue to make, a contribution to the future of mobiles for literacy in SA, and will be of value to:

- Teachers looking for alternative tools for literacy and communication development.
- Learners in non-traditional learning environments, e.g. those with access to internet-enabled mobile phones but not to books.
- Publishers who want to explore alternative channels of publishing.

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3 For media coverage see [http://m4lit.wordpress.com/category/promotion/](http://m4lit.wordpress.com/category/promotion/)
Aspiring authors who want to, or have to, self-publish in the form of m-novels.

11 Acknowledgement

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12 References


