

LAUNCH OF THE YOZA M-NOVEL LIBRARY

YOZA On 22 August a new library of cellphone stories – also known as mobile novels or m-novels – was launched by the Shuttleworth Foundation as part of its m4Lit (mobiles for literacy) project. **Yoza** is the name of the m-novel library, which uses cellphones to support teen reading and writing. The m-novels are cool, interactive and free. Yoza is available on www.yoza.mobi and on MXit (go to Tradepost > MXit Cares > mobiBooks) on all WAP-enabled cellphones, as well as on Facebook (search for Yoza Cellphone Stories).

Steve Vosloo, founder of Yoza and fellow for 21st century learning at the Shuttleworth Foundation, says: “For the foreseeable future the cellphone, not the Kindle or iPad, is the ereader of Africa. Yoza aims to capitalise on that to get Africa's teens reading and writing.”

BACKGROUND TO THE LAUNCH

The m4Lit project began in 2009 as a pilot initiative to explore whether and how teens in South Africa would read stories on their cellphones. Most of the reading and writing that happens on cellphones is of very short texts, e.g. SMSes and chat messages on MXit. The Shuttleworth Foundation published a story called *Kontax* in September last year– twenty pages in length – and actively invited reader participation through this longer content; cellphones are interactive after all. Readers could leave comments on chapters, vote in opinion polls related to the story and enter a writing competition. By the end of May 2010 another *Kontax* story had been published.

The uptake was tremendous. Since launch, the two stories have been read over 34 000 times on cellphones! Over 4 000 entries have been received in the writing competitions and over 4 000 comments have been left by readers on individual chapters. Many of the readers asked for more stories and in different genres. Encouraged by the high uptake of the stories and by these reader requests, the Shuttleworth Foundation decided to launch Yoza.

WHAT ARE YOZA’S GOALS?

To get young people reading and writing

Yoza’s goal is to get young people reading and writing, and in the ‘book-poor’ but ‘cellphone-rich’ context of South Africa, the phone is a viable complement and sometimes alternative to a printed book. If, as a country, we want our youth to read, then both books printed on paper and books on cellphones are needed. The paper versus pixels debate consistently takes up a lot of page space, but in a country with a severe literacy problem, it is necessary to move beyond that and focus on reading and writing, whatever the medium.

To create good reading material

First and foremost, stories published on Yoza offer compelling, entertaining reading for teens in South Africa. The aim is to captivate teens and inspire them to catch the reading bug. To that end, an initial line up of appealing stories in different genres have been planned (see Yoza's story line up below). Enjoying well-written stories by good authors is part of the Yoza experience. The m-novels are written in conventional language, with txtspeak only used when a character is writing or reading SMSes or instant message chats. Also included is prescribed school reading that is in the public domain, for example, *Macbeth*.

To use cellphones to make reading material affordable and widely accessible

There is a growing awareness around the impact that a lack of books has on literacy levels in South Africa. Books are scarce and prohibitively expensive for most South Africans. Stats show that 51% of households in South Africa do not own a single leisure book, while an elite 6% of households own 40 books or more. Only 7% of schools have functioning libraries.

What South Africa's teens do have access to are cellphones, with stats indicating that 90% of urban youth have their own cellphone. The take up and interaction with the first two *Kontax* stories published in English and isiXhosa clearly demonstrates that cellphones are a viable platform for local teen reading and writing. There is no charge for the actual stories, but users do pay their mobile network operator for mobile data traffic. Images have been kept to a minimum to keep the mobile data charges low – these data charges on local cellphones range from 5c to 9c per chapter, making Yoza m-novels a very affordable option for great reading material for teens.

To be “open”

Part of Yoza's success will be measured on the number of teens that read, enjoy and share its stories. The more, the better. For this reason stories are published under a Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike licence. This means that anyone can freely copy, distribute, display and remix the content, as long as they credit the original and subsequent authors.

The Praekelt Foundation was commissioned to develop the software platform that drives Yoza, and this too will be released as open-source software.

To grow the library of stories and create a community of readers

Over the next six months the plan for Yoza is to build a library of cellphone stories of multiple genres that are available to teens not only in South Africa, but ultimately throughout Africa. *Kontax* has already been published in Kenya through MXit. Competitions with airtime prizes prompt readers to participate in the interactive questions at the end of chapters, keeping readers engaged and coming back for more.

Current story languages include English and isiXhosa, an Afrikaans story is being written, and ideally stories in all of the South African languages will ultimately be published on Yoza. The Shuttleworth Foundation encourages the public to get involved in translating the stories into local languages – “if you translate it we'll gladly publish it.”

To reach sustainability

While the Foundation is incubating the project, it will need to be sustainable from early next year. The project is actively looking for sponsors or partners to help make it sustainable.

WHAT'S IN THE YOZA LIBRARY?

- *Kontax*, the flagship title about a group of four teenage friends in Cape Town. In trial publications, the first two instalments of this m-novel series were read 34 000 times in seven months! The Yoza library features all m-novels in the series, with a fourth sequel launched on 22 August. This series is written by Sam Wilson and Lauren Beukes of Clockwork Zoo.
- *Streetskillz* is a brand new soccer series written by talented young writer and soccer fanatic Charlie Human. The first story – *Golden Goal* – launched on 22 August and is set in the month of the soccer World Cup. Unforgettable international soccer reality merges with a dramatic fictional street soccer competition in Du Noon township in Cape Town.
- *Sisterz* is a sassy new series by local chic lit star Fiona Snyckers. On 22 August *Latoya's Secret* launched straight into the depths of dark family secrets, the highs of friendship, school Pop Idols auditions, and the breath-stopping sensations of first love.
- *Confessions of a Virgin Loser* by talented, thoughtful novelist Edyth Bulbring is the story of a Joburg boy steering his way through the complicated world of peer pressure, teenage sex and HIV/AIDS, while just trying to be a cool kid at school.

Sequels to the above stories will generally launch on the first of each month from October 2010.

- *A Bicycle Ride through Lesotho* by Duncan Guy – of *Learn the News* fame – tells the entertaining tale of riding through the Mountain Kingdom on a bicycle.
- *Yoza Classics* is a section of its own, featuring a range of public domain titles. School prescribed work *Macbeth* is one of the first titles selected for Yoza Classics. The idea is not necessarily that teens will read the whole of *Macbeth* on their cellphones, but if they have to read Act 1; Scene 1 for homework and they don't have a textbook, then they can do so on their phones.

USEFUL MEDIA INFO

Steve Vosloo, founder of Yoza, is the fellow for 21st century learning at the Shuttleworth Foundation. He has a technology background and focuses on youth and digital media.

Quote from Steve Vosloo

“We are looking to grow the library of stories as well as a vibrant community of young users who not only read the stories but participate in the commenting, reviewing and writing of them. We're turning reading into a social, sharing experience.”

INFO FOR READERS

Teens – get reading on Yoza!

- Look out for interactive questions at the end of each chapter – there are airtime prizes to be won! Also look out for regular writing competitions to win more airtime.
- In August and September, Yoza and READ Educational Trust are giving away great prizes for the best story comments as part of Readathon 2010.
- Write a story for Yoza and submit it at www.yoza.mobi/write – if they like it, they'll publish it.

Parents and teachers – get involved

- Encourage teens to read the stories, write comments and story reviews and enter the writing competitions.
- Bring Yoza into the classroom by using one of the stories as prescribed reading and have learners write assignments on it.
- Write a story for Yoza, or encourage your learners or child to submit a story at www.yoza.mobi/write. If they like it, they'll publish it.

CONTACT

For further information contact:

Steve Vosloo
m4Lit Project Leader
Shuttleworth Foundation
Call: +27 (0)83 208 9891
Email: steve.vosloo@shuttleworthfoundation.org
Blog: www.m4lit.wordpress.com (for project updates)

Press Release

Issued by: Emerging Media
Contact person: Renee Conradie
Call: +27 (0)11 792 4706
Email: renee@emergingmedia.co.za