

Enhancing the Competitiveness of an Independent Feature Film Production Company through the Application Of New Digital Technologies using Knowledge Transfer A Case Study of Green Screen Productions

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Abstract

This paper describes the Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) between Green Screen Productions (GSP), a commercial feature film production company, and the University of York's Department of Theatre, Film and Television (TFTV). Supported by the Technology Strategy Board (TSB) and the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the two-year project began in January 2013.

A contextual discussion details how the feature film industry is undergoing a significant technological transition as it moves away from traditional analogue tools towards digital systems. The paper describes how this changing industry context prompted the KTP project as GSP seeks to become more competitive by embracing new technologies and processes in order to maximise efficiency and profitability.

After describing the origin of the relationship between GSP and TFTV, and the development of the KTP, the paper discusses how the main objective of the project was to develop a set of resources to enable the company to choose and apply different types of digital technologies in support of production and distribution of its film projects. It then discusses the strategy to achieve this objective and how the knowledge transfer process between the Company Partner, Knowledge Base and Associate occurred. Lastly, the paper presents the benefits that each partner has obtained since the project was initiated.

Keywords: *feature film production, film distribution, film value chain, Technology Strategy Board, Arts and Humanities Research Council*

1. Introduction

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP) offer companies a unique opportunity to grow by exploring specific strategic business needs and capitalising on cost-effective collaborative relationships with key academic research groups. Often

these partnerships involve the commercial development of advances in research and yield a tangible product or manufacturing process as the main outcome. KTPs within the creative sector are comparatively new and are more difficult to characterise than those in the engineering, manufacturing or scientific industries. This is due to an inherent paradox that lies at the centre of creative industry, particularly the film industry, where management must contend with both creative and commercial demands. Managing the creative process while at the same time balancing the financial requirements makes for a highly dynamic environment that requires flexibility [1]. The KTP between Green Screen Productions (GSP) – an independent feature film production company – and the University of York's Department of Theatre, Film and Television (TFTV) is one such collaboration. The partnership involves a detailed exploration of cutting-edge production methods, distribution methodologies and enhanced digital marketing practices with the goal of imparting core knowledge to enable Green Screen Productions to maximise its ability to be competitive and enhance productivity. This paper will describe both the nature of the project as well as the broader commercial context that prompted it.

2. Feature Film Industry: Changing Landscapes

The feature film market is complex, constituting an array of specialised players, each with their own business dynamics and market requirements. These players involve producers, financiers, sales agents, distributors, exhibitors and retailers. Correspondingly the activities that draw these professionals together to produce a film product involve the lifecycle of development, financing, production, distribution and exploitation. The relationship between these diverse and often disconnected players and activities forms what is known as the film value chain [1,2]. Within the UK this value chain is mainly operated by small-to-medium-sized businesses (SMEs), often running on tight margins [3].

The strategic effect of what could be termed a 'disintegrated model' is that each element in the film value chain is heavily dependent on the next player/operator's partnership and cooperation in order to drive a project forward [4]. A significant technological shift is occurring as the industry moves away from traditional analogue tools towards digital systems, which has begun to change the nature of the chain. This shift has allowed companies to have greater integration across the value chain by converging resources, reducing the reliance on specialty skills from third parties and consultant experts.

An example of this can be found in the domain of principal photography where relatively inexpensive digital cameras, such as the Red Epic, can deliver picture resolution similar to that of a conventional 35mm negative. In post-production, digital images can now be acquired and immediately edited as well as enhanced with visual effects, using personal computers at a fraction of the cost of those processes for physical film [2]. These cost efficient advances in technology are lowering the entry level for filmmakers and facilitating a greater number of low-budget breakout hits. This was recently witnessed in the release of British director Gareth Edwards 'Monsters' in 2010. The film was shot on a Red Epic and went

through an extensive post-production process involving 250 highly technical visual effects shots [5]. This was completed single handily by Edwards and his editor and was only possible due to the low cost of new industry standard software tools and computer hardware. 'Monsters' had a production budget of only \$500,000, yet the film went on to gain an international theatrical release, earning approximately \$4.2million at the box office [6].

While these technological advances have provided filmmakers with more efficient and cost effective methods of producing films, they have paradoxically created a more competitive marketplace by opening the filmmaking process up to more people. This was highlighted in the British Film Institute's 2013 annual statistical yearbook that notes an ever-increasing congestion within the marketplace. In the ten-year period between 2003 and 2013, there was a 40% increase in the number of films released in the UK, with 423 films released in 2003 compared with 698 in 2012 [7]. This increase in releases has been exacerbated by a transition away from traditional 35mm print towards digital cinema projection (D-cinema), which allows exhibitors to be more flexible in programming.

To compound the issue even further, annual theatrical ticket sales have plateaued during this period. In 2003 admissions stood at 167.3 million and in 2013, 165.5 million [7]. It should also be noted that the revenues generated from these admissions favour the bigger budget films; the top 100 films released in the UK have taken an average of 91% of the gross revenues over the past five years [7]. Within the current industry, there are too many films now competing for too few viewers, resulting on a squeeze on revenues, particularly among independent film producers. Recent statistics highlight the difficulty that companies face operating in the market, indicating that films with budgets between £2m - £5m have only a 4.6% chance of returning a profit. This rises to 17.4% for films with budgets over £10m [8].

As a result, the film industry is looking more progressively at new ways of commercialising product utilising new technologies. Broadband Internet, mobile and connected devices, and video on demand (VOD) platforms such as Netflix are seen as increasingly important in monetizing product. Indeed, producers are now using VOD technology to reconsider established production-distribution models and explore new business opportunities. This was evidenced in a watershed moment in 2011, when Netflix commissioned the \$100M development of the political drama serial *House of Cards* (2013) starring Kevin Spacey. It marked the first major production solely financed and distributed by an online VOD platform, completely bypassing the traditional television ecosystem of networks and cable operators, and entering the value chain system at the beginning stages. By utilising sophisticated algorithms, the Netflix platform could determine specific audience preferences from their downloads, which provided a profile for a potentially successful product that was used to develop the project. This detailed knowledge about the market helped to reduce the investment risk inherent in film or TV production. Unlike traditional TV or film exhibition, which often staggers release dates to specific markets, the entire first season of the series was released on the

same day in all Netflix's territories. This marked a new way of distributing TV content online and demonstrated to the industry the advantages of embracing online delivery not only for TV but for film as well, as Netflix core business is film rental. This type of fundamental change highlights the evolving economic and strategic nature of the industry and the opportunities for innovation that have emerged.

Building a solid understanding of these technological developments across the film value chain within Green Screen Productions is a core objective of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership with TFTV. The goal is to enable GSP to become more agile in a challenging marketplace and take advantage of suitable opportunities that competitors may not be able to exploit.

3. Company Partner, Knowledge Base and Background

Green Screen Productions (GSP), incorporated in 2008, is an independent feature film production company founded by a team of experienced industry personnel including producers Alan Latham (*Circus, Modigliani*) and Thomas Mattinson (*Victoria & Albert, Nancherrow*), and award-winning visual artist and director Kit Monkman (Prince, Kylie Minogue) with Oscar-winning producer Stephen Evans (*Madness of King George, Henry V*) serving as the company's Chairman. They established the company in North Yorkshire with the aim of producing cost-effective and innovative commercial films and television programmes for international distribution. A key component of their strategy was to take advantage of the lower overhead costs of establishing facilities in the North of England and to partner with an academic institution to source emerging talent. Serendipitously, the emergence of a new entity at the University of York directly fitted this objective.

Established in 2007, the Department of Theatre, Film and Television (TFTV) at the University of York was developed as part of the first phase of the University's Heslington East initiative, a £750M expansion project that is to ultimately double the size of the institution. TFTV differs from similar departments in other universities as a substantial portion of its funding has come from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Conditions attached to this funding require that the department engage in commercial activity and help to build the local economy within the creative sector. To facilitate this, commercial-level facilities were required. In Autumn 2010, the department opened a state-of-the-art £30M facility purpose-built to support and foster interactions between the University, researchers and business. These facilities include high-end postproduction resources for editing, picture grading, visual effects and sound, two broadcast-compliant HD television studios, a black box sound stage, a 220 seat scenic stage theatre and a 150 seat digital cinema that can also function as a dubbing theatre. This production complex was designed to be one of the best-equipped commercial resources in the UK and this has played a major role in attracting industry collaborators.

Rather than build the department completely from scratch, the University sought to recruit from within using existing staff from other departments. Among the four founding members was John Mateer, a film and television industry veteran who had been hired to establish production elements of a course in Media Technology in the Electronics department. Mateer's professional experience has included working on innovative projects involving cutting-edge technologies for production and post-production as well as visual effects. This expertise helped to make a formal relationship between Green Screen Productions and the University viable.

In 2005, Alan Latham and Thomas Mattinson were producing a feature film for Bauer-Martinez and MGM Studios entitled *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey*. Kit Monkman and his business partner Tom Wexler had been hired to oversee visual effects for the project. Originally this was only to have been a few shots for the film so Monkman got in touch with Mateer (whom he knew previously) to see about establishing a visual effects facility on the University Science Park and also to find out if any students might be interested in working on the project. A team was assembled from Media Technology and Music Technology undergraduates who were trained on the requisite software and hired as visual effects assistants. The production company was so pleased with the work that they took the decision to use Monkman and his team for the vast majority of the visual effects (about a third of the film). The alliance was highly successful with all parties benefitting – the production company obtained high-quality visual effects work at a reduced cost; Monkman and Wexler established themselves as capable feature film visual effects supervisors; the students involved were not only paid for their work but gained valuable industry experience and credit (two students, Lewis Saunders and Andrew Fensom, were immediately hired by established Soho postproduction companies) and the University gained strong publicity that later helped to drive the development of TFTV.

Based on the success of the ...*Toomey* collaboration, Latham and Monkman looked to develop closer ties with the University working with Mateer. After Green Screen Productions was formed and TFTV was fully in operation, an Umbrella Agreement was made between the parties to establish a formal relationship. As part of this agreement, GSP would have access to the facilities and equipment in TFTV for feature film work, as well as access to top graduate talent. For the department, the partnership would enable teaching to be informed directly by current practice, the department's profile to be raised within the film industry, students and graduates the opportunity to gain experience working on professional projects and, most importantly, the University to fulfil the obligations associated with the ERDF funding.

The first feature film project to be developed from the Umbrella Agreement was *The Knife That Killed Me* for Universal Pictures UK, with production starting in 2011. This film used computer-generated backgrounds with live actors being incorporated into them, presenting a highly complex technical challenge. As the film developed, it became clear that there were company needs for expertise that transcended the scope of the project and current relationship. The University's

Research and Enterprise Office had been monitoring the collaboration between GSP and TFTV, and suggested that a Knowledge Transfer Partnership could be appropriate to meet GSP's emerging needs. A KTP would allow for a detailed exploration of cutting-edge production and distribution methodologies in a way not possible through the existing relationship either in traditional academic research or a standard business setting. GSP and TFTV agreed, with Mateer, Monkman and Latham taking the process forward with the assistance of Rukmal Abeysekera, the University's Knowledge Transfer Manager. An application for a Knowledge Transfer Partnership, jointly through the Technology Strategy Board (TSB) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), was submitted in 2012. A two-year £135K partnership was approved to start in January 2013. A search for a suitable Associate was conducted and Keith Kehoe, a recent graduate of the MA in Producing for Film and Television programme at Bournemouth University, was appointed. This decision was based, in large part, on the strength of his dissertation, which looked at financial aspects of independent feature film production. Given his interest in the financial side of film as well as his experience as a producer of short films (including one that was accepted at the Short Film Corner at the Cannes Film Festival) Kehoe stood out as the best fit for the project.

4. Knowledge Transfer Partnership Project

The Directors of GSP have significant skill and experience in traditional methods of film production and distribution. As such, they are experts in conventional methods of all stages of pre-production, production, post-production and distribution of feature films, but have not relied on digital technologies up to this point.

From the outset, the principals in the company have been interested in exploring new technologies that have been adopted by the industry. However to do so, they have had to rely on consultant experts to adapt these new systems to their projects, and only when such systems have been proven to be used on a wide scale. This reactive approach is very common in the film industry given the perception of risk associated with new methods. To ensure maximum production efficiency and profitability within the current industry climate, GSP were keen to engage in a more proactive approach. Therefore, recognising the benefits of digital technologies, but lacking sufficient knowledge to be able to fully utilise them for productions without outside assistance, GSP could see the opportunity of engaging in a formal Knowledge Transfer Partnership.

As such, the objective of the KTP was to develop a set of resources for GSP that would enable the company to choose and apply different types of digital technologies in support of production and distribution of its film projects. Similar production companies typically do not have this type of expertise in house thus the knowledge gained would give GSP a competitive advantage. In essence, this represents the beginning of a paradigm shift within the industry and GSP is looking to get ahead of the curve.

The project objectives would be achieved by undertaking specific outputs. The first began with the creation of a needs-analysis report to specify GSP's requirements. This was developed through meetings with the Managing Director, Producers and other staff to gain a precise understanding of the current methodologies for producing and distributing films within the company as well as to identify GSP's objectives for using new technologies.

Once the needs-analysis documentation was agreed with the primary stakeholders, the Associate conducted a literature review to determine appropriate technologies and to identify examples of best practice. This review covered all phases of production and distribution, with the Associate undertaking secondary research of trade publications, vendor literature and other standard industry resources. Primary research was carried out through attending specialist industry training events in the UK and across Europe. Regular meetings with GSP staff and TFTV personnel took place to discuss the findings and to ensure suitability to the company's needs.

Based on the formal analysis and review, 'toolkits' were developed to package the information as a series of resources for GSP staff to use. It was decided early on to divide these toolkits into six specific areas of the feature film process: Pre-production, Production, Post-production, Distribution, Marketing and Financing. Each toolkit consists of a set of documents that details technological solutions that can be applied to each specific production or distribution context. For example, the distribution toolkit outlined a series of strategies that the company could apply in order to release their films. This included case studies that discussed how other companies have utilised alternative strategies to distribute film and glossary descriptions detailing how different video on demand platforms operated. The knowledge transfer has been achieved through a formal presentation of each toolkit to GSP staff, with a discussion of the findings and conclusions of the research. This has been supported with regular consultations with GSP to ensure that staff can understand and apply the specific information of each toolkit. GSP trials each toolkit in different production contexts as dictated by its active slate of projects. The Associate has monitored these trials, collecting feedback that is used to refine and improve the toolkit before being formally integrated into business methods.

Digital technology is a highly technical and specialised area, so a key challenge the Associate has faced has centred on gaining a sufficient understanding of relevant new systems and processes. He has had to consider finding the correct level of descriptive detail and tone to communicate this information effectively to GSP staff who are not particularly technologically focused. To achieve this, close collaboration and frequent communication have been required between the Associate, Knowledge Base and Company Partner. Accordingly, on a weekly basis, the Associate met with the Academic Lead to draw on his expertise and receive guidance towards appropriate resources. Likewise, the Associate met with the Company Supervisor regularly to understand GSP's current operating procedures and to ensure that the company's needs were being examined in a way

that accurately reflected their requirements for specific technologies. Monthly meetings also took place between the Associate, Company Supervisor and Academic Lead to ensure that the correct areas of GSP operations were being examined and that development of each toolkit was being properly conducted.

As the KTP has progressed, there have been agreed adjustments to the initial aims of the project. Through the process of acquiring new knowledge, the company have come to realise that some toolkits require more attention than others. This is to be expected given the dynamic nature of an industry experiencing significant change in the face of rapidly evolving digital technologies. However, more importantly, as a new company GSP have matured over the duration of the formal relationship with TFTV and have realised that some relevant expertise actually already exists within certain areas of the company. This was evidenced when the Associate began working on the Post-production toolkit. The employees within the Visual Effects department in the company had gained appreciable additional knowledge through GSP's production of *The Knife That Killed Me*. Though the Associate assisted in integrating improved project management systems within the visual effects department, the complex technical knowledge for graphics production was already largely present but the level had not been fully recognised. Because of this, it was felt that the company could gain more benefit by the KTP focusing on the most pressing needs within the company. As a result, more emphasis was placed on the Distribution and Marketing toolkits as the company prepared for the release of *The Knife That Killed Me*.

The Knife That Killed Me is an unusual product within the film market as it was shot entirely in a studio with the actors performing against a green screen with the backgrounds being subsequently created digitally. The film therefore has a unique visual style unlike any other current film within the market, which places it outside conventional genre and audience parameters that sales agents, distributors and exhibitors use to market film product. This has created challenges for the company in terms of securing theatrical distribution, despite strong test audience feedback and pre-release critical acclaim. Distribution and marketing are rapidly evolving areas of the feature film chain as the industry has begun to focus more on digital delivery of product. Aware of this transition, principals within GSP were keen to capitalise on the new opportunities available. Accordingly, the KTP Associate has explored emerging digital distribution and marketing strategies to connect the film with a young adult audience, the film's core target market. Working closely with the company, an online marketing campaign was developed that utilises social media as its primary means of generating awareness. A 'crowdsourced' funding campaign on the Kickstarter platform was launched to raise additional finance to distribute the film and raise further awareness with the film being released theatrically, on DVD and through online video on demand platforms in the Summer of 2014. Traditionally, GSP would have needed to hire third party specialists to develop and rollout a campaign such as this. The KTP enabled the company to take advantage of the technological transition in film exploitation and have control over the financial, creative and administrative requirements of film exploitation that would not have otherwise been possible.

5. Benefits To KTP Partners

The enhancement of knowledge has presented a variety of benefits to each of the KTP partners allowing them to grow in a number of ways:

5.1 Company Partner

For Green Screen Productions, the ability to apply the newest digital tools and techniques to their existing business practices are crucial if they are to become a more competitive and sustainable feature film business. This has been achieved by enabling GSP to choose and apply particular toolkits, adapting them to the specific needs of each production. The benefits of this are numerous:

- Utilising the newest filmmaking technologies and practices has not only enabled GSP to improve operational procedures but also offered them a new means of creative expression through gaining a deep understanding of production technologies that allows them to be used in innovative ways
- Having a thorough understanding of digital delivery of product has allowed the company to explore new opportunities for commercialising film. This involves utilising video on demand to shorten traditional film release windows and employing digital marketing techniques to raise product awareness
- The company has gained improved efficiency in the VFX department through employing new project management systems
- Staff have benefited from being upskilled enabling them to apply cutting-edge technologies in pre-production, production and post-production

Green Screen Productions are similar to other production companies in that they seek to continually improve their business efficiency by producing the best possible films at the lowest possible cost. Where GSP differ lies in their ambition to innovate utilising emerging technologies in order to reorganise relationships across the value chain and become more integrated. The architecture of the independent film value chain rarely involves companies producing and delivering film product to audiences through a single company. GSP realise the opportunity that having this ability to control product provides. This has enabled them to break away from a traditional business perspective that separates these activities (and ultimately results in lower direct revenue). This represents one of the most exciting benefits facilitated through the KTP collaboration.

Before the project began, GSP were not engaged in the final two stages of the feature film life cycle – marketing and distribution. This KTP has allowed the company to begin to explore these processes through the release of *The Knife That Killed Me*, which has served as an effective ‘test bed’. In terms of marketing,

the company have benefited from being able to build direct brand awareness with consumers through digital engagement on social media. The ability to retain full control of the creative and administrative elements of the marketing campaign allows the company to be more responsive to audience reaction to marketing content. The company can quickly identify what is, or is not, working and adapt accordingly, allowing GSP to remain more agile than if they were working with third party specialists or consultants. For distribution, the company have explored reducing traditional release windows in order to make the film available on a number of platforms simultaneously. Part of the strategy involves live streaming the film online for free (as a 'one-off') during the film's national premiere. The approach can also be seen as a means of aligning to emerging audience viewing habits and expectations, which increasingly involve online platforms. A simultaneous release also offers a more cost-efficient approach, allowing GSP to concentrate on marketing using a single unified campaign for multiple platforms.

A key part of creating a competitive business strategy involves aligning an organisation with its strategic environment [9]. Through the KTP and collaborative relationship with TFTV, Green Screen Productions have been able to gain greater understanding of emerging digital opportunities for the film industry and have positioned themselves to take full advantage.

5.2 Knowledge Base

The Department of Theatre, Film & TV has gained unique insight into a number of different aspects of commercial feature film production and exploitation in the context of an emerging new digital economy. The ability to work very closely with GSP through all stages of an active commercial film project has meant that TFTV has gained absolutely up-to-date information about the business of independent feature film production through all phases of the process. It has also given direct exposure to challenges posed by current market conditions. This has helped to not only develop additional research strands in the domain (discussed below) but also to inform teaching by giving students an understanding of current and emerging practice, and how new technologies are affecting them. Research has been enhanced in a number of different ways:

- All phases of the development, production, marketing and exhibition of *The Knife That Killed Me* have been formally incorporated into a research framework whereby project stakeholder and participant expectations have been actively monitored and surveyed at each stage of the process (pre-production through completion). This has not only enabled the creation of a highly detailed snapshot of a current independent feature film project but, through the KTP, enabled direct analysis of financial and commercial aspects of the film that would otherwise have not been possible given the commercial sensitivity of the data

- New strands of research have emerged looking at areas such as changes in industry distribution methods, new means of feature film marketing and means to enhance post-production processes
- Existing areas of research have been strengthened including explorations of new financial models for independent feature film and the efficacy of academic-industry collaborations in the creative sector

Work placement and internship opportunities have also been made available to students as part of the collaboration. For example, during the digital marketing campaign of *The Knife That Killed Me*, the company hired a student intern directly from the department for three weeks in order to assist with the management and implementation of the digital marketing campaign. The KTP with Green Screen Productions has enabled TFTV to develop and expand its understanding of commercial filmmaking and enhance its ability to engage with industry partners that would not have been possible otherwise.

5.3 The KTP Associate

Through his close work with principals at Green Screen Productions, trips to film markets and exhibitions, and participation in numerous targeted courses and workshops, the project has allowed Kehoe to develop an in-depth understanding of all aspects of feature film creation and exploitation. This includes a strong understanding and appreciation of new technologies available to film practitioners. Kehoe has developed a close working relationship with staff in the company. He has been able to draw on their wealth of experience to understand the roles and responsibilities of industry professionals in a commercial film environment. This experience should serve him well as he pursues his overall career objective of ultimately becoming a feature film producer.

Unique to this project has been the ability for Kehoe to be fully engaged in the implementation process as the distribution and marketing toolkit has been trialled with a live project. This has allowed him to gain valuable practical experience that complements the knowledge obtained and has also enabled him to tailor his work directly to support GSP objectives.

The Knowledge Transfer Partnership supports personal development to ensure that the Associate has the skills and knowledge to successfully complete the project. This has allowed Kehoe to attend leading film industry training workshops including:

- London Film School - Sales Marketing and Distribution: a two-day intensive workshop with leading industry experts. This gave Kehoe his first introduction to the current UK distribution landscape and the impact of digital technology on traditional processes

- European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs (EAVE) – Film Marketing Workshop: a four-day residential programme in Luxembourg that focused on marketing during development, production, sales, distribution and exhibition. The international perspective gave new insights into alternative regional approaches to film marketing
- Squared Online – Certificate in Digital Marketing: a six-month online training programme created by Google to develop expertise in digital marketing technology and practice. This proved to be valuable in the creating of the campaign for *The Knife That Killed Me*

GSP are a company with a culture that encourages innovation and the sharing of ideas from all members of staff, not just principals. They use a flatter and less hierarchical reporting structure that is not common in production companies. As a result, Kehoe had to adapt to this different way of thinking, which had the benefit of him gaining a new sense of confidence in making proposals and approaching his project management tasks.

6. Conclusion

In the ten-year period between 2002 and 2012 the number of production companies operating in the UK almost doubled from just over 4,500 to nearly 9,000 [7]. To compete in the face of this increasingly crowded landscape, companies must be prepared to innovate and adapt to the newest advances in technology and practice. This is particularly pertinent against the current film industry backdrop where the intricate relationship between content and technology has become more complex than ever. New ways of producing film and delivering to audiences exist through digital technology. The film sector is grappling with the challenges and opportunities that these present.

Green Screen Productions have understood this since their inception in 2008 and have realised the value of a commercial relationship with a research-led university department, such as Theatre, Film and Television, to adapt to industry change. The objective of the KTP between GSP and TFTV has been to provide a proactive strategic response in order for the company to operate at the cutting-edge of digital film production, distribution and marketing. All indications suggest that, by the conclusion of the KTP in January 2015, the project will have successfully achieved this objective, injecting digital specialist expertise within Green Screen Productions that will strengthen their long-term competitiveness in a challenging UK film industry.

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