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FROM MOVIES TO GAMES: HOW FILM POLICY IS CHANGING

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Following on from the European Screens Conference, MeCETES has invited speakers to write a blog about their conference paper. Here, Gertjan Willems charts how film policy in Flanders is expanding into new areas like video games and app design.

While the expansion of film industry activities from film to other media has a long history, media convergence has intensified this trend in recent years. Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, offers an interesting European case-study of how film policy is responding.

In Flanders, a selective, cultural film support system was first installed in 1964. The support system provided production support and occasionally post-production support for feature films and to a lesser degree for animation films and short films, with occasional support for documentaries.

From the mid-1970s on, filmmakers could also apply for screenplays grants. During the 1980s, the Flemish film policy framework remained quite stable, with a clear focus on film production support.

This started to change in the 1990s. Apart from pre- and post-production support measures that became more important, the support policy towards 'creative documentaries' became a structural policy element and, notably, production support for 'quality' television series was introduced.

In 2002, the film support system was renewed as the Flanders Audiovisual Fund (VAF) was established. Ever since, under the VAF umbrella, Flanders' film policy framework has become more encompassing and more layered.

For the film component, separate regulations (grouped under the 'VAF/Film Fund') have been set up for fiction, animation, documentary and experimental films, each time with subdivisions for screenplay-writing, development, production and promotion support. This is complemented by a variety of other support schemes, for example for low budget films or promising graduates from film schools.

Next to stimulating film projects, the VAF also supports professional training for filmmakers, executes and orders studies on the film and audio-visual industry and supports various non-production oriented film initiatives in Flanders (e.g. film festivals, film education projects, film publications).

At the same time, the VAF has increasingly expanded its policy scope from film to other media. Under the VAF, the television support scheme has diversified to fiction, documentary and animation television series. This television component is since 2010 being organized under the 'VAF/Media Fund', which clearly aims at anticipating on the changing media environment, marked by convergence trends. As such, the VAF/Media Fund offers the possibility to apply for support for a cross-media component to television series, thereby focusing on interactive media such as games, websites, social media and applications for smartphones and tablets.

The VAF has also expanded its field of action with the VAF/Game Fund, which aims at supporting the creation of applied games and entertainment games. When the ministers of Media and Education in 2012 agreed to set up this new game support program, they decided not to incorporate it in the government administration, but to encapsulate it in the autonomous VAF. The fact that the ministers decided to give the new media program a place within an institution that has a film focus at its roots, seems to suggest that film still takes a crucial place within the broader creative screens policies.

This is confirmed when we look at the concrete allocation of funds to the various support schemes managed by the VAF. Whereas the 2014 budget for the VAF/Film Fund was €15.4 million (with €7.7 million reserved for fiction film production support), this was €4 million for the VAF/Media Fund and €750,000 for the VAF/Game Fund.

In this light, we can only conclude that although there is a definite and irreversible expansion of film policy to broader creative screens policies, the film policy component, and more specifically the fiction film production policy component, retains its central place within the policy framework, around which new media policies are organized.

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