ASK THE ARTISTS:
ANDREAS
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Andreas is the founder and CEO of the Munich-based company Cliparts.de, experts in the field of game show infrastructure and graphics services. They have been responsible for many beloved shows, such as "The Price is Right", "Jeopardy" and "Wheel of Fortune", as well as the German hit show "Schlag den Raab" and its spin-off "Schlag den Star". We met with Andreas to learn more about the intricate field of game show productions.

Ventuz:
You operate in a very specialized field. Tell us what Game Show Technology entails in your view.

Andreas:
What generally comes to mind when you think about game shows is the graphic represent-tation of questions, answers, scores and so forth, both in the form of on-air graphics as well as on displays in the studio. This is what the viewer sees. For us, however, the entire peri-phery is also part of our work. This includes

buzzers, time measurement, any type of sensory feedback, anything that is included in the games. And some of our customers always come up with quite wacky game ideas. Our job is to create and implement the technology to make these games work in the TV studio.

Ventuz:
Have you always been interested in games?

Andreas:
Not really, but I have always been interested in content and story. Originally, I wanted to

become a journalist. But there was also my passion for computers and I might even have become a true techy, if my parents had allowed drilling and brazing in the living room. I started programming in tenth grade and eventually went to university and got a degree in precision engineering. But my interest in content never subsided.

Ventuz:
What was your first encounter with the TV industry?

Andreas:
I was still in university, when I had an internship at an engineering office in Munich and was asked to create a desktop publishing tool for a production at the Bavaria Film Studios. That was back in 1989. So I went into the studio and overheard the producer complain about the control tool for the digital indicators. Even though I had no experience, it was obvious that the provided solution was not the right fit for the studio: it was complicated to handle and didn't work according to the production's needs. I sat down over the weekend, programmed a new solution and showed it to my boss. We then presented my approach to the producer,

who was already fed up with the other contractor, so we got this job. And that was the first installment of "The Price Is Right" in Germany. That's where it all started.

Ventuz:
What did the market look like at that time? What were the requirements?

Andreas:
The first projects I got were not very sophisticated in terms of the content. The challenge lay more in coping with the production volume. With "The Price Is Right" we were recording four shows per day, five days a week for three weeks, so sixty shows back to back, live on tape. We needed to provide a system with broadcast reliability in order not to disturb production.

Ventuz:
What do you mean when you say: broadcast reliability?

Andreas:
It is a combination: the most important thing is absolute stability of the system during production. We treat every production like a live

situation, because even when you record to tape, you still have an audience in the studio that wants to have a good experience. The second important issue is usability. When you work in a live environment, you can never be sure what happens next. Therefore, you need a frontend that allows you to react quickly to changing circumstances. The candidate might accidentally press the wrong button, or the host might allow a late buzzer or an answer that is only 98% correct and would have been ruled out by the system. Your frontend needs to be flexible enough to permit these exceptions and visualize them accordingly. This is exactly what our systems are designed for.
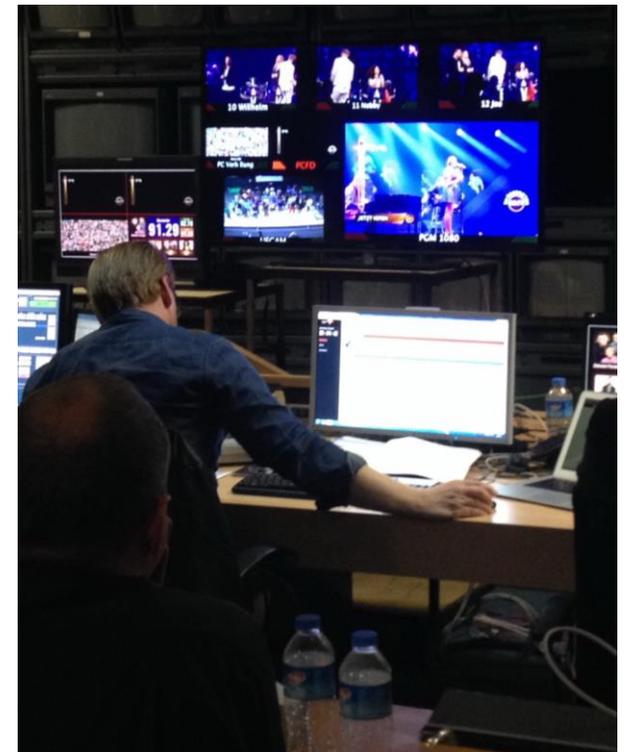
Ventuz:
You graduated in 1991, and in 2001 you turned your one-man-show into the company Cliparts.de and hired staff. How has the market changed since you started out?

Andreas:
The first big change came when broadcasters started to use more on-air graphics such as lower thirds, subtitles, clocks, counters and so forth. Slowly the graphics became more and more important with shows like Jeopardy. You still had your buzzers and buttons, but all displays became digital. Using video signals saved a lot of costs and provided much more flexibility. For a short while there was a hype around using virtual studios, but that didn't last very long. And the biggest shift today is wireless. Many productions want to ban cables from their sets. I do understand this, it is slick to have your candidates use tablets, but I would never recommend going wireless – after all, it is less reliable. Nonetheless we have produced many shows using Wi-Fi and have always found ways to troubleshoot any obstructions. The wireless trend is so strong, it even exceeds the studio: apps and second screens are a big topic nowadays and allow the viewers at home to participate in the show. We have seen some interesting concepts, but so far very few actually succeeded. It isn't always easy to predict what the viewer will like.

Ventuz:
Does it happen that you advise a customer not to pursue an idea?

Andreas:
Yes, certainly, especially because budgets are growing tighter and tighter. Sometimes I even talk them out of hiring us completely, if I see that they can solve their problem with already existing onboard means. I truly believe that today, as a company, you can only survive if you are authentic and competent at the same time. Part of that is showing the customer the best way to go, even if that is not beneficial for us. They will remember us as an honest and competent supplier and come back to us with future projects.

Ventuz:
When and why did you start using Ventuz?

Andreas:
With the rise of on-air graphics, we needed a character generator and chose a solution that was perfect at the time. But due to some business moves and acquisitions, the point came where this tool was not developed as thoroughly as we would have liked. Handling

became stiff and we did not have the flexibility we needed. The biggest problem was the shift to HD, which was a disaster. Plus, the support was slow and insufficient. We needed to change. Ventuz was one of the tools we tested. We loved it, it was a huge leap from what we had been using before. In the end, we chose it because it allowed us to stick to our preferred programming language C#. And I appreciate the people behind the software. They are accessible, easy to talk to and the support has been great from the get-go. This is one of the reasons that I am doing this interview and have agreed to publish our projects on the Ventuz website. I haven't done this for any other hardware or software provider, but Ventuz really was a game changer for us. And it is always a pleasure to work with the Ventuz staff.

Ventuz:
Your work entails much more than Ventuz. How do you find the right hardware and software for your projects?

Andreas:
We have a hardware partner who we have worked with for many years. Whenever our customers ask for a specific setup or we develop an idea, he is the first person we

contact. We then get together and find the perfect setup, try different approaches and combine the best fitting software and hardware into a final solution. Sometimes we also research devices on the internet. We then order what we need and test everything in our office. But at the center of our work still lies our custom control software, which we have developed over the years. This is the secret recipe of every game technology provider: every company has their own control software that manages all devices and third party software products.

Ventuz:
Tell us a bit about some of the latest challenges you have had to face.

Andreas:
We have been responsible for one of Germany's most popular game shows during the last years, "Schlag den Raab", and we now also support the spin-off "Schlag den Star". Recently we were asked to create a setup that would allow the contestants to throw medicine balls, these heavy balls they use for physical therapy, at a wall that would give visual feedback in the spot where the ball hit. Now, we obviously couldn't use a touchscreen, as the ball would have crushed it. So, the stage builder installed
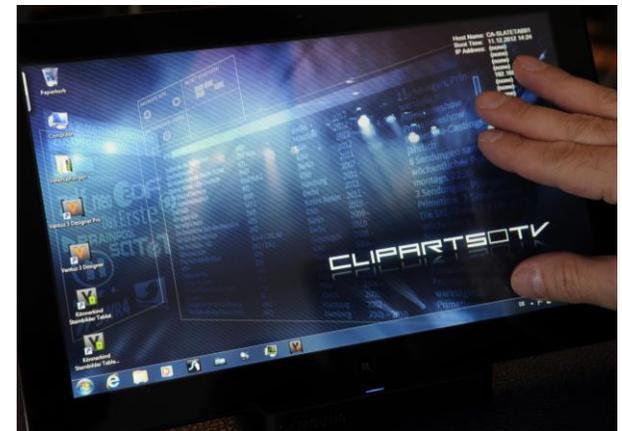
acrylic glass. The only problem was, the impact of the balls caused a vibration in the glass that resulted in multiple touch inputs. We had to navigate on a fine line between muting the touch input long enough for the vibration to fade, but not too long, because the contestants had to throw as quickly as possible. We found a solution for the show, but went back into the lab afterwards to perfect the setup. Another technology that we have recently implemented is for speed measurement. We have our very own custom-made solution that is based on radio signals. But we need to stay at the pulse of time, so we now also offer a GPS-based solution. Both are tested and work equally fine, but the customer has a choice, which is always good.

Ventuz:
Which kind of projects interest you most?

Andreas:
For me, it is about the people. Especially today where schedules and budgets are getting tighter, it is nice to meet someone who takes the time to bounce an idea with me. I enjoy that very much. And I like it when people are able to

handle the stress, because working on a set is always stressful. You can pass the stress on, or you can stay calm and get the job done with a positive attitude. I try to be like that myself, so I cherish it in other people. But besides this, it is always challenging to be confronted with a technical problem we have not seen before - when we have to become inventive.
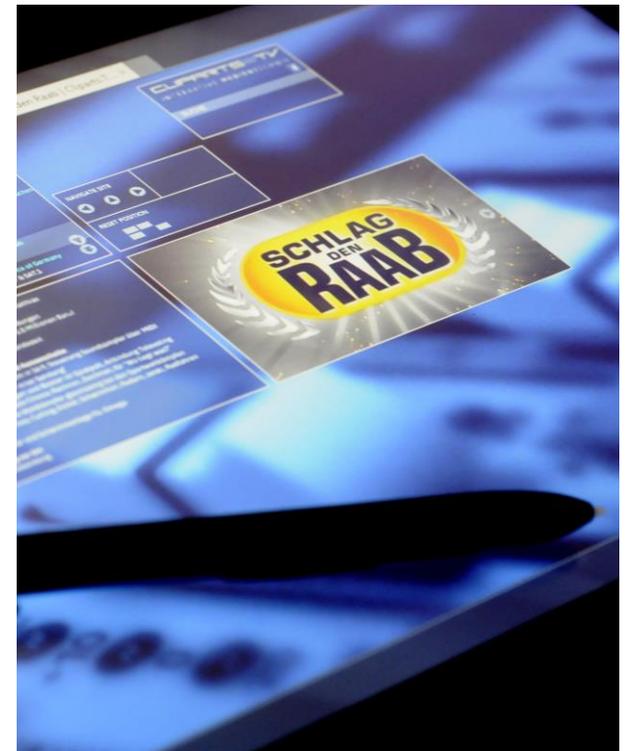
Ventuz:
Where is Cliparts.de today and where will you go from here?

Andreas:
2016 turned out to be one of our most productive years ever. We produced 240 shows in a period of three months during the summer for RTL Plus, remodeling some old classics like "Jeopardy" and "Wheel of Fortune" – and that was just one arena. Another 480 shows will be produced until the end of 2017. A lot of new shows are in progress, for example with the famous German show host Thomas Gottschalk or singer and songwriter Xavier Naidoo, and a

new serial for ZDFneo is in the making as well. We have exceeded the number of 23,000 shows that we have worked on during the lifetime of this company. To better accommodate our customers in Northern Germany, we have recently opened an office near Cologne, where many German game shows are produced. And for the future: I have a little side project where we develop ideas not only for games, but for entire game shows. A dream of mine would be to see one of these concepts put into reality. But the world will not end for me, if it does not happen. I am looking forward to the many shows we can work on with our customers during the years to come, with new challenges and technologies.

"Just like in every production with you, really without exception, I am again highly satisfied! You and your guys really do a great job and we are extremely happy to work with you." This is a very recent statement of a production manager of one of the largest German production companies. Do we need to say more?

Ventuz Technology AG

Luttherothstrasse 16a
20255 Hamburg – Germany

P. +49 40 413 66 09 70

info@ventuz.com
www.ventuz.com

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By Katharina Glück, Ventuz Technology AG