

AUTOMATIC PICTURES

Company Information

Presided over by company principal Frank Beddor, Automatic Pictures is an incubator of creative properties that extends from films – including the upcoming big-screen incarnation of the classic board game Monopoly – to what Beddor calls “all things ‘Looking Glass Wars.’”

“The Looking Glass Wars,” a *New York Times* best-seller written by Beddor, is the first volume of a trilogy that has spurred the author and his Automatic Pictures team to develop a visionary holistic methodology that supports both the artistic and marketing aspects of the project.

“The Looking Glass Wars” became a sensation in the U.K. when it debuted there in 2004. At long last, it revealed how Lewis Carroll, author of “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” had willfully misrepresented the story of seven-year-old Alyss Heart, betraying the exiled princess of Wonderland by turning her painful history into a fairytale, when, in fact, it is a dark and dangerous depiction of familial treachery, thwarted love, and the despotic domination of imagination. Volume 2, “Seeing Redd,” debuts in August 2007 (on the Penguin imprint Dial Books in the U.S. and Egmont Books in the U.K.).

In tackling this narrative, Beddor found himself creating a world that could not be contained by traditional literary forms. The first book had not been out long before, at the urging of fans, he and writer/Automatic Pictures creative executive Liz Cavalier began collaborating with artist Ben Templesmith to create the comic book series “Hatter M.” A parallel adventure depicting the journey of Alyss’ faithful bodyguard, Hatter Madigan, who, for 13 years, has searched for his mistress after becoming separated from her in *The Pool of Tears*, the portal from Wonderland to our world. “Hatter M” was nominated for the prestigious 2007 Will Eisner Award for Best Limited Series.

What Beddor discovered was that although readers of “Hatter M” didn’t have to read “The Looking Glass Wars” to enjoy the bodyguard’s tale – just as people snapping up “Looking Glass Wars” T-shirts at comic conventions didn’t need to know the story to appreciate a cool design – those who *were* led from the novel to “Hatter M” and vice versa became that much more invested in the larger mythology.

To further enhance the reader’s connection to “LGW,” Automatic Pictures’ Automatic Records offshoot released *The Looking Glass Wars Soundtrack*. “I wanted to expand the intellectual dimension of reading the book into a heightened sensory experience for the reader,” says Beddor. He attributes the success of the book largely to the online activity of its fans, many of whom fall into the young-adult readership base, a particularly active audience who seem content to endlessly review, comment on and speculate about the trilogy. *The Looking Glass Wars Soundtrack* fueled the frenzy as fans immersed themselves ever more deeply in Alyss’ world. It also helped sell the novel.

This creative/marketing model is further manifest in the “Looking Glass Wars” teaser trailer, a 30-second piece starring the menacing card soldiers featured in the book. “As far as I know,” Beddor says, “no one has produced a special effects-driven animated preview to promote a novel.” The teaser trailer premiered simultaneously on MySpace.com, YouTube.com, AOL Red and IGN.com, among other digital venues, to coincide with the September 2006 U.S. publication of “The Looking Glass Wars” and *The Looking Glass Wars Soundtrack*.

In addition to the popular audiobook presentation of “The Looking Glass Wars,” (2007 Winner Ben Franklin Award for Best Audiobook – Children’s) the “Hatter M” series, the soundtrack, the teaser trailer, the line of merchandise, and an elaborate Web destination will soon enable fans to create their own “mash-ups” of the teaser trailer using a variety of graphic, animation and sound elements.

Coming soon, Automatic Pictures will launch the 2DMMO (Two-Dimensional Massively-Multiplayer Online) game CARDSOLDIERWARS.COM that allows players to travel through the looking glass into visually rich Wonderland environment. Gamers select a suit (spade, club, diamond or heart), recruit from the House of Cards, and build an army that will place their own Queen on the throne. The “CardSoldierWars.com” game has created an ideal opportunity to introduce fresh storylines that expand the Looking Glass Wars universe while at the same time enticing readers unfamiliar with the book to begin turning pages.

“Players who’ve found “CardSoldierWars.com” because they seek out new games to conquer can improve their strategies by reading ‘The Looking Glass Wars’ and ‘Hatter M,’” Beddor explains. “The game capitalizes on the interconnectivity of the mediums and encourages critical thinking and decision making, all of which deepens and extends the experiences of gaming and reading. On a very basic level, the “CardSoldierWars.com” game is a great way to get reluctant readers to open a book.”

What might seem to be missing from Automatic Pictures’ grand “LGW” scheme is a film, particularly in light of the success Beddor enjoyed as producer of the 1998 critical and box-office hit “There’s Something About Mary.” “I’m working on the scripts for ‘The Looking Glass Wars’ and ‘Hatter M,’ simultaneously since they sync up and interconnect to create a macro story. We’re also working on the script for ‘Seeing Redd,’” Beddor reveals, adding: “The great thing is that the movies will be the cherry on top of this cake, not the cake itself. In order to protect the story and my Alyss, I need to establish all these other creative entities and make sure they are solid first. If you rush into the film, it’s very hard to do it well. I’ve seen it happen: A terrible movie comes out and essentially kills the underlying property. It’s critical that ‘The Looking Glass Wars’ be allowed to continue to develop organically, at its own pace. I’m thinking very long term.”

Automatic Pictures will take its forward-looking approach to creative-property proliferation and marketing – emphasizing the organic relation between parts and the whole – to the development of the Monopoly movie, for which Beddor will also be creating a world. He has lent the methodology to a few of his fellow authors as well, who joke that he should share his expertise in an infomercial.

“There is a real interest in taking what we’ve developed at Automatic and applying it to other creative endeavors,” Beddor affirms. “But you can’t take a cookie-cutter approach to it. Not every genre lends itself to this methodology. And with every tributary, it’s critical that the medium be appropriate for the storyline. *And* you have to be constantly asking yourself how you can tell a story over multiple platforms in a way that’s true to the original vision and feels authentic to the audience, who are increasingly sophisticated and don’t appreciate having something shoved down their throats. The approach has to be about the fans’ sense of discovery, about their taking ownership of the story. We’ve been very sensitive to fan response, and it’s guided everything we’ve done, from telling the story of Hatter M to the way we’re writing the films.”

Beddor has reinforced that relationship with lively presentations at schools in which the students are invited to participate. Of course, this also helps sell “The Looking Glass Wars,” but for the author, it’s much more than that: “I’ve heard that after my presentations, kids ask their parents to buy them the book, and the parents call the school and say, ‘My son wants me to buy him this book. He’s never been much of a reader – what’s going on?’”

The author/world creator/producer inaugurated Automatic Pictures in 1999 as a traditional film-production entity. “My grandmother had a push-button Dodge,” he explains. “You’d push a button to go from park into drive and then another button to go into reverse and so on, and underneath the buttons it said ‘Automatic.’ I learned to drive in that car.”

Aside from “The Looking Glass Wars” and the Monopoly project, Automatic is developing a film based on “The Juliet,” a short story by science-fiction writer (and Philip K. Dick contemporary) Alfred Bester. He describes it as “Bonnie and Clyde in space.” Also in development are a script called “Pretty Wicked,” a black comedy set in a gated community in which most of the primary characters are teenage girls, and “The Software,” based on a book series by P.J. Haarsma that Beddor calls “Harry Potter in space.”

In all of Automatic’s undertakings, Beddor relies on a tight-knit team that, in addition to Cavalier, includes Nate Barlow, who heads up Automatic’s many and varied online initiatives, creating and managing content and overseeing marketing outreach; game designer and developer Greg Cook, who is also the company’s chief researcher – “We need a lot of research around here,” Beddor allows; and a squadron of like-minded consultants.

Automatic’s acquisitions policy is guided by Beddor’s increasingly selective personal tastes, but he does detect a bit of a pattern: “‘Wicked,’ the film starring Julia Stiles I produced before ‘There’s Something About Mary,’ ‘Mary,’ ‘The Looking Glass Wars’ and at least one of the other projects we have in development all feature strong female characters. I’ve always been drawn to strong female characters, partly because you just don’t see them as much as I’d like – it’s a completely underutilized point of view. There are all these strange taboos about female characters not being allowed to do certain things or behave a certain way. So, from a storytelling perspective, with a female character, you can really flip the script. And when you put men into scenarios with strong women, a whole new set of interesting dynamics plays out.”

At its heart, “The Looking Glass Wars” is about the power of imagination, and Beddor’s ability to imagine a whole new set of interesting dynamics is the V-8 engine powering Automatic Pictures. He says of the trilogy’s genesis: “When I started, I was just trying to figure out this world, but it became so enormous that I didn’t know where to put all the ideas. So I started organizing them into files. The files were bursting open, but the ideas were all safeguarded there, waiting for me to find a place for them.” Ultimately, Automatic Pictures is where Beddor files the products of his seemingly boundless imagination.

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