

The Virtual Film Game.

By Kelly McErlean. New Media Technology College, Dublin, Ireland. 2002.

Introduction

Digital technologies are having a significant impact on the film industry. The new media sector incorporates many of the elements of the traditional media industry including film production, animation and photography. New media producers are looking to develop audiovisual content based on the standards created by the international film and television production sector.

With the introduction of new technologies such as DV cameras, filmmakers have been given the tools to create relatively inexpensive product in a short timeframe. The impact of these technologies is felt both at the top and bottom of the sector and the Internet has provided a global distribution medium that is available to all.

This article will examine the increasingly symbiotic relationship between the new media and traditional media sectors. The development of digital film production and distribution technologies will be examined, and their impact on the final audiovisual product will be assessed. The article will also look at the increasing sophistication of film audiences worldwide and the production process as a feature of the film product. The Hollywood Stock Exchange will be examined in terms of its impact on the contemporary film industry and the surprisingly high-level insider knowledge acquired by its online players.

The Hollywood Stock Exchange

The global film industry has long looked for accurate indicators of the potential performance of their product in both local and international markets. In recent years, Hollywood output has developed scripts built around the 'lowest common denominator for global product', a product which can be successfully sold across the world by virtue of its international star, storyline, setting, effects package etc. In the US, income derived from the local market can no longer support inflated budgets and so the product's narrative is designed to work across a variety of cultures. This has led to the 'dumbing down' of film product and, following significant media mergers, has created barriers to entry to the film production and distribution sector. Media mergers have led to the creation of media conglomerates capable of dwarfing the competition due to vertical integration. These companies also aim to 'trim down to focus on businesses that are strong cash flow and high-growth, and get out of the businesses that aren't' (Fabrikant 1995). Obviously these mergers may not proceed according to plan and expected synergies may not develop, but generally they attain significant market share and their dominance of the market cannot be challenged by independent operators.

The US media sector has promoted the development of many new media technologies which are in everyday use. These include streaming media, online news channels and interactive television. The film sector in particular has traditionally employed expensive marketing techniques to attract pre-selected demographic and ethnographic groups. Today, the US film industry is looking to a

new kind of indicator in order to assess the potential success of films, which are either 'in development', or languishing at the 'concept' stage. It is collectively known as 'the Internet buzz' and its main protagonist is 'The Hollywood Stock Exchange'.

HSX History

The Hollywood Stock Exchange, or HSX, is published online at www.hsx.com. Founded in 1996, it is defined as an 'an integrated marketing, research and technology company driven by its patented entertainment stock market.' HSX's three-quarter million online traders can purchase and sell virtual shares of movies, music and stars. This virtual market is based on supply-and-demand. Consumers can systematically trade 'virtual entertainment securities' via the exchange.

Market research has always been the main goal of HSX. HSX derives income from this process via the syndication to various institutions of information gathered as a result of online transactions. The parent company of HSX is Cantor Index Ltd. Cantor is an online financial spread-betting firm, based in California.

In February 2001 HSX launched its first subscription-based market research applications. HSX Research aimed to become the leading provider of information to the entertainment research market. The primary application developed by the group, HSX Trader Insight, 'consists of six dynamic reports that provide clients with long-lead estimates of audience awareness, intention and box office projecting for all film projects'. Further applications, including advertising

effectiveness analysis, product placement analysis, entertainment product indexing and other value-added market research services will be added in the future.

HSX – Marketing

The HSX site itself has been credited with correctly predicting several unexpected box-office smashes – most notably *The Full Monty* (2000). Online players identified the film's strengths, an interesting plot line, well-developed and clearly defined characters, strong cast and crew. By investing virtual dollars in this feature before principle photography they ensured a significant 'internet buzz'. With the online public using the site demonstrating strong interest in this film, it became clear to the producers of this low-budget feature that it would be worth allocating a significant marketing budget to the picture. If the general public's high interest in the film had not been identified at this early stage (before) cinematic release, it may have been too late once the film came out.

Playing the HSX Game

According to Tom Miller, HSX 'Cinemeconomist', understanding the 'Time Value of Money' is critical to successful investing. This concerns the comparison of stocks over time. For example, waiting for a one hundred percent return on a stock over a longer period is not necessarily better than receiving a lesser return over a shorter period. In other words, cash in today is probably better than cash in several weeks. Cash made today can be reinvested quickly into other stocks. Investing in lower value shares can have its advantages. Take for example a stock

valued at \$10 giving \$1 per share profit. This is actually a better buy than a stock valued at \$100 giving \$6 per share profit. For the first stock the Return on Investment (ROI) is 10 per cent (calculated using the formula $10 \times 1/100$) and the ROI of the second stock is 6 per cent ($6 \times 1/100$). So the first stock with its smaller per share return actually gives a greater ROI (Miller 2001).

HSX is an 'events-driven game' (Impossible 1999). Successful players are not necessarily the ones who spend the most time trading online. Some trade only in the evenings and take long-term positions on stocks. Others take short-term positions and must watch them carefully during the day to move them on in the event of a sudden drop. Short-term positions are best entered into early in the day; it is recommended that these positions be taken before noon. Afternoon traders are following the pack and those traders who are 'shorting' will make the real money. 'Shorting' is the term used to describe investments where the investor is betting that a share price will go down. Some traders trade only once a week just before films are released – the biggest movers are those that have just been released and they can rise and drop significantly. Many new players tend to invest in films that will feature their favourite actors, even if these films will not be released for some time. This tends to be a mistake as the money is tied up for a long time in stock that is unlikely to move significantly. The 'openers' are the fastest way to make money with a small portfolio on the HSX. The 'adjust' value applied to each film as it opens can be significant. Deciding how significant and which way it will adjust takes time and experience. It is important to understand development of the films' marketing plan. How aggressively is the film company

pushing the film; how good are the films' trailers and how often are they on?

Trailer analysis is about identifying who the studio is targeting and how successfully it is doing just that. If the trailer is well made and well received then the film will probably do well. If the trailer is poorly made and looks as though it has been thrown together then it is likely that the studio itself does not expect the film to do well. However the adjust might go against all expectations such as *Fight Club* (2000). This film had a very good trailer yet it did not realise a strong opening weekend. With hindsight, we can see that the target market was not easy to define from the trailer. Also, the trailer did not receive blanket coverage on TV and in the cinemas which is a must if the film is to open well. If the production company has struck a deal with a television channel then that channel will promote the film with interviews, commercials and guest appearances (Keen 1999). Gauging the reaction of your peers is also a good indicator of how well a film is likely to perform. Generally, the rule of thumb in predicting the potential success of a film during its opening weekend lies in being able to assess how proactive the studio that made it is in marketing their product. If it appears to be indifferent to the film's success then it will fail. If the studio is pulling out all the stops and bringing the stars back to do interviews and guest spots then the film may actually do well. After that it is a matter of predicting how relevant the film is to its target audience. In 1998 HSX experts began to talk about the 'metagame'. This referred to 'the idea...that it's just as important to know what other traders are going to do as it is to know what the market is going to do' (Edmonds 1998). The closed economy of the HSX means that the dollars earned by traders cannot go anywhere. When a

trader suddenly decides to invest heavily in a stock the money must come from somewhere. Other stocks or bonds must be sold off in order to raise the capital. When 'playing the market' it is important to know where the money is coming from. When *Titanic* (1997) went into orbit on the HSX the money came from weaker openers. When 'playing the audience' the HSX investors must avoid relying too heavily on their critical judgement alone. It is better to triangulate opinions through multiple sources such as magazines, peers and specialist articles.

Shadow Of The Vampire

The HSX site is responsible for assembling a large number of online *virtual producers* for the feature film *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000) starring John Malkovich and Willem Dafoe. In the movie the legendary filmmaker F.W. Murnau employs the services of a real vampire to create the most realistic vampire movie ever. As payment for his services the vampire, Max Shreck, has been promised the neck of the female star played by Catherine McCormack. Shreck is the ultimate demanding star who disposes of the cast and crew in typical vampiric form. Murnau completes his film regardless of the consequences and the loss of life. The film's cast and unusually creative plot line created strong interest in the online film community long before principal photography. The number of SOAV shares traded online via the HSX was impressive and it was obvious that this interest could be employed in fulfilling the aim of offering the role of Virtual Producer to regular site users. Everyone who signed up to become a Virtual Producer (VP) paid a small fee to participate and all were credited on the DVD version of the film.

The VP idea is simple and effective, allowing the public some degree of participation in the creation of film products. In the current climate of film distribution via DVD and supporting web sites, the general public is much more aware of film production methods and techniques – as seen by the large numbers of behind-the-scenes documentaries and books that are now available. This ensures that virtual producers are capable of understanding the decisions they are being asked to make with regard to production activities.

Low-Cost Film Production

The Virtual Producers concept exploits the audience's knowledge of film production and gives them the opportunity to actively participate at various stages of the development process. Low cost film and video kit has put the tools of film production into the hands of the general public. The latest hardware and software being produced by Apple is aimed at the home user. The digital video format camera is simple point and click with little sophistication. The software is user-friendly and allows home users to piece together simple but effective audiovisual sequences. Capturing the video and audio is easier now that the majority of PCs and Macs are delivered with some capture facilities pre-installed. Firewire technology provides simple plug-and-play functionality within the capture process – the firewire lead connects the computer to the video camera and enables the automatic detection of the camera as a peripheral device.

Post-production software has generally been divided between high-end systems such as Quantel and Avid and low-end systems such as Adobe Premiere.

Apple's Final Cut Pro system is set to shake the industry giants with a high-quality system that costs less. Video producers once had to deal with the overused term 'broadcast quality'; this has been replaced with another overused phrase, 'real time' (Mermell 2001). Real-time systems can render dissolves and effects so quickly that there is no apparent time loss. Slower systems practically shut down the package while they deal with the mathematical calculations involved in creating a transition from one clip to another. Final Cut Pro offers real-time rendering for most day-to-day effects that one would expect to find in an audiovisual sequence. New hardware options allow this system to integrate with most high-end tape formats such as Beta Sp and DVC Pro making it an attractive option for professional and home users alike.

The DV camera has revolutionised home-movie making by increasing the potential image quality while substantially reducing costs. British filmmakers have been pro-active in the take-up of this new technology. 'There's a fluidity to the DV process, from filming through to distribution. People know it's within their means and audiences pick up on the documentary immediacy. It's more instantaneous, more familiar aesthetically' (Cooke 2001). Lack of grain, and weaknesses in depth of field and image sharpness are compensated by the ease of operation, flexibility and low cost. Filmmakers using DV cameras tend to be more interested in telling their story than creating a high-quality visual look and feel. This removes the barriers of maintaining film aesthetics and brings the audience straight to the emotional centre of the piece. However, the reduction in audiovisual quality does quickly identify a weak story and poorly developed characters – there is nothing to

hide behind. The new film language that DV is creating has yet to be properly developed and most independent filmmakers feel they are inventing the DV filmmaking process as they go along.

There is a plethora of web sites dedicated to film production. Free advice is available on the purchase and rental of production equipment. Industry experts are also available online to discuss your production problems and suggest solutions. Special effects web sites teach the enthusiastic amateur how to create CGI effects on their home computer using low-cost software. The tutorials help the user to recreate their favourite effects such as Star Wars light sabres. Whereas the film industry traditionally protected its secrets to maintain the illusion of reality, now it seems that the industry is keen to teach the public more and more about the production process and the technologies employed. A common feature of DVD packages is the 'making of' documentary, usually a short film that takes the viewer behind the scenes of the film production to meet the cast and crew and to watch how the film was made. DVDs also offer Directors' commentaries that run throughout the film. These commentaries give the Director the opportunity to explain their reasons for shooting scenes in a particular style and even to suggest other possible versions of a scene that were not used in the final cut. Leading DVD expert Jim Taylor predicts that future DVD formats will be 'supported by home video games systems and Internet Web/TV boxes, a single disc could contain a movie, the video games version; computerized text of the book complete with pictures, annotation, and hyperlinks; and even a link to an Internet web site with more information along with an on-line merchandise order form' (Taylor 1998). The

filmmakers are using the new distribution media to engage more directly with their audience in an attempt to connect with the paying public and hopefully understand what attracts them to this movie in the first place. They are also attempting to create a more complete interactive audiovisual experience built around a single product. This can be seen already with big-budget films offering live merchandise such as online games and updates related to the film itself.

In this climate of home movie making and independent movie making, it is no surprise to see so many HSX site visitors actively participating in the pre-production and principle photography of a feature film such as *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000).

Online Broadcasting

The development of sophisticated web broadcasting technologies such as Quicktime, Real Player and Windows Media have enabled production companies to distribute cut-down versions of their products to a wider audience at low cost. While audio and visual quality may be compromised due to bandwidth constraints and compression issues, the wide reach of this distribution network far out-weighs any simple quality factors.

Up to now, this system of web casting has been most used to distribute film trailers via the Internet. Users can download the trailer onto their hard drive and watch it on their home computer. Film file sizes are large and download times are quite long so it is unlikely that full online features will be available to the home user in the near future.

The prohibitive cost of streaming high-bandwidth materials online has led to the setting up of outsourcing companies. These companies provide scalability and bandwidth, high-speed implementation and relatively low-cost online broadcast services (Sawyer & Greely 2000). The Real Broadcast Network is the Internet broadcast division of RealNetworks. Its advanced streaming infrastructure enables it to handle very large-scale broadcasts with significant file sizes. Unfortunately the content can only be delivered in Real formats as no plugs-in are available to work with MP3 or Windows Media Audio. Other top-tier outsourcing online broadcasters include Akamai and Yahoo! Broadcast Services.

Other issues to be resolved by films distributors include copyright concerns and the protection of the intellectual property. Data encryption is resolving some of these issues although the distribution of data encryption/decryption technologies presents its own problems. Using obscure, yet effective encryption technologies will protect the company's digital product, but it will not be easily decrypted by the viewing public, and will therefore have a limited distribution range.

Significant players in this area of online film production and distribution include *AtomFilms.com*, *Online Broadcasting.com*, *ifilm.com*, *BMWFilms.com*, *Mediatrip.com* and *Alwaysi.com*. These sites are involved in a range of activities including production, promotion and distribution of online films. They vary in design and implementation due to the experimental nature of their concept. The online movie market is still at the cult phase of development. However, traditional moviemakers are becoming more involved in online film production and distribution as the related technologies become more sophisticated. The online

film industry is still looking for a serious hit – that which achieves the sort of international recognition normally reserved for traditional cinema releases.

Online films received a major boost last year with the launch of an online film awards ceremony. 'The Directors Board of Motion Picture Arts and Technologies is a non-profit organization that recognizes excellence in the production of Internet films, animations, and websites that incorporate motion' (Schleicher 2001). At the Pixie Awards ceremony, short films shot for the web were given the generic title 'i-Features' and motion pictures were called 'motion pixures'. The ceremony was held at The Hollywood Roosevelt Blossom Ballroom, the site of the first Academy Awards in 1929, and winners received a Pixie statuette, a female version of the Oscar that exists only online. The Pixie Awards web site is www.pixieawards.org.

At the first awards, Joe Nussbaum, co-writer and director of *George Lucas in Love* (1999) won the Best Director of an i-Feature Film. Many of the films featured at the ceremony were highly creative with excellent scripts and well-developed concepts. The low-budget, high-audience potential combination of the product they were creating seemed to enthuse the cast and crew of these films and push them to produce a product that was entertaining, thought provoking and all the things that good television and cinema should be. To reduce costs, many of the filmmakers had concentrated considerable efforts on pre-production, thereby avoiding costly mistakes later. Solid pre-production and extensive script development indicates that their approach was serious and that they understood the pitfalls of traditional low-budget filmmaking, where the excitement of seeing the

completed product on the big-screen leads filmmakers to be happy with inferior work and adopt an 'it'll do' attitude.

While digital technologies allow low-cost film production and distribution, many established filmmakers are also getting in on the act. The BMW company backed a series of online films that featured a variety of BMW cars being put through their paces by the British actor Clive Owen. The films were shot on film and had reasonable budgets and some major names in starring roles and behind the lens. Directors of the films included Ang Lee and John Frankenheimer; Madonna, Forrest Whittaker and Mickey Rourke provided the star power. Unfortunately the films were not shot with the limitations of Internet broadcasting in mind and they only work if you have the patience to download the largest file-size version of each film. Trying to stream the movies live results in choppy pictures and a lot of 'buffering'. However, the films were successful in marketing terms as some 100,000 people logged onto the site (submitting personal details as they did) in the first two days alone. The marketers can now relax, safe in the knowledge that the large production budgets and web development costs have created a large, demographically precise database of potential customers for a large number of products.

Director Damien O'Donnell set out to shoot a series of web-based companion pieces (collectively titled *Hotel*) to Mike Figgis's improvised Venice-based film *Nite Vision* (Stables 2001). O'Donnell worked with the *Nite Vision* cast, in character, to capture them on film outside of the *Nite Vision* narrative. These pieces were uploaded to the *Nite Vision* web site on a daily basis and soon formed

their own unique material. O'Donnell said of the work, 'we've got exactly the same characters, exactly the same environment, but the results are different somehow'. This production demonstrated that many established filmmakers are using digital technologies including the Internet to revitalise their work and to fuel new ideas, particularly in the fields of non-linear narrative and reaching the audience on a more personal level.

In the UK, Channel 4 has adopted a genre-based commissioning style to creating programmes, websites and interactive services. Instead of following the traditional development process, C4's Broadband Lab 'has adopted an approach whereby content ideas are conceived as 'projects', and then a decision is made later whether to develop them for TV or broadband, or both' (Solomons 2001). While this may be considered stretching the brand, it is also a pragmatic approach various platforms available for the development and distribution of audiovisual content. The Internet as a distribution platform creates new possibilities in terms of interactive content creation. Recent success stories such as *Big Brother* utilise TV and several new media platforms to create a fully interactive experience incorporating the highest audiovisual standards. In marketing terms, the information derived from comparing television-viewing figures to quantifiable demographic web-based data is extremely valuable. Unfortunately for the viewing public, such marketing information will lead to the further dumbing down of television content as broadcasters try to find the interactive product that suits all. To have any chance of success, such a product cannot demonstrate sophistication

in any area for fear of alienating any ethnographic or demographic groupings. In other words, generic, middle-of-the-road will become the order of the day.

Web-Based Soaps

In the mid-nineties an online soap called *The Spot* made an impact in the development and distribution of audiovisual materials via the Internet. Unlike its static competitors, this soap offered more than just pages of text with limited still images. *The Spot* allowed viewers to watch actual video footage.

In 1995 this web-based programme was attracting 20,000 viewers per day and won Cool Site of the Year. Site visitors could download 2-minute episodes of the soap, speak to their favourite characters and / or actual actors playing these characters, read scripts and watch previous episodes. Fans' suggestions were often integrated into the onscreen action. Yet in the end *The Spot* closed due to inadequate bandwidth availability. Visitors reported difficulties in logging onto the site and excessive download times for QuickTime movies. Viewers with 28.8Kb modem connections were unable to stream video footage. Falling viewing figures meant the producers found it impossible to sustain advertising revenues and the site shut down. In January 1997, American Cybercast, producer of *The Spot*, filed for bankruptcy.

While *The Spot* failed to live up to its early potential as a successful online soap, it did however point the way for future innovators in this area. The interactive elements of the site were kept simple and there was a concentration on strong script-writing to maintain interest.

The Next Step in Online Broadcasting

The French research group Idate has published a series of articles on broadband penetration and new media suggesting that TV and Internet convergence is happening on many levels (Screen International 26 October 2001). The report suggests that early set-top box systems that allowed the TV to link to the Internet created competition between viewing and surfing. Hybrid systems that offer interactive TV content are blending the services together to make a single intuitive product. Idate suggests that TV operators have the market advantage to generate revenue through interactive programming due to the similarity of content. High-speed access is predicted to allow the speedy development of an Internet video market. Other interactive services will progressively become available. Sales of set-top boxes are on the increase in North America and are predicted to reach 74 million by 2005. The market research firm Cahners In-Stat Group has identified two categories of set-top box. The first is the network-specific box used with DSL, satellite, cable and terrestrial television to connect to a service provider. The second category is the games consoles such as PlayStation, Nintendo and the Microsoft Xbox, described as living room entertainment gateways. The difficulty with technology, which is so expensive to develop and implement, is that there is no guarantee that the market will respond positively to the introduction of a fundamentally different service from their gateway. Traditionally television stations acted as gatekeepers for the family, only showing shows that had been approved by the censor and warning the public if shows contained anything that may offend.

Video-on-demand (VOD) services are developing rapidly and may dominate the market before online-broadcasting gets a foothold. Current cable-based systems can already deliver high-quality materials direct to customers' homes. Sony and Disney have VOD services in development called Moviefly and movies.com respectively. The economies of VOD-based production and distribution costs have led Forrester Research to estimate that revenues will reach \$13.5bn by 2006 (Screen International 1 June 2001). Possible synergies between cable networks and content copyright owners will lead to high levels of film product becoming available on-demand straight into our homes. Yet it is the fear of Internet piracy and the possible emergence of a Napster-style film distribution portal which has stimulated the media giants into action. Also, the margins on such a distribution mechanism are higher than with any physical system such as tapes or disks and the pure convenience of the system encourages market activity. The value-added element of the VOD system will allow the delivery of up-to-date product-related information to make the film watching experience much more current. Anti-trust legislation in the US will probably prevent the monopolistic mega-merger of a dominant network and content provider.

In the short-term IP-based online delivery of innovative content will grow faster than DSL VOD. However, the high-quality service offered by the latter will eventually win out as the ever-increasing audience looks for a more standard audiovisual product, one that is aesthetically satisfying yet intellectually less stimulating. It looks as though the rental market will be the biggest loser as distributors gradually side towards the high profits of electronic content delivery.

Steve Perlman's company, WebTV was bought by Microsoft for \$503 million. Now Perlman's new company Moxi Digital is preparing to launch the Moxi Media Centre in 2003. This enhanced media hub will include the functionality of a DVD player and TiVo combined with broadband-enabled wireless Internet access. An 80Gb storage drive will allow a large selection of audiovisual materials to be stored, including full music albums and feature films. When the Moxi goes online via satellite connection a large media database will enable intelligent and customised searches of available materials. Studios will be only too happy to release their products to the Moxi as it will also act as a locked box security system and will log every access to each programme, song, image etc. This will allow the studios to make charges to the customer as appropriate. While it makes sense to integrate the increasingly sophisticated media technologies becoming standard in our homes, the Moxi appears to be a Trojan horse for the media giants. Not only will they have full copyright protection for their intellectual property, they will also be able to charge for each and every viewing, and receive detailed and very valuable marketing information on individual users and demographically specific user groups.

Turning Videogames Into Films

The indistinct line between new media and traditional media projects is most apparent within the video games industry. The video game market has become an increasingly popular source of movie ideas. With varying degrees of success (critically and commercially) producers have taken storylines and

concepts from games such as *Super Mario Bros*, *Tomb Raider*, *Final Fantasy* and *Wing Commander*. In theory, the popularity of these games should guarantee a reasonable return at the box office, relative to the original return of the videogame. However, the audience attracted by these 'pre-packaged brand recognition flicks' (Nunziata 2001) is often highly protective of the characters and stories involved and can be very difficult to please. The films may have well-known characters and storylines, but it is important to remember that many of the games being translated into big screen format may already be in the bargain bin, perhaps suggesting that the public has tired of the brand already.

The videogame *Resident Evil* was released as a film in early 2002. Milla Jovovich stars in the film version and is directed by Paul Anderson, who also directed *Mortal Kombat* (1995). The game itself was known for its gory fight sequences, violent first-person action and a complex plot structure (which added to the game's enjoyment as you worked your way through the non-linear narrative). Unfortunately, the film version will have to adhere to the more stringent rules of acceptable content as employed by the film censor and many of the attractions of the game will be lost. Complex plotlines and back story of the game often have to be oversimplified if the producers want to bring the film down to a manageable length, and also to avoid losing the youth audience within the first five minutes.

Remedy Entertainment developed the third-person action game *Max Payne* with clear cinematic influences including photo realistic textures and a strong visual style reminiscent of the films of Chinese director John Woo. The game even

features the ability to take the character in *Matrix*-style bullet-time where the action goes into extreme slow motion and the Max Payne character can dodge bullets and take aim at the enemy. The developers' focus on film-style game play paid off when Dimension Films and Collision Entertainment quickly bought the film rights to the title.

Clearly the game designers intended to develop a concept that would readily co-exist in multiple media platforms. The Max Payne character of the title is obviously influenced by Detective Mills in *Se7en* (1995) and Popeye Doyle from *The French Connection* (1971). As most filmmakers want to include recognisable archetypes when developing stories, this gave the game the added advantage of having a character that would be easily identifiable onscreen.

A *Duke Nukem* film is in development with Dimension and Threshold Entertainment. They plan to create a franchise with the 3-D Realms character in the mould of *The Mummy* (2001). The PG-13 film would have a wide audience, as the game is available on almost every games platform in existence. The Duke Nukem character from the game bears many similarities to the character Ash in *The Evil Dead* (1982), so the transition to the big screen should be quite straightforward. To increase the potential popularity of this feature the producers intend to cast World Wrestling Federation star, The Rock, in the title role.

Not all videogame translations are going so well. *Dragon's Lair* is a classic old-style arcade game that was developed by Gary Goldman and Don Bluth and released in 1983. The game was being developed as an animated feature with

Fox until Goldman and Bluth's *Titan AE* (2000) failed to attract much interest at the box office and Fox pulled many of their animated projects.

The videogame *Doom* will also not be reaching cinema screens any time soon due to the fact that the game's developers (idSoftware) and potential film producers are unable to agree on a suitable script. Bruce Campbell of *The Evil Dead* (1982) fame is again being touted as the most suitable star. Following extended negotiations, the film options have lapsed and reverted back to idSoftware who are content to wait with this potential project.

Videogames developers are creating interactive audiovisual product that again aim at the lowest common denominator in terms of audience. Many are simply violent with repetitive tasks and problems being set up for the user to solve. The interactive nature of the games makes them a primarily solitary viewing experience as usually only one person can play at a time. Obviously this is quite different from the cinematic experience of a shared response to a linear storyline of definite duration. Perhaps the televisual product that most closely resembles interactive games is the *Big Brother* style programmes that have received international popularity in recent years. Viewers can interact at a very basic level by voting for their most favourite and least favourite cast member, but it is a long way off the continuous and constant interactivity of videogames.

Turning Films Into Videogames

Movie producers develop movie tie-in merchandise to increase income following the release of their film. By producing a videogame that is based on the

film they can increase the lifespan of the movie in the consciousness of the general public. The games may follow the same storyline as the movie or act as a prequel or sequel to the movie. A well-designed game will develop its own audience through interactive storylines and playability. Some games such as *The Terminator* are simply shoot-em-ups with a film-based front-end. Others such as *Starfighter* (based on Star Wars) introduce new game play and user interface. Interplay and Shiny Entertainment will develop interactive entertainment projects for current and future interactive gaming platforms based on the sequels to Warner Bros. *The Matrix*. The original film contained a large amount of CGI and slow motion effects so it is an ideal product to make the transition from film to game. The DVD *The Matrix Revisited* allowed the audience to see behind-the-scenes footage of effects production and Woo-Ping Yuen's martial arts choreography on the film and this will be reflected in the game's ability to replay gaming sequences in 'slow-motion'.

Spider-Man (2002) movie will have a videogame companion upon its release. Two Activision *Spider-Man* games already existed for the PlayStation 1, but this third game will be specifically for the PlayStation 2 and will be based on the new movie. To extend the storyline potential of the game there will be several new characters appearing who will not be in the film. This may be an unusual example of a games company working closely with the makers of the film. If the new characters prove to be popular in the game then they will most likely feature in the inevitable sequel.

Usually, games development companies produce most film-related titles separately from the actual film production team. While the games industry has many similarities to the film production industry, the products they create are different in several important ways. The most obvious is the interactive element of game play that does not yet exist in feature films. The player can manipulate characters whereas the cinema audience has no control over the narrative outcome.

Action Director John Woo has teamed with Producer Terence Chang, Digital Dream Studios and Rainbow Studios to form Digital Rim Inc. This company will bring together a wide range of creative, technological, marketing and business talent to produce and distribute, among other things, video games. Games will be developed for PlayStation 2 and Microsoft's X-Box. One of the first titles will be the *John Woo Action Game Series 1*. This high-profile of the director/producer team will ensure that the games will receive significant marketing budgets, but it remains to be seen if their use of interactive gaming technologies is as innovative as their use of digital film production equipment. The Editor creates the attractive element of Woo's films such as the balletic choreography of the action sequences in post-production. In games design there is no editor to add a touch of finesse to fast-paced sequences, it's all down to the first-person player.

Fox Interactive has developed a game based on the *Aliens* movie franchise titles. *Aliens: Colonial Marines* will incorporate 'the sort of creepy hall-crawls and atmospheric radio chatter that made Cameron's film suspenseful' (Nunziata, 2001). This is an interesting move to retain the elements of the original movie that

made it successful, the build-up of tension and increased anxiety that define those calm moments before the storm. The visual aesthetic and audio accompaniment are well known to Aliens fans and therefore the game should provide many recognisable motifs to ease the transition from film to game.

The most ambitious multiplayer game being developed to run online is called *Stars Wars Galaxies* and is being produced by Sony Online Entertainment and the LucasArts Entertainment Company. The game's playing style will be MMORPG, which stands for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. Players will be able to personalise their character and travel between the Star Wars worlds as a bounty hunter, trader and even a Jedi. Interplanetary travel, non-player characters, playable species and space combat will also be possible in future versions of the game. The developers aim to create a digital world where hard-core gamers and somewhat less-intensive participants can compete with each other. The sheer size of the game and the legion of Star Wars fans that have probably been waiting many years for such an opportunity to exist in this world will surely guarantee success. In fact, it will probably lead to many dysfunctional types who will become increasingly unable to compete in the real world, never mind the virtual one.

Conclusion

The virtual film game is available to all. Contemporary audiences are being asked to participate in the development of film and television narratives via interactive media. The media employed for distribution range from WebTV to

hand-held consoles. The public's increasing proclivity for interactive content is driving the sophistication of the technology.

In the past new technologies were presented as high-spec boxes, self-contained units that would change our lives. The Moxi Media Centre shows that we are still looking for these self-contained units that will change our lives and hopefully realise our sophisticated (if unpractical) vision of the future. Yet the consumer always tires of looking at the same box and its features. Future technologies will need to be less hardware-based and more software-driven. This will enable updates and improvements to be made, and new features added to existing systems that have already been purchased. This can already be seen with satellite TV where consumers can add channels when they require them. PC manufacturers have begun to build much of the functionality of the machines into the software instead of the hardware, which has helped to reduce hardware obsolescence.

In the future audiences will be rewarded for their participation and attention, not for the purchase of technology boxes. Future advances in technology will be integrated into existing home-based systems remotely, without the knowledge of the audience. For their part, the audience will be expected to 'play the game' and the studios will monitor their activities to develop marketing campaigns for the individual, the street, the town and the region. The more interested the audience is in the game, product and medium, the more information will be made available to the studio. Selling this marketing information will generate more revenue than the direct sale of audiovisual product ever could.

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