

Embracing the **Multi-Platform** Storytelling **Universe**

First the bad news. Most filmmakers are so busy making their films that they forget to think about the people watching them. Meanwhile, the audience as we know it has left the building.



By *Ingrid Kopp*

THERE IS A GROWING DISCONNECT BETWEEN WHAT THE audience is already doing and what filmmakers think of as “the audience”. The mass audience no longer exists; it has fragmented in the age of the Internet into a plethora of niches and people are now interacting with technology across many devices, often simultaneously.

People born into this connected world are technologically savvy consumer-producers and they are probably doing things with your films that you would never have conceived of, with or without your permission. What they are probably *not* doing is trotting off to the cinema on a Friday evening to watch the latest indie films or watching documentaries on TV at the allocated time.

This is worrying for all those people with films clamouring for theatrical release and audience attention in a crowded marketplace and it is certainly challenging for filmmakers and industry folk used to traditional production and distribution practices.

The good news is that the people formerly known as the audience are also part of the solution to the current upheaval in independent film. If you start to execute your filmmaking process across the different platforms that your audience is already using, you will find that a whole universe of storytelling possibilities opens up and your audience will help you by engaging with your work in creative ways, thereby becoming collaborators and cheerleaders for your project.

Lance Weiler has pioneered multi-platform techniques and the engagement of audiences with his horror films *THE LAST BROADCAST* and particularly *HEAD TRAUMA*, and he shares a lot of his experience and resources through his open source Workbook



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Interactive *HEAD TRAUMA* screening

Project website. He says using a kind of Horror 2.0 in the creation of elements like ARGs and live theatre around his films is the “most exhilarating creation that I’ve ever done”. He adds that multi-platform creation is exciting in terms of creativity, business and technology in that it mirrors current consumption habits, allows for new forms of funding and makes technology creative.

“It has changed my whole thought process,” he says, “The way that I script is different now. I’ll allow my characters to use social media and use this as story reconnaissance, role playing with certain people and building mini-stories. It has become a natural extension of the creative process for me.” This process can be both creatively and financially fulfilling. “When you are smart about the participation model, you have the opportunity to reach more people.” Weiler says, “Creating a perpetual motion machine is the ultimate goal so the audience can run with it and continue the life of your project. With *HEAD TRAUMA* the more assets I had, the more valuable the project became for others. The current business models are eroding away and I’ve been jumping up and down

getting excited about these new opportunities and it doesn't feel like enough people are listening. The traditional path is a dead end but there are so many new possibilities here."

One person who is listening is Wendy Levy at the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) in San Francisco. Levy set up the Producers Institute for New Media Technologies at BAVC in 2007 to help filmmakers navigate this new terrain.

Brad Lichtenstein, producer and director of *WHAT WE GOT: DJ SPOOKY'S QUEST FOR THE COMMONS* attended the Institute with his team in June 2008 and later blogged about how the experience transformed their project. "It's become what some might call a *transmedia experience*, morphing our outreach remix and share strategy and the storytelling into a single multi-modal force hurtling forward in real and cyber space... We spent 10 days working with web developers, game developers, designers, Second Life experts, mapping experts and other talented folk re-imagining public media strategy. While we wrote in our proposal that we want our project to be *viral* and to build community through online sharing and remixing, we actually figured out how to make those goals a reality in the hive of BAVC's institute."

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Levy is a great evangelist for the importance of giving people access to technology. "The Institute is basically a creative and technological think tank, bringing technologists and storytellers together to increase access and relevancy. Producers can bring three people, one of whom should ideally be a web developer, and they should leave with a working prototype."

This is a paradigm shift for many independent producers who must now embrace hybrid roles, but Levy is convinced that this is unavoidable: "Multi-platform is not an enhancement but an integral part of the story. Your impact is limited if you don't engage with this and funders are now realising the power of media to expand their goals in all their programmes." The Institute focuses on social issue films, particularly projects with a social justice element and Levy thinks about this in terms of civic engagement platforms and not just distribution platforms.

Lina Srivastava, a consultant who specialises in social change, is enthusiastic about the possibilities for creating worlds around social issue film projects and building communities of interest through participation. She has coined the term *transmedia activism* for this kind of work. "Transmedia storytelling holds enormous potential for social change initiatives to galvanise their base, by creating multiple points of entry into the 'universe' of an issue."

MIT Professor Henry Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling is essentially an extremely sophisticated and co-ordinated multi-platform approach: "So, for example, in the *MATRIX* franchise, key bits of information are conveyed through three live action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games. There's no one single source or ur-text where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the *MATRIX* universe."

This obviously works very well in the genre universe of sci-fi and horror but Srivastava argues for the adaptation of these techniques to social issue projects too. "There is a real opportunity



for activists to raise awareness and influence action by accessing audience members through multiple points of entry into the issues underlying a cause. The more people are exposed to the stories around your cause and the ideas behind change, the more likely that (A) some change will be effected or (B) you'll influence the person or groups of people who can help you create change."

Cross-Media Specialist Christy Dena highlights the importance of social media in this kind of work: "All films need a web presence, but social change projects in particular also need to utilise social media of some kind. Since social change is about a strong call to action, that call to action needs to be complemented with a conversation, a two-way communication."

Storytelling should still be at the heart of any multi-platform approach but giving your audience the tools to get hooked into the story allows for the kind of immersion that will keep them engaged. You need to make sure that your process is organic and that you are not trying to shoehorn a concept into multiple platforms when it doesn't work creatively. As Weiler says: "Your process needs to be a natural extension of the story, part of the over-all conceptual design."

If this all sounds rather intimidating, you should take comfort from the fact that you are already doing a lot of this work and that pursuing this approach will help your film to get lasting traction in a saturated landscape. "People get overwhelmed by the process but if you plan your strategy it can be as doable as what you already do," Weiler says encouragingly, "You already need a website, stills, research and rehearsals so why not mine some of this by using technology that is out there. In this cluttered media world you need as much leverage as you can get. If you are in the long tail, you need to be found. Music can be easily repeated but film needs to have its life extended by other means. The extension of the world around a film is very powerful."

All this comes back to the point at the beginning of this article: filmmakers need to think about and engage with their audience. Right now filmmakers are running blind without really considering what the audience can do. They should, as Weiler says, be "challenging the form, challenging the conventions around what story is" because this can create dynamic experiences for everyone involved. And as Wendy Levy puts it, they really have no choice, "filmmakers have to engage with this because this is the world now." ■