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Innovation in storytelling and audience engagement

We've seen the impact of digital technologies on the music and print industries and are now beginning to see its impact on the world of film and video. In the words of Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen, digital technology has largely been a disruptive innovation - it has changed the product itself, and its delivery and consumption in ways that the market didn't expect. For music, this meant the decrease in physical album sales, due to an increase in the demand for single tracks. There were also the concurrent lowering in prices, as well as an increase in access to free, and pirated, music. For film, we can expect more of the same, but like with the music industry, the artist need not despair. Just as musicians are now beginning to connect more directly with their fans and find new revenue streams, albeit ones that privilege the individual artist not the record label, so too can filmmakers now develop new artistic and business practices that may prove more creative and more lucrative.

Perhaps the single biggest change wrought by digital technology has been its exposure of many a bad business practice. As Warren Buffet has said about the recent global financial meltdown, "it's not until the tide goes out that you see who's wearing the swim trunks," and digital technology has allowed us to see that many things weren't working well for artists and audiences in the film business. To be sure, many Hollywood financial shenanigans have been exposed, but for those of us working outside this system - be it American independents or artists working with some public subsidy for production - an entire model has collapsed.

It is now not just possible, but normative, for a filmmaker to finish an excellent feature film, play it at a major film festival to much acclaim and then receive an offer for distribution of as little as \$50,000 US for all rights, in all territories, for as long as twenty years. These economics don't make sense, but they often never have. It's just that now, filmmakers can more easily email one another and find out that this bad deal is a regular occurrence, and one that has often been hidden in the sale of global rights. The problem, however, is more basic - for all but a handful of important, artistic films fail to reach a broad audience, regardless of whether their sale price was high or low. Sure, they may have been playing numerous film festivals, and winning many awards and acclaim for their directors, but very few of these films can claim to be seen by more than a few thousand persons globally.

While the adage art for arts sake is nice, it is more often the case that filmmakers hope their works are seen by an audience, and hopefully a sizable one at that. Furthermore, in an era when government funding bodies are increasingly focused (obsessed?) with impact and quantifiable numbers, while simultaneously being cut or downsized in many

regions, this is not only an unsustainable model, but one that will continue to undercut itself. Digital has exposed the underlying business model as a bad deal for all, but unfortunately the system it seems to put in place erodes these same models even further. Some would say not just erodes, but has already exploded them altogether.

The problem with digital, is that to fully address both its dilemmas and promises, one must fully embrace the true paradigm shift it offers. Too often, filmmakers and industry repeat the same mistakes as the music industry, thinking they can apply some digital window-dressing while practicing business as usual, all while proclaiming loudly that these mistakes have taught lessons from which we've learned. Unfortunately, building a Facebook page, for just one such new digital strategy, while continuing to try and perpetuate the old model is not a paradigm shift and such strategies will fail. Remember, it's not that the music industry couldn't see digital coming, couldn't imagine an iTunes like service; to do so would have undercut their existing, seemingly healthy business. To succeed they would have to cannibalize everything about their model, and that was too much for the executives to swallow. So others came along and did what needed to be done.

The same is now happening in film, but it needn't play out the same. The key to surviving and thriving in any paradigm shift is to realize that the "rules of the game" have changed. To adapt, we must realize that "old world" values are being replaced with something new. Computer theorist Alan Kay has said that the best way to predict the future is to invent it. Filmmakers, and industry, can create this future now, but only by strategic thinking, which involves teasing out some of the properties, or values, of this new paradigm. While these will undoubtedly evolve, a few things now seem abundantly clear.

First, we have moved from an economy built on scarcity to one built on abundance. The entire film (and music and print) industry has been built on the notion of scarcity. It was expensive to learn how to make films, to shoot them, to edit them, to market and distribute them. Talented actors were hard to find, and being so few, they attracted inordinate attention for the films that featured them, so they commanded big salaries. Shipping film cans was expensive, and there were only so many theaters with only so many films made, so as an audience member, your choices of what to see were relatively limited. Digital has changed every aspect of this scenario. While a quality film can still be expensive to make, it needn't be any longer. Amateur and "pro-am" filmmakers are flooding the market with both low and high quality films. Prints no longer need to be made. Everything is zeroes and ones. Content has become super-abundant.

This alone has changed everything about the economics of film production and consumption, but it has also shifted the power dynamics. As an audience member, I now have a plethora of choices. In fact, I have too many things to choose from, and I can choose to watch them not just in the theater, or the comfort of my home in front of an amazing HD television, but I can watch what I want on my Iphone while on the train.

You can't stop me, because being zeroes and ones, I can easily and cheaply find your film anywhere, and all digital locks can easily be broken (as in truth, can most analog locks, you can Google and find those methods online now as well).

Where a filmmaker was once just competing with a few hundred other films each year, you are now competing not just with every other person with a digital camera, but also with the entire weight of film history, now (largely) available online somewhere, often in a great format. As an audience member, I face an embarrassment of visual riches, and we have now entered the attention economy - because what matters to me now as much as any currency is the value of my time. For me to grace your film with my attention, much less my money, you must get my attention. You must engage me. This is not as easy (if it ever was) in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

Luckily, another key trend of digital helps us with engagement - the rise of participatory culture. Audiences can now easily participate actively in the art they engage with, and expect to be able to do so. This is an historic return to the way art used to be practiced—by and for all. Ancient cultures valued communal art making and practice, with the arts integrated into community activity. Audiences no longer want to just consume their art—they want to be involved, to engage in the conversation around art and creativity and perhaps participate in its production. Artists can no longer expect to just make their art and let someone else engage with the audience - the audience now demands to be part of a conversation, and rewards those who participate in this back and forth. Many artists fear this communication, but I would suggest that while conversation is difficult, it is much better to be rewarded by a fan base that can participate in dialogue than be ignored entirely by audiences who expect this engagement. It also lessens the disintermediation of the old system, allowing artists to speak (through cinema or blogs) directly to their intended audience.

This direct engagement with one's audience is necessary, because if there's anything clear about today's audiences and consumers it is that they demand authenticity and trust. They don't want to *just* be marketed to incessantly. They want to not just have a dialogue, but have an authentic dialogue that values their input, respects them as viewers and this can only be accomplished when the artist is personally engaged with her audience. Zoe Keating, an avant-garde cellist from the United States, engages with her audience on a regular basis via the short messaging social media network Twitter, and as a result has garnered over 1.5 million followers. They follow her because she engages them with stories from her life, responds to their inquiries and this has been rewarded well - she can now ask her fans for funding to produce her music, and go directly to them to sell her art as well. She no longer needs a middleman to have a successful career. Numerous other musicians and now filmmakers are doing the same, but all are learning that audiences engage more directly with authentic, trusted voices.

These audiences also expect convenience and immediacy - something almost antithetical to the business model of film, which has been wedded to the idea of

territories and windowing. To be frank, these are useless relics of the past, creating an artificial scarcity that the audience will no longer tolerate (because they are now globally connected and have a choice of many options). Audiences want their films (or other content) when they want it, on what device they want it, on their timetable and they probably wanted it yesterday. It took the music industry a long time to figure this out, but offering content more quickly, at a reasonable rate also helps the fight against piracy. People are less likely to pirate content when they can get it quickly and easily. Many filmmakers are now finding success by offering their films for sale as DVD, VOD and online nearly simultaneous with their theatrical release. Most are also finding that this doesn't detract from their theatrical revenues either. In fact, in the US, a few distributors are even finding that an advanced preview on VOD can help push theatrical sales.

This notion, that a film should be available in multiple windows more quickly also stems from another hallmark of the digital age - the expectation for finding content on multiple platforms. Consumers are now well accustomed to watching films not just in the theater and on their large flat screen televisions (or digital HD projectors), but are equally comfortable watching films on the computer, their Ipad, and even on their Iphone or other smartphone device. Many filmmakers find the idea of someone watching their masterpiece on a small cell-phone screen, perhaps while taking the train or bus to work, an abhorrent situation. This is understandable, but such filmmakers should realize that increasingly, if your film is not available on multiple platforms, it doesn't exist for a large portion of audiences. In fact, it is very possible that exposure to quality films on small screens might lead to greater respect for the theatrical experience. Many a film school student or even just a film lover will admit, when pressed, to their first experience with many of the masters of cinema having come from a VHS tape on a small television. For many, especially those not living in major cities, this was the only way to get access (and importantly, repeat access) to quality cinema. Getting the chance to then watch that film, perhaps as a restored print, on the big screen was then much more exciting. Revival houses rely on this phenomenon, and it is likely that the trend will continue in the digital age. Second, the largest problem for quality, art films is obscurity, perhaps we should welcome any increase in audience no matter the screen size!

More importantly, many filmmakers are beginning to embrace the nature of multi-platform in their storytelling. Transmedia storytelling utilizes multiple platforms not just as exhibition formats but also as possible means to expand story-telling and audience engagement possibilities. In fact, transmedia practice addresses all of the changes suggested above. It acknowledges that audiences want to participate more directly with stories, and let's them engage on the platform, or platforms, of their choice in a smart way that rewards those who participate more actively - with some participants even contributing to the story itself. Not everyone wants to participate as actively as the most dedicated fans, but transmedia practice allows for this as well - each platform or element is a distinct experience. If I only watch the film, I can enjoy it, but if I have also played the game, watched the episodic "prequels" online or attended the live alternate

reality game (ARG) event, I might have deepened my relationship to the “story-world” shown in the film.

As a creative individual, this can offer not just new story-telling possibilities, but also help alleviate some of the pain associated with the new world values. Perhaps you don't want to have someone watch your film on a mobile phone. You might be alright, however, with them using their phone to play a game related to your film, watch the trailer or even some short form content related to the film. You might not want everyone to have access to the DVD in advance of a theatrical screening, but you might want those fans who donated to your crowd-funding campaign to have such access so they might spread the word. Or perhaps those fans who successfully complete a game gain access to some of your content early. The possibilities for both story development and audience engagement and building are greatly enhanced through transmedia practice.

Transmedia storytelling is beginning to gain some traction among creatives. For it to succeed, however, the film industry must embrace such multi-modal thinking not just in creative storytelling, but also in creative business practices. Due to market conditions and established players who fear new models, we see less experimentation with business models. Few broadcasters, exhibitors, distributors, financiers (governmental or investors) or others involved in the production and dissemination of films understand either the values of the “new world” brought about by digital, nor the concept of transmedia. Successful producers will likely have to speak of the new world in terms of the old. It will likely be much easier to pitch a film that happens to have multiple platforms with interesting audience engagement strategies than a transmedia production, for at least the near future. Just as certain story elements work better in different environments on different platforms, so too might certain business models work best for certain platforms. Producers will likely have to carve up rights for each platform, and raise funding for them differently as well. A broadcaster might only fund the traditional film, and perhaps the website. The game and live events might have to be funded by corporate sponsorship or advertising support. The short form “prequel” to the film might be crowd-sourced, while the book is supported by an advance from a publisher. Each creative project will have as many different monetary schemes as it has story elements, if not more. While this creates more work, it also opens up possibilities.

Producers now have more potential places to turn for funding, for marketing support, for audience aggregation and engagement. Producers used to spend anywhere from three months to multiple years developing a project. Once that film was in the can, however, it was not uncommon to spend less than six months preparing for and marketing a release. An enormous amount of time that could be spent developing ones audience is often lost, and can now be captured by thinking of audience development from the script stage - and by figuring out on which platforms they will engage with the story and how to monetize those platforms. Hard work, but for smart producers, work that might pay off quite handsomely with both creative and business rewards.

Producers must now put as much creativity into thinking about, learning from and developing their audience as they do developing their stories. This is not to suggest that storytelling is no longer key. A good story, well told, remains central to the creative and business success of any film. Focusing on the audience need not detract from the art of filmmaking. Hollywood's obsession with market testing and polling has given audience development a bad name. Such market testing essentially said, "give 'em what they want, no matter how dumb it is." *Transmedia practice asks instead - given my story, who is the audience? Where do they reside? What do they like to do? What platforms do they use? How can I most creatively engage them in my story-world through those platforms? These questions, asked properly, don't detract from art, they can make it richer, more meaningful and more engaging.*

Brian Newman writes on film and new media at www.springboardmedia.blogspot.com