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Unstable Platforms: The Promise and Peril of Transition

'Teaching Smart Cinema: DVD Add-ons and New Audience Pleasures'

Pat Brereton ©

[Extracts from 'Cinema in Transformation: Smart Cinema, DVD Add-ons and New Audience Pleasures' Palgrave Press 2011/2]

Many scholars categorize new digital films, using concepts ranging from database narratives (Manovich), forking path narratives (Bordwell), multiple draft narratives (Branigan and Bordwell), twist films (Wilson 2006), complex narratives (Staiger, 2006), modular narratives (Cameron, 2006), puzzle films (Buckland, 2009) including Elsaesser's mind-games taxonomy. All of these terms help to flesh out this study's exploration of smart cinema, alongside new forms of digital film making and contemporary audience consumption.

The term 'Smart cinema' acquired popular currency in academic circles in the late 1990s. The most coherent explanation has been put forward by Jeffrey Sconce's essay (Screen 2002), who argues that smart films reflect the presence of a growing 'culture of irony' and parody. Its intended audience is apparently the disillusioned yet highly educated new generation who display a form of ironic contempt and emotional distancing from their surroundings and socio-cultural existence. Smart movies like *Donnie Darko* broadly encapsulate what have been described as reflexive and playful postmodern texts, which in turn are augmented by the specific attributes of new digital media. These new attributes draw upon technological innovations facilitated by the computer and the internet, alongside the proliferation of video games and music videos, together with other new generational e-pleasures and e-cultural tastes.

This paper will use films like *Be Kind Rewind* to demonstrate the importance of smart cinema for new generations, while drawing on the special issue on DVD add-ons for *Convergence* (2007) which I edited, that focused on how add-ons can strengthen the overall appeal of this consumer fan-driven medium and at the same time incorporate significant educational applications.

Overview

Drawing on extensive research for a forthcoming book length study for Palgrave, this paper will examine how so-called smart cinema and new media generally can be read as transforming modes of viewing and thereby influence future teaching strategies. With a growing preoccupation around convergence within new media research, DVD add-ons in particular provide a useful bridge between new media and conventional film study, while also signalling how new generational cineastes might consume digital media.

While Sconce uses the term primarily in aesthetic and thematic terms, I will also focus on its technical and special effects associations, made possible by the evolving characteristics of DVD together with new forms of presentation, including YouTube and other online interactive features. Essentially, a new brand of cinephilia is being created and audiences can 'position themselves as insiders with a unique knowledge of film culture'. (Tyron, 2009: 21) Teachers most especially have to take account of this new relationship, to remain effective pedagogues and to develop more robust media research projects.

While critiquing Bordwell and Thompson's more conventional narrative film studies framework for instance, I will also call upon a cross section of new media theories, including those posited by Everett et al. (2003), Lister et al. (2003), Downey and Ride (2006), Miller (2009), Buckland et al. (2009) among others. This paper will also respond to a much needed exploration of audience/reception theory, including work by Barker et al. and their international study of *Lord of the Rings* (2007), together with studies by Bennett and Brown (2008), alongside Barbara Klinger among others, who have helped to frame a 'post-multiplex', new e-generational audience, for the study of film in its broadest context.

Exploring New Audience Pleasures using Smart DVDs

A key to the new afterlife of cinema, according to Terry Rowden, is both the proliferation of cable and pay-per-view options for accessing feature films and the widening range of supplements or 'extras' that characterise practically all DVD releases. In the light of what he calls their 'postmaturation', this supplementary material often comes close to overwhelming the 'actual' film in the high profile releases, i.e. the ones with the greatest global appeal. Between the commentaries, 'making of' documentaries, alternative endings, web links, and director's cut, it is becoming harder and harder to say or even to feel comfortable guessing where the 'real' or, perhaps more anachronistically, 'reel' film either begins or ends. (Rowden, in Christensen et al. 2008: 293) While not fully embracing this conclusion, nevertheless these extras certainly make it unlikely I think that any two viewers who access them will experience or sequence the package in exactly the same way. The supplementary or hypertextualising possibilities of the DVD and of digital technology, fundamentally compromise any particular film's future as a normatively stable text – for instance there are currently five different versions of *Blade Runner* – once it has disappeared from the movie screens. Furthermore, as Peter Lunenfeld (1999) has suggested, '[T]he backstory – the information about how a narrative object comes into being – is fast becoming almost as important as that object itself. [and] For a vast percentage of new media titles, backstories are probably more interesting, in fact, than the narratives themselves.' (cited in Christensen et al. 2008:293-4) Even if one were not to fully endorse this radical assertion, nonetheless the extra textual backstories have become particularly important for the smart aesthetic and help to frame a critical reading of various conflictual pleasures.

Smart cinema, as defined by Jeffrey Sconce, has become a popular term of reference for a broad strand of recent cinema. Together with re-viewing add-ons from DVDs, a generation of contemporary students appears to have acquired a new aesthetic taste and fascination for consuming such films. Sconce foregrounds an ironic stance as a key aspect of this mode of filmmaking. He specifically lists five elements that many of these new films share:

'Cultivation of a "blank" style and incongruous narration

A fascination with 'synchronicity' as a principle of narrative organization

A related thematic interest in random fate

A focus on the white middle-class family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunctionality

A recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity.' (Sconce: 358)

Teaching and Re-Educating Audiences with DVD Add-ons

In a special issue on DVD add-ons in *Convergence* (2007), I set up a broad overview of film theory debates and issue, which are reflected in the growing taxonomy of DVD add-ons. Such features encourage viewers to expose themselves to these ancillary elements and hypothetically at least assist in re-framing and re-educating audience engagement with the primary text, armed with extra knowledge and contextual materials. Such extra features certainly provide useful markers and framing devices to help deepen the knowledge, interaction, engagement and even learning of a new generation of fledgling cineastes as well as re-ignite the palattes of older generational audiences. Primary avenues for pedagogical discussion and analysis with this material include looking at issues around; adaptation, style, political and economic production history, as well as more broadly framed film study debates and audience reception concerns.

This paper will particularly focus on directorial commentary and how these help situate and flesh out a new form of smart auteurism, which both calls attention to the creative process while at the same time, possibly side stepping, even subverting the semiotic and other stratified and developmental processes of conventional film analysis. The tacit new relationship built up between the cineaste/viewer and the film creatives, coalesce around the interactive production and consumption of such newly conceived dialogical material. Before this, it was left to gate-keepers like film journalists, who were presented with information packs to digest for their subsequent film reviews to help service audience needs for contextual information and exploration. These journalist packs contained much of the material now freely available on DVD add-ons, which I suggest can now help to frame audience responses directly by informing their critical faculties and influence general film reception.¹

Adaptation, Style and Auteur theory

From the earliest days of cinema to the present day, many narrative films have been based upon prior literary properties. With so much add-on material from original sources now becoming available on DVDs, including excerpts from the original novel for instance, alongside the duplication of storyboards and other script development tools, students are in a better position to compare and contrast original sources with the final film version than ever before. Appropriate add-ons certainly help to deepen the active viewer's knowledge and understanding of the complex production process of filmmaking and most especially translating ideas and stories from one medium to another. *Be Kind Rewind* for example can be used to illustrate how adaptation and other attributes of film analysis have been transformed within new media protocols.

The study of film direction and auteur theory, as well as evolving theories of cinematography, music, performance and stardom are all greatly facilitated by having the chance to hear a range of creative personnel discuss their role in the making of the film, encapsulated within various DVD add-ons. These commentaries/interventions (either as voice-over commentary, synchronized to the film or as 'behind the scenes' documentaries)² often provide useful material to encourage students to learn more about their chosen medium. The auteur theory for instance continues to be a focus for film studies and directors' commentaries help to promote, if not always validate, its primary importance in film appreciation. In my experience, students frequently identify the audio commentary track as the most useful extra, with the director and/or some of the stars and senior members of the crew talking the viewer through the movie experience, as the film plays in the background. Such tracks help to explain the

effects being striven for and suggest the directors' overall intent, while also revealing various creative tricks in the film making trade.

Smart films posit a particularly complex dialogical engagement with cineastes, as they often frame an ironic and playful exposition of the filmmaker's work, which in turn serves to sometimes contradict and even subvert the normative semiotic exercise of the initial film viewing experience. At all times nonetheless, critical viewers ought to be fully aware of the bottom line marketing strategy, underpinning such apparently revealing even critical exposés.

Political Economy and Production History

DVD add-ons can also serve to tease out the production background that led to the making of a particular film and help to investigate the economic barometers of success. Incidentally, particularly with regards to high-concept, special effects-driven films, there is often more extensive and detailed production history provided in the bonus features. These typically trace major difficulties in bringing the final concept to screen while also outlining the extensive use of creative labor involved in the process.³ For example, in the double disk version of Spielberg's *Minority Report*, one add-on feature outlines his desire to construct a 'believable' future world. We are consequently informed how Spielberg brought the 'best minds' together for a 'technological think tank' with the aim of focusing on a future prognosis around what would be in vogue over fifty years from now. Alongside endless trial and error mock-ups of how to visualize this future world, the large film production team is shown experimenting on various technical and new aesthetic strategies designed to help underpin Spielberg's and Stanley Kubrick's (who initiated the project) often contrasting visions of the original short story as conceived by Philip K. Dick. Such add-on material attached to what can be considered a technologically smart science fiction movie, help tease out the process around the conception and execution of new special effects.⁴

At a more macro level, critics have also noted how some DVDs of historical classics have bonus features that provide evidence of the longitudinal placement of the film within the movie company's stable of productions. This information can initiate a useful business case study, as well as frequently exposing how the text fits into predetermined genres or not, as the case may be.⁵ Recent studies of Miramax (see Perren (2001), Cauldwell et al. (2008)) for instance are very useful in explicating the genesis of a smart American Indie production aesthetic.

New Media and Smart Aesthetics

As I argue in a chapter on SFX and science fiction movies, new digital media can be expressed as part of a new [smart] 'database logic'. 'Much of the literature in this area comes from a broad cross disciplinary field and draws specifically on how the computer has revolutionized both the creative and consumption modalities of new media. New generational use of the computer and in particular the graphic user interface (GUI) with its intuitive use of drop down menus, alongside other features including cutting and pasting, while using a mouse to interface with the machine, remains by all accounts revolutionary. Use of new interactive protocols has become a major transformation, from earlier having to acquire a complex computer language to become proficient with the technology.' DVD add-ons of all types, which can be accessed and used in any order, foreground the new media potentiality of the medium

and research is needed to help tease out how new generational audiences engage with smart film aesthetics.

I would tend to agree with Chuck Tyron who affirms that ‘a new brand of cinephilia’ is being created and audiences can ‘position themselves as insiders with a unique knowledge of film culture’ (2009: 21). Tyron goes on to assert that ‘the supplementary features on DVDs have the primary effect of reconceptualising the activity of movie watching, expanding interpretive practices while possibly opening up apparently closed texts to new readings. The DVD, both as a material object and as a packaged commodity, participates in the promotion of the viewer as a movie geek, as a viewer actively participating in film culture rather than merely passively consuming movies’. (ibid.: 32)

Sweeding and Memorialising: Be Kind Rewind

Be Kind Rewind is just one of a flurry of new films about social memories (and mimics) of the movies, reflecting a burgeoning modern interest in fan remakes, in transformative works, and in what Andrew Keen scathingly dubs the ‘cult of the amateur’ (referring to its online equivalents).

The film is set in a VHS-only video rental store in a rundown city neighbourhood. After a magnetic mishap erases all the tapes in the store, the store’s most loyal customer, Miss Falewicz demands she rents *Ghostbusters*. So the employees try to mock-up the film from scratch. Incidentally, classics of this mock-up genre include *Raiders of the Lost Ark: The Adaptation*, a 1980s no-budget remake by three teenagers over a seven-year period (see TheRaider.net).⁶

In an age where a cell phone has more processing power than any computer available two decades ago and in an information economy that delights in blurring the line between amateur and professional, Swedes are refreshing and retro chic. The creativity involves focusing on how Swedes choose to use found objects or cardboard props to simulate special effects instead of duplicating them technologically. Swedes innovate through manipulating their inherent constraints.⁷ The apparent recurrent striving for increasingly innovative digital creativity appears to be promoting a counter-productive fascination with old technology at the same time.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that online streaming video sites (such as YouTube) have recently given rise to a prevalent electronic community of ‘the clip’ and informal, more fluid ways to access movies and footage or historical moments. [Alongside functioning as a nostalgic celebration around the re-formatting of new technology to look more retro, as in the Steam-Punk movement for instance.] One could argue that for better or worse, the future may lie in what Lucas Hilderbrand describes as a ‘potential for democratisation of media memories’ and even an adjustment of what history means now. (Kerr, 2)

Be Kind Rewind is more a commentary on how new audiences memorise film that it is on the texts themselves. In the movies the store dubs its method ‘swedeing’ (as in Sweden), and the films that receive this affectionate treatment range from the sublime to the ridiculous. (Kerr, 4) The internet however is decidedly not covered in Gondry’s film, as part of his preference for paraphernalia from the past. Moreover, this very sense of personally ‘owning’ movies dates back to the video age: the compulsion to

have a copy to watch over, and to help you remember the movie. *Be Kind Rewind* turns the clock back to where this contemporary obsession with retro started – the video shop, echoing the quintessential smart director nerd, Tarantino, who apparently got his initial creative inspiration from working in such a retail premises.

Kerr goes on in his very provocative contextual reading, focusing on how Gondry's habit of crafting treasures out of what others throw away. 'Videos are thematically consistent with his claims for memory and nostalgia.' Gondry's DIY movie 'also coincided with a watershed moment in video history, as the last standalone JVC VHS unit was manufactured in the same year. Accordingly, tapes are ephemera themselves now, and are considered a product of the eighties, which is also perhaps the moment in time where the modern surge in pop culture is rooted (remembering 'Generation X').' (Kerr, 6)⁸

By all accounts a new phenomenon has hit YouTube. Not only can now get your daily dose of stupid skateboard stunts – 'Jackass style, alongside giggling babies - now a legion of videos of teenagers running around in goofy, half-baked costumes' reenacting popular movies marked 'sweded' are available for your viewing pleasure. As YouTube puts it; '[S]wedding is taking something you like and remaking it from scratch by mixing it with other things you like. You can use whatever you can get your hands on, everyday things and items like technology and stuff. Then when you're finished you have a new thing, an awesome thing. It's not the same as the thing it was, but a better thing, based on the old thing'. It's putting you in the thing you love - that's Sweding - re-imagining your favourite film, trailer scene becomes the *raison d'être* of this process. *Be Kind Rewind* bestows a new vocabulary and popularity upon this class of user-created content and brings new meaning to the notion of an active fan culture.

As Elsaesser strongly affirms in a similar context that mind game films 'break one set of rules (realism, transparency, linearity) in order to make room for a new set, whether we examine them from a narratological angle, from an ontological, epistemological, psycho-pathological or from a pedagogical perspective. A DVD-enabled text – would have to be a film that requires or replays multiple viewings: that rewards the attentive viewer with special or hidden cues; that is constructed at a spiral or loop; that benefits from back-stories (bonuses) or para-textual information; that can sustain a-chronological perusal or even thrives on it. This form of smart interactive engagement has become the panacea for promoting a new form of cinematic experience.

The DVD-enabled movie, whose theatrical release or presence on the international film festival circuit prepares it for a culturally more durable and economically more profitable afterlife in another aggregate form. All of which would lead one to conclude that the puzzle films make 'mind games' out of the 'very condition of their own (im)possibility: they teach their audiences the new rules of the game, at the same time as they are yet learning them themselves.' (Elsaesser in Buckland et al. 2009: 39)

In this new media value chain film is in some ways becoming marginalized, with cross-platform media all the rage and new smart filmmakers having to learn from these developments. For example the platform hardware owners (Sony, Nintendo, Microsoft) develop their strategies within a strongly oligopolistic market, both for

home and handheld consoles. Videogames, which normally allow a non-linear interaction with the user (unlike linear interaction being the case for music and movies), yet all are exploiting their online possibilities. (*de Prato et al.* 2010: 26) Exploiting technology's full potential in the public sphere means reimagining the way public goods are created, delivered, and managed. (*ibid.* P.37)

Independent New Smart Creatives and Niche Marketing

As signaled above there has been a huge upsurge in new innovative cinema from the late 1990s, spawning an enormous growth in the independent sector as part of a new generational phenomenon. Research include Hanson's study *The Cinema of Generation X* (2002) and King's *Indiewood* (2009), which provides much needed framing of a range of production and new audience issues. In my ongoing smart film study, I tease out the main trends from previous generational cinema and explore how they influence the present. Essentially, I pose the question, is so-called Independent cinema always framed against the mainstream, as art cinema always appears to be, or alternatively simply/cynically is it used as an effective marketing exercise to develop new forms of niche audiences, as mass media become more and more diversified?⁹

As suggested in a piece by Irena Reifova (2010)¹⁰ '[T]o approach communication media in their complexity as a media culture means showing equal interest in both producers of media texts and users of their meanings as two fully fledged parts of a single whole. This approach explores the formative tensions in which the particular articulations of production and consumption in the particular culture make sense, i.e. facilitate the processes of [de]stabilizing identities, power relations, cultural anxieties or pleasures.'

Graeme Turner (2004: 82) usefully coins the term 'democratic turn' to refer to the accession of ordinary people, who are not elites, celebrities or professional communicators, into the productive media spaces. Analysis of this process is based on the presupposition that popular culture may make otherwise boring or opaque topics more accessible, make citizenship a more pleasant activity and free it of political clichés or news speak. This utopian analysis builds on the key concepts of 'popular citizenship' and 'cultural citizenship' (Hartley, 1999, Hermes, 2005, Miller, 2007) and of course calls upon the discursive potency of new e-media.¹¹

The advent of popular bottom-up communication practices is often discussed in terms of the quality of presentation.¹² In a post-hegemonic society, people seem to prefer identity politics to party politics as a tool kit to help them to find their place in the world. (Hall and Du Gay, 1996) Such evocation of personal politics very much concurs with the trajectory of much postmodern, smart cinema, which often avoids direct exposition of ideological/political debates in favour of more low-scale individual interventions and group preoccupations.

Concluding Remarks

Research by Ranjana Das (2010)¹³ suggests:

'Audience reception studies have in past decades emphasized the active, interpretative, critical, creative and sometimes resistant nature of engaging with the media'.

Generally 'it seems that many highly used theoretical categories – interpretation, text, genre, mode – call for some rethinking and clarification in the context of Web 2.0.

More specifically, it has recently been suggested that parallels of significance exist, conceptually as well as empirically, between audience reception studies and user studies (for instance Livingstone and Das, 2009)' (ibid.: 81) In any case, critical media literacy and pedagogic practice 'demands that people adopt a critical and responsible stance as they alleviate, analyse and critique the media'. (ibid.: 88) The current preoccupation with new media literacy – and this paper's engagement with DVD add-ons - needs to be continuously cogniscent of how audiences actually read such texts, much less try to conceptualise how they live a so-called 'digital life'.

This paper and my ongoing book length study have tangentially outlined some of the interconnections between so-called new smart media pleasures, alongside the pedagogical possibilities for teachers, in terms of the usage of DVD add-ons. Having earlier explored many of the possible teaching benefits for harnessing such pleasures, I hope this further investigation will provoke more debate, all the while remaining strongly committed to the view that effective media literacy strategies must provide a coherent language and grammar of engagement and, if at all possible, be based on an understanding and legitimation of students' pleasures, use patterns and preferences of consumption. While acknowledging much of the best critical analysis of film still remains outside of the DVD package - as for instance Sconce's comparative assessment of smart cinema, which sparked off this study - from my observation in teaching film over the years, I would suggest that such freely available bonus features, alongside the growing back-catalogue from film history, help to frame how new audiences can be re-educated, or at least e-educated, through new modes of engagement around the consumption of digital movies. Film scholars, like historians should certainly use DVD add-ons as primary sources, excavating their field of study. Even if many DVD bonus feature remain simply self-serving advertising propaganda, many features nonetheless can assist in affirming the cerebral game of decoding film, which in turn encourages students to test their pleasures, all the while enabling us as educators to learn to appreciate the intertextual and contextual range of debates, which inform textual analysis.

In summary, I have sought to signal how such bonus features frequently strengthen the overall appeal of this consumer-fan driven medium that coincidentally or not incorporates significant educational applications. As already said, with a growing preoccupation around convergence within new media research, DVD add-ons (and of course Blu-Ray) provide a useful bridge between new media and conventional film study, while assisting in exploring how new-generational cineastes connect with the medium.¹⁴

¹ Note research work is being carried out on E-film journalism and blogging around film reception, by a PhD student of mine Eileen Culloty. Furthermore, Laura Canning is completing a PhD on Smart Cinema, focusing on genre among other aspects of this new phenomenon.

From the quirky subversion of the ‘serious’ exposition around the making of the film feature see *Sideways* (2004), where we witness the crew getting more and more drunk and getting very little footage completed, to the more conventional if nonetheless offbeat affirmation of the creative process of filmmaking in the behind the scenes documentary on Michel Gondry’s offbeat *The Science of Sleep* (2006), there is a large catalogue of useful documentaries on DVD which flesh out the film making process.

³ Peter Jackson stands out among contemporary directors for his extensive use of add-ons in his films, including supplemental material on the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and more recently his 2005 *King Kong* remake demonstrates. Like Spielberg, Jackson certainly celebrates the process of production by meticulously documenting every storyboard and every creative decision that went into the production of his massive adaptation process. Jackson even suggests in his commentary on the DVD add-ons that the format affords him more creative space to showcase his extensive production process and believes that audience expectations are different for such material. Fans of his films can ‘wade’ through the recorded process of film making and even engage step-by-step with the creative decisions necessary to transform such a mega-business project into the final edited version.

³ Much has already been written on such blockbusters, which are less easily categorized under the rubric of a smart aesthetic.

⁴ For example chief designer Alex McDowell is shown explaining the development of the graphic work needed to create the three-legged spider, using graphic animation techniques that naturally interest students of filmmaking. Also particularly impressive is the automatic program, which helped built the set in 3D and can tell the camera how to shoot the shot without making “mistakes”.

⁵ Paul Grainge for instance traces how the DVD release of *North by Northwest* (1959) was packaged in 2001 with the contemporary logo of Warner Bros (the MGM back catalogue being owned by Turner Entertainment, a subsidiary of Time Warner). By replacing and refreshing old studio signatures, media corporations have been able to claim proprietary rights over Hollywood’s past, a form of brand annexation tied to the appropriation and circulation of competing logos (352).

⁶ It’s not ‘creative’ in the sense of adding intentional, meaningful changes to the original, viewers nevertheless enjoy it as a rough, DIY labour of love. In 2004 a Hollywood producer bought the life story rights of the three adaptation filmmakers. (Prigge)

⁷ Clearly the offbeat idea of communal ‘mimicking-from-memory’ has taken root. This has likely been inspired by modern interpretative communities: the increasingly active and involved audiences who can blog about their reactions, rant on board, and (most significantly) upload their parodies, remakes and ‘sequels’ on YouTube and the like. (Kerr, 1)

⁸ The unusual video store runs at a loss as a library for locals who cannot afford to upgrade to DVD players. The source of their troubles – the magnetizing force that wiped the tapes – is from a power station, which Jack Black’s character attempts to sabotage as he feels it controls minds and makes people forgetful – reminiscent of Orson Welles’ *F is for Fake*; ‘Almost any story is knockoffs of movies’. (Kerr, 7)

⁹ Throughout my extended book length study, I trace a number of case study trajectories of smart independent creative directors, from established auteurs like Lynch and Tarantino, together with a flurry of new directors, including Gondry, Nolan, Anderton and many others and trace their relationship with the mainstream Hollywood product.

¹⁰ ‘Processes of hybridisation in contemporary popular and media culture: theoretical remarks’ in E-Communications textbook by ECREA media network.

¹¹ Meanwhile John Hartley, another optimist I admire, differentiates mass television and new ‘emergent’ television that may foster redefined forms of citizenship. In his view, the convergence of popular culture and politics results in so-called ‘democratainment’ (Hartley, 1999: 154)

¹² Recently, an area in which new citizenship is manifested within the realm of the participatory format of popular culture in the ‘old media’, alongside the participatory dimension of the new media/technologies (e.g. social networks, blogospheres and citizen journalism). (Jenkins, 2006)

¹³ See the 2010 ECREA media studies reader with a chapter titled: ‘The task of interpretation. Converging perspectives in audience research and digital literacies’

¹⁴ Incidentally in my book I also explore how Sconce’s notion of smart cinema can be further developed and extended to apply to a wide range of national cinemas to help us appreciate the growing synergies between various film cultures as the medium converges with other new media in ever more exciting ways.