

# MULTIMEDIA - WHAT'S ALL THE RACKET

## Multimedia: The DOOM of Television

Ian McFadyen muses on the shift from passive medium to active art form.

One day about a hundred years ago a young glove salesman named Samuel Goldfish was walking along a New York street contemplating his future. Samuel had not yet hit on the career which he felt would make the most of his entrepreneurial talents.

Having an hour to kill he dropped into one of the new Nickelodeons which had sprung up in American capital cities. These tiny cinemas charged patrons a nickel for the privilege of viewing short, fuzzy, jerky black and white films of such simple subjects as a train leaving a station or a baby waving from a pram.

Samuel had never seen a motion picture before but as he sat there watching the jumpy, blurry images and more importantly, the people gazing at them, mesmerised, he knew he had discovered the business he wanted to be in. He knew he was watching the birth of a new medium.

It may seem strange but cinema was not immediately perceived as a medium of entertainment.

The motion picture camera was originally regarded as purely a scientific instrument, a means of analysing movement, and even when its potential for entertainment began to be realised, it was still only in terms of reproducing existing works.

Samuel Goldfish got together with a family of New York impresarios called the De Mille's and embarked upon filming the hit Broadway plays of the day. Their vision was that through cinema, people all across America could watch the same Broadway plays as the people in New York. Silently of course. Remarkably, the most successful early films in America were films of operas. Despite the obvious drawback of not being able to hear the singing, opera worked because opera singers had an acting style big enough to convey emotions on a silent screen.

Twenty years later, when Goldfish had moved to the west coast, changed his name to Samuel Goldwyn and founded MGM, the cinema had developed its own techniques, its own audience, its own aesthetic quite separate from theatre. It went on to develop sound, colour, wide screens and, in a variation known as television, the ability to be recorded and broadcast simultaneously to audiences of millions. It has been,

without a doubt, the communication and artistic and educational and entertainment medium of the 20th century.

### Gazing at another technology

What has this got to do with Multimedia? The answer is that as we reach the end of this century we, like Sam Goldfish, are gazing at another technology which although now primitive, is poised to dominate the next century just as cinemas and television has dominated this one.

Multimedia is not just the presentation of audiovisual material via a computer. It is audiovisual material which is for the first time under the control of the user.

Despite all the technical, creative and artistic achievements of film and cinema over this century, the medium is still limited by the fact that the audience is passive. This is not to say that the audience does not take part in the action emotionally. But no matter how exciting, how moving, how romantic, how visually beautiful such a film or TV show is, the audiences' participation is still purely vicarious.

The ability, through computers, to make the audience part of the story, opens up a whole new approach to art and entertainment which is already capturing the hearts and minds of millions.

### You are the protagonist

As the parent of a 12 year old, I can't help but notice that kids no longer go to school and talk about what they saw on TV last night. They talk about how to solve *Kings Quest*, *Ultima*, *Pagan*, *Leisure Suit Larry*, *Myst*. "The Age" Green Guide has increasingly less space devoted to television and more devoted to questions and answers about computer games - "I'm stuck in the cave of the *Bat Spiders*, how do I get the key to open the Wizard's box."

Which brings me to *Doom*. *Doom* is currently the most popular computer game on sale. It is macho, noisy, scary, incredibly violent and totally compelling. In *Doom* you, the player, are a soldier moving around a series of labyrinths populated with demonic, toxic, homicidal monsters with appalling conversation skills which you must either kill or be killed by.

The important point about the game is that it is totally Point of View. You see on the screen what the character sees. You operate the character, you are the character. You must move forward, turn left, turn right, open doors, throw switches, aim, shoot and, when necessary, run. In other words it is virtual reality in a simple but very accessible form.

By contrast, a game like *Myst* it totally cerebral. In *Myst* you are on an island surrounded by strange fragments of classical architecture, Victorian machinery and the sound of the wind and lapping waves. Your task is to solve the mystery of the island, but you don't even know what the mystery is. This game comes with no manual, simply an empty notebook in which to write down what you discover. There are no other inhabitants, no guns, no monsters and yet *Myst* is just as compelling as *Doom*, and just as scary. Maybe even more so. The point is that once again you, the player, are the protagonist in the play.

But there is more going on here than just participation. You get participation from a cheap arcade Grand Prix racing game or an F-18 cockpit simulator. What we're starting to see here is computer games with characters, mood, tension, music, stories. We're starting to see sophisticated individual aesthetics which go beyond a simple choice of fonts and graphics. In other words we're starting to see something with all the elements of literature and art.

### The paradox

So are these games which are more than games a threat to television or cinema? There's a simple test. Put a computer with CD-ROM and some of these games in your kid's room and see how much time they spend watching TV. The answer is you won't see them for weeks. Or rather, you will, because you'll be in there with them.

For herein lies the paradox. Television, which is designed to be watched by the whole family, actually stultifies family interaction. A computer which is designed to be operated by one person, stimulates interaction between family members. My

four year old insists that I help him play the computer - "Daddy, what do I type now? Can you do the moving?" - two of us squashed on a single chair. I will offer a reward here and now for the first computer manufacturer to make a machine with two keyboards.

"But", I hear you thinking. "People don't want to come home after a hard day at work and have to solve problems in a computer game." Not true. After a hard day at work, there's probably nothing more satisfying than picking up a gigantic gun and blasting several hundred mutant cacodemons into Bolognese sauce. Yet the idea persists that people just want to relax - that they just want to sit and be entertained.

Let's be clear about this. People want to sit and be entertained by television and videos because that's what a hundred years of cinema and television has trained them to do. A century ago the idea of a whole family sitting on a couch staring at a box for several hours every night was inconceivable. There were parlour games, musical instruments, painting, drawing, carving, cooking, sewing, weaving, home renovation, sports. But 20th century technology and the economics behind that technology created the century of watchers. Sports, home renovation, travel and family interaction are now things to watch on TV rather than things to actually do.

Now a new technology is creating a new generation of actors rather than watchers. Simulated action it may be but at least it is

some form of action. Twenty years from now people will be amazed that passive entertainment was ever so popular.

### Stepping into the screen

Let's look at some of the prospects for future entertainment. First, we can assume that, as with cinema, the audiovisual quality will improve. Screens will become huge and fine grained. They will become more immersive either by being worn as helmets or by becoming so wide as to give an impression of a total surround screen. Audio will become fully directional. Games will get bigger, longer and more realistic. There will be characters that you speak to, listen to you and interact like real people. There will be exotic locations, amazing special effects. In other words it will be like movies are today except that you will be IN the movie.

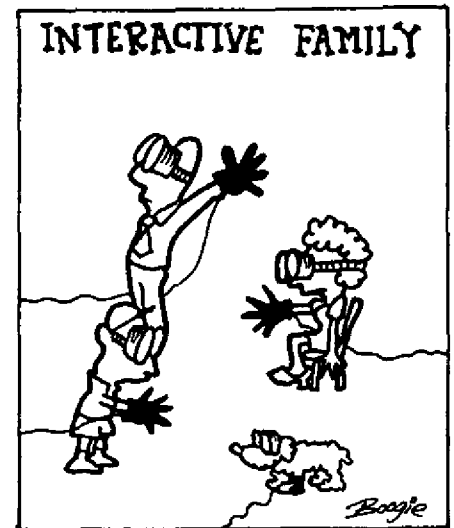
When Steven Spielberg, or his equivalent, makes Jurassic Park II, you will not sit in a cinema watching a T-Rex chase people in a car - you will be wearing a Virtual Reality helmet, and the T-Rex will be behind you, and getting closer. It is Purple Rose of Cairo in reverse - the audience steps up into the screen. It is Alice passing through the Looking Glass.

Not only this, but several people will be able to share the same experience. You can already play Doom on a network. This means you see other soldiers in the labyrinth who are actually other players playing the same game at the same time.

You have the choice of co-operating with these other players, or treating them as the enemy.

But, again, as with cinema, the appeal of this medium will not lie with technical sophistication. The cinema captured the public imagination when it stopped showing trains pulling out of stations and started dealing with the eternal themes of life: love and death, tragedy and comedy. When a new generation of multimedia artists learn how to deal with these themes in this unbelievably powerful medium it will become the art form for the next century.

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## Converging Cultures

**Jock Given expounds - what's going to happen as royalty-based industries converge with fee-based industries and everyone wants to acquire and publish everything?**

In simpler times, publishers produced books, record companies made records and filmmakers made films.

These days, some publishers, some record companies and some filmmakers, along with some computer software and games companies, are developing the same products - for the most part, CD ROM.

It's a convergence of product lines that is requiring established businesses to acquire new skills and new business practices.

### overlaps in the past

Not that the idea of overlaps in the products of different media is itself new. Books have always been turned into films, films have

spawned soundtrack albums and merchandise or been turned into books, and stars from all media have been the subjects of biographies.

The producers of the "original" products have always tried to ensure at least that they are rewarded from the success of any such spin-offs. They have often also tried to control spin-offs, so that subsequent exploitation can be managed as part of an overall strategy for the "concept".

For the film and music industries, this has not been a matter of controlling the "cream" - "nice-to-have" revenues on top of their primary business. They've seen the whole nature of their business change, many times. If they hadn't worked out how to control the new revenue streams, they wouldn't be around.

Recording and broadcasting provided new revenue streams not previously available to musicians whose only form of

remuneration was the sale of tickets to public performances. These "new" forms of exploitation now typically earn far more money for the creators than live performance. Television and subsequently video provided new revenue streams to distributors and filmmakers whose primary form of remuneration had been the sale of cinema tickets. Cinema release now often returns very little to the primary creators. It's often as much a marketing platform to give a title profile in the TV and video markets where it has to earn the real money.

For publishers, this is newer terrain. The types of books may have changed (paperbacks as well as hardbacks) and the ways of selling books may have diversified (book clubs, department stores, supermarkets as well as traditional bookstores and libraries) but the core of the business has still been books. Although CD-