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14

FEATURES

PGA Profile: Katherine Oliver **8**
*Nancy Goldman talks with the
NYC Film Commissioner*

Case Study: **14**
Richard Zanuck & Dean Zanuck
It's been a long, long road to Perdition

On-Set: *Six Feet Under* **24**
*The PGA producing team addresses
the hit series' grave concerns*

Reality Check: **32**
The 2003 PGAAwards

David Foster **34**
Getting to The Core of producing

The Virtual Threshold **41**
Anyone up for an immersive social experience?

A Lifetime of Service **50**
*The PGA's prestigious
Charles FitzSimons Award*

Cover photo: Dana Tynari

CONTENTS



24



41



8

DEPARTMENTS

4 Short Takes

6 From the Executive Director
Jobs! Jobs! Jobs!

30 PGA Bulletin and
Member Benefits

46 Book Review: *Producer: A Memoir*
by David Wolper
Alexandra Mircheff

48 Book Review: *The Independent Film
Producer's Survival Guide*
Richard Hull

54 Mentoring Matters
Neil Parris



THE VIRTUAL THRESHOLD

By W. Vito Montone

What a wild ride the last five years have been. We producers have been hearing about convergence, new media and next-generation entertainment everywhere we turn. We'd better not miss it, right? Of course, pop goes the ... well, pop went the bubble. Studios and individuals alike threw hundreds of millions into a technology sinkhole. The funny thing is, they all forgot something we learned a long, long time ago. Entertainment is about touching people with our work. It's about stories, heart and emotion, whether it's film, television, games or events.

I don't know about you, but I've read a flurry of articles telling me that a 3D virtual reality revolution is coming. It's the next "Big Thing." The Internet 2.0. This doesn't excite me for two reasons. One, these predictions hardly ever turn out to be true. (Remember videoconferencing?) Two, this "Big Thing," poised to break through for the last 10 years, is touted for the wrong reasons. Tacking the word "virtual" onto any traditional activity or service doesn't create a revolution. If you don't learn from history, you are doomed to repeat it.

Nevertheless, I *do* hope the prognosticators are right, and I'll tell you why. People want to be connected. They just want a *Cheers*-like place where everybody knows their names. And the Internet has the power to connect the globe without satellites, cable channels or broadcast towers. The online possibilities extend way beyond typical game scenarios that have defined and dominated "virtual reality" to date. The living room is our Holy Grail.

I have been watching "virtual" space for years now. Like a lot of people, my interest was sparked reading the cyberpunk thriller *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson. In the frac-

tured but recognizable world of the novel, the Mafia controls pizza delivery, the United States exists as a patchwork of corporate-franchise city-states, and the Internet — incarnate as the Metaverse — looks something like the virtual reality hype of a few years ago. Type *Snow Crash* into the search engine Google, and you get 294,000 results. Plug in "virtual worlds," and 513,000 sites appear. Try "virtual reality," and you hit a mother lode, more than 1,700,000 pages, in the same leagues as the juggernauts *Star Trek*, Barbie and Coca-Cola. Clearly a whole host of people are looking at, engaging in or postulating about our virtual lives.

This is great, but what does it mean? It's telling that the root of "virtual" in Middle English is "virtuall," meaning "effective," and in Latin is "virtus," meaning "excellence." Could we actually be on the brink of a more effective and excellent way of communicating or sharing experiences? As producers, this is what we should be looking for: not the technological hype, but the entertainment of the future. New media is not about re-purposing traditional media, it's about creating new forms of entertainment.

Virtual reality began with people wearing helmets and toting toy guns, hunting and killing each other in pods at sophisticated game centers. As computer capabilities expanded, CD-ROM games and their massively multi-player online versions have been most successful at exploiting this same "dark" side of consumer demand. With so much violence, parents have grown concerned about the content and its implied effect on society. No one is certain whether art imitates life or vice-versa, but the two are inextricably linked.

For us, the key word is "social." You know, good old-fashioned sociology, the study of human social behavior, especially the origin, organization, institution and development of

human society. This is where the key to our digital future lies. Where else but in society itself? Computers and people have begun to act as one. Like it or not, this is how we are all linked. And there is nothing wrong with it. We know more: where to get the best deals, the latest information about any field of study, what is happening in all aspects of a society, no matter where in the world it occurs. We know more people from more places, places we have never been. And we are closer. By adding the Internet to the computer, the importance of social computing has emerged. Social computing is studied in some of the world's largest corporations as part of their R&D efforts. One such group defines it as "the study of systems that convey social information and context by providing visual cues about the presence and activity of participants." Hmm, both cryptic and thought-provoking.

We have had chat rooms for years and message boards even longer, but we know visual images and sound convey more meaning and a greater experience than words alone. The film and television projects we create provide rich experiences that can capture an audience's imagination. And with an interactive twist, so does our digital future, with something I call "immersive social experiences." These are experiences where disbelief is suspended *while* interacting, something traditional media delivery systems can't provide. And they shouldn't want to, either, because the old and the new will coexist in a synergistic way. After all, contrary to industry expectations, theatrical film releases weren't hurt by the emergence of VHS and DVD.

What is an immersive social experience? It's made up of two essential elements: the interactive medium necessary to deliver it and a purpose or subject for people to share, often referred to as "content" in the new media arena. So what is new media, anyway? While I have been known to use the term myself, it now seems a bit odd to me. VHS was a new medium. DVD is a new medium. But aren't they really traditional media based on new technologies? Once confusing the next generation of entertainment with technology led to the downfall of the dotcom era.

Get back to basics: We are storytellers who deliver experiences. The content is derived from the limitless palette of the creative worlds of entertainment and commercialism. True to our industry, any content that has achieved "brand" status is going to give us the largest potential impact, whether revenue or marketing reach drives us.

The interactive medium is a computer or game console with a DSL or cable modem (broadband) connection to the Internet and a unique combination of 3D animation, video, chat and traditional computer programming such as C++, Pearl, Flash, CGI, JavaScript, etc. In this case, the combination of technology forms the virtual world platform. It is analogous to the technology of the broadcast center, satellite and cable head-end or projection systems that we rely on today.



Attendees at the Official 3D Virtual Star Trek Convention.

With immersive social experiences, participants use 3D graphic images, or avatars, to project their presence and to represent their activities and emotions. Add contextual 3D environments (rooms, buildings, places, etc.) that you can navigate, participant and celebrity chats, some streaming video (live or archival), as well as contests, games, polls and commerce, and you have the modern-day social toolbox. With the right brand, you can deliver the content, community and commerce (the 3 C's) in one seamless, elegant solution that can synergize television, music and feature film properties.

Let's put it all together. We know that the public loves their brands. People are loyal to the sequel, the series, musicians and designers alike. They buy merchandise, toys, clothes, books and music. They attend fan conventions and cruises. They brand cars with designer labels. They consume entertainment and celebrity-driven licensed product to the tune of \$17 billion a year.¹ People clearly want deeper relationships with their favorite brands. Immersive social experiences can deliver the richest experiences they can imagine. Devotees can convene with liked-minded people worldwide, see and meet experts and celebrities that make a brand tick, and buy the latest and greatest the brand has to offer. *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, Barbie, WWE, Pokémon, *The Lord of the Rings*, KISS, daytime soaps, *The Osbournes*, *The Man Show*, *Terminator*, BMW ... the list goes on and on. Is the world ready for this? Resoundingly, yes.

Here's where we sit today:

- Computer processors have broken the GHz speed barrier, meaning plenty of processing power for video.
- Computers have graphic accelerators typically with 32 MB of dedicated RAM or more delivering rich on-screen graphics.
- 53 million households worldwide have broadband, with Asia and Canada having the greatest penetration. There is a glut of bandwidth, driving down the cost of streaming video.²



Vir-Con's cyber mall

- 53 million adults socialize via online chat.³
- CD-ROM, console and online computer games generate more revenue than filmed entertainment — \$6.35 billion in the United States in 2001.⁴
- By 2004, it is estimated that online game revenues will triple to approximately \$4.8 billion in the United States.⁴
- Wireless devices now boast color screens and processor power, as well as WIFI connectivity. Their ad campaigns include capability for pictures, video and animated characters.

XBox and Playstation have an installed base of more than 20 million units worldwide and now have broadband accessories to complete their Trojan Horse mission to bring the next generation of digital entertainment into the Promised Land: the living room.

Sounds like a resounding yes to me. There is now a significant worldwide market that has the capability to participate in immersive social experiences. And it is growing at an enviable pace. The computer and the Internet can actually bring us closer together, not farther apart, as "old" thinking would assert. In virtual worlds, we are all on equal footing. We can revel in our similarities instead of harping on our differences. It sounds like a bold new world. And we need that now.

Reality television is leading the way in demonstrating public readiness. While there have been many interactive forays, *American Idol* is a stunning example of the

market's willingness to take an active role in programming. Members of the audience (or perhaps they should be called "participants" at this stage) controlled the selection of the next "American Idol." It is not such a great leap to see the participants becoming the content. We already have made stars out of contestants on the *Survivor* series. Now *Star Search* goes live. In Korea, where online multi-player games have taken over the coffee bars, there are two 24-hour cable channels devoted exclusively to game play. The best players are elevated to celebrity status based on what they do "virtually" during the game. As we continue to extend the power of the communications arts to the individual, we begin to see the next tier of celebrity: our virtual selves. Here our ability to captivate transcends the reality of what we look like or whether we can act.

If that is not enough proof that the landscape is changing, consider three recent events: the first-ever **Official 3D Virtual Star Trek Convention**, held August 2002; **SimCity**, the best-selling single-player computer game, which went massively multi-player with **The Sims Online** in November 2002; and **There**, a new 3D world that started public BETA testing in January and has been working in stealth mode for four years with \$33 million from the dotcom boom days.

While these three offerings are very different in content, they have one thing in common. They are heralding an era of new interactive experiences in which traditional game play is not the key focus.

There is the next-generation chat room whose goal is to



bring adult users worldwide into an immersive virtual 3D world to socialize, much like its predecessor, Cybertown. It's an online place with real-world physics, natural scenery and sounds, and the ability to interact with people and objects.

The Sims Online is a non-game that requires participants to seek basic primary needs: food, sleep, shelter and a "virtual" social life. There's no murder or mayhem. And frankly, the participants freak out if you even suggest anything violent. **The Sims Online** is essentially a study of our social framework in which the participants play God to their creations. The producers, Maxis, expect to reach 500,000 participants by the end of the year. Both **Sims** and **There** soon will be driven by monthly subscription fees.

As its executive producer, the **Official 3D Virtual Star Trek Convention** was my creation. The concept came to me after years of careful thought and after watching dozens of startups with high hopes and revenue dreams that remained just out of reach. I firmly believe the shortest path to earning revenue is to focus on the target audience's existing behavior and give them enhanced access, convenience and features. Just watch the cable TV or telecom industries ... bit by bit, feature by feature, they grab a bigger piece of the pie. I wanted to create a new experience that requires no new behavior, but instead brings users more of what they love.

Hence, the virtual fan convention, just one expression of immersive social experiences. Mega-brands boast significant world-wide fan bases, often 20 million strong, which can be combined with existing convention activity, celebrities, exclusivity of content and availability, online gaming and chat. The producing team I assembled fashioned a feature set to rival but never replace real-life (RL) convention experiences: role-playing, costumes, contests, celebrity video and more. (See sidebar, "3D Virtual Star Trek Convention.") We combined "live" video production via satellite, streaming video, a front-end marketing site and the 3D world site and its functionali-

ty. Proven technology, proven delivery. Taking our cue from our live event producer brethren, we focused on the experience, the convention programming and the setting—the 3D convention center and its avatar models.

Vir-Con 2002, as it was known via its guerrilla online marketing, had fans worldwide participating from so many countries we had to look some up, 95 countries in all. We even had registrants from the Vatican City and Vanuatu (the corporate tax haven and home of Kazaa). Attendees participated by inhabiting the bodies of online 3D alter egos, branded *Star Trek* avatars, and touring the multi-room Virtual Convention Center. They spent three days exploring, interacting, chatting and befriending the virtual attendees. They built lasting relationships, viewed celebrity appearances streamed live from a real-life convention, shopped for official merchandise and memorabilia, even took part in live, staged adventures with virtual street-theatre actors.

Their favorite *Star Trek* celebrities treated them to exceptional live stage moments. Online fans, including a 30-person *Star Trek* Club in the Philippines, had their questions asked of the celebrities live in Las Vegas. Celebrities acknowledged Vir-Con 2002 attendees by waving and saying hello. Vir-Con 2002 was all the buzz at the Las Vegas convention among actors, producers and fans alike: from Eugene Roddenberry, to Creation Entertainment, to actors like Leonard Nimoy, Nichelle Nichols and George Takei, and newcomers like Anthony Montgomery and Dominic Keating. Vir-Con was embraced as a *very real* and desirable entertainment experience in the same way attendees participate in real-life entertainment events. And they paid. Because it was a live event, you had to be "there" to fully comprehend the Vir-Con experience. Closing remarks overheard in our virtual Quark's Bar Sunday night, include: "I don't want this to end," "You changed my life," "When is the next Vir-Con?" "Please keep the convention open all the time," and "This was the best time of my life!" These just begin to characterize the fans' experience at Vir-Con 2002. Many thousands of *Star Trek* fans, both



Avatars gather at Quark's Bar



Vir-Con's lobby, featuring streaming video

online and live in Las Vegas, have a new appreciation for the meaning of "to boldly go where no man has gone before."

These immersive social experiences represent the beginning of non-gaming digital entertainment. And there is more to come, much more. This is especially true as Playstation and Xbox take hold of the living room. Our home theatres will be filled with lean-back (passive TV) and lean-in (interactive content) experiences designed to take us anywhere we want: past, future, here or there, together no matter where or who we are. And the "lean-back" group will enjoy watching the "lean-in" group as entertainment. That is a good thing, even if the motivation for interacting is driven by brand names. Brands are the fuel of the coming revolution. Don't worry, though. The participants themselves are the ultimate arbiters of the virtual experience. Led by us, they are the very heart of the experience itself.

And think about this for a moment ... this new form of entertainment has direct and instant access to the global market that violates no existing intellectual property rights. Only producers can satisfy the burgeoning market of immersive social experiences with great content such as virtual conventions, virtual words, virtual concerts, virtual theme parks, virtual shows, virtual celebrities and more.

We all know there is an oft-misdirected fear of computer use. You know the drill. The vision of millions of the world's inhabitants sitting at home at their computers, alone, is chilling to the non-computing generation. Never having to leave the house. But why not? You can work, research, shop and be social at the same time. You can be nourished, supplied and entertained all from the comfort of your home. Is the world going to be filled with pale bleary-eyed computer users holed up in dark rooms, all their needs satisfied on the web, including business, relationships and even ... pleasure? It's the downfall of society, as we know it, right? Or, is that, as we *knew* it? Will we be Neo before or after he is shown the Matrix?

3D virtual immersive social experiences are a more "effective" and "excellent" way for individuals to celebrate our similarities and share the same interests in a more intimate, safe and convenient way than travel affords us. We can make these experiences thrill, entertain and move.

Is it real? Absolutely. When did we decide that speaking on the phone was real and not virtual? Only a producer would understand. ☞

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Footnotes:

- 1 The Licensing Letter © 2002 EPM Communications
- 2 Compiled by Owen Thomas, Business 2.0 September 2002
- 3 Nielsen/NetRatings
- 4 Interactive Digital Software Association

3D VIRTUAL "STAR TREK" CONVENTION

The VirCorps, LLC's proof-of-concept event, was held to rave reviews. Here are the first-ever Official 3D Virtual *Star Trek* Convention specifics:

- It coincided with the official *Star Trek* Convention in Las Vegas on August 2-4, 2002, produced by Creation Entertainment.
- Nearly 10,000 consumers worldwide signed up.
- Average ticket price of approximately \$48 per person.
- Worldwide registrations spanned 95 countries.
- Technology infrastructure design capable of 100,000 simultaneous attendees was tested.

Pre-show Activities June–August 2002 3D Virtual Convention Lobby

- Scheduled author and *Star Trek: The Experience* performer chats
- 3D chat
- Sneak previews
- Free *Star Trek* mall and early-bird registration
- Streaming video

August 2–4, 2002, Event Features Both 3D and non-3D Interactive Content

- Multi-day and multi-level paid registration
- Three tiers of 60 *Star Trek* avatars
- Chat: public, private and "whisper"
- Lobby
- Pay-Per-View interface with imbedded Video Player for "live" streaming video content
- Grand Ballroom with "live" wide-shot streaming video content
- Multi-story Grand Hallway
- Private viewing room with "live" close-up streaming video content
- *Star Trek* mall: e-commerce links
- Green room with *Star Trek* celebrity chats
- Officer lounges and Babel lounges
- Activision game room
- Multi-story trading room for peer-to-peer auctions
- *Star Trek: The Experience's* "Quark's Bar"
- Conference rooms for free-play
- Trivia challenge contest
- Virtual Pursuit® treasure hunt contest
- Staged-reality street-theatre by *Star Trek: The Experience* actors