

NEW MEDIA

VIRTUAL

By w. vito montone

meets

There's a word that is haunting us, the "C" word. No, not the one uttered on Larry David's Curb Your Enthusiasm. The word is "convergence." It's a fun word that has been looming, casting a cloud over the digital future as it tries to emerge. Type it into Google and you get more than 2.5 million pages. There must be something to this convergence stuff. But what does it mean? I mean really, what in the world does it mean? Technologies colliding? Entertainment colliding? Is it games on phones? The Internet on TV? According to the dictionary, con-ver-gence is a noun that means coming together from different directions, especially a uniting or merging of groups or tendencies that were originally opposed or very different. Also called convergent evolution. Hey, I like that one: convergence evolution.

Keanu Reeves in The Matrix in between screen shots from the MMORPG World of Warcraft by Blizzard (top and bottom).

MAIN QUEST COMPLETED - Defeat the Slave Master

DANIEL

But what about the others who were taken away?

For many years, many things have been converging. Like the notion of new media, it's not necessarily new. I'm sure that many of you are wondering what the big deal is; after all, you have been converging on the entertainment consumer from different directions for more than 50 years — the stage, the radio, the small and large screens. You have been taking stories from one form to another — altering, conforming and optimizing the message for each platform. Those practices are part of the answer to the riddle of convergence, but let's dig a little deeper.

So far convergence has focused on hardware and delivery systems — computers, Internet appliances, personal video recorders (PVRs), game consoles, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and cell phones, to name a few. So it has been the hardware that's evolved: phones with games, computers with tuners, televisions with interactivity. Is this what convergence is? I'd completely understand if you were to say, "Who cares? Let me know when it's done, and I'll make content for it."

That approach will keep your production pursuits simple and calm, and low in risk. But what will you miss?

What is important to remember here is that entertainment is not just about storytelling anymore. It's about building universes where people can express themselves. They want to dive in.

—Joel Silver, producer of *The Matrix*, *Variety*, Feb. 2003

Thank you, Joel. I couldn't have said it better.

I'm sure that some of you guessed that what Joel was referring to was the multi-platform methodology of physical production. After all, footage for the movie and the game of *The Matrix* was shot simultaneously; sometimes even the actors didn't know which platform they were performing for. If nothing else, *The Matrix* has proven that with the right team vision, any blockbuster entertainment property with legs can find ways to multi-purpose story, talent, crews, sets, effects, and marketing to create a greater efficiency to achieve its piece of the market. So here we have a kind of production convergence. It's an important development, but it's not the whole story.

Another variation on this theme is the long-heralded promise of iTV (interactive television), where the viewer of a TV show can instantly get more information about the subject, a TV screen you can click like the Internet. Or iTV might mean playing games and gambling via the TV, as they do elsewhere in the world.

These are examples of convergence, though not very stirring examples. For some companies, this approach may have opened new licensing opportunities or made possible targeted, interactive advertising. But is this the convergent Holy Grail? I think not. It's time to start considering a more profound convergence, the convergence of content. And for that, we can start by looking at reality television.



REALITY



From top to bottom: Paradise Hotel contestants; American Idol winner Kelly Clarkson with runner-up Justin Guarini (right) and co-host Ryan Seacrest; a scene from Survivor.