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Cell Phone Cinema

By Douglas Rushkoff, Wed Nov 10 08:15:00 GMT 2004

Lights, camera, compression! The new world of bite-sized video.

From the talk coming out of the [CTIA Wireless IT and Entertainment Expo](#) in San Francisco last month, you'd think wireless providers were about to reap Hollywood-size revenues from new mobile TV and cinema applications. Although AT&T Wireless and Sprint are the only US operators currently offering mobile TV services, and [consumer demand has yet to be determined](#), a number of [reports](#) are already enthusiastically hyping mobile TV as the killer app for wireless data , [particularly for emerging 3G networks](#).

But there is a glaring blind spot in these reports: for all their focus on the technical, economic and financial aspects of streaming video technology, they are virtually ignoring the stuff that consumers are going to be exposed to - the actual content! Most cell phone video advocates seem to be assuming that content will consist of existing television programs, crunched down to fit into the inch-size screens of mobile phones. But that's hardly a way to launch an entirely new media platform. Luckily, there are a few people thinking a bit more creatively.

"We encourage film makers to experiment," says Beau Buck, CEO of [Big Digit](#), a company focusing exclusively on mobile video content. "The thing we've wanted to avoid since the beginning is the temptation to show movie trailers and repurpose content made for television - content that is not really made for the mobile medium." Buck's strategy for making tiny content is pretty big: create an entire culture that will ultimately drive compelling media back to him.

He's off to a good start. His "World's Smallest Film Festival" debuted at CTIA in 2003, to an appreciative crowd. He's hoping he'll be able to aggregate enough content through this and other bottom-up creative outlets to fill at least one entire television schedule. He's already got one, in fact, called [mFlix](#), which is now available as a premium content selection on Sprint TV.

Buck's own willingness to experiment has seen the categories for his festival shift radically from traditional -- comedy, drama, sports -- to distinctly wireless -- mobile message art, mobile music video, animation -- based on what he says is "a constantly moving definition of what works." It's an attitude that the makers of cell phone cinema should probably apply to pretty much every aspect of their new, untested medium.

Unlike traditional filmmakers, aspiring mobile media producers are forced to relinquish control over the environment in which their works will be viewed. Cell phone cinema audiences will be distracted by ambient noise, glare and even interruptions. Further, thanks to network and usage constraints, movies are typically limited to a minute or two in length, leaving very little time for plot or character development and a desperate need to deliver punch lines quickly.

"You have two minutes. Don't become Ingmar Bergman," says Roberto Croci, AKA Le Bestia, a mobile media director who has his own section on mFlix called Beast Neighborhood. "By the time you spell psychological, the guy is already gone." Croci's films are among the most popular on the fledgling mobile channel and his 'Cooking with the Beast' series is a set of hilarious one-minute cooking lessons aimed at bachelors.

They're as funny as anything streaming on cell phones today, but just as visually crude. The current technology limits creative options. Although Sprint claims that its flagship Samsung MM-A700 phone is capable of 15 frames per second, mFlix films are encoded at a bitrate of 8 fps to compensate for packet loss, signal drops and other network issues - which, combined with high compression rates (1000 to 1) and the phone's form factor, restricts the film maker's options for creative expression even more.

Meanwhile, encoding removes every other frame, so editing must be kept simple, with no dissolves or quick edits. Composition is also limited, with close-ups working a whole lot better than panoramas on such tiny screens. Backgrounds must be kept simple, lest they look like a blur. And forget about camera movements altogether.

So with such limited content, delivery and range of technique, how can these cinematic snacks actually make any money? So far, the nascent industry is adopting the same business model as the premium cable channels. Sprint TV costs ten bucks a month for a basic package, plus \$4.95 for each of the premium channels, such as mFlix, CNNtoGO or The Weather Channel. Sprint recently announced that it had 150,000 paying TV subscribers. At best, this means \$1.5 million for a month of content and delivery expenses. Buck estimates he's got [20,000 paying subscribers for mFlix](#), meaning \$100,000 per month to split with Sprint, procure his content, and pay all those kids slaving away on Final Cut Pro for their chance at cell cinema stardom.

Still, the expectation of a potentially enormous pie has ignited a few of the major content players. Not that they're taking any of the newly learned lessons in mini cinema to heart. News Corp. has begun experimenting with what they're calling [Mobisodes](#), but they're little more than repurposed episodes of its existing shows, in a format optimized for cell phones.

Cell phone cinema may be the "next small thing," but my guess is that its fortunes rest on the willingness of its advocates to create media native to the handset. If they don't have enough faith in this medium to develop some content for it, then why should subscribers have the faith to pay for it?

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