



TimePlay has outfitted U.K. theater seats with game consoles so audience members can compete against one another for sponsored prizes.

# Lights! Camera!

**Interactive cinema ads:  
wave of the future,  
or major annoyance?**

# Interaction!

**BY ANN COOPER**

**I**T USED TO BE that going to the movies was an exercise in suspending one's disbelief for a couple of hours. The only marketing that took place was above the popcorn concession stand in the lobby.

Much has changed.

By the late '90s, marketers began seeing the potential of on-screen cinema advertising and the captive, youthful audience it offered. Ten years later this very successful medium is experimenting with new technology to engage the audience even more so. On-screen cinema advertising has evolved. It is now an integrated marketing medium with audience participation.

Currently being tested are text messaging, motion sensors, game controllers on seats, and smell-o-vision. And this is just the beginning. In the not-too-distant future, moviegoers will be able to download music, video and games; order tickets; buy popcorn; participate in loyalty programs; enter sweepstakes; and play games against fellow audience mem-

bers and even pit one audience against another in a cinema vs. cinema competition.

Welcome to the brave new world of cinema interactivity. Helped by the inexorable growth and technological sophistication of mobile devices, interactivity in all its forms is taking off.

According to Matthew Kearney, CEO of New York-based Screenvision, which has almost 15,000 screens in the U.S., "Interactivity has a host of different meanings and it's a national evolution that's not specific just to cinema. We're seeing the transition of movieplexes into entertainment centers. It's happening because of the increasing use of text messaging, which provides an exclusive platform for brands to reach consumers."

Cinema, he argues, offers advertisers the target audience they want: young, high income, better educated and early adopters.

Screenvision first began testing text messaging in 200

screens last June with long-term partner Verizon Wireless. Moviegoers were greeted with a song by an artist from the carrier's music service V Cast, with instructions on where to go online to download it or buy the ring tone. A trivia quiz also offered the chance to win a free download, or bag of popcorn.

Verizon followed up with another campaign in December 2006 tied in with the "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" movie; this time on 3,000 screens. The prize was a trip to the Caribbean. Its latest campaign, running through June and July, is associated with the latest Pirates movie, and gives people a chance to be whisked to a pirate ship for a party.

Screenvision also created a recruitment program with the U.S. Army National Guard, which ran in 3,000 screens last August and December. It involved a two-minute video, and a tie-in with iTunes, offering free music downloads. The audience was invited to text in its age and let the Guard tell them about fitness requirements.

Cinema offered the perfect target audience according to Andy Blenkle, account supervisor at the Guard's New York-based ad agency LM&O. "For us, it's important that we place such advertising specifically when it's difficult to reach

young adults, during school holidays, for example." LM&O was able to measure effectiveness by monitoring the sign-ups both before and after the program ran. "We saw a lift after the program," said Blenkle, who also pointed out key do's and don'ts. "The magic of theatres is that the audience expects to be entertained and be drawn into the experience of the film, and so you have to have the highest quality content. There are obviously administrative and logistical issues, and you do have to remind people to turn off cell phones."

Verizon, at the end of its program, actually ran a message telling people to do just that. "We're very cognizant of the cell phone issue," said Kearney. "Some exhibitors are very cautious about it. We take it seriously." But complaints from theatre owners have been minimal, he said.

Meanwhile, next on the cards is video downloads and sponsored gaming, and Screenvision is already talking to several interested clients.

But text-messaging is only one method of interactivity. Recently, MSNBC.com launched a breakout style game in cinemas involving motion sensors. It made its debut at the "Spider-Man 3" premier in theaters in Los Angeles, Philadelphia and New York, which were equipped with a

**THERE'S A MOVIE BEING MADE ABOUT LIFE. WHICH ARTIST WOULD PERFORM ON YOUR SOUNDTRACK?**

- A JAMES BLUNT**
- B TAKING BACK SUNDAY**
- C PUSSYCAT DOLLS**
- D CHRIS BROWN**

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Verizon wireless uses the slideshow format to prompt text messaging during the pre-show.

By detecting the movements of moviegoers, the audience can collectively play this MSNBC-branded game.





**Brazilian ad agency Agencia Click created this six-minute, interactive movie for Fiat where audience members use their phones to answer questions which, in turn, generate one of 16 different endings.**

**Lobby promotions, such as this branded popcorn bag, encourage brand interaction via text messaging.**



camera that tracked the motion of the entire audience. Projected on the screen was a modified version of MSNBC's NewsBreaker computer game. In that version, consumers clicked on bricks and got a live story. They could then connect to the Web, read the story and get a screensaver that had stories popping up. The cinema version, however, functioned like a game of "Break Out". "People were almost like human joy sticks," explained Marty Cooke, chief creative officer of MSNBC.com's ad agency SS&K, based in New York. "If the audience went to the right, [the paddle] would go to the right. Everyone was cheering and waving their hands around."

The idea came from SS&K's regular Friday afternoon brainstorming sessions. "We had these guys in called Brand Experience Lab, who go around to colleges and find unused technology," he said. BEL, based in New York, had found something called Magic Mirror Technology from the Carnegie Mellon University, which basically worked like a motion detector. "Somebody said, 'why don't we use this technology with this game and see if we can project it live in a cinema?'" said Cooke.

Obviously, there are pros and cons in using such technology. "The audience got into it because it was 'Spider-Man 3,' and not 'The Lives of Others,'" he said. "Part of the art is choosing the proper film." An added bonus was it taking

off on YouTube, resulting in over another 100,000 views. It was also discussed on blogs such as Boing Boing. "We pride ourselves on finding technology people haven't used before, or using technology in a way it hasn't been used before."

Cooke says they're unlikely to use it for other clients. "It's so specific to this creative concept. We're not going to go pitching interactive cinema games unless it's the right thing." And while it only ran in five or six cinemas nationally, MSNBC was over the moon, he said. "While this was a one-off thing in the cinema, by pushing it out onto the Internet, thousands of people are now getting our brand message on YouTube and on blogs. So, it's had a huge ripple effect."

Timeplay Entertainment meanwhile, has developed consoles that are mounted to seats along with software that integrates with digital projectors. This enables cinema-goers to play games with each other. Each console has a unique IP address, and comes equipped with a 3.5-inch touch screen and backlight. The device, about the size of a Sony PSP, connects to theater seats with a tethered arm. The concept is currently being test-marketed in Odeon theaters in the U. K.

"It has a lot of both gaming and commercial applications," said Aaron Silverberg, VP of Marketing at Timeplay, based in Toronto, Canada and Universal City, Calif. "Now, it's mostly a consumer proposition, involving simple games popular on the Internet. But we're just getting started."

It was Timeplay CEO, Jon Hussman's idea. Hussman had a vision about leveraging the cinema environment at a time when sales were dropping off. "Investment in infrastructure and technology has been rising, while the sales industry has been flat and in decline," said Silverberg. The catalyst proved to be movies going digital. "We thought, 'How can we leverage the environment, the social experience and the technology to a new level?'"

It is, he admits, a big financial investment. "The investment is the content, then you've got the platform and it's based on a wireless network, not about retro-fitting the entire theatre by any means." People loved the concept in pre-research, he said. "Interactivity is now much larger than one-way media. It's the wave of the future, and I can't think of a better environment than the cinema to participate in an interactive experience."

Silverberg is coy about future plans, but Timeplay is in discussion with a major U.S. cinema operation. "The U.K. is a learning experience right now, but the potential is limitless. You can have 150 people playing against each other in a theatre as well as other theatres throughout North America. Cinemas are looking for new models and they're trying to get into the meeting and convention business. So this clearly taps into a lot of emerging trends."

But not everyone agrees that such interactivity is welcomed, or even wanted by moviegoers. Cliff Marks, president of sales at NCM, headquartered in Centennial, Co, sounded a cautionary note. While NCM continues to talk

to partners about creating gaming concepts for inside movie theatres, "We're still apprehensive about jumping in full throttle with messaging," he said. "Consumers go to the movies to escape the realities of everyday life. One of the beauties of the cinema is the almost pristine effect of those four walls. While years ago some people resented the fact that this captivity was used to create marketing programs, today, most customers appreciate the fact that we put on an entertaining pre-show. But the more we complicate it with various technologies, the more consumers may resent the fact that they're being marketed to instead of entertained."

Consumer research, he said, had shown that many consumers had not been receptive to texting on the big screen. "The exhibitors themselves, such as Regal and AMC, are concerned because they see the consumer feedback on their Web sites and in their questionnaires." As for Timeplay, Marks says, "I've seen their demo and it's really quite good. But there are operational challenges that come with building consoles into seats, such as maintenance and kids breaking them. Or you need to bring it in and take it out every time it's used. And that itself has its challenges."

Projected cinema ad spend is forecast to reach \$1 billion in 2008, according to Veronis Suhler Stevenson, and it seems likely that advertisers will continue to reach out to young moviegoers in any way technology allows. And just as most moviegoers eventually accepted onscreen ads in cinemas, perhaps it's only a matter of time before they similarly accept interactivity, in all its various forms.

Playing on the popular movie trivia slides during preshow, the Army National Guard challenges young movie-goers to test their knowledge.

