

IDEAS TECHNOLOGY CULTURE BUSINESS

WIRED

**CAN YOU TRUST
FACEBOOK?**
MARK ZUCKERBERG
HITS BACK P.48

**GOOGLE'S
NEXT MISSION:
CURE DISEASE** P.124

TV BREAKS FREE

FROM DOCTOR WHO TO SALT

...AND SO DOES HOLLYWOOD. WELCOME TO THE AGE OF TRANSMEDIA P.88

ON TEST IN THE WIRED LAB:
IPAD COVERS / WI-FI SPY
CAMERAS / CLIMBING GEAR P.135

**ENERGY CRISIS
SOLVED: BUILD
A STAR ON EARTH** P.116

**UK MAGAZINE
LAUNCH
OF THE YEAR**

THE FUTURE AS IT HAPPENS
AUG 10 £3.99 wired.co.uk

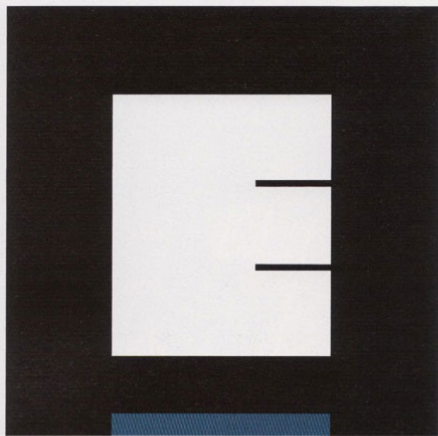




ENTERTAINMENT REIMAGINED

Film and TV are moving to a new form of storytelling - taking in the mobile internet, alternate-reality games, even street-corner stunts. WIRED meets the pioneers of transmedia

By Tom Cheshire and Charlie Burton. Illustration: Chrissie Abbott.
Photography: Timothy Saccenti and Shamil Tanna.



Robinson got off the R train in Astoria, Queens, and started walking to the American Museum of the Moving Image. It was a warm July evening in 2007 and Robinson, then 37 years old and a filmmaker, had come with a friend to see a movie, *Head Trauma*. As they approached the cinema, she noticed that the payphones were ringing – all four of them. “You forget payphones exist,” recalls Robinson. “That was the first thing I noticed.” She picked one up: all she could hear were fragments of a conversation, “sounds of madness”. Outside the cinema, a preacher in short sleeves and a tie was raving, handing out apocalyptic comic books to passers-by. He pressed one into Robinson’s hand as she hurried past, anxious to get to the film. The opening credits prompted the audience to send in a text to a given number. As the film rolled, they started receiving “weird text messages”; phones were ringing.

The film was about a drifter who inherits his mother’s house and starts to lose his mind. The next day, back in Brooklyn, Robinson found the comic in her handbag. On the back was written: “Do you want to play a game?”, along with an address, *headtrauma-movie.com*. She typed it in to her computer. What she found was an online game that continued the story. “In the middle of it, the phone rang,” she says. She recognised the voice. It was the film’s “hooded villain”. He started asking questions: “Do you feel guilty? Have you ever lost consciousness?” Last, he asked Robinson to tell him her darkest secret. Her answer started playing back on a loop through her computer speakers. Robinson clicked on the exit box. She kept clicking, but nothing happened. Her phone buzzed with a text: “Where are you going? We’re not finished yet...” At that point, Robinson was dumped into a conference call with other cinemagoers who had just gone through the same experience. “We were all like, ‘What the fuck was that?’ It was totally nuts.”

Unwittingly, she had just participated in an emerging form of mainstream entertainment. Lance Weiler, the creator of *Head Trauma*, had programmed software to make all the payphones on the block ring. The preacher was an actor, a lead in the feature. Based on the participants’ responses to the automated phone calls, audio and video launched on the desktop screen. The exit box was a fake. Clicking on it sent that last text. For Weiler, a 41-year-old New Yorker, the experience “demonstrated the fluidity of an audience. After the movie ended, it followed people home.”

This is transmedia storytelling. Large studios and broadcasters, as well as independent filmmakers such as Weiler, are building fictional worlds that smash through their frames on to multiple platforms. Unlike quick promotional spin-offs, this new type of tie-in extends, rather than adapts, storylines. It tells various parts of the story using distinct media, exploiting the qualities unique to each platform. So when you watch a TV show, you might follow a sub-plot that spills on to the web, then read the dénouement in a graphic novel. Yes, writers have long created worlds that go beyond the page – L Frank Baum did as much with his 1900 novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, whose storyworld he expanded into a musical and other books. But today’s transmedia producers are planning for multiple platforms from the start. They design fictional

universes that are consistent however the audience engages. Meanwhile, in New York, Lance Weiler was planning *Head Trauma*. He didn’t have much cash to burn (the film cost \$126,000), but wanted an equally engaging experience. Weiler’s answer? A pervasive game. “I started to experiment with it not being a film in traditional form – how could I put people into the shoes of the protagonist? How could the story move from one experience to another in ways that created some degree of social interaction?”

In its limited US cinema release, *Head Trauma* consistently sold out. So Weiler planned his next project, a post-apocalyptic mystery called *HIM* (short for *Hope is Missing*), as transmedia from the outset. It launched in 2007 as a blog set up by a man to find his missing fiancée, Hope Wilcott; the quest became an alternate-reality game. It proved popular: the blog attracted 2.5 million views. Weiler is now working on an augmented-reality app for Android phones which continues the story. And this autumn he’ll shoot the *HIM* feature film with Ted Hope, producer of *21 Grams*.

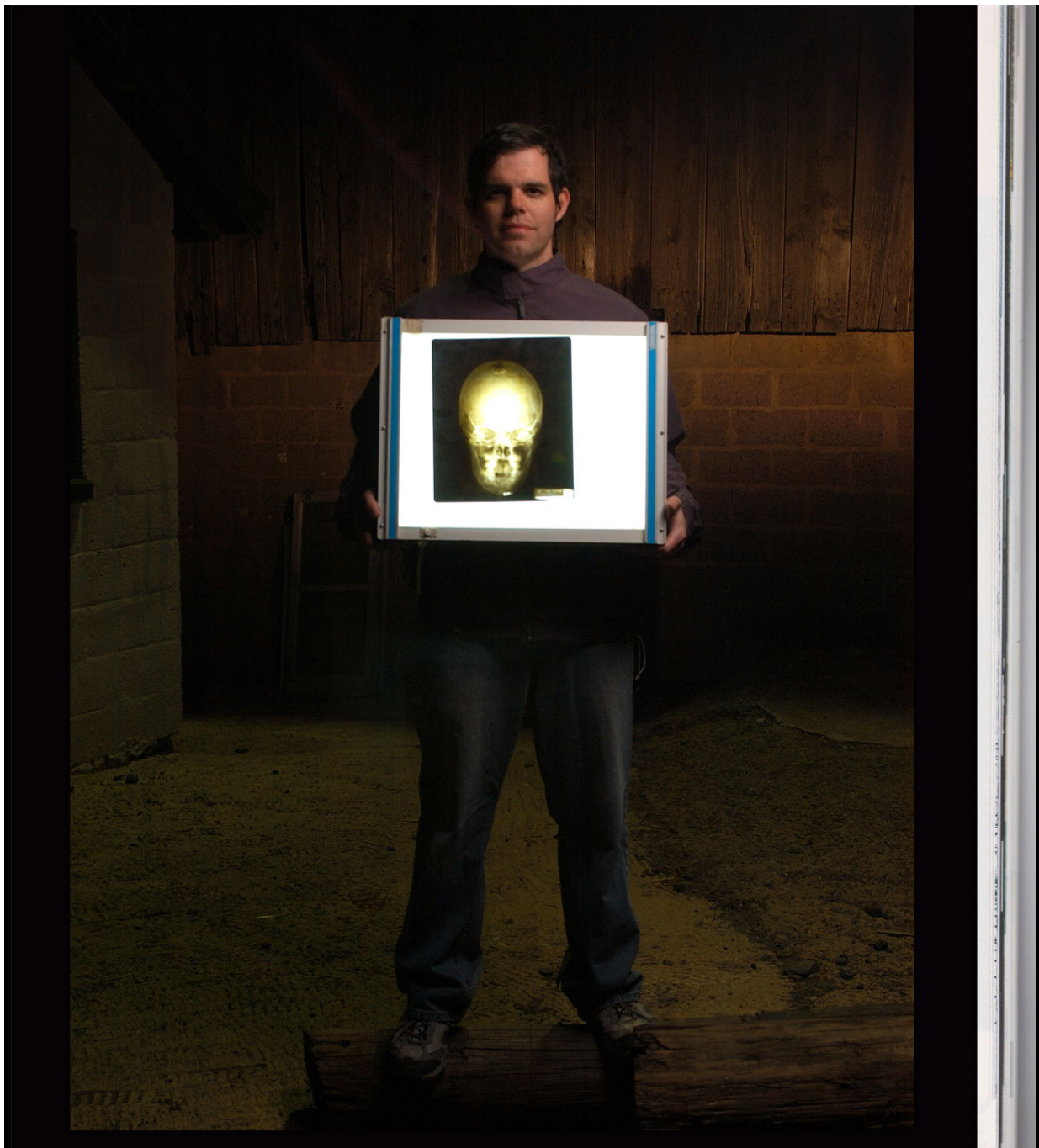
Today, dedicated transmedia production houses are starting to win contracts from broadcasters and studios around the world. Los Angeles remains the biggest hub: Imagine, the multiple-Oscar-winning studio run by Brian Grazer and Ron Howard, recently struck a deal with Blacklight Studios, a transmedia startup, to get first refusal on film rights to its projects. Grazer says he signed Blacklight “before transmedia had penetrated Hollywood’s consciousness, because it represents a new model, from both a creative and business standpoint.” On the east coast, Jeff Gomez’s Starlight Runner, and Fourth Wall Studios – whose founders worked with Steven Spielberg and Microsoft to produce alternate reality games – are now creating their own entertainment properties. Jim Stewartson, Fourth Wall’s president, aims “to take transmedia to the masses. The market is going to be as large as the industry itself.”

ILLUSTRATION: CHRISSE ABBOTT

A history of transmedia

1953
Winky Dink And You An interactive show on CBS in the US encourages children to draw on their TV screens.

1955
Disneyland Walt Disney expands his cartoon kingdom into the real world with a theme park in California.



2003

Hot Wheels: World Race Mattel creates the first multiplatform narrative based on a retail product.

2004

Lost ABC uses metasites, an ARG, novels and mobisodes to engage audiences with its cult TV show.

2006

Head Trauma No budget, no problem: transmedia can work for indie producers.