THE HACKS AND HACK NOTS

WHILST PIRACY HAS BEEN A LONGSTANDING FOE, JOURNALIST, FILMMAKER AND WANNABE HACKER **MICHELA LEDWIDGE** SHOWS HOW FILMMAKERS NEED TO FIND A FRIEND IN ONLINE STRATEGY. AND FAST.

I'VE JUST RETURNED FROM hackdaylondon, a web event in which 500 geeks converged on Alexandra Palace outside London to spend their weekend hacking something cool. A hack is something clever, a bit different; often a cheeky but elegant solution to a problem. You don't have to be a programmer but it helps.

As part of the eligibility rules, hackers had to incorporate data from BBC or Yahoo (the sponsors) into their hack. One woman developed a system that converted BBC online news headlines into sock knitting patterns. Two guys made a rocket out of a Coke bottle, fuelled by Diet Coke and Mentos mints, stuffing a USB memory stick of technical documentation into the bottle before it took off. These were all way more clever then ours but we had still had fun creating Storybook, a tool that analysed and then illustrated any story text with images from Flickr (a photo web site) and loaded them into a 3D scene.

At the start of the weekend we put out a call for help with our 'interactive story'. We then had a constant stream of visitors to check progress (embarrassingly little). Even after all the years of vapourware and over-ambitious experiments, people are still fascinated by the premise of interactive story and eagerly awaiting new attempts.

The opportunities for collaboration between new media and film-making are exciting precisely because there are no roads yet. Culture is evolving online at a rapid pace and the creativity shown over these two days and 74 submissions was astonishing. Whether you consider these folks to be audience members, suppliers, collaborators, potential subject matter or all of the above, consider their talent. The event was a reminder of how creative and generous the global developer community is – the people largely responsible for bringing the Net to the point where it can support any level of filmmaking.

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More Excuses. Filmmakers used to reside in an ivory tower of privilege but now that people are shooting feature films on mobile phones (such as the South African *SMS Sugarman*) the tower is crumbling. Not every film needs a distributor. Or an agent. Where organisations fear to tread, individuals are churning stuff out simply because they can.
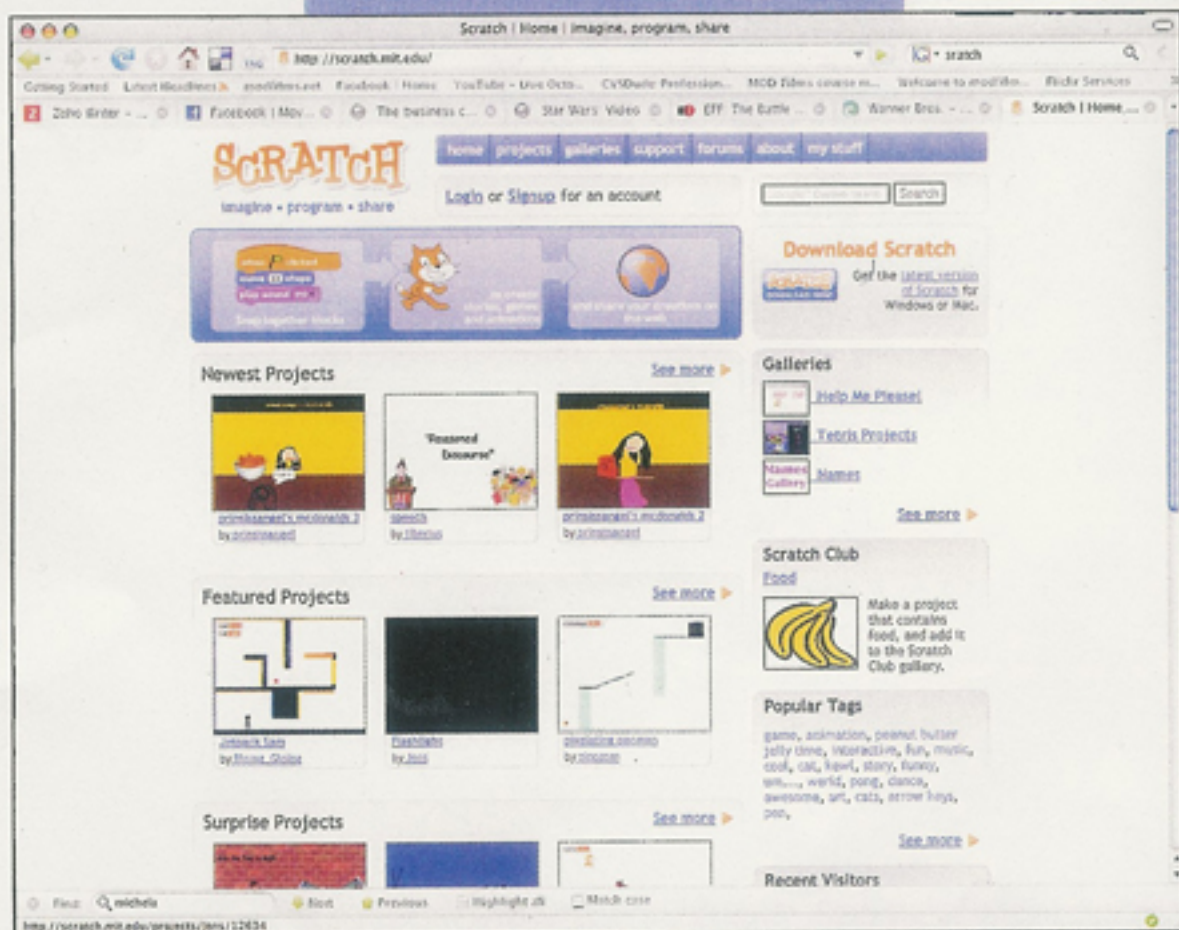
We don't judge films by volume or backend technology (although the PR campaign for *Pearl Harbor* did try to sway us) but now that you can download free film and video-game making software for eight- to 12-year-olds (for example, Scratch, pictured), we can expect to see an extremely tech-savvy generation emerging. No pressure pros and no more excuses.

Hate computers? Then use them sparingly. Plan what you want to do ahead of sitting down (or standing up – far more healthy). You will get back to First Life a lot quicker that way. Don't understand how to use the Web for productions? Get more geeks into your network. Sites like Facebook make it easier than ever to keep contact with your virtual collaborators.

Here are a few more questions: To what lengths are you prepared to go to stop someone copying your films? How exactly does it impact your ability to make films? How digital content can and should be licensed is the subject of raging debate and fierce lobbying which will only be settled once more of you hop off the fence.
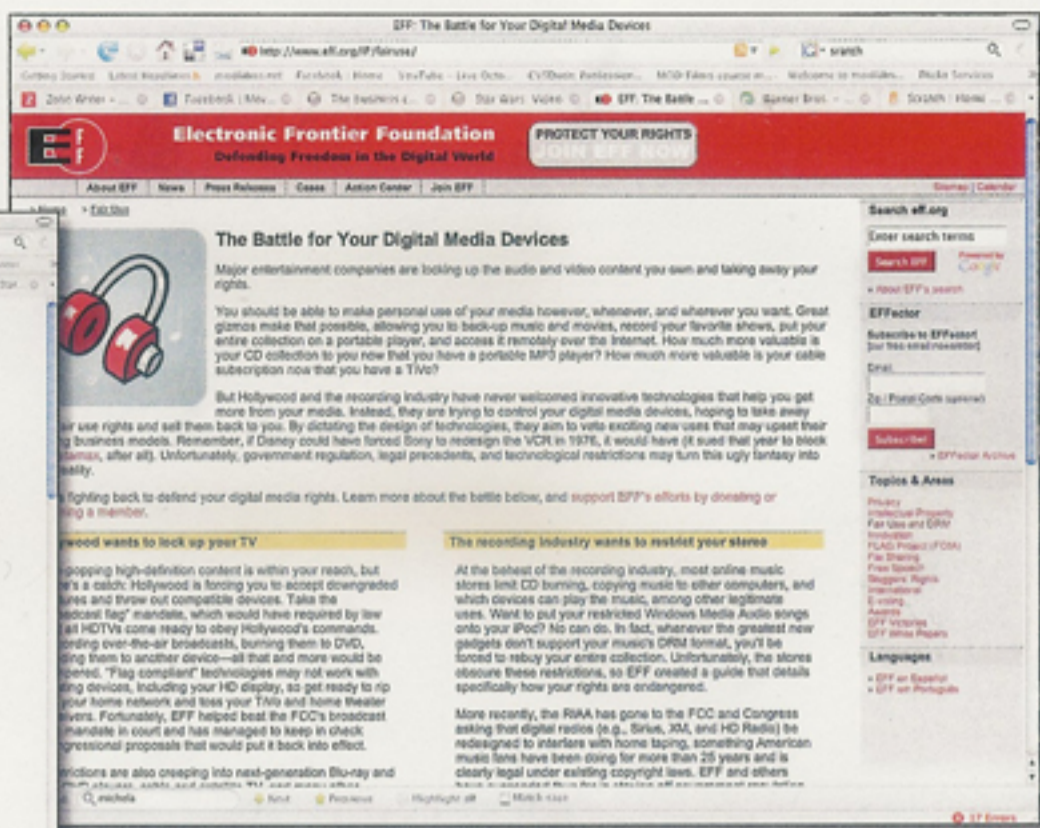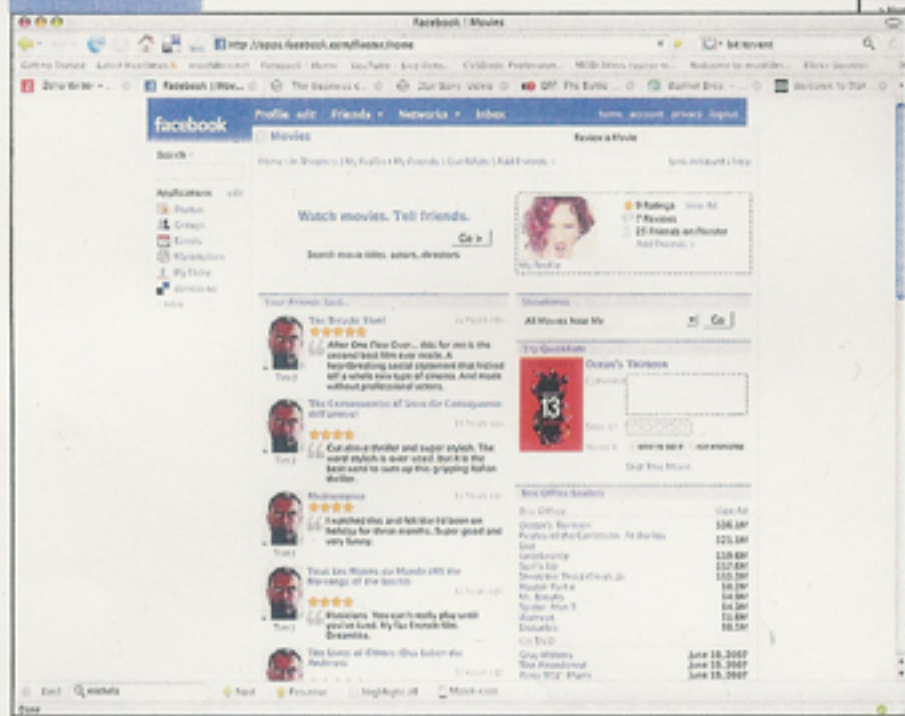
In the frontline is DRM (Digital Rights Management) – the term describing various technologies that enforce content licensing restrictions and, more broadly, the very relationship between digital content and audience. There are roughly three

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LEFT: OPINION SHARING ON FACEBOOK.
ABOVE: THE ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUNDATION CONTINUES ITS BATTLE.

schools of thought when it comes to DRM, which might equally be called Enforcement, Disruption and Connecting.

Enforcers are pro-DRM believe that copyright owners should be allowed to lock up audio and video content and enforce full rights over anything sold. This includes previously unenforceable rights such as the ability for copyright holders to have more direct control over entertainment devices such as a television set-top box with the capability to disable content and devices as they see fit. Enforcers say that they represent the majority of film content creators and that without this there would be no productions. The Hollywood studios owning vast archives of film content are key Enforcers.

Disruptors are anti-DRM and believe that the media landscape envisioned by Enforcers is far too restrictive and promote new forms of licensing to govern new forms of culture. They see full copyright – the notion of All Rights Reserved as broken in the digital age. They challenge IP provisions being used to limit rights unfairly in ways that threaten the growth of new cultural forms and hamper legitimate use (for examples, backup copies). Whether through advocacy, releasing new technology or the court system, Disruptors challenge the presumption that the film business can continue in its current form, funded by artificially limiting the availability of digital product. Through their activities, including hacks, Disruptors call for a decisive shift away from the traditional media business model to a more two-way managed relationship with audiences. The creators of Bit Torrent and You Tube were originally Disruptors, less interested in preserving the status quo than provoking change.

Connectors are anti-DRM in its current form and wish to see new forms emerge, but have more of a vested interest in seeing the current media business transform through evolution rather than revolution. Disruptors sometimes morph into Connectors as they start to take a more moderate approach in line with existing business practices. The creators of the P2P file sharing software Kazaa went on to create Skype and now Joost which spurn copyright violations. Media companies that redistribute content are typical connectors, reliant on external copyright owners to function. The upcoming BBC iPlayer project (TV download service) has come under considerable fire for utilising Microsoft DRM technology with vocal Disruptors in the UK and elsewhere insisting that the BBC should have held fast and negotiated a radically freer access to content with copyright owners.

What is so difficult about all this is the fundamental conflict between the way media companies companies have been set up to do business and the way that technology and culture is evolving. Individuals who are privately anti-DRM often have little room to maneuver in organisations given the pressures on content production funding. Conversely the most vocal Disruptors are rarely content producers themselves and so less affected by changes to the way large productions are funded. Connectors are often caught in the crossfire, going to lengths to avoid appearing to be Disruptive. The BBC, for example, has nothing to gain by forcing the issue of content licensing reform in the UK with the very content providers it is dependent on. So instead it presses on with the delivery of the iPlayer TV download service with what will likely prove to be obsolete DRM technology. The BBC, however, also produces events such as hackdaylondon and provides a platform for some of its most vocal Internet critics via message boards and the backstage.bbc.co.uk mailing list. Digital Rights Enforcement is likely to gain a further foothold but it is unlikely that audiences will put up with it for long. How many of you still buy iTunes-only tracks?

The film business is short-termism at its finest. Faced with scaremongering campaigns regarding piracy and copyright violations is it any wonder that so many professionals put up with the nonsense and keep their mouths shut so they can keep working? Organisations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation have spent decades mounting legal challenges to moves that threaten civil rights online. Now filmmakers need to bear the consequences of their future collaborations in mind. Established companies have no incentive to change how they operate without pressure.

Moving to new business frameworks will be painful so 'delaying tactics' are understandable. But at what cost to directors whose work is defined by their own personal brand? How many artists working with Sony understand what the CD copy protection scandal of 2005 was all about? Sony BMG's Global Digital Business president said in 2005 that 'Most people, I think, don't even know what a "rootkit" is, so why should they care about it?'. Sony BMG has since settled out of court in multiple class action lawsuits and withdrawn all copyright protection on CDs.

There has never been a better time to be making films. Now if only people could see them. Tapping into Internet culture on a creative, technical, legal or economic level can only increase your audience. The public Web is now 16 years old so it's no surprise that things are hotting up with lots of energy, anger and unbridled creativity. Filmmakers and hackers have much in common if only they can get it together. It's your move. Find your audience. There's a lot more drama to come. ◎

Michela Ledwidge is a film director and media systems architect who set up the first website in New South Wales. Her latest film, Sanctuary, was shot on 35mm and is in post-production as a re-mixable sci-fi for MOD Films. �◌ wikipedia.org defines 'rootkit' as 'a set of software tools intended to conceal running processes, files or system data from the operating system'.