

MOD the movie – sustaining the story through live performance

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes “re-mixable film” – a revised approach to film-making influenced by game design, online systems design and live performance. It describes a future for film distribution and licensing that is more coordinated with broadband entertainment, based on re-useable and syndicate-able film assets. Online, the film becomes a stage. An XML schema for film asset management and an open API for real-time films, focussing on audio, are discussed in reference to projects in development at thequality.com.

Let’s play a game called ‘MOD the movie’. Anyone can play, film people, game people, music people, acting people, hecklers, anyone who wants to perform. In this game, you turn a film into a stage and see how long you can keep people entertained, onstage and offstage.

A MOD is computer game jargon for a Modified version of a game, usually created by teams of players. MOD software tools are distributed free by game companies in the knowledge that s/he who tinkers with the game is extending its shelf-life. In 2003, the most widely played online game is Counter-Strike, a MOD of the first-person-shooter Half-Life that was released in 1998.

MODs are a good example of internet culture in action. Fan behaviour has evolved somewhat since Beatle mania. These days, fans of games like Half-Life, Quake, and Unreal can spend weeks and months creating and distributing MODs that completely transform the look and sound of the games they admire, sometimes purely for comic effect.

"MOD the movie" is about fiddling with a film in similar fashion. The film-maker relinquishes control to encourage re-mixing as a playful art form. People like control. New business opportunities can be based on supporting the urge. Demonstrate the potential with sample MODs. Make it fun to fiddle without game-play.

You only need to tell one story. Re-mixable film does not mean interactive narrative. Keep things interesting, you can enter any kind of film in the game, not just digital animation. Extra points are given for 35mm film MODs, especially if the original assets (rushes, stills) are unavailable. Put huge amounts of effort into MODs or leave the experience linear. All that matters is that the story is excellent and that assets are available to hack and license. Let the audience decide if they prefer the director’s cut to the MOD. Recycle the best stories you have. People love to jump on stage and show off. Give them a reason to with familiar films. The stage can record interaction. Let them capture XML moments for the album.

Sing-along *Sound of Music* screenings (cult karaoke cinema) work well with simple and silly interactive elements (wave your plastic edelweiss in the air, hiss at the Baroness). Familiarity with a film encourages the audience to contribute to the mix. The same principle applies with the tradition of throwing rice at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* screenings. Online entertainment should benefit from offline storytelling experience. Go back to the campfire. The audience makes the experience. Set up your virtual stage for as a framework for generic interaction and let people choose from the MODs that are available. Lower the barriers to publish new MODs. Treat the film as a tune that can be played by any instrument, at various skill levels. Then let's jam.

To get far in the "MOD the movie" game, you need to think like a librarian. How do you organise your audio and visual assets so that they can be found by other people? Focus on audio to start with. Real-time sound is less computationally expensive than real-time visuals. You have more options, and plenty of console rhythm games for inspiration – kitsch *Gitaroo Man* (Koei, 2002), cool *Rez* (Sony, 2001) and fiddle-friendly *Frequency* (Sony, 2002) for starters. Let the audience play with separate rhythm, tunes, effects and dialogue tracks. Encourage the syndication of user-contributed tracks as if they were blog entries. License your film assets to game developers and other samplers. In 2003, Dreamworks Pictures announced a five picture "film sampling" deal which will involve splicing Mike Myers and new scripts into pre-existing films. License your best one-liner to Spielberg.

So you finally made it. You took a film and played with it like a stage in your mind. How did it score? How long was the season? What was fun about it? Did you get any laughs? How long did you hold the attention of an audience? If you are lucky, enough of your audience will let you track their usage (through console game logging) as feedback for the sequel.

The product you are envisaging is still, for want of a better label, film. A film built like a Rubik's Cube. Your film has a form that is fixed but malleable. An assembled story designed to encourage manipulation and disassembly. Who knows? Perhaps the films that prove to be the most enduring over time will be those that provide the best interfaces. Films can be the best story-telling tools in the hands of an increasingly sophisticated audience, or perhaps simply the best toys.

Film production is migrating to more open media frameworks. In 2003 Apple introduced an XML interchange format for Final Cut Pro (non-linear editing software) and ILM released its high definition lighting file format, EXR, as open source. Most media playback platforms however remain black-boxes for fear of copyright violations. The vision for re-mixable film is that by freeing up the terms of use around licensed properties (and endorsing file sharing), producers benefit from non-commercial audience creativity. The premise is that iterative development around film assets will lead to more sustainable business opportunities around licensed commercial use. Security around the virtual stage is of secondary importance to disseminating the story. Ever seen a kick-ass rock band? Someone always gets to the stage. It is harder to hide once you are up there. As the hip-hop music industry can testify, sampling makes money for copyright holders, even without investing in digital rights management systems.

Every re-mixable film asset has a machine-readable wrapper, an XML description of its technical function, its license conditions, and its position within the film (or Rubik's Cube).

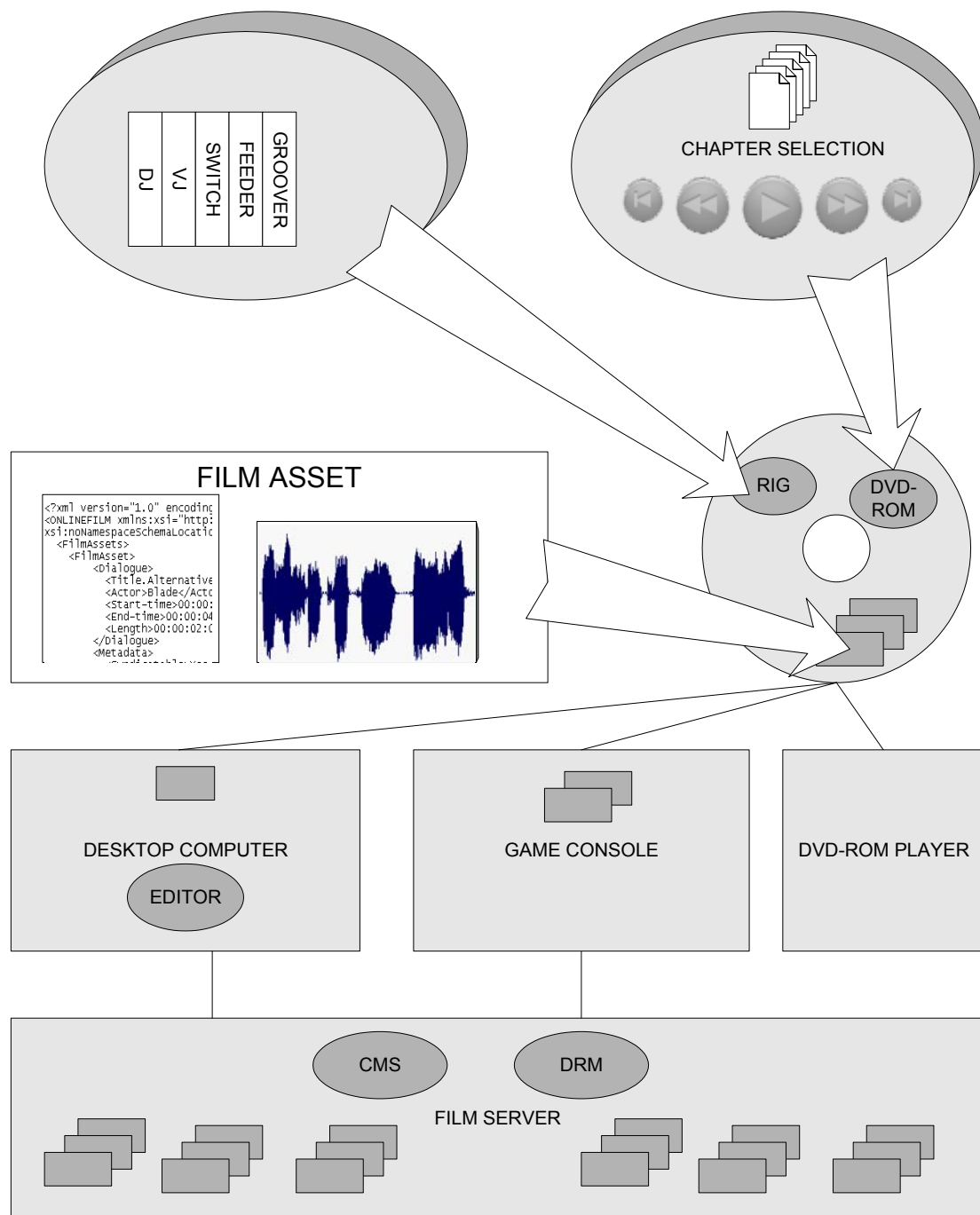


Fig.1. A variety of applications use an open XML Schema to identify, track and manipulate re-usable assets across various platforms.

The re-mixable film DVD consists of a real-time playback engine, an asset library and two separate (sample) experiences of the film that you are encouraged to MOD. The engine is “the RIG”, a media player that accesses the asset library via a standard API and composites video, audio and 3D assets on-the-fly. The RIG-compatible experiences are a) regular film playback (“the ROM”) and b) club-mix (DJ/VJ)

controls displayed within the film's aesthetic ("the GROOVER"). The source code for both ROM and GROOVER is available as the basis for MODs.

"MOD the movies" is not just about fun and games. Digital stories need to become more sustainable in environmental, creative, technical, and commercial terms. Cultures stagnate when there is no mechanism for passing on their heritage. Online stories need gestation periods as long as offline stories. Where did the majority of 1990s online content go? How can an online story even last a decade if the operating system it was designed for is no longer in use? The only way is reduce the story to its core elements and scatter them to the wind. The story-teller's job is to deliver the goods and make sure that they are passed on. The job is not to control the re-telling. As an open re-mixable film culture (and language) evolves around trust networks, there will be less technical knowledge required to spin a good non-linear yarn. In the age of cross-media publishing and broadcasting systems (and petabytes of un-recyclable content), the live digital experience is yet to be fully explored. Live film-makers will re-invent the screen.

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