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‘The Coolest Way to Watch Movie Trailers in the World’: Trailers in the Digital Age

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Abstract

At a time of uncertainty over film and television texts being transferred online and onto portable media players, this article examines one of the few visual texts that exists comfortably on multiple screen technologies: the trailer. Adopted as an early cross-media text, the trailer now sits across cinema, television, home video, the Internet, games consoles, mobile phones and iPods. Exploring the aesthetic and structural changes the trailer has undergone in its journey from the cinema to the iPod screen, the article focuses on the new mobility of these trailers, the shrinking screen size, and how audience participation with these texts has influenced both trailer production and distribution techniques. Exploring these texts, and their technological display, reveals how modern distribution techniques have created a shifting and interactive relationship between film studio and audience.

Key words: trailer, technology, Internet, iPod, videophone, aesthetics, film promotion

In the current atmosphere of uncertainty over how film and television programmes are made available both online and to mobile media players, this article will focus on a visual text that regularly moves between the multiple screens of cinema, television, computer and mobile phone: the film trailer. A unique text that has often been overlooked in studies of film and media, trailer analysis reveals new approaches to traditional concerns such as stardom, genre and narrative, and engages in more recent debates on interactivity and textual mobility. 'Film' trailer is itself a disingenuous term: although it has been described as a 'brief film text... created for the purpose of projecting in theatres to promote a film's theatrical release,' (Kernan, 2004, p. 1) reducing trailers to a purely theatrical concept limits our perception of what trailers are, what they can mean, who they target, and why we should be interested in them. The trailer grew beyond the borders of the cinema screen over fifty years ago, when 1950s television trailers for new film releases demonstrated the ability of the trailer format to move between visual media. Since then, the trailer has been transferred onto the various iterations of home video – from VHS to Laserdisc and DVD – and in the last decade has moved onto the technological screens of the Internet, games consoles, mobile videophones and iPods. Challenging the perception of the trailer as a cinema-centric format, this article will investigate how new screen technologies and dissemination media have changed the structure, aesthetics and availability of trailers. Analysing trailer texts that debuted on the Internet, mobile videophones and portable media players engages with issues of screen size and clarity, the rejection of the linearity of film and television schedules, and how audiences participate with texts. From this sense of how trailers have been altered by new mobile media technologies, I will consider what these changes mean for the relationship between studios, distributors and the audience.

When trailers have been linked to recent screen technologies, much has been made of their intimate relationship with viewers: Internet trailers allow advertisers to ‘talk one-to-one with a potential customer’ (Anthony Goldschmidt, quoted in Debruge, 2000); trailers on mobile videophones let you ‘carry the *Star Wars* universe around with you’ (Orange Press Release, 2004); and the video iPod was heralded by Steve Jobs as ‘the coolest way to watch movie trailers in the world.’ (Kahney, 2005) This intimacy has been created through the combination of mobility and interactivity offered by the mobile trailer. Each new technology has shifted the personal and temporal space within which the trailer message is viewed, reviewed and, potentially, amended. Although this development began with video trailers in the 1980s (packaged and presented as portable and pliable, videotapes shrunk films, and trailers, onto a format that could be carried in the hand, taken between houses, rented and returned), it is the more recent expansion of the Internet and portable video players that have changed the trailer audience from mass spectator to individual participant, from unwilling recipient to willing consumer, and from passive viewer to active controller, able to pause, fast-forward and advance images frame-by-frame. These mobile trailers depict a move from the social (cinema, television) to the personal (computer, iPod, phone).

The film companies have been quick to restructure trailers in order to target and attract particular fan cultures, but the interactive nature of the audience extends beyond playback options. The availability of desktop software and access to multiple file-sharing websites has empowered fan audiences to produce and display their own unique trailer texts. Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* (1992) explored the products of fandom, the stories, songs and films that fans have historically produced and circulated amongst their own groups, but as he acknowledges in a more recent book,

‘the Web has pushed that hidden layer of cultural activity into the foreground.’ (Jenkins, 2006, p. 133) The article will show how this concept of a new Internet visibility can be seen in fan-produced trailers for established cultural products such as *Star Wars* and *Back to the Future*, as well as in the efforts of studios and production companies to target and attract that active online fanbase.

In order to explore these developments, this article will consider the first experiments in trailer production for three central screen technologies: the Internet, mobile videophones and the video iPod. Given that fan cultures are early adopters of new media technology (Jenkins, 2006, p. 131), this investigation focuses on the different trailer options used to promote films with a strong fan-oriented base: *Lord of the Rings* (2001), *King Kong* (2005) and, primarily, the three *Star Wars* prequels released in 1999, 2002 and 2005. Lucasfilm was one of the first film companies to exploit the Internet as a marketing tool, to target trailer texts towards online fan culture, and to experiment with trailer production exclusively for the Internet and mobile videophones. The trailers it produced have a dual technological display: the special effects used to fuel their visual spectacle, and the dissemination technologies deployed to expand their narratives beyond the movie screen. Moving outside the boundaries of George Lucas’ empire, analysis of trailer campaigns for films without an established fanbase – online advertising for *Fight Club* (1999) and the iPod trailer for *Marie Antoinette* (2006) – reveal how specific technological limitation can lead to aesthetic change. Throughout, the article’s combination of contemporary discourse with close textual analysis demonstrates that the trailer is central to our understanding of how visual media have become increasingly mobile, colonising the smaller screens offered by new technology.

Online Trailers: ‘The most anticipated two minutes of film ever’

There’s an opportunity to create trailers for the Internet that would be completely different from the trailer you would create for a theatrical experience... To just run the same trailer on the Internet, even though it gets four gazillion hits, may not be the best use of the footage that was selected for a theatrical experience.

(Goldschmidt, in Debruge, 2000)

In November 1998, ‘the most anticipated two minutes of film ever’ was the teaser trailer for *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*. (Mzimbo, 1999, p. 44) Since June that year, Lucasfilm had been teasing online fans with short video documentaries that followed production on the film, but restricted access to any new footage of the *Star Wars* universe. The use of Apple’s Quicktime software to stream these videos was unusual in 1998 Hollywood, where official websites tended to be based around simple content: text biographies of stars, production details, poster images, star photographs, and occasional sound clips of music or effects.¹ Lucasfilm may have been more ambitious with these web documentaries (nineteen were made available over a twelve month period), but the launch of the *Episode I* teaser trailer was limited to established media: a cinema release for the trailer, and excerpts available for television entertainment shows. The teaser was not aesthetically unique – it remains a strong example of contemporary film trailer production, with narrative revelation and CGI-fuelled visual spectacle – but it is notable because of Lucasfilm’s reluctance to make it available online, and the ability of technologically-savvy fans to circumvent that decision. The *Episode I* teaser represents not only the first use of the

Internet for trailer dissemination, but also how new digital technologies allowed online fan audiences to partially commandeer and interact with a trailer text. From this initial example of Internet distribution and audience interaction, this section will explore how these elements, along with the technological restrictions of the computer screen, have affected the aesthetic, structural and mobile aspects of the trailer since 1998.

On November 17th, 1998, the only venue for watching the *Episode I* teaser was the cinema. Yet by the evening of the 17th, and years ahead of the advent of video-sharing sites YouTube or MySpace, a handful of *Star Wars* fans recorded, digitised, uploaded and shared the teaser through an exponentially expanding number of websites. Lucasfilm, despite the established online presence they had through www.starwars.com, took another four days to post its own version, again in Apple Quicktime. When they finally did, 450 *Star Wars* fans a second attempted to download the trailer from the official site, over 200,000 in forty-eight hours, an estimated 1.5 million downloads in the first week, rising to an estimated 3.5 million in total: shattering all previous Internet download records. Lucasfilm, however, warned fans that the Internet was not the best option for viewing the trailer. A note on www.starwars.com said ‘We encourage anyone interested in the trailer to go see it at a theatre, because unless you have a THX-certificated web browser, you won’t be seeing... top-quality audio and visual presentation quality. We hope you’ll see the trailer first as it was meant to be seen, in a theatre.’ (Lucasfilm, 1998) There remains a clear distinction between what is acceptable online and in cinemas: the *Episode I* web documentaries, with their talking heads and brief glimpses of behind-the-scenes work, were suitable for the smaller computer screen, but the widescreen visual spectacle of CGI special effects offered by the teaser were somehow more cinematic,

designed and suited only for the big screen experience (there is no mention of the incongruous fact that the same footage appeared on television, another much smaller screen, but one that had become an accepted part of the Hollywood promotional machine).

The *Star Wars Episode I* trailer was not specially designed for the Internet, but its appearance online firmly established three key features of future web-based trailers: mobility, access and control. Trailers on videocassettes had introduced a form of mobility, but Internet trailers had the potential to be saved to disc or hard drive, and were accessible from any computer (with the right software and connection). The act of moving the trailer out of the cinema and onto the Internet also freed the trailer from the linear programme structure: viewers could choose to watch the trailer whenever they wanted, rather than as part of a theatrical or television schedule dictated by production companies, distributors, and cinema chains. When trailers transferred to television and video, they were still contained within a programme format, a set screening order – the growth of the Internet allowed audiences to access the trailers they wanted, in their own time. This notion of access is closely tied into the final element of the online trailer, giving viewers the ability to control trailer exhibition, pausing, stopping and re-watching the footage whenever they desired.

This increased level of control promoted the trailer to a high position within fan culture, which could now scrutinise the montage of imagery laid out for them, and share their findings with other fans. Within days of the *Episode I* trailer appearing online, websites such as www.theforce.net had a detailed breakdown of trailer scenes, while web forums were full of other fans desperate to debate the footage and what the disparate images might refer to in the feature. Unlike any other time in trailer history, content analysis was now something that could be done by the most casual fan with

access to a computer. This desire to excavate and interact with a cultural text has been described as a key element of fandom, 'a model of interactivity as well as a mode of consumption... the fictions it dedicates itself to are modelled accordingly.' (Jones, 2003, p. 165) The *Episode I* trailer may not have been specifically modelled for the fan / cult audience, but its success (and online impact) was followed by the rise of more intricate, complex and layered montage sequences within trailer structure. As trailers were debated and pieced apart online to reveal potential 'spoiler' information, film companies complicated the process, producing trailers that added in more images and increased the pitch of editing to a point where the casual viewer might miss a piece of information. The dedicated fan would, however, be able to discover it through downloading, pausing and re-watching the trailer text.

The creation of trailers specially designed to appeal to the Internet audience can be seen less than a year after *Episode I* debuted online, with five Internet trailers for the 20th Century Fox film *Fight Club*. Made available only through the Fox website, these five trailers appeared in small pop-up windows above the main page. Processed to look like old, scratched and badly projected film stock, these online trailers are thematically similar to the manipulation of imagery and celluloid seen in the main feature. Each trailer follows a similar set-up: close-ups of Edward Norton's character speaking directly into the camera, excerpted images / scenes from the film, and an intricate mix of soundtrack elements. ² Using a hyperactive editing style, with optical effects and single-frame jump cuts, these are complex layered texts that suggest the potential restrictions and opportunities of Internet advertising. Direct address was a common structural approach in 1950s television trailers that used personal appearances from stars and actors to offer a sense of intimacy. The *Fight Club* online trailers mirror this concept, aware of the limitations of the small on-screen pop-up

windows that use only a quarter of the available screen space (most likely on a fifteen inch computer monitor). The aesthetics and structure of these trailers use the assumed intimacy of the small screen to their advantage, with Norton's friendly and inclusive address intended to create a one-on-one relationship between trailer and audience. Rather than the mass-market visual spectacle of contemporary trailers (such as *Episode I*), the *Fight Club* online spots target one person at a time.

This sense of personal address works with the (often frenetic) montage of images and sound to create a playful association between soundtrack and image.³ The editing patterns work to create humour, or to suggest deeper narrative concerns, such as the schizophrenic nature of the Norton/Brad Pitt relationship. During Norton's comment that 'All the ways you wish you could be... that's me' there is a brief cut to an image of Pitt on 'me', then back to Norton, suggesting an uncertainty over the identity of 'me'; in the 'I Know You' trailer, Norton's direct address is momentarily interrupted when the film stock jumps to Pitt, also staring at camera; we see Norton's point-of-view of his dull office, where a ghostly image of Pitt flickers in and out of existence; and over the lines 'deliver me from clean skin and perfect teeth' the trailer offers images of Norton, Pitt then back to Norton – the dialogue once again suggests one person, while the figure of Pitt is literally spliced into Norton's life. Many of these instances rely on the trailer's use of specific cinematic imagery – the processing of the images to look battered and worn, the suggestion that this old and tattered film is coming loose in a projector – alongside advanced modern editing techniques and frame-by-frame manipulation (made possible through non-linear editing technology such as Avid or Apple Final Cut). The trailers seem to relish this dichotomy: designed for downloading/viewing through the technology of the Internet

and created by advanced digital editing technology, their aesthetics foreground a false depiction of decrepit cinema projection.

The *Fight Club* Internet spots demonstrate the ability of modern editing software to produce compelling and intricate layered texts that can target a distinct audience. The online trailer for *Star Wars Episode 2* further demonstrated the interaction between fan culture and a cultural text, while also solidifying the place of the George Lucas universe as a nexus for fandom. Debuting at www.theforce.net in October 2000, the trailer eschews the close imagery and direct address of the *Fight Club* online adverts for epic widescreen spectacle. The trailer features sweeping helicopter shots over locations that appear familiar from the previous films (the desert of Tatooine, the mountains of Naboo, the city-planet of Coruscant), quickly edited images of the cast, and several special effects shots, including a horde of lightsaber-wielding Jedi attacking an unseen enemy. A more detailed examination of the trailer – an activity that online previews were now designed for, and expected – revealed more questions than answers. Many of the space battles were from earlier films, some of the actors did not appear to be in known *Star Wars* locations, and elements of the footage were taken from other feature films (most notably, the Jedi attack: a scene from *Braveheart* with digitally added lightsaber effects). The trailer was quickly revealed to be an unofficial preview cut and created by a single fan. It highlighted the fact that fandom had evolved ‘beyond zines and collectible figurines’ and were now ‘a new breed of fans empowered by desktop technology to create participatory works.’ (‘Trailer Trash,’ 2000, p. 9)⁴ Within eighteen months, Internet fandom had expanded from sharing the *Episode I* trailer to producing its own unique trailer creations. The trailer, already a major online promotional tool for Hollywood film

releases, was now a site of negotiation between studio and audience, where fans could interact with cult texts.

In November 2001, when the official marketing campaign for *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* began, an online teaser trailer titled 'Mystery' expanded on the *Fight Club* notion of modelling trailer texts for multiple viewings. The teaser's title, along with Yoda's line 'Dangerous and disturbing this puzzle is,' foregrounds the structural tease offered by the preview footage. Online fans watching (or downloading) the trailer were given a narrative puzzle rather than the linear narrative that much contemporary trailer advertising relied upon. The earlier theatrical teaser 'Forbidden Love' had built a trailer narrative around the romantic pairing of Anakin and Padme: in contrast, 'Mystery' presents an enigmatic montage of footage and dialogue excerpts, a fragmented narrative that encourages detailed examination rather than cursory viewing. The trailer is not completely opaque: broad clues – an attack on Padme, a return to Tatooine, a chase through the skies of Coruscant – are littered throughout, and key characters are pictured to suggest the traditional sequel trailer reliance on known pleasures. There are two levels of mystery here: a diegetic one based around the identity of Padme's attempted assassin (established by dialogue excerpts), and a non-diegetic one, constructed through the montage of new and strategically familiar images. These latter shots are barely on screen long enough to register, and require (and reward) a frame-by-frame analysis: a space battle reveals a spaceship not seen since *The Empire Strikes Back*; a one-second sequence shows a bar fight similar to the original 'cantina' scene in *Star Wars*; there is a lightsaber battle between Anakin and an unseen opponent; an oceanic world with flying sea creatures; Christopher Lee (as new villain Count Dooku) lurking on the far edge of one frame; and a half-second image of Anakin wreathed in Force lightning (not seen

since *Return of the Jedi*). This online trailer develops the notion of what an Internet preview can do: offer the audience more questions than answers with a exciting (if vague) collection of narrative events, and beyond that, a layered text (based around montage editing) that can be excavated for further detail.

This expansion of online trailer content is linked to how the *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* teaser was made available on the Internet. As the online marketing environment grew, a synergy began to develop between studio franchise properties such as *Star Wars* and technological developments in online video software.⁵ ‘Mystery’ debuted online in November 2001, but its appearance was directly attributable to two other technologies: DVD and Quicktime. The trailer was (initially) only accessible through a weblink built into the *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* DVD release: fans had to buy the DVD, and then play it through their computer in order to unlock the trailer via the *Star Wars* website. To view the trailer once they reached the website, fans then had to download Apple’s latest version (5.02) of Quicktime. Available in three sizes, ‘Mystery’ was heralded as being free to view: however, only the small and medium ‘screens’ were actually free. Following the Internet interest in the *Episode I* teaser, fans had to pay for the third *Episode II* trailer option. The website referred to it as a ‘large and clear version... for maximum quality and careful inspection’ (Lucasfilm, 2001), official confirmation that the producers expected this new level of fan interaction with the text, and modelled their trailers accordingly. Payment gave fans access to Quicktime Pro 5, a more advanced playback system that also allowed them to download and save the trailer to watch as often as they desired. By combining their technological resources, Lucasfilm and Apple were able to nurture the growing online demand for *Star Wars* content and expand the dominance of Quicktime software.

New Line Cinema used a similar synergy when launching the first online trailer for *The Lord of the Rings*, offering it only to people who downloaded Real Player 8, a competing video player to Quicktime. The trailer they offered through this new software was a different approach to online trailer structure and content, although one that proved equally adept at ‘modelling’ trailer content for fan culture. In place of a traditional teaser such as *Episode I*, or the online option offered by *Fight Club*, this trailer gave a broader look at director Peter Jackson, and his vision for the whole trilogy. Fast-paced montage and direct address are replaced by a collection of interviews, production clips that show actors on set, performers in half-assembled creature costumes, early pre-visualisation computer images of huge armies pouring across landscapes, and some short clips of finished footage. The montage of completed imagery may be replaced by behind-the-scenes shots and suggestive hints but it offered a similar sense of reward to Tolkien fans, who could watch, rewind and debate the images: what monster was being shown, which scene was being dramatised, and what battle the pre-visualisation might show. This preview offered another option for online trailer aesthetics, but its success – 1.7 million people downloaded the trailer in the first 24 hours (Donahue, 2000) – led not to a growth in ‘behind-the-scenes’ trailers but the spread of Internet production diaries. Available on all three of the recent *Star Wars* prequels, and similar effects-driven blockbusters *King Kong* and *Superman Returns*, these diaries offer three to seven minutes of footage shot on set, interviews with cast and crew, or glimpses of completed scenes. Released weekly or fortnightly through official websites, they have extended this early online trailer concept into another text modelled for fan interest and interaction.

The ability of online trailers to target and retain such a fan audience - as well as a more casual audience who may only watch the trailer once, rather than excavating it

– has been a factor in the resurgence of interest in trailer releases. Although many of the trailers that appear on the Internet are simply advance previews of a cinema trailer about to debut, their appearance is chronicled daily on film websites such as www.aintitcoolnews.com, www.empireonline.com and www.ign.com and exclusive trailer releases are hotly contested (and advertised) by Yahoo, MSN and Apple. Generally targeting the more passionate end of the fan spectrum, high profile trailer releases for franchise properties such as *Spiderman*, *Transformers* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* regularly dominate message boards, fan forums and blogs with speculation over film's plots, character arcs and the chance to discover 'spoilers' in new trailers. Aside from this strand of online promotion, the Internet-only trailers have developed unique aesthetic options that have impacted back on the cinema previews that spawned them: the fast-paced montage that encourages (often requires) multiple viewings, the importance of the soundtrack to structure modern trailer messages, and the use of behind-the-scenes sequences. Perhaps most importantly, by adopting online distribution, film studios have passed control over trailer viewing into the hands of the audience, the individual who can choose which trailers to download, when to watch them, and whether to archive them in a personal library. While films have been collectable since the advent of video (and before, if you take into account 16mm collections), the availability of trailers online has increased their profile in marketing departments and in film culture generally, freeing them from their pre-film position in theatres and confirming their existence as unique short films in their own right.

The Mobile Trailer: From Videophones to the Video iPod

‘Being able to carry the *Star Wars* universe around with you wherever you go is pretty compelling.’

(Orange Press Release, 2004)

From video through DVD and onto the Internet, trailers have become increasingly mobile, freed from the confines of the cinema programme or the set schedule of television broadcasts. Yet this mobility was finite – the physical DVD with its set trailer gallery, or the downloaded trailer saved onto a CD or memory stick – and was further constricted by the need for a larger visual interface: a television, DVD player or computer system was required to actually play back the trailer. The next extension of the online trailer, explored through this section, is the recent developments in portable media that have made the trailer text truly mobile. The advent of mobile videophones and the growth of portable media players such as Apple's iPod have once again altered our ability to interact with trailer texts. Because the effects of these new technological developments are still largely unknown, and aesthetic and structural conventions are more fluid, this section will explore a selection of trailer texts that have debuted on these new media screens: the *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* trailer viewable via the Orange mobile phone network in 2004-05, and *King Kong*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Marie Antoinette* which were released via Apple's iTunes trailer site in 2005-06. Analysis of these texts, and the discursive network that surrounded their dissemination, will consider the restrictions imposed by these mobile screens, the aesthetic opportunities they may offer to future trailer structure, and whether they continue the notion of audience control and interaction so central to online dissemination.

The teaser trailer for *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* that was made available for download to Orange mobile videophones in November 2004 was not a unique phone-only trailer. Echoing earlier transitions between cinema and new media screens, the *Episode III* teaser was a reformatted version of the cinematic text, made

available on the same day as its cinema and online debut.⁶ Available ‘free’ for Orange customers with compatible videophones, it demonstrates some of the limitations of the phone screen.⁷ The visual restrictions of the videophone are striking: the images are often blurred, with digital artefacts producing an image made up of block-like segments rather than fluid motion. The quick style of editing developed for the cinema and computer screen does not seem suited for this smaller screen – complicated shots are reduced to simple concepts (an explosion, a space battle), reducing the clarity and impact of the digital cinematography. As with early television spots or the online *Fight Club* trailers, the strongest images are close-ups, particularly in dialogue exchanges where the camera does not pan or cut quickly, but allows the eye to linger on the image. Unlike almost all previous *Star Wars* trailers, the special effects do not dominate – the videophone image affords no spectacle of spaceship dogfights, fantastic landscapes and digitally created panoramas. The strongest structural element of the videophone trailer is the soundtrack – with the lack of clear visuals, the music, sound effects and dialogue sell the developing narrative, clarify some of the onscreen action and suggest (if only partially) the excitement the visual montage is attempting to create.

The appearance of the trailer on this smaller screen may (as Lucasfilm and Orange claimed) offer the chance to carry the *Star Wars* universe around in your pocket, but the videophone trailer offers a further reduction of the theatrical or online experience: the trailer was specially reformatted by Lucasfilm in order to fill the 1.33:1 screen. Given that all other trailers available on Orange phones were letterboxed, further analysis of the differences between the full-screen phone trailer and the widescreen cinema and online trailer may illuminate Lucasfilm’s decision to experiment with this format, and what it offered to the viewer. The recomposed

frames, and pan-and-scanned images, show the clearest reformatting. Two-shots of Anakin/Palpatine and Yoda/Obi-Wan only contain one full figure, with the other head cut in half by the edge of the frame. It makes it more difficult to identify the figures until they speak, or we see the reverse angle. Shots that utilise widescreen composition are missing elements, reducing planets in scale, cutting off large portions of buildings and excising figures completely: a videophone image of a group of Jedi confronting the Chancellor features three (possibly four) indistinct figures, and a green lightsaber blade that appears to be hanging in mid-air on the far left of the screen. Comparison with the Internet version of the trailer reveals that a lightsaber-wielding Jedi on the left of frame has disappeared in the full screen version (leaving only his green blade on screen), while the vague fourth image is actually a tall ornament between two other Jedi. The scene remains intelligible with these omissions, but it relies on dialogue, sound effects and the appearance of three bright lightsaber blades to distinguish the onscreen action. Some of the changes wrought by the full screen reformatting offer more positive developments: cutting extraneous detail adds emphasis to close-ups of Palpatine, Anakin and Yoda. In the online trailer the characters are more distant, but in the videophone version, the faces fill the small screen, underlining the narrative intent of their excerpted dialogue. Centring these closer images pushes them forward in the midst of the unclear and fast-moving imagery.

This aesthetic boon is undermined by the very nature of the *Star Wars* trailer, unable to balance the severe diminishment of the sweeping visual spectacle the preview relies on to construct its message (and which is effectively conveyed on other screens). The focus of the trailer is panoramic adventure and screen-filling wonder. The close-ups are effective, but because the trailer was recomposed rather than

specifically designed for the restrictive videophone screen, they are few and far between. The Quicktime screen available through the Internet may be only two or three times the size of the Nokia 6630 screen, but the increase in size and the sharp clarity of the image make it appear bigger again. The difference in quality resides in the technological basis of these playback options: most phone memory currently restricts the size of video files that can be stored and played back. The size of file in the current comparison is telling – Orange’s *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* trailer is 580KB, the online version is 31.9MB (31, 949 KB), over fifty-five times larger (the advent of higher Broadband connections and speeds also means that the download rate is similar in both cases, despite the size of file). In order to keep data transfer fees as low as possible, videophone files are also encoded at a far smaller rate – approx. 100kbps rather than the Internet, which goes up to 1500kbps.

The introduction of new technology on 3G phones will revise some of these data storage and transfer issues, but the 2004 *Star Wars Episode III* teaser release demonstrates the standing of both technological options at that time. Trailers remain an important tool in demonstrating the desirability of the mobile videophone screen: Orange have targeted trailers on videophones as ‘free, promotional content... a short video format that customers were already familiar with’ in order to encourage customers to pay for the other exclusive sports and news-related video footage. (Ashberry, 2006) Since 2004, when Orange first made them available, trailers have consistently been among the most popular downloads via Orange World, with the *Episode III* teaser rated ‘[the] most popular video clip of the year’ for Orange in 2006. (Ashberry, 2006) With no other trailers attempting to create a videophone aesthetic, the *Episode III* videophone trailer remains a unique attempt to create a different trailer experience for phone consumption – even if that experience was simply the

reformatting of a trailer from another medium. With phone users already successfully downloading letterboxed trailers, film companies currently regard mobile phones as being ‘on the periphery’ of promotional sites, with the future lying not in videophone-specific trailers, but in ‘user-generated content... like YouTube.’ (Ashberry, 2006)

This raises the possibility of a more participatory experience – similar to the production of online fan trailers – but it has yet to be demonstrated on the videophone screen. With 3G phones offering a better video experience – streaming video rather than downloading increases the size of media file that can be accessed – the quality of trailer viewing will increase. Whether the availability will be restricted to cinema or online trailers transferred to the smaller screen, or if fans will use the screen to share and distribute their own products remains to be seen.

At its launch in October 2005, Steve Job singled out trailers as a unique content option for the Video iPod, claiming Apple’s new media player offered ‘the coolest way to watch movie trailers in the world.’ (Steve Jobs, quoted in Kahney, 2005)

Within two months, twenty trailers were available to download (via the Apple website and iTunes) including forthcoming blockbusters *King Kong* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Alongside music videos, podcasts, short animated films, and television shows (all largely fee-driven), trailers have remained a popular download option – partly because they are seen as free content, but also because their short length suits the iPod experience (traditionally based around the short form of music tracks and/or videos). Like the Nokia 6630 videophone, the iPod has a small screen size – marginally larger than the average mobile phone at 5cm by 3.8cm (320 by 240 pixels) – but unlike the phone, the quality of the image is much higher, partly due to the processing power, screen resolution and playback software contained within the iPod. ⁸ Within two years of its

release, the video iPod has grown in dominance as a vehicle for trailer dissemination: unlike the reluctance displayed with the Internet, film studios quickly embraced the iPod, including a downloadable iPod version of all available online trailers. The 2006 London International Film Festival also underlined the importance of the iPod screen as a promotional interface when it made 62 trailers available for video iPod download via their website. The ‘coolest’ way to watch movie trailers was now on the move, in crisp digital quality and presented in widescreen: the mobile trailer was now a reality.

The prevalence of trailers for video iPods does avoid one key question: what should an iPod trailer look like? In the time since its release, no iPod-only trailers have been produced that deliberately target the smaller screen size, personal interaction, or its heritage of aural entertainment. Unlike the videophone, there have been no experiments in re-framing or creating new content specifically for the iPod screen: Disney’s ‘full screen’ release of *Narnia* promotional material from 2005 offers a suggestive step in this direction, but the selection of clips and behind the scenes features that were made available were no different to the online production diaries for *Star Wars* or *Superman Returns* – and the iPod trailer for *Narnia* remained in its widescreen format. With no trailer text yet created specifically for the iPod, this section will conclude with a selection of potential routes the iPod-only trailer could take in the coming years. The iPod trailers for *King Kong* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* demonstrate some of the restrictions that the smaller screen imposes on trailer visuals that have been transferred onto the mobile screen, while the iPod trailer for another kind of film entirely, *Marie Antoinette*, suggests a different aesthetic route from its blockbuster cousins, based on aural information over visual montage.

All three trailers are identical to their cinematic and online versions: audio and visual information is the same, all use widescreen formatting (the iPod screen retains

the black bars above and below the image), and the basic difference remains the available screen size. The use of the letterbox reduces the iPod screen from 5 x 3.8cm to 5 x 2.7cm (approx.) but none of the trailers address this lack of visual area. The trailers for *Narnia* and *King Kong* represent the basic structural devices of modern blockbuster previews: a series of images establish narrative detail (shots of Jack Black, Naomi Watts, a map, and the ship setting sail; the four children exploring the magical wardrobe that draw them into Narnia); dialogue excerpts that explain those images (Jack Black's voiceover; the Beaver's excerpted lines about the children's destiny); a suggestion of narrative complication (Kong's roar interrupts filming; the White Witch appears); before the trailer moves into a montage of CGI-created visual spectacle (Kong, dinosaurs, the native people, giant insects, Kong fighting a T-rex; Aslan, centaurs, sweeping images of a huge battle). The intent of this simple structural schematic is not to reduce these trailers, but to demonstrate that the cinematic and online trailer conventions remain strong structural devices. Most of the images are medium, long or establishing shots – particularly in landscape-building films such as *Narnia* and *Kong* that want to make their fantastic landscapes believable (including the effects-created 1930s New York of *Kong*). Close-ups are used throughout, but unlike the dialogue sequences in the videophone version of *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, they do not dominate the screen: the widescreen aesthetic reduces the close-up to one area of the screen, alongside background detail. The only exception to this rule are two incredibly close images of Kong's face, particularly focused on his eyes: filling whatever screen the trailer was played on, they demonstrate the ability of the CGI technology to create enhanced realism. On the iPod they are particularly effective because they are one of very few images that

speak to the alleged intimacy the more mobile screen can create between screen and individual viewer.

Both *Narnia* and *King Kong* rely on their soundtracks to create scale and excitement, most notably in the montage sequences that build to the conclusion of the trailer narrative. The third iPod trailer being considered here, a teaser for *Marie Antoinette*, is a departure from the blockbuster trailers analysed so far, but its use of music is a strong indicator of what an iPod trailer could focus on, linking music and imagery thematically, creating mood and association as much as scale or visual grandeur. The trailer uses mostly medium and long shots that display the excess of the French court, with a narrative focus on Kirsten Dunst as the title character, and the suggestion of a romantic triangle between her, the king and another nobleman. With no reliance on close-ups or dialogue exchanges, it is the soundtrack that suggests a potential iPod aesthetic convention, and an existing strength of the iPod: the music video. Under two minutes in length, the *Marie Antoinette* teaser is cut to the New Order track 'Age of Consent,' linking the trailer with music video aesthetics and suggesting a stylistic convention that future iPod trailers could follow, given the popularity of both forms on current video iPods. In the *Marie Antoinette* teaser, the juxtaposition of the 18th century clothes and locations with the 1980s music promotes the eclectic nature of the feature, but also raises thematic parallels between those periods in history. The iPod screen may reduce some of the visuals – the palace of Versailles, the party scenes – but the music remains dominant, propelling the images, and giving the teaser a coherent structure. Unlike the blockbuster trailers, the *Marie Antoinette* teaser offers a new possibility opened up by the mobile technology, rather than a reliance on existing conventions.

The availability of iPod trailers is currently in a similar position to the videophone options on Orange. The major film studios, recognising the video iPod as an important site for movie promotion, dominate the list of trailers available for download, while also offering mini-video exclusives and documentaries that mimic the style of the Internet production diaries. The Internet remains the dominant place to find fan-produced trailers, but downloadable video podcasts (particularly those based around cult properties such as *Lost*, *Heroes* or *Star Wars*) reveal a potential source of participatory fan trailers. The availability of desktop editing software and the desire for fan cultures to share their products and thoughts offers the potential for fan-produced trailers on both videophone and iPod screens. With software that can encode into the correct format – and the possibility of disseminating video podcasts through the iTunes store – it appears more likely that mobile fan trailers will become a regular feature of iPod screens.

The creation of a unique iPod trailer may occur at some point in the future, but like a videophone-specific trailer, such a preview would need to consider the use of widescreen imagery, whether a full-screen image allows more opportunities for direct address, and the exploitation of the intimate nature of the small screen/viewer experience. Although the iPod offers clearer and better quality than the videophone screen, the smaller frame is not best designed for the speed of montage seen in the online spots for *Episode II: Attack of the Clones*. In contrast to the current modelling of online trailers for playback and multiple viewings, perhaps iPod or videophone trailers should linger on images rather than rush from one to the other – as the close-ups in the videophone preview of *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* demonstrate. In addition, the use of the soundtrack becomes central: not simply the current mix of excerpted dialogue and (occasional) voiceover with music, but the interplay of music

and imagery that lies at the core of the iPod's current appeal, and which *Marie Antoinette*'s teaser offers a suggestive example of. Whether or not these aesthetic elements are developed, the growth of mobile media in both videophones and portable music players suggests that the introduction of a specific trailer that targets the smaller screens of these dissemination technologies will happen, and that trailer production techniques may be altered once again.

Conclusion

The technological advances that have expanded the range and number of media screens on which filmed images can be played (and replayed) have decreased the size of those visual interfaces, but increased the mobility that they offer to audiences. The size of the potential audience has shrunk from hundreds to one, while the level of interactivity and control offered to that audience has increased exponentially. The technologies that have made trailers mobile have removed them from the traditional programmed place within a film or television schedule: the Internet and portable media players have actively encouraged fans to download a library of current and classic trailers, to be played (replayed, paused, fast-forwarded) whenever the viewer wanted, rather than at a pre-set time and place. These issues of trailer dissemination, the studio-audience relationship, and fan interactivity are crucial to our understanding of the selected Internet, phone and iPod previews that illuminate recent changes in the aesthetics and structure of the trailer text.

Mobility remains a key quality. Orange based an entire publicity campaign around the idea of carrying the *Star Wars* universe around in your pocket, despite the less than stellar visual display the phone technology offered. Viewing trailers on the move allows fan cultures to access this information whenever required, and links to

one of the reasons why trailers have proved so popular. Given the recent interest in trailers because of their potential 'spoiler' information for forthcoming features (a particular fascination among modern fan cultures), the desire to access and display these layered texts on the move (or, more importantly, not restricted to the home, or the one screen) has also grown. As free video files, they allow owners to demonstrate the abilities of a video iPod, videophone or PSP. The online activity of downloading and sharing trailers has simply become mobile.

The downside of this mobility is that the available screen size has shrunk, but the trailer industry maintains its grip on a cinematic or theatrical framing, specifically its insistence on widescreen or letterboxed images. Although screen size has been shrinking since the 1950s, the trailer has continued to exist theatrically in a widescreen format: despite the dominance of television, home video and DVD, the wider screen has remained a central cinematic concept. New mobile videophones now mimic the widescreen dimensions, while the next generation of iPods and iPhones feature touch screens that allow for the more rectangular image area. This focus on the widescreen aspect ratio means that there has been little or no attempt to create a new aesthetic, composed for the smaller screen and more reliant on close images and soundtrack over larger scale visual spectacle. Only the *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* videophone trailer offers an experiment in full screen visuals and because of file and format issues, it is not entirely successful. So, the expansion onto new media screens has been undertaken in terms that reinforce the theatrical trailer aesthetic and presentation. Despite the influence of the iPod, which originally offered a new mobility and storage option for music tracks, it appears that widescreen imagery will remain dominant on these small, mobile screens.

Audience interaction has become key to the trailer production industry, but it also remains an important participatory element for viewers. Consumers are more involved than ever before, downloading trailers, building up personal archives, controlling the texts, analysing them and sharing this knowledge with other fans. The advent of MySpace and YouTube means more fans are making more trailers available to download and watch (for classic films as much as new releases). With the availability of digital editing tools, new trailer texts have also entered the online world: taking a leaf from the ‘fake’ *Star Wars Episode II* trailer, these unique texts offer parodies of classic film trailers. From ‘George Lucas presents *Singin’ in the Rain*’ (complete with laser blasts and TIE-fighters) to the recent run of *Brokeback Mountain* trailer parodies (starting with *Brokeback to the Future*), these demonstrate that online fan interaction with trailer texts remains strong. Henry Jenkins suggests that in order to retain their audiences, studios need to give fans a ‘stake in the survival of the franchise... creating a space where they can make their own creative contributions’ (Jenkins, 2006, 168): but the evidence of the trailers analysed here suggests that the studios are more content to encourage trailer producers to model trailer texts that encourage audience interaction with licensed product, creating online excitement through official montage sequences and imagery than fan-produced works. The degree of interactivity these texts allow – pausing and sifting through the trailer – may also be complicated by the growth of videophone and iPod trailers, where the control offered by these portable screens is not currently as tactile or accurate as a computer interface. However, with technology constantly developing, it is likely that fan created trailers and trailer modelling will both continue for some time to come.

Since the online appearance of the teaser trailer for *Star Wars Episode I*, the trailer has successfully moved from one media screen to the next, revising and changing its basic structural and aesthetic conventions to fit within that new technologically created frame. These new screens have not overhauled trailer aesthetics and structure, but they have developed the existing conventions and taken them into new directions. It is telling that both Orange and Apple are stressing trailers as unique content for their new screen technologies. Unlike Lucasfilm, which was initially reluctant to embrace the Internet as an outlet for big screen visual spectacle, these new media companies have positioned the trailer as a central text for users of their mobile screen technology. This new mobility has enhanced the position of trailers within film promotion, but it has also increased awareness of the trailer as a unique text that can be downloaded, archived, discussed, interacted with, and re-purposed by individual fans. The development of videophone and iPod trailers could bring changes to the trailer text, but it remains to be seen whether the limitations and opportunities offered by these technological interfaces influence the next iteration of trailer production, or simply use their screens to disseminate and display a dominant, and homogenous, product.

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, the official websites for 1998 releases *American History X*, *You've Got Mail*, *Practical Magic* and *Gods and Monsters*.

² The online trailers feature five unique soundtracks, with an eclectic mix of hip hop, dramatic stabs, choral music, sound effects of sexual groaning, cartoon footsteps (familiar from Hanna Barbera animation) and the bionic 'noise' of the Six Million Dollar Man. This playful use of sound may also be an address to potential viewers,

referring to sounds and music that twenty- and thirty-something males would recognise and respond to (mirroring the direct call to this audience in Norton's monologues).

³ The online trailers also appear to have bypassed MPAA approval: the 'Change Your Life' trailer splices half-second images of Helena Bonham-Carter and Brad Pitt having sex into its montage, with Bonham-Carter's growing orgasmic moans high in the soundtrack mix.

⁴ As Henry Jenkins notes, the production of short trailers for online download was also a way for fans who were amateur filmmaker to disseminate their work, get their name known in the fan community. (Jenkins, 2006, p. 141)

⁵ This is not limited to the Internet: in 1991, the first release of the *Star Wars* Trilogy in widescreen was used to promote the new range of Phillips widescreen televisions.

⁶ The 1976 *Star Wars* cinema teaser trailer was reedited for its 1984 video release, and the *Episode I* teaser was digitised for its Internet appearance.

⁷ The *Episode III* trailer was downloaded from the Orange World portal and viewed on a Nokia 6630 videophone in January 2007. Although regarded as free content, all trailer downloads available via Orange are subject to a data transfer charge.

⁸ The playback format of the media file is a major issue for image quality on phones and the Internet. While mobiles use Mp4, Internet files are encoded for Quicktime or Windows Media – offering better quality, but requiring custom players not currently loaded onto mobile phones (due to memory capacity). In terms of visual clarity, mobile phones struggle to playback files that are encoded at a higher bit rate – including Quicktime or Windows Media.

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