

Don Levy: "*Jurassic Park* had 60 CGI scenes; *Spider-Man* and *Beowulf* had over a thousand each."

By Michal Ramati

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Just like other forms of media, over the past few years technological developments have brought many changes to the world of cinema – largely related to the introduction of broad-band internet, but also due to the development of various mobile devices and constant improvement of ways of creating sounds and images.

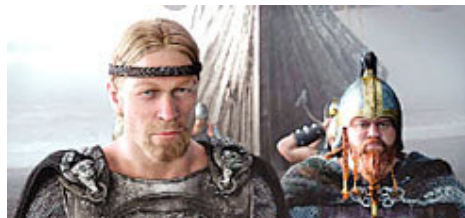
Don Levy, Senior Vice President for marketing and communications at Sony Pictures Digital, estimates that this new technological environment provides extra opportunities for the motion picture industry – and that the internet does not pose a threat, but rather offers new ways to attract audiences.

Levy, who is arriving in Israel this week for the BIRD Foundation's 30th anniversary, is head of marketing and communications activities for the Imageworks division at Sony, which specializes in digital special effects and the development of digital characters – including those found in hit pictures like *Beowulf* and the *Spiderman* movies.

In an exclusive The Marker interview, Levy talks of the opportunities the studios are facing, and how the internet is making inroads in the movie world.

Holding a Dialogue with the Audience

"There are more opportunities to reach and entertain audiences today than ever before," says Levy. "The internet is an excellent means of holding a dialogue with the audience. There are highly active fan sites, and viewing habits are changing – you can download a movie to a mobile device. People like entertainment, and the internet is a way to raise awareness and build buzz for an approaching project. When it comes to marketing, the net plays a huge, exciting part."



Q: How has the internet influenced movies?

"The internet has matured into one of our finest sources on information, and a significant tool for distributing entertainment content. Back in the late 90's Yair Landau, my closest colleague, told me that if people are willing to scour the internet

for illegally-obtained entertainment content – we have the opportunity to develop legal methods of creating and distributing entertainment. Today, more and more content is available online, either paid for directly or sponsored by ads. We've seen a huge amount of growth in the field, and we'll be seeing lots of interesting new things over the next few years.

Q: It's only been a couple of years since media companies started to offer free content over the net.

"Our predictions from a few years ago were that broadband would become a major factor between 2005 and 2007. 2007 was supposed to be the year when broadband became sufficiently widespread, and up until then, only limited activity was possible. Now, with broadband being as common as it is, we're seeing a lot more activity in the field."

Q: And what opportunities do the studios see there?

"We at Imageworks recently decided to open our interactive division to outside businesses. They can now offer 12 years of experience in digital media for marketing entertainment content – especially to film studios, TV and home entertainment. The team has tons of experience in creating prize-winning websites.

"Beyond the sites themselves, the team has lots of experience in developing crowd-pleasing environments and activities. For instance, the Interactive division has been working with the producers of the TV show *Wheel of Fortune* for the past seven years, integrating online content into the show. They've founded the Wheel Watcher's Club, a site that taps viewer loyalty for the program's benefit. We've also created a bunch of mini-games and subscriber games for downloading onto cell phones. Our group, along with show producer Harry Friedman, has done an excellent job in understanding and taking advantage of the web's potential.

"In addition, all our projects have innovative online campaigns. We had a wonderful site for our animated feature *Beowulf*. It's a smart way to reach audiences."

No Form of Media Will Disappear

Q: What new platforms seem most promising?

"I think the exact point is that we won't see a single predominant platform. I think we'll see more people using gaming consoles as home media centers, not just for games but for entertainment in general. I definitely think cable TV and DVR will remain prominent, and that the internet will have an ever-growing role in media access and consumption.

"Mobility is also huge – mobile video players as well as cellular video. Sony Pictures started selling flash-card movies in Europe four years ago. They sold every last one, even then.

"I don't see one platform defeating another. Let me give an example from the pre-modern world. One of the earliest forms of human entertainment was storytelling. Gutenberg's inventing the printing press didn't stop people from telling each other stories. Similarly, the advent of photography didn't stop people from drawing pictures, and movies don't keep people from going to the theater.

"It's a process every new invention goes through. We keep on finding new ways to reach an audience. I see it as a way to expand the market, not narrow it. Patterns of consumption and audience behavior might constantly re-balance themselves, but there's no rule that one platform must completely cancel out another.

Q: In the past, a movie would run in a limited amount of theaters, eventually expanding to more and more parts of the world. Today, we see mass launches on as many screens as possible across the globe. How did this trend start?

"A certain level of excitement exists in anticipation of a movie. Producing and marketing a film is a very expensive business, and when the media starts getting excited about one, we want to use as much of this excitement as possible and provide people with as much access to the film as we can while levels are still high. If you advertise a product, you have to make sure it's available for sale."

Q: And when you produce a film, you have to make sure it's available everywhere in the world?

"Absolutely, especially when it comes to animation. You have to take local voice casting into account early on in production. You have to take everything into consideration, from translating the title to how the script works in different languages".

"When you make a movie the first thing you have to think about is the story itself, but when you do that you also start to think about the world market, and about working with colleagues throughout the world on local launches."

We've Become More Efficient

Q: The last few years have seen more and more investment in special effects, at greater and greater cost. Are things starting to get out of hand?

"Actually, when it comes to digital filmmaking, production costs have dropped in terms of cost-per-frame. What's changed is the amount of work required. In other words, we can do a whole lot more than we did in the past.

"While the first *Jurassic Park* movie had only 60-70 scenes involving CGI, the second one had some 200. With films like *Spider-Man* or *Beowulf*, we're talking about 800-1,000 CGI shots.

"*Beowulf* is completely computer generated. *Spider-Man* has about 20 digital minutes. It looks completely real, but parts of it are totally computerized. Compared with the rest of the film industry, costs in the digital field have not risen, and in point of fact we're much more efficient today than we were in the past."