
Case Study: Pushing the Medium

The interactive character of DVD and its flexibility in dealing with different forms of digital content have encouraged some DVD producers to stray from the predictable path and attempt more ambitious projects. *1 Giant Leap*, released by Palm Pictures in 2002, explores some of the key themes of civilization in video collages, music, and interviews with a number of the most interesting thinkers of our era. Designed from its conception as a DVD presentation, *1 Giant Leap* incorporates innovative features, such as an electronic jukebox that can cycle through the various chapters included on the disc in different sequences.

The project also highlighted the advantages of digital video cameras and non-linear editing tools. The two filmmakers, Jamie Catto and Duncan Bridgeman, travelled light during their journey across Africa, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. The lightweight DV camcorders performed admirably in difficult conditions. Shooting primarily under natural light, the filmmakers shrugged off heat, rain, dust, and insects in their travels. The resulting multimedia title is a composite of world music, insights on such heady topics as Time, God, Sex, and Death from speakers such as Kurt Vonnegut and Tom Robbins, glimpses of different societies from around the world, and an underlying theme that our essential humanity unites us all.

National Geographic Channels International (NGCI) partnered with Palm Pictures to present a documentary special, *The Making of 1 Giant Leap*, which premiered in April 2003.

Origins

Chris Blackwell, the founder of Palm Pictures and one of the guiding spirits behind *1 Giant Leap*, sees DVD technology as liberating to creators. Palm Pictures has developed a catalog of properties, including many DVD releases, showcasing unique and original works from independent filmmakers, animators, and musicians. As an inductee to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in March 2001, Chris had an open ear when approached by two young musicians about the project.

“The guys who put together the music,” Chris said, “Jamie Catto and Duncan Bridgeman, came into our office in London and pitched us on allowing them to go to different parts of the world to complete a recording, which would be a mixture of different music genres. They played us a demo that was made up of samples and they wanted to go around the world to record the people live. So, I said, ‘Well, you know, Palm Pictures is set up as a DVD company. I love the music, and I love what you guys are doing, but I’d like to add to it. You should bring along a couple of people and film everything so we can make it into a DVD.’ And, that is exactly how it happened.”

The overall theme of the project evolved organically as the music and video was captured and the project team began sorting through the assets. “We let Jamie and Duncan pull the material together,” Chris said. “They would come back and show us what they had done. The project was pretty much all done out of England. The thing that took most of the time, as you would imagine, was all the editing—a tremendous amount of time. Eighteen months or more.”

Authoring the DVD

David Beal, President of Palm Pictures, oversees many of the technical aspects of DVD projects. He pointed out that the authoring process for *1 Giant Leap* was technically challenging because of the unique elements that were worked into the design.

“The authoring was quite extensive,” David said, “especially when we looked at the programmable jukebox function and the explorer function. The bit-budgeting on that disc was pretty much completely to the max. We almost didn’t get the last music video on, because we couldn’t squeeze the content enough to fit.”

Depending on whether the video footage was designed as value-added footage on the extras portion of the disc, or the primary feature footage, the bit rates were scaled to the level of quality desired, with variable bit rates being used when possible. “Obviously, you want to do everything variable—you have to be really careful to maintain the look you want when coming off DV. Most of this was shot on DV with some Betacam.”

Authoring and many other parts of the project took place at the Palm Pictures satellite office in England. During the course of development, Suzette Newman, Jumbo Vanrenan, and Adrian Boot were very active in the process. Apple Final Cut Pro was used for the video editing, but the complexity of the jukebox and explorer functions went beyond the capabilities of DVD Studio Pro. Instead, the final stages of the DVD authoring included scripting and hands-on work in DVD Producer.

The Compelling Nature of DV

Much of the footage in the project was recorded on DV format cameras, a technique that is used with many Palm Pictures projects that feature dynamic content and also require unobtrusive video work.

“I attribute the fact that we used DV,” David said, “to why a lot of the footage is so compelling. This is something that Chris has always highlighted: when you go into a situation with a camera rig and lights and all this equipment, it changes the situation. A lot of the footage was captured by the team when they were using small handhelds out in the middle of the bush in different places. The equipment is so unobtrusive that people have a tendency to forget about the filming process. You get much more compelling video.”

CD or DVD?

During development, the staff at Palm Pictures struggled to resolve an important issue. Should *1 Giant Leap* be first released as a songs-only CD or as a DVD with the full audio-visual experience?

Chris remembers the thinking at the time, “You know, *1 Giant Leap* was the first of its kind—something that was actually conceived as a music-based DVD. We felt then (and now) that the music, the audio side, would probably be the best way to start bringing it some attention. We went backwards and forwards on it, for about a year, trying to decide whether we should release the DVD first, or release the CD first to get some atten-

tion for the upcoming DVD. We eventually decided to release the CD first and then release the DVD."

Breaking Down Barriers

Part of the impetus behind Palm Pictures is breaking down the rigid barriers that have stifled many creators, both in filmmaking and the music world. The shift is sweeping and undeniable. David said, "I think the *1 Giant Leap* project is very symbolic of what we have seen as a revolution in filmmaking. It is somewhat equivalent to what the advent of the electric guitar did to music, as well as what the turntable did to music when it became an instrument. I think that all of these new digital creator tools, whether the DV cams or Final Cut Pro or Avid DV Express, are changing the type of people who can make films now. People can dabble and when they start to get something good, it is not like they are on a budget and have to finish it in a month. With this approach, you are going to get some really interesting rock-n-roll filmmaking."

The independent filmmakers may be able to move into the vacuum created as Hollywood has increasingly aimed for the mainstream markets. "I think that Hollywood has had the traditional feature covered for a long time," David said. "The new stuff that takes advantage of the new formats and the new creator tools is more interesting to us."

Palm Pictures is currently working on the *Directors Label*, a series of DVDs that highlights the work of prominent directors. "The first three," David said, "are Spike Jonze, Chris Cunningham, and Michel Gondry—all guys who have really pushed the boundaries with visual work. I think that prior to the DVD format, this type of project wouldn't have really made it. It's not the kind of thing where you just put a whole batch of videos on VHS. The approach is very non-linear with short films, commercials, music videos, and commentary by the artists and directors. It is incredibly entertaining, but you also learn a lot about the process by listening to what these people went through. DVD is the format that has enabled these types of projects to come to fruition."

Chris said, "We're really excited about the *Directors Label*. I think they are a sort of Exhibit A—the kind of thing that I believe will really happen with DVD. Basically, you are examining the creative force behind a whole lot of videos that you have seen. You are letting people in to look at the body of work of this person. So, there is a medium through which you can actually promote a director, which never really existed before."

Counting on DVD

Despite the extremely slow ramp-up in the marketplace, Chris Blackwell never doubted the ultimate success of the DVD format. He was convinced from the moment he first saw a movie released on Laserdisc.

“There is a film that I put out when I had Island Pictures called *Koyaanisqatsi*. The film was made by Godfrey Reggio. There were no actors in it and no dialogue or storyline—it was just images set to music by Philip Glass. When I saw *Koyaanisqatsi*, a light went off in my head, and we picked it up, released it, and it did quite well. It has become a bit of a classic in a way. From that moment on, I was just waiting for the time when there would be an audio-visual format that was going to gain acceptance with consumers and creators. Soon after Laserdisc came out, everyone started going digital. Laserdiscs hung in there until DVD finally came out, and when it finally arrived, it was something that I had been waiting for, for ages. I think that DVD hasn’t even started yet. At the moment, it is still used more as an ancillary for movies. But, DVD is an incredible platform for creative people.”

Nurturing Innovation

With a market becoming more accepting of the blending of different forms of media, Palm Pictures keeps looking for new ways to communicate with digital media. “We are always looking,” Chris said. “Some things originate from music, and others come from somebody just wanting to make a little film about something. I feel that DVD will create a new kind of business, somewhere between the record business and the film business. Between the two, because I think the costs will be much less. I think that all the stories and elements that you really want to see will be released and marketed on DVD. You will buy them just like you buy a CD. Just like you await the new CD of an artist, you will await the new DVD from this director guy who makes these films and you have no idea how on earth he ever thought them up, or thought about making something in that way.”

Future DVD Distribution

The new model for entertainment, Chris believes, will be something that sits in between where the film and music industries are right now. “I don’t think it is going to be competitive with the regular film business. There is just so much competition for somebody’s leisure currency. The fact that there are cinemas that are going to distribute digitally just means that this one person—this imaginary person that makes something totally unique

for \$2000—might reach a wide audience. You won't have to spend fortunes blowing it up and making prints and shipping them out; you will just have them distributed on DVD to theaters."

Palm Pictures continues to explore different means of title distribution. One method that appeals to them is the approach used by *Res* magazine. As David explained, "*Res* is an integrated DVD, print, and Web magazine. It uses a different model in that sponsors pay for the disc and the readers get the DVD for free. It is another type of distribution channel that is subscriber-driven. The magazine has two covers: one for subscribers, and one for newsstands. The DVDs are only included for subscribers because newsstands are reluctant to carry anything that is polybagged."

With this more free-format approach to the medium, the *Res* magazine staff can include content outside the realm of typical Hollywood DVDs, including short-form content, travel programming, music by innovative artists, and so on. The success of *1 Giant Leap* has helped to reduce some of the barriers to presenting unique content on the medium. Retail channels, however, still run into problems categorizing content that spans both music and video.

Chris commented, "I think retailers in general are embracing DVD, because it is something fresh and something new that they can introduce through their system, but I still haven't seen any of the retailers figure out how to merchandize it properly. If it is a music-driven DVD, often it is pushed to the DVD film buyer, rather than being integrated with the CDs to capture the music buyer. In a way, if something is a music-based DVD, you really want to have it in the music section, but because we put DVDs in a larger case, they don't fit properly in the racks in the music section."

Nonetheless, Chris sees growing acceptance for DVDs that present music rather than films. "Music-based DVDs are beginning to sell very well," he said, "and they are starting to be really embraced. So, I am sure that you will soon see much better merchandizing, because there will be so many more titles in the marketplace. When there are only two or three, it is not worth it for a retailer to set up a new system for merchandizing. Lots of companies are delving into their catalogs and/or making new DVDs. A lot of new acts, frankly, view themselves as being audio-visual acts. They want their releases out not just as audio CDs, but also as audio-visual DVDs. I think that by the fourth quarter of 2003, you will see much more visibility and much better merchandizing."

Aiming Outside the Mainstream

As Palm Pictures builds a following, the content development typically skirts the mainstream market. "I think when you start anything," Chris said, "you have to start eclectic, at least a little bit. You have to try to build some sort of a base. The mainstream market is very hard to reach, especially for an independent. To get whatever product you are working with in front of the consumer is very expensive."

David also thinks the future is bright for creative innovation, largely because of the availability of a new generation of easy-to-use video and DVD creation tools. "Finally," David said, "DVD has been around enough and has been established enough as a format. And, I think that these content creation tools have come far enough. When somebody gets an idea, they can go soup to nuts without a budget at home. They can shoot on their consumer DV cam. They can edit on Avid DV Express or Final Cut Pro. And, even as dumbed down as iDVD is, they can author their own DVD. All you need is a Mac or a PC with a DVD burner. So, even though you probably don't want to take that route for big commercial releases, this is really giving more people an opportunity to present more interesting ideas."

David continued, "If somebody walked in the door and said, 'I have an idea to make a movie, but I've never done any filmmaking in my life and I don't have any budget. Do you want to invest in my movie?', the average film company's reaction would be, 'No. You have no stars. You have never been to any kind of film school or done anything like this before.' But now people can actually go out and do it. Because they are approaching it without the stringent framework of what the average filmmaker has learned about how to make a movie—not only the process, but securing funding."

"Half the time," David said, "creating content is about finding the money to do it. Now, people have the freedom to really experiment and do things outside of the system. *1 Giant Leap* was done in our system, but I think Chris is probably the only guy in the business who would have enough vision to do something like this. Who else would be willing to say, 'Take these cameras and go around the world and make a record and a film.' And this with guys who had never made a film..."

David thinks that the evolution of digital media is going to get a lot more interesting. "The idea that people are starting to think of visual content in a non-linear fashion is really amazing," he said. "They have digested

music in a non-linear fashion for a long time. With the CD, people are so adjusted to that. But, historically, video has been something that you put in the player and you watched it from beginning to end. Now, people are beginning to open up to short form content and other more experimental content. I think the idea of the personalized viewing platform is powerful—the fact that people can watch a movie on their PC, and, soon, on their cell phone.”

The big challenge in the industry, David feels, is finding the right content for the right platforms. “When you think that a lot of people have huge TVs at home and go home and sit on the couch and watch the news—you don’t need a huge TV to watch the news. I have a cell phone that has video and the video quality is fine for watching the news, but you are probably not going to want to watch a big Hollywood blockbuster on your cell phone. You want to watch that on a real proper system and screen. Also, when someone is at home, they are not necessarily going to jump through short form compilations of entertainment. There are a lot of viewing environments where you only have 15 or 20 minutes—maybe you are on a plane or in a cab and you think, ‘Maybe I will watch a short film.’ The difficulty is getting the content out there and making people aware of it. The Internet is a powerful tool to help build awareness for projects. DVD is a portable, tactile, sexy format that actually sounds good as well as looks good. VHS never sounded very good. All of these things combined with all these possible viewing platforms are creating a visual revolution. For a lot of content, you might view it in a Starbucks, or you might view it in a cinema, or you might view it on your cell phone. The challenge is matching the right content with the right platform. This is all good for us, because things are opening up, creating much more demand for content. People nowadays are used to stimulus. They want to see audio-visual content everywhere.”

Palm Pictures is well positioned to take advantages of these shifts in media use and presentation and their latest projects are pushing the boundaries of the format even farther. Chris says simply, “We’re trying. We love DVD.”

Asked if he has any words of advice for aspiring DVD developers, his reply is equally concise, “I think that they are in the right place at the right time.”