Mediating New Technology: the Realization of a Digital Intellect.

By Paul Booth

Introduction

One of the more difficult aspects to deal with in the academic study of contemporary media is that technology often becomes out-dated or obsolete within years – or even months – which limits the effectiveness of critical study. Technology changes at an exponential rate, and perhaps nothing changes faster than home entertainment. In recent years there has been an explosion in the availability of consumer-priced electronics to make even the most techno-phobic user a home video pioneer. From TiVo to HDTV, from Blu-Ray to Plasma screens, the sheer influx of new technology creates a disarmingly high volume of "technology" to write about. And as rapidly as technology changes, so too does the type of "thinking" – the intellect – of media consumers change. New media technology lies at the forefront of a rapidly changing mindset in consumers. As Steven Johnson points out in *Everything Bad is Good for You*, new media has encouraged "more intellectually demanding" viewers – audience members whose intellects have been stimulated and advanced by the demands that new media places upon them (9). As part and parcel of new technology's ability to enact new ways of thinking, contemporary technology claims to offer a way for users to get closer to the text than previous technology allowed. As pointed out in *Nebula 4.3*, audiences are becoming more and more familiar with this type of interactive technology: Atkinson writes about how her film *Crossed Lines* which "presents a malleable form of digital fiction" that allows audiences to control not only what they view, but how they view it ("Crossed," 96). By introducing aspects of interactivity to a media product, and changing the nature of the encoding of media messages, media producers of new technology like the DVD declare that the "text" is becoming easier for the audience to grasp.

In this paper, I show how technology changes not just the demarcation between media reception and production, but also the fundamental change in thinking – a change I call "digital intellect." A digital intellect has two, paradoxical, meanings. First, it values and understands the impact that technology has on the reception of mediated entertainment. Second, as the term "digital" implies, it represents a fundamental binary opposition between audience and produce. Just as digital files read as either "1" or "0," a digital intellect reads media as determined by its

own production. Through an understanding of the DVD and its false interactivity, we can observe this new digital intellect.

The first meaning of "digital intellect" indicates a change in our cultural mindset. As Johnson says, the reception of new media is "enhancing our cognitive faculties" (12). The popularity of new media that has seen the creation of a digital intellect, has also exceeded current technological bounds. This mediation, however, is severely limited by current technological allowances. As I show, despite these changes in media, when new technology is mediated through an old medium, they cannot reach their full potential.

The second meaning of "digital intellect" is more determined, as we find that viewers are often faced with an "either/or" choice, which is advertised as interactivity. This paper concentrates on this latter view of digital intellect, to expound upon the former: while current scholarship in media and technology has seen a rapid evolution, viewers may not yet have caught up to the possibilities of their own "digital intellect." Because of this digital intellect that has formed in modern audiences, areas of scholarship that have been relatively static for years have seen a dynamism. This paper examines two closely related areas of media criticism and identifies how they have changed with a rise in digital intellect. By examining a specific text – in this case, a "choose-your-own-adventure" DVD of the 2006 film *Final Destination 3 (FD3)* – I show how new technology can stymie mediation. Digital intellect, however, forces old technology to work with new media. To see how this new intellect forms, I will first describe the relationship between technology and mediation. I then examine how the process of "encoding" and "decoding" functions, both in an Old Media context, as well as in a new media manner, to enable a digital intellect in the audience. Further, I examine how the issue of "encoding" and "decoding" is, at heart, an issue of genre. Finally, I explore the implications of interactive audiences and DVD technology. What I conclude, however, is that no matter how many interactive or user-centric decisions a DVD offers, the user is *not* given a truly interactive experience. The DVD of *FD3* presents itself as interactive, because audience members are given choices throughout the film to determine the paths the characters will travel. Yet these are false choices, a *false interactivity*. Because the medium has not yet caught up to the capabilities allowed through the DVD technology, and because modern audiences now perceive through a digital intellect, DVD technology has been subsumed by the televisual medium. Indeed, because audiences are already primed to be active and interpretive, new technology like the DVD

mirrors, rather than produces, an interactivity that is inherently present in the technology. Digital intellect is here realized in an audience with a strong mental sense of new media. My paper concludes that interactive technology based in Old Media (i.e., technology like the DVD that must be presented in a televisual format) can only give the impression of interactivity, and that, instead of new media needing new technology, in reality it is new technology that demands new mediation.

Digital Intellect, Media, and Technology

As stated above, by "digital intellect" I refer to the ways in which new media have created a different and novel way for audiences to interpret and respond to media. In the past, audience responses to media were analyzed in a variety of ways. In 1956 psychologists Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl formulated their "para-social interaction" theory of spectatorship. In this, they stressed that viewers of media can form social bonds to both characters and real individuals on television. Horton and Wohl determined that although "para-social interaction … is analogous to and in many ways resembles social interaction in ordinary primary groups," it is not "true" interaction between two people (229). In other words, viewers often form bonds with the personas they witness onscreen, and these bonds have a place in their life that resembles the place of bonds between real people. The characters on television are perceived as real and not fictionalized to these viewers, because their lives are so closely followed that they become as intimately known as real people. This one-sided social bond helped to show how audiences could appear active towards a media text.

However, as new technology has allowed audiences to further explore media, both as entertainment and as epicenter of identity construction[1], these audiences have developed a technological savvy that extends past media's former constraints. Specifically, as Steven Johnson states, popular media have been "growing increasingly complex over the past few decades" and have been "exercising our minds in powerful new ways" (13). He specifies the ways in which audiences interpret media create different ways of thinking, but insinuates that this is related to technology. For instance, he claims that television programming before the advent of the VCR tended to have more linear and less complex plots. Today, with television on DVD readily accessible to anyone with a Blockbuster card or a Netflix account, television shows

[1] See Sherry Turkle's work on identity and virtual reality.

have gotten more complex, with greater character development and storylines that stretch across seasons. In other words, technology has changed media, and with that change, the ways in which audiences interpret that technology has increased their digital intellect.

Nan Adams, as well, shows that knowledge can come in many forms. She writes that "technological advancements have allowed fluency across all cultures and at the same time have rapidly increased our ability for information gather, storage and retrieval," and that in this, "a new intelligence has begun to emerge" (94). This "digital intelligence" has emerged in "our postmodern pluralistic global culture" and increases "our ability to develop effective strategies" (93). This change, seen through the ways in which media and technology interact with an audience, affect not just the ways in which audiences *see* media, but also the way in which audiences *think*. New technology lies at the heart of this change.

In this paper, I shall use the term "media" to refer to anything that represents, or attempts to represent, something else and the term "technology" as the vessel through which this mediation occurs. In this case, new media would refer to digital media that has emerged in the past decade or so, and Old Technology would be the means by which Old Media would have been broadcast or sent out before digital technology. In other words, media is the presentation of content through a channel; technology, alternatively, is simply the mechanics of the production of that channel.

Media and Technology

Of course, it must be asked if media scholars can find use in studying "technology." I would like to posit that although the line between media and the technology that mediates may be slim, it is an important one. Brian Winston, for one, articulates the blurring of this line in the introduction to his history of communication technology: he writes that there is a "historical pattern of change and development in communication" and that it resides with a change in the mediation of "technology" (3). Further, McLuhan famously quoted that the "medium is the message," linking, at least for him, the communicative abilities of a single medium and the meaning of the output from that medium (7). Yet, does this mediation change with different technology? For each medium, different communicative aspects of the mediation do, in fact, occur, and these can be linked to the technology of mediation. For example, although both VHS tapes and DVDs are viewed through a technological device (VCR, DVD-player) on a

technological device (television), the interpreted mediation of both is significantly different. The inherent properties of the *technology* foster a different viewing habit in the audience. Because DVDs can be paused at exact frames, flipped from chapter to chapter, scanned at different speeds, stopped and started precisely, and even hyperlinked from primary feature to secondary feature and back again, the experience of watching a DVD is different from watching a VHS tape, where the basic mechanics of stop, start, pause, fast-forward and rewind encompass the majority of the options. The technology of the DVD changes the way that we watch mediated and recorded entertainment on television, and helps foster differences between the receptions of the mediated text.

Yet, in many ways, the current use of the DVD continues to be mired by the mediated style of traditional electronic media, like television. As Atkinson writes, "Instead of harnessing the capabilities of the medium whereby new genres of interactive storytelling could be conceived, what we are witnessing is the effect characteristic of Remediation, whereby old media is recycled, reformatted and delivered through a different channel" ("Versatility," 23). Atkinson here references Bolter and Grusin's formulation of "Remediation," the powerful notion that all media simply reuse the material from previous media. Key to the production of the DVD, however, is that producers make use of the *notion* of interactivity – a feature *not* remediated from previous media – and thereby highlight the digital intellect of the viewership. Viewers, aware of the *capabilities* of a medium, become enamored with its possibilities.

One way of highlighting the interactive components of the DVD is in the extra-textual features. For example, the relationship authors Brookey and Westerfelhaus had with the DVD text of *Fight Club* was substantially different than what would have occurred on VHS. For Brookey and Westerfelhaus, the DVD of *Fight Club* offered rich secondary sources of information, including background featurettes and commentaries that "offered fresh and valuable insights" on the film (26). With an inherent comparison between the primary and secondary texts, because both are packaged in the same location, the DVD as a whole "can be employed to discourage and discount some interpretations while encouraging others" (Brookey and Westerfelhaus, 39). Thus, while comparing the various extra-textual features, including the commentary and the featurettes to the film, the researchers found that the DVD of *Fight Club* demonstrated an underlying homophobic attitude of the film, through a playful ironic distancing from the overt masculinity contained within the film text itself. It is not that the text of *film* did,

but that the text of the *DVD* – the technology, in other words – did. The VHS copy of this would not have had the same effect, not just because the text is presented differently, but also because the technology does not have the same capabilities and could not allow it. This same difference can be seen in other examples of different technology mixing in similar media: take, for example, the track-skipping capabilities of the digital CD versus the more linear analog tape. As CDs became more popular, the concept of the "album" changed. No longer did albums need to be linear arrangements of songs; CDs led to a change in the audience's reception and interpretation of audio texts.

But how does the text of the DVD differ from other media texts? A DVD is a unique combination of many different contents: combined into one larger package, the primary text of the film or television show is usually packaged with extra features like deleted scenes, commentaries or the like. Thus, the DVD text is not one particular media text, but rather the *combination* of all the secondary texts as well. It is a hypermediated, user-controlled technology that allows for a greater amalgam of mediation (cf. Atkinson, "Crossing"). The abilities new technology open up clear the way for media scholars to make new connections between texts and to produce media scholarship that examines the inherent messages of different media.

(Digital) Encoding/Decoding

One of the most interesting aspects of DVD technology is the impact that it has had on audience participation with a filmic text. Although he writes before the advent of DVDs, Stuart Hall articulates how different interpretations of texts can exist because of the participation of the audience. *Producers* of media and *receivers* of media can mis-communicate when the ideas from the producers are encoded differently from how the same signals are decoded by the audience. Different viewers will decode the same production encoding in different ways. As Hall articulates, for one of the decoding positions taken by the audience, "it is possible for a viewer … to decode the message in a globally contrary way" (172). Instead of arguing that the message is *this* or *that*, viewers take their own readings and retool them for their own use. In other words, current viewers of media with their digital intellect do not now passively receive information from the producers of media; they instead actively work to shape and mold the media into their own interpretations. With this feedback on the media text, producers shape their encoding methods to more align with what media audiences decode. Producers often "are concerned that

the audience has failed to take the meaning as they … intended," and actively work to court viewers through understandable encoding (Hall, 170). The media text thus becomes the intermediary in a conversation between the producers and the receivers, and functions as a necessary channel to aid in a dynamic communication.

Hall writes about the triangular relationship between producers, audiences, and media in general. John Fiske, however, is more specific to television as a medium when he writes about the decoding of messages. For example, he underlines a number of common encoded messages in a television program, *Hart to Hart*, which all work to produce the universal decoding of encoded messages on a show. Indeed, all revolve around the efforts put forth by audience to engage in new readings of the show and of the characters. He writes, "the technical codes of television can be precisely identified and analyzed" and that the producers "give meaning to what is being photographed" for the television (135). We know that the bad guys are bad guys because they wear black; the encoding of the hue "black" as a signifier of "evil" is a common code across media. The active audience in this case not only decodes the significant themes and icons that the show's producers put in the show, they also *extend* this knowledge into *other* media texts: it's not just that any particular decoding functions on a specific show – it is that the decoding works on a *variety* of texts. Importantly, however, this knowledge exists through repetitive reception: the more one watches, the more one becomes used to the codes. In sum, both Hall and Fiske make a point of establishing within a basic framework how active audiences emerge and how media texts function, yet also establish that this activity remains determined by the production.

Audiences with digital intellect work differently at decoding than did audiences with an analogic intellectualism of the past. It is not just a change in specific audiences, however, but rather a change in culture. This "change in … culture" is caused by "digital technology," according to Adams (96). Through "our ability to interact with this emerging digital environment," audiences have become more active and more able to decode the messages of producers (96). In fact, an audience's ability to decode these messages often overtakes the producers' ability to encode: writers of fan fiction often take the encoding of producers and subvert it for their own personal use. In his analysis of amateur music videos created through footage "poached" from television shows like *Star Trek*, Henry Jenkins writes that "fan viewers are often totally disinterested in the identity of the original singer(s) but are prepared to see the

musical performances as an expression of the thoughts, feelings, desires, and fantasies of the fictional character(s)" (235). These early fans delineate the edges of a digital intellect.

Fiske's work with television audiences does not limit itself to decoding of elements, however. In the introduction to the book *Reading Television*, John Hartley writes that "broadcast television" is "a principle mechanism by which a culture could communicate with its collective self": in other words, TV as a medium facilitates a reciprocal relationship between producers and receivers (Hartley, xvi). Fiske and Hartley later detail a semiotic analysis of television when they articulate the Codes of Television. As they define it, a code is "a 'vertical' *set* of signs … which may be *combined* according to certain 'horizontal' *rules*" (41, emphasis in original). In other words, the set of signs that are used to decode television texts exist in a relationship with the production encoding of the rules under which those codes exist. A "code depends upon the agreement of its users," and thus affects the reception of the media (41).

In this way, not only do audiences participate in the construction of televisual texts, but the technological texts themselves do as well. When one media text is encoded in a certain way, and then decoded, and that *same* decoding is used on a different text, it is as if that first text has influenced the reading of the second in a profound manner. Audiences use texts just as producers use audiences – through technology. The interaction of an audience and a text, through the encoding/decoding model set up by Hall and elaborated upon by Fiske, demonstrates the effusive power of media technology.

The influence of DVD technology, however, has seen the *combination* of texts taking precedence over the experience of a singular text. When primary media texts (films) are combined with secondary media texts (extra-texts), the combination becomes greater than the sum of its parts. The audience views the film not as pure cinema, but as part of a larger product. The mechanisms for film production, distribution, and marketing, are visible on the DVD itself – making the media text more than simply the film. It is the film process itself. DVDs have made film viewers savvier, more knowledgeable, and more influential as an audience. They have, in other words, contributed to a digital intellect.

With a text that is, in itself, combinatory, the users can complement the interactive components of the technology. Much like producers of television programs encode into the media text certain characteristics that are generically decoded by the audience, so too do producers of DVDs encode into the text of the DVD certain aspects of the technology that are

decoded by the audience. For example, just as Fiske points out that something as innocuous as "make-up" in television shows can affect the "merging of ideological codes," so too can producers of DVDs encode seemingly innocuous messages into the text of the DVD (139). One common encoding on DVDs is the presence of interactive menu screens that display some important moment from the film: in the DVD for David Fincher's *Se7en*, for instance, the menu screens flash and screech in the same manner as does the movie when the killer's notebooks are found. The producers of DVDs encode meaning into these screens. Audiences decode these as elementary aspects of the text.

Thus, although Hall hypothesized the encoding/decoding model within the model of old media, like television and film, the implications for new media, like the internet, are far-reaching. Decoders of new media have been inundated with new material – and a new method of reception – that has changed the way audiences think. Digital audiences, more than any other type of audience, have the ability to *alter* the original text, to "encode" their own messages into them, and become producers in their own right. George Landow calls this "wreaderly," meaning that the demarcation between "writer" and "reader" has changed (Landow, 14). An example of this is the wiki: an online device that allows for instantaneous interaction between people and text. One can post text, and any other person can seamlessly edit that text. As Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner write, wikis exist as texts "*in process*, with viewers able to trace and investigate how the [digital] archive has grown over time, which users have made changes, and what exactly they have contributed" (718). Digital copies of media texts are exact simulations: they allow for loss-free transfer. Any would-be wreader thus can make changes that are just as effective as they are affective. These wreaders have the ability to *change* the primary text itself. In effect, they alter the relationship between the style of the text and the technological substance of the genre.

(Digital) Genre: Innovation/Convention

In fact, genre is perhaps one of the most significant factors involved with understanding digital intellect. Genre theory, the examination of conventional elements that constitute a recognized format, produces a tension in the audience between expectation and innovation. When elements are recognized as generic, they are automatically filed as encoded elements of a mediated text. However, when they are new or not recognized, they must be parsed to be understood and categorized. This is a central tenant of digital intellect. Genre contrasts

convention and innovation to affect both the role of the producer and the role of the audience member. Audiences understand genre by decoding the specific elements put there by the producers that make it understandable. It is, in other words, a reciprocal arrangement.

For this effect, producers encode new elements into conventional genre that innovate and change what audiences think the genre can be. The classic example of genre evolution is the Western: for decades the genre effects of the Western remained consistent. Later, however, the genre evolved from the early days of cinema where it was a generally racist and violent exaltation of Manifest Destiny to more modern versions of Westerns, which see the genre as a critique of the patriarchal expansion of the pre-Civil War era. Modern westerns see a "modest revival" with a "successful attempt to remodel the genre" (Buscombe, 293).

But to define what elements make up a genre is, perhaps, a confusing proposition to ask, as Rick Altman writes in his seminal article "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre." According to Altman, the trouble with genre studies has been that it has either focused on genre as a semantic practice, where scholars focus on "the genre's building blocks" like iconography, locations, characters, traits, and the like; or on a syntactic practice, which organizes genre based on "the structures into which they are arranged," like the thematic elements that situate the *meaning* of a genre in a specific order (1984, 10). In other words, a semantic approach to genre studies is inclusive and allows many films to be part of a genre. A syntactic approach to genre studies is more exclusive and limits the types of films that are included in a general canon. Altman eventually calls for a method of genre studies that combines both semantic and syntactic through audience interpretation: a "spectator response" he writes, is "heavily conditioned by the choice of semantic elements and atmosphere because a given semantics used in a specific cultural situation will recall to an interpretive community the particular syntax with which that semantics has traditionally been associated in other texts" (1984, 17). His later book calls this spectator response a "pragmatic" view of genre (1999). The pragmatics of a genre indicates a change in the *use* of the genre. The pragmatic approach argues, "every text has multiple users," describes, "why different users develop different readings," "theorizes the relationship between users," and "considers the effect of multiple conflicting uses" (1999, 214). In effect, he argues that genre is not just constructed from *textual elements* and from *ideological meanings*, but also from *diverse uses*.

The audience, thus, is the bridge between the dual elements of genre. What is important to note, however, is that, because of the time period in which he wrote, Altman does not deal with the advent of new media to the extent that film studies does today. The very notion of "genre" has changed with new technology, and the ever-expansive definitional elements that constitute the meaning of the term have altered because of new media.

As example of this, audiences with a digital intellect bridge these dual elements and can often play with the effect genre can have. Audiences can reinterpret the genre of a film through the re-editing of an online film trailer. These audiences, through their digital intellect, have the ability to reconceptualize the basic structure that lies at the heart of genre. The realm of the digital offers the amateur film editor the chance to interact more fully with the primary filmic text: by changing the text itself, the user becomes a creator of a completely *new* object. The audience member changes the text itself, using the "enchanc[ed] cognative facilities" that Johnson indicates emerge through audience interaction with new media (12).

Altman later conceptualizes the relationship that genre and audience as a "necessary" one (1996, 279). Indeed, the film industry depends on the relationship between a maintained, generically trained audience and the media text itself. He recognizes a tension between the "actualization" of generic tenants and the "failure to respect those norms" (1996, 280). Whenever a genre film introduces a new element, for example, audiences must negotiate in themselves a tension between adapting their generic expectations to the new film type, or rejecting the film for being too different from what is conventional.

However, one must be able to work with syntactics, semantics, *and* pragmatics to allow audiences to realize their digital intellect. In fact, as Fiske and Hartley point out in *Reading Television*, the codes of television function in a generic way: the signs that make up the codes "within a single medium … will vary according to the context or genre" (36). The point here is not that genre functions in different manners, but that in either case, the audience focuses the interpretation. Genre does not function without the input of the audience just as an audience's goal in watching a media text can be the decoding of codes. To be more specific, if a producer wants the audience to understand a text in a particular way, he or she must use tools that an audience understands, like genre, but because the audience's role in the production of the tools necessary for understanding genre has changed, that has necessitated a change in the role of genre in general. Technology has mediated that change, but that mediation may not be enough.

The Text: The DVD of *Final Destination 3*

With an understanding that digital intellect has changed how viewers examine media and technology, we can examine the relationship that the DVD of *FD3* has with its audience and see how the DVD offers what appears to be an interactive experience. What we find, however, is that the "interactivity" promised by *FD3* is nothing other than *false interactivity*. The choices offered are determined beforehand by the producers of the DVD. Yet, in presenting these options, the producers are playing on the digital intellect of the viewer: only audiences that are already attuned to the interactive capabilities of DVD technology can become part of the "Choose-your-own-adventure" mentality. *FD3* has previously been analyzed, most notably by Atkinson ("Versatility"). In her article, she describes the limited interactivity of the *FD3* DVD: "we are not actually able to 'change the characters fates'" ("Versatility," 30). Indeed, for Atkinson, *FD3* serves not as an illustration of the pinnacle of interactive achievement, but rather as a model for what *might* be possible with *future* technology: the Blu Ray player. As she says, "just as the invention of television led to the invention of the different genres of television programming and the multi-camera studio, so too should the technology of DVD bring with it a proliferation of new techniques of interactive storytelling" ("Versatility," 34).

Yet, instead of concentrating on what is most interesting about what *might* happen, it also behooves us to examine the nature of what brought us to this point in our culture: interactivity, even the false interactivity of the *FD3* DVD, has become a necessary and important feature for new technology. DVDs are hyped as a technology that allows the audience to experience the film in a new way. Producers of DVDs are thus concentrating on a new form of viewer: an audience with a digital intellect. Because of the hyper-mediated environment of the DVD, the viewer can decide in what order to watch things, in which language and with which special features highlighted. If audiences have become more active in the decoding/encoding process, then the relationship between genre convention and innovation changes. Adams shows that "intellectual skills have begun to depend upon our ability to interact in a digital environment" using "technology [as] a tool" (96). However, technology is more than a tool; technology is, instead, an indication of digital intellect. By attempting to harness new properties of new media – hypermediation and interactivity – DVDs like the one for *FD3* present a new way of watching films. However, because the presentation is still, inherently, in an *old medium* (television or

film), the technological constraints necessarily limit the new properties. When this happens, these properties become less innovative, and more conventional – and the convention is that of false interactivity.

Perhaps a definition here would help articulate what I mean by "false interactivity." I use the term "interactivity" to refer to the relationship between a new media text and the audience: when the audience can actively change what occurs in the text, and the text can reflect those changes. For example, a video game is often cited as interactive because the player can "interact" with the text and affect how the game plays, what levels are achieved, and what environments are explored. In reality, the exploration of the game is an example of what I mean by "false interactivity," for the interaction happens solely in the mind of the player: the video game text has already been laid out and the environment already programmed, and the player has only the options that have been put in the game's code from which to choose. A medium with false interactivity is one in which the user consciously and willingly suspends her disbelief and enters into a witting contract with the medium to pretend that she has choice. It is granting control to a medium that, in reality, doesn't have any. Players selflessly and willingly giving up control for the sake of seeming like one has more control (Booth). However, because players *feel* as though they are exploring *new* territory, the game becomes a much more interactive experience only *for the individual players*. False interactivity is the hallmark of the relationship between technology and mediation, especially when the development of the media outpaces that of the technology.

Thus, at the heart of the concept of interactivity lies the issue of audience participation. And for the audience's participation, the DVD presents what is seen as an effective technology. As an exemplar of the false interactivity of the DVD, the DVD of *Final Destination 3 (FD3)* provides a relevant focus of analysis. The third film in the *Final Destination* trilogy, *FD3* continues in the teen horror milieu of the first two films: a small group of beautiful teenagers manage to narrowly escape death thanks to the intuition of the protagonist. The specter of Death, however, is unsatisfied, and thus kills each individual in the group, in the order that he or she would have died had they not escaped. Specifically for this third film, the teenagers avoid Death by exiting a roller coaster moments before it crashes. Each character that gets off the coaster is eventually killed, each in a spectacularly gruesome and bloody way.

What is of particular interest in this DVD is that the producers encoded what they term an "interactive" aspect to it. Viewers of the DVD are given the opportunity to take advantage of DVD technology and interact with the text itself. Specifically, moments before each character's death scene the film pauses and a title card appears that asks you, the audience member, to choose between two choices. Picking one of the options sends you down a different fork in the convoluted plot: sometimes the character does not die after all, sometimes they die in a different manner, or sometimes something completely unexpected happens. You do not know which choice will lead down which path; however, you do know that one choice will lead to what happened in the theatrical run of the film, while one choice will lead to something "new." What perhaps is most textually rich about this DVD, however, is that any new scenes added for the interaction of the viewer must have been planned, written, shot, edited and produced deliberately for this DVD presentation. However, none of these scenes would have, at the time of filming, furthered the narrative. The encoding of the DVD takes these new scenes and incorporates them into the larger technological text of the film. In this way, the DVD is not just a new way of watching the film, it becomes a new text altogether.

Thus, a tension exists for viewers of this DVD text. Should viewers attempt to mirror the plot of the film as it was shown in the movie theatre, where interactivity is slighter, or should they try different endings? Because the outcome of each decision is unknown when the decision is being made, viewers can only understand their determinations in hindsight. Interestingly, however, there is, despite the pretense of interactivity, a thread of decoding throughout the DVD. If the viewer does *not* choose the path that occurred in the theatrical run of the film, the film itself might end after the new scene. As shown in Atkinson, it is possible to watch the entire film in 20 minutes, as one choice may allow the theatrical version to be shown, or a different version in which the protagonist dies early in the film and the film ends ("Versatility," 39). The point is, there is no way for the viewer to know, beforehand, which way the DVD should go, which not only presents a new generic experience, but also increases the decoding the viewer must do.

When the disc for *FD3* is first put in the DVD player, the viewer is introduced to the concept of the interactivity when the screen reads "please select a version to view: Theatrical Version or Choose the Fate! You're in Control. Cheat death by changing the movie and the destiny of the characters" (*FD3*). When chosen, this second option immediately shifts to a new menu control:

> Would you save innocent strangers from their Final Destination? At several key points you will be asked to make a decision with Mortal Consequences. What would you do? Select heads, or perhaps tails? Use your remote to select an option, then choose their fate. But fate is an impatient mistress, dear friend, and if a decision is not made quickly, she will choose for you (*FD3*).

As the announcer intones these words as they flash upon the screen, the viewer is given the choice to decide the action of the film. In other words, it is not that the entire film is hyper-mediated, but rather that at a crucial few points, the audience can pick a direction in an expanding flow-chart of options.

Even within this menu option, the viewer is shown the DVD producer's encoding process, and is encouraged to actively decode the message in a particular way. The encoding message is inherent within the option itself: that there are two versions (a "theatrical" and a "Choose the Fate!"), and that in one, the audience is in control and that in the other, it is the "director's" decision. This encoding provides the audience with a decisive binary opposition between their way and the director's way of viewing the film. Yet, this remains a sense of false interactivity.

Further, the encoding/decoding effects continue throughout the "Choose the Fate!" option on the DVD. The first time the viewer is given the choice to decide the fate for the characters, it is at a crucial coin toss: when the protagonist's boyfriend flips the coin in the air, should it land heads or tails? The decision as to the fate of the characters supposedly rests in the audience's use of the remote control. However, whichever choice the viewer picks, the resulting film proceeds in the same manner. There are only two differences: the first is that a character calls the coin in the air depending on which choice the viewer picked, an audio dub that would have been simple to enact on the DVD, and the second is that what *would* have been a dream sequence in the theatrical version of the film ends up being what actually happened to the characters in the film world.

In fact, picking the "tails" option will end the movie after 20 minutes. Instead of being "in control" of the characters' fates, the user instead is faced with the proposition that their choice was "wrong" from the standard generic standpoint of the movie. This reinforces new media as a genre while negating it as a technology. The film itself is not what the user would have expected, and their choice forms the basis for their incorrect decoding of the producer's encoding of the DVD. Ironically, what is important to note here is that the producers of this

DVD are, in fact, attempting to create a more interactive media presentation for an audiences attuned to that type of digital presentation.

This encoding helps to shape a generic change for the audience in their anticipation of the film. Instead of expecting to find a teenage slasher/gory horror film, they now expect to find a new media product. There has been, in effect, a change in what genre *is*. Instead of focusing on the properties of a categorization of film, the audience now focuses on the categorization of the properties of a technology. New media, and the DVD specifically, becomes a genre: a product of the audience's own devising. And this product becomes more than a horror movie, more than a teenage slasher film. Because this media product seems to be produced from somewhere between the makers of the film and the audience, the audience members that participate in the "Choose the Fate!" option feel as if this genre is more defined and refined by them than others can be.

Thus, although the producers of the DVD have attempted to create a new media paradigm of audience interaction, because the audience has *already* learned to be active through the decoding of messages, and through their reception and participation in genre, the impetus for the audience members to experience the interaction of the DVD is lessened. It takes new technology for a new media product to demonstrate new media principles. This doesn't occur in the DVD because the presentation of that media is through an old media technology. By virtue of its own inherent properties, the TV is "old," and all the "desires and fears it once aroused as the latest, most popular, all singing, all dancing attraction" have been "transferred to new media such as the Internet" (Hartley, xvii). New media requires new technology to truly embrace the inherent differences between the paradigms.

Conclusion

If we look at *FD3* as an exemplar text of what possibilities exist for DVD technology, we can see a lot of promise. As Atkinson establishes:

> The future of advanced DVD production technology is a future in which narrative interactions will be previsualized within the film production process. The generation of suitable interactive content will be factored into both the preproduction planning stages and the film production process, and will in turn affect the ways in which we engage with the content, shifting both user consumption and expectation exponentially ("Versatility," 34).

The future of home entertainment may yet be interactive; as I have shown, however, it is not there yet. We as an audience take comfort in knowing that we can have a role to play in media, if we want it. And yet, what appears to happen when these new technologies are mediated through old technologies is that they fall short of what is expected. It is not interaction, because it has already been preplanned. When the "wrong" choice of *FD3* ends the film, the audience cannot help but feel that there is a "right" choice – the theatrical choice. Given this, the DVD for *FD3* still asserts the director as the ultimate auteur of the film. If the director's version is seen as the "correct" one, then any audience member who chooses the "Choose the Fate!" option on the film only tries to mirror what the director intended. The choice for the film is not a choice at all, but rather a connect-the-dots: connecting the scenes to make the director's coherent picture. A digital intellect strives for more.

The DVD for *FD3* is marketed as an interactive experience, but in reality there is nothing but false interactivity. This, however, is not the fault of the producers of the DVD, but of the technology. Television cannot offer the sort of intertextual, interactive entertainment possibilities that the internet can, and as such is necessarily limited by its own technological development. Perhaps what future mediation of film will entail will be the presence of a digital environment that allows for true interactivity: a Wiki-movie, for instance. Although the process by which this encoding/decoding is far beyond the scope of this paper to analyze, it is not too much to imagine that audience participation will only increase as the availability of digital technology does. Digital intellect, as Adams states, "is emerging" (96). It is not yet fully formed. However, for now, the DVD is a technology ahead of its medium.

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