



When the movie theater fits in your hand

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By Gloria Goodale,

LOS ANGELES — From the dawn of modern movies, the big screen has provided filmmakers with the canvas they've needed to create epic, visionary tales set against large, sweeping landscapes — think D.W. Griffith or Peter Jackson. But in the new digital era, the cinematic experience no longer dominates popular entertainment, even though it is still one of its primary drivers.

Increasingly, audiences are using their visual media to fit their lifestyles, whether at home or on the move, sacrificing screen size for the ease of access and portability. Computers, cellphones, Game Boys, even grocery checkout screens are all being pressed into service as entertainment venues. But, while quality content is still king, one size doesn't fit all. (Just try watching *Star Wars* in the palm of your hand — can you even find Yoda?) As the novelty of watching anything and everything on smaller devices wears off, the media revolution is spurring filmmakers, studios, and viewers alike to ask themselves what role screen size plays in delivering the best value for the entertainment dollar. Answer: Each size requires, and is increasingly inspiring, uniquely tailored material.

The challenge is inspiring Hollywood, where A-listers such as small-screen producer Steven Bochco (*NYPD Blue*, *Hill Street Blues*) and film star Morgan Freeman have both recently announced partnerships to create material for new media (cellphones and websites). New short-form narratives from Mr. Bochco are scheduled to appear on the Metacafe website as early as January.

Expect more of the same from the creative community, says Frank Chindamo, president and chief creative officer of FunLittleMovies.com, which is based in Burbank, Calif. Every technological leap has been matched by a new form of storytelling, he adds. Cinema was the first form of filmed entertainment. Then TV arrived and that meant that the TV show had to be invented, observes Mr. Chindamo. This new, more intimate form was a hybrid of theater, vaudeville, music, and radio. "Now there are whole new forms of entertainment on the Internet and mobiles and they're still figuring that out," he adds.

Determining the right kind of entertainment for a given screen size is like assessing real estate, says Michael Krupat, vice president, Television Group for City Lights Media Group. It's all about location. Where and when is the content being watched?

Mr. Krupat's firm creates content for virtually every platform, from theatrical films to television, computers to cellphones. "We have to be very careful," he says. "We have to think about size because each screen requires that you do things differently."

He points to his firm's recent mobile phone series, *Dingo Ate My Video*, starring puppet versions of a dingo and a baby. "We had three inches to work with, so we couldn't have

too much detail or movement," he says. "If you start doing more, like with three or four characters, then you begin to lose detail."

Creating content for so many different screen sizes is not as simple as reducing the amount of detail or size of the landscape. "Screen size matters," says DP Venkatesh, CEO of mPortal. "But not just because there are optimal sizes for different stories. You have different sizes because there are different uses."

Comedy tends to work well on small screens, says Chindamo. Viewers can consume it in short bites, with a low attention span, perfect for highly mobile, distracted consumers waiting in a bank line or even at a red light. "When size goes down, what comes up is accessibility. What we have also found is that as size goes down, so does attention," adds Chindamo.

As screen options multiply, even filmmakers committed to the big-screen experience are finding they must play to their strengths to survive. The eight-story high IMAX screen came onto the scene in 1973. It remained a venue for nature and educational films until five years ago when the company decided to capitalize on its size and began partnering with Hollywood to present feature films. Tom Hanks retooled *Apollo 13* for the big screen, as did Robert Zemeckis with *The Polar Express*. Now audiences can see current films such as this season's hit, *Happy Feet*, on a towering screen, some 4,500 times the size of an average TV screen.

IMAX executives are betting that the IMAX format can lure otherwise reluctant moviegoers with what they're calling its "cool factor." "We only like to work with visionary filmmakers who take us to places we'd like to go but can't get to easily, like the moon or the Batcave or Hogwarts," says Greg Foster, president of IMAX Filmed Entertainment.

He points to the roller-coaster effects that Zemeckis inserted into the IMAX version of *The Polar Express* as just one of the many unique assets IMAX can offer. "We're bringing in the incremental customers," says Mr. Foster. "These are people who are specifically seeking out the IMAX experience, which in turn drives box office and home-video rentals."

Families at a recent midday screening of *Happy Feet* at Los Angeles's Universal Plaza appear to agree. "We came because IMAX allows you to feel like you're really in the movie," says John Winters, who came with his wife and 2-year-old son. Screen size is critical, he says, adding that a movie made just for IMAX is unique. "You can't get that anywhere else. We paid \$14 to get it, but it was worth it."

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