

LIFE

16

TUESDAY, JULY 27, 2010



A replica motorcycle from Disney's yet-to-be released movie *Tron: Legacy* is displayed during Comic-Con in San Diego on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Marketing 'Tron: Legacy' brings the hardest sell yet

Six months before its release, signs indicate that Disney's high-gear marketing campaign has already succeeded in turning the sequel to the 1982 movie into a cultural event

BY BROOKS BARNES
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SAN DIEGO

The futuristic movie *Tron: Legacy* is not just pushing the boundaries of special effects. It is redefining the Hollywood hard sell.

By the time the movie arrives in US theaters on Dec. 17, Walt Disney Studios will have spent three and a half years priming the audience pump. The most recent push came last week at Comic-Con International, the annual pop culture convention in San Diego. For the third year in a row, Disney teased fans with exclusive *Tron: Legacy* footage. No other movie has guest-starred here so often.

"We're going to show you five minutes of the movie every year for 20 years," the comedian Patton Oswalt said as he introduced a third trailer for the film to about 6,500 people on Thursday.

The selling and selling (and selling) of *Tron: Legacy* is the Hollywood marketing machine in its highest gear yet. Marketing campaigns for what the industry calls "tent-pole" movies — big budget, big risk, big potential payoff — have traditionally started about a year before their release in theaters. Increasingly, that is scarcely enough time.

With DVRs undermining the No. 1 tool for promoting movies — television commercials — studios are trying to create Internet brush fires on behalf of their coming releases. One variant is a controlled burn: carefully doling out bits of information over months and years.

Lead time also makes a big difference when it comes to breaking through the advertising clutter and competing entertainment options. In a post-*Avatar* world, the goal at the multiplex is to make movies feel like must-attend events; longer campaigns can help achieve that.

At the same time, the risk for motion picture studios is bigger than ever. Special effects movies like *Tron: Legacy* can easily cost more than US\$350 million to develop, produce and market. A studio does not want to release a behemoth like that without a megawatt campaign.

It is not just the movie business that is experimenting with a longer selling cycle. Television, too, is seeing a new model emerge. That the comedic musical *Glee* was the No.

1 show of the 2009 to 2010 season in the US was no accident. Yes, the execution of the show mattered. But so did the marketing muscle that Fox put behind it.

Most new shows get eight weeks of promotion. Fox gave *Glee* more than a year's worth. The network started to push the show in February for the May premiere of a single episode, then spent the summer fanning the sparks — screening the pilot at summer camps, streaming it on Fox.com and blanketing beaches and concerts with fliers.

"We worked those kids like crazy over that summer," said Joe Earley, Fox's president for marketing, in reference to the *Glee* cast. "As reach is becoming more challenging, you need more frequency."

Glee returned for a short run in September. But Earley kept up the promotional pressure until a second batch of episodes arrived in January.

Comic-Con, which ended Sunday, is important for entertainment companies because it is a prime spot to start one of those Internet fires, said Sean Bailey, Disney's president for production. "People look to Comic-Con to guide their moviegoing decisions for the rest of the year," Bailey said. "It's a barometer of what's cool."

The original *Tron*, released in 1982 and loaded with computer-generated effects, was a hit with the young male crowd, who quickly turned a related arcade game into a success. But the

movie failed to attract a wide audience. The story — a man is pulled inside a video game and is forced to play space-age gladiator games — turned off mainstream moviegoers.

"It went beyond suburbia's ability to deal with it at the time," said Steven Lisberger, who directed and wrote *Tron*.

Disney cannot afford to have *Tron: Legacy* play out in similar fashion, which is one reason it is spending so much time trying to position the film in the marketplace. "We really want to open it up — the message is that this is a film that everyone will find cool and contemporary and relevant," Bailey said.

The studio first decided to "activate" core fans, Bailey said. Disney unveiled a *Tron: Legacy* teaser trailer at Comic-Con in July 2008. Over the next year, Disney released more video, introduced an ambitious online game and fed bloggers a steady drip of news.

In July last year at Comic-Con, Disney introduced a walk-through experience (lots of vintage arcade games) and a Twitter-enabled scavenger hunt through the streets of downtown San Diego. A second *Tron: Legacy* trailer appeared with *Alice in Wonderland* in March.

Last week, the studio built an even more elaborate walk-through experience that re-created sets from the movie and attracted more than 7,000 visitors over three days. Disney also released a third trailer. On the convention floor, Disney gave people a peek at the coming

merchandising storm: talking action figures with digitally projected faces, iPod accessories, Adidas sneakers inspired by *Tron: Legacy*, and clothing.

With the core audience on board — the online game now has about 4.5 million active users — Disney is turning its attention to the people who make the difference between a hit and a blockbuster: mothers, children and non-technophiles.

The monorail at Walt Disney World got a *Tron: Legacy* makeover. The Disney XD cable channel will present an animated miniseries in the fall (followed by a regular series, to be announced). Most important, Bailey and his studio colleagues are working to hammer home the message that *Tron: Legacy* is more than a chase through a virtual world.

"It's very focused on a father-son story," Bailey said. Jeff Bridges reprises his role from *Tron* as a talented video game programmer; Garrett Hedlund plays his son.

Tron: Legacy, filmed using advanced 3-D cameras, will inevitably be compared with *Avatar*, which opened on a similar date last year and sold more than US\$2.7 billion in tickets at the global box office. That is perhaps an unfair bar to set.

But six months before release, there are signs that Disney is succeeding at turning its movie into a cultural event.

Without Disney's prodding, Donatella Versace echoed the movie's aesthetic — sleek black uniforms, white and blue glowing light — in a recent menswear show in Milan. Rihanna, Katy Perry and Lady Gaga have all sported *Tron*-esque fashions. Audi has designed a concept car openly inspired by the look of the vehicles in the movie. The music group the Black Eyed Peas featured a flying "lightcycle" — *Tron*-speak for a motorcycle — on its recent concert tour.

"If this thing isn't a hit," said John Juarez, a Comic-Con attendee, "somebody at Disney is going to have a lot of explaining to do."

The cast of *Tron Legacy*, from right, Bruce Boxleitner, Jeff Bridges, Garrett Hedlund, Olivia Wilde and Michael Sheen, pose for a picture at Comic-Con in San Diego last Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

[MEDIA]

Jezebel — the Web site that roared

A recent spat over a TV show's hiring policies could lead to blog requests being taken more seriously

BY SARAH HUGHES
THE GUARDIAN, NEW YORK

Talked about on numerous blogs and Web sites, covered by the *New York Times*, attacked by *The Daily Show* and attracting upwards of 38m global page views a month, the women's Web site Jezebel has clearly come of age.

It also needs to be noted that the site has overtaken its infamous sibling, the gossipy Gawker, in terms of notoriety after a public spat with Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*. Gaby Darbyshire, Gawker Media's chief operating officer, told the *New York Observer* that Jezebel "has received more complaints per year than any other [Gawker media] site," while Gawker's founder, Nick Denton, told the *New York Times* that it was no longer seen by advertisers as "a cute new entrant" on the blogging scene.

The spat with *The Daily Show* began with a report by the site's Irin Carmon on the program's hiring policies, which highlighted the lack of women in senior writing or on-air positions and argued that it was "a boys' club where women's contributions are often ignored and dismissed".

Although *The Daily Show* had declined to comment for Carmon's original piece, a visibly flustered Stewart attempted to address the issue a week later stating: "Jezebel thinks I'm a sexist prick."

In the days that followed *The Daily Show* released an open letter rebutting Carmon's report titled "Dear People Who Don't Work Here" and signed by more than 30 female employees. Blogs ranging from *The Awl* to *Slate* weighed in on the controversy and a post signed by the Jezebel editors reiterated that, far from having an axe to grind, Carmon had requested a comment from *The Daily Show* for her initial piece and had been turned down.

Meanwhile, *The Daily Show*'s newest female hiring, Olivia Munn, whose controversial appointment had in part triggered the initial post, gave a forthright interview to *Salon* stating that "no one knew what the fuck Jezebel was before that story came out ... *The Daily Show* didn't know what Jezebel was".

In this, however, she was clearly wrong — not least because fellow *Daily Show* employee Samantha Bee is quoted in Rebecca Traister's upcoming book *Big Girls Don't Cry* as saying: "You can really tell when something resonates with people ... I'm always excited when one of mine [her clips on *The Daily Show*] ends up on Jezebel."

The piece had attracted so much controversy because of the growing power that Jezebel wields. In September last year it surpassed the flagship site Gawker in monthly page views and now attracts over 38 million global viewers and 2.6 million unique global users per month.

When launching it in 2007, founding editor Anna Holmes conceived it as an antidote to superficial, consumer-led glossies. "I thought there was a way to talk about things that women were interested in without talking down to them," she says. "It seemed possible to address serious issues with wit and to acknowledge that women want more from a magazine than consumer products."

What really stood out, however, was its tone. "I knew that the one thing I didn't want was for everything to be all about insulting people," says Holmes, who stepped down as editor-in-chief two weeks ago. "I thought that there was room to be witty without being unkind."



PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

"Jezebel is a site for modern, intelligent women who do not want to be pandered to," says Jessica Coen, the site's new editor-in-chief. "We don't want to talk down to our readers — we want to be able to discuss issues both high and low, and address them in a way that respects the intelligence of the reader."

Coen, who edited Gawker from 2004 to 2006, agrees that part of Jezebel's appeal lies in its rejection of the Gawker ethos. "A sarcastic note here and there is fine but nothing but snark is lazy," she admits. Instead she hopes to continue to expand the site. "I want Jezebel to reach readers who want an intelligent version or a tongue-in-cheek approach to gossipy brain candy, and also readers who are looking for writers and reporters to be engaged in larger, deeper issues and have something to say."

Not all the site's vocal commenters are happy with that switch. Recent weeks have seen mutterings of "Jez-mopolitan" and suggestions that it is moving too far from its original incarnation as the anti-*Cosmo* or *Elle*.

Carmon, a former reporter at *Women's Wear Daily*, believes that *The Daily Show*'s reaction (no comment, then the open letter) has led to "far more attention" being paid to her post.

Will the subsequent attention lead to change in how the mainstream media deal with requests from blogs? "I think we're at the frontier of all this right now," she says. "More and more people with traditional news experience are moving to work online and that does mean that the relationships between blogs and official sources will change."

While the relationship between Jezebel and *The Daily Show* may not be recoverable, their falling-out could have fruitful results.



PHOTO: REUTERS