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Movie-makers embrace digital age



By BBC News Online's Tim Masters

Hollywood blockbusters cost millions - and that's before the first snap of the clapperboard.

But at the other end of the spectrum, the advent of affordable digital camcorders has led to an explosion of opportunities for film-makers working on zero or low budgets.

It is a cottage industry on a global scale - with short films being edited on home PCs and distributed via the web.

“
It's a fantastic innovation to have a global audience for something you shot in your back yard
 ”

And with connection speeds on the increase, the downloading of full-length features is fast becoming a viable option. **Richard Allison**

In the UK, low-budget film-makers have been finding the switch to digital cameras has brought huge rewards in both creativity and picture quality.

"It's like a full movie studio in the palm of your hand," says Richard Allison of Look at the Duck Productions, based in west London.

The group has around eight regular members and is



Internet links:

- Trickshot Film Productions
- Atom Films
- Exposure
- Sticky Biscuit ifilm
- Look at the Duck

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currently editing a dark thriller, Department 23, among several other projects.

Richard Allison says the net has transformed the way films are distributed

"We've been using the net to promote our films for about three years - it's a fantastic innovation to have a global audience for something you shot in your back yard," says Allison, who works by day testing computer software.

"I get e-mails from interested people all over the world every week."

Look at the Duck already has one online trailer on its site, and future goals include several more trailers in different formats.



Department 23: A woman becomes embroiled with a shadowy organisation

"An online trailer can hook people enough to order the tape," says Allison, whose earlier science fiction films shot on analogue video were made under the banner Trickshot Film Productions.

He wants to re-edit these using digital technology and bring them to a wider audience.

Allison says a production like Department 23 costs around £100 to produce. But he's planning something far more ambitious: a full-length independent feature which will cost closer to £30,000.

"That's about two years away, and we have to find private investors. In the meantime, we've several ideas for some 30 minute films."

Virtual multiplex

Low-budget shorts are getting greater exposure through a proliferation of online cinema sites like Atom and ifilm.

AtomShockwave markets and distributes films and animations ranging from 30 seconds to

30 minutes.

Nevette Previd, European Director of Communications, says more than 20,000 films were submitted to the site last year.



AtomShockwave's catalogue includes the Oscar-nominated Periwig-Maker

"We don't take everything," she says, "but those we do pick up get an advance and a percentage of sales."

The site contains several different themed "channels" and viewers can vote for their favourites.

Dark comedy, digital style

"We want to get our stuff noticed on internet movie sites and at general film festivals," says Mark Poole of Sticky Biscuit, a group of low-budget film-makers based in Guildford, Surrey.

With about 10 regular members, Sticky Biscuit's first production in 1995 was a homage to trashy sci-fi director Ed Wood called Sex Snatchers from Outer Space.



Out of the archives: Sticky Biscuit's earliest sci-fi outing

"It went down really well at a local film festival and proved to be a hard act to follow," says Poole.

Since moving to digital production last year, Sticky Biscuit has produced three film shorts, including Shark (a writer meets one of his own creations), Mother's Ruin (the dark secrets of a mummy's boy) and The Scottish Picnic.

"It's a slapstick 8-minute version of Macbeth set to the music of Don Giovanni," says Poole, "with the three witches as rock chicks!"

Poole describes the Sticky Biscuit style as "dark comedy", in a

similar vein to the League of Gentlemen.

"We'd like to spend more time on film-making but it's a nightmare trying to get people together at the same time."

A typical production will shoot over a few days, with the main expense being the cost of digital video tapes.



The title sequence of The Scottish Picnic

Visitors to the website can download a clip from Shark, and read about the group's special effects arm called Industrial, Plight and Tragic. E-mail enquiries have come in from as far away as Korea.

Poole says: "When we started out, our films were parodies, but now we're really finding our niche."

Time and talent

Things are looking good for the video-maker as technology advances and prices plummet.

Of course, it takes more than the latest camera and editing software to make a movie. Directorial skills and a sizzling script don't come in a box.



Technology is helping low-budget film-makers

But The Blair Witch Project proved that camcorder footage could hold its own on the big screen.

And with a little time and talent, it's now easier than ever to get that £100 digital epic up on the net, rubbing shoulders with the big boys.

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