# Can Blu-ray escape from the DVD mould?

*For the new high-definition disc format to be more than simply a bigger storage device, the Blu-ray user-interface will have to sharpen up. Blu-ray should shamelessly borrow from the Apps, IPGs and websites of the competition; then do it better and in HD, says BOB AUGER, President of Newmérique, a digital media consultancy.*

There are some incredibly user-friendly menus appearing for IPTV, cable and computer apps, which are totally different to DVD. Blu-ray players (including PS3) will be displaying them too. If we stick with the "tried and tested" DVD-style menus, Blu-ray will look dated and will fail to keep up with the trend. Playing safe is not an option – Blu-ray is an "intelligent player" but holding back for a supposedly familiar DVD menu-style is a recipe for disaster. Educate commissioners, authors and distributors – tell them Blu-ray is more than enhanced DVD and the consumers will follow.

When VHS ruled the video home entertainment waves, there was no user-interface (UI), the machines were simple to use, the ultimate in "plug-and-play" – you plugged the cassette in the slot and it played. Although 15 years have gone by since the launch of DVD, many of the Blu-ray discs on sale today offer little more than a high-definition alternative to those VHS days; the only concession to interactivity is often the "Play All" button that must be clicked to watch the movie.

The time has come to restore interactivity to Blu-ray and make it the showcase for packaged media that it was always intended to be.

The DVD format that was agreed in 1996 called for a fixed instruction set embedded in the player, although some members of the DVD Consortium had lobbied for a "smarter" specification, similar to the earlier Philips CD-i player. The basics of DVD remain unchanged to the present day and despite the decision to produce a dumb box, over the years DVD has delivered impressive interactivity in the hands of skilled authors.

In a world in which several hundred thousand VHS cassettes could be conjured up with a single call to a duplicator, DVD appeared new, different and difficult to grasp. The office doors of filmed entertainment publishers and distributors were suddenly besieged by a whole new group of geeks, who apparently spoke a completely different language. The reaction was immediate. "Simplify," said the content owners, "make it easy for my grandmother to use. Even better, give us something the CEO can understand."

Apart from a few pioneering efforts, such as *Les enfants de Lumiere* (July 1997) from Editions Montparnasse in Paris and the *Edge DVD* magazine (November 1998) from Troma Films in New York (pictured above), the UI on early titles was little more than a big play button, with smaller buttons for chapter selection and subtitles on/off. Only as DVD became more popular did budgets increase slightly and innovations such as moving menus, director's commentaries and "value added extras" were added.

It took a while, but eventually the content owners' early reluctance to experiment faded. Consumers were judged ready for hidden extras that required a pre-set sequence of buttons to be selected before the content was revealed. There were even web sites dedicated to demystifying those "Easter Eggs". Even so, very few companies cracked the complexity of the authoring tools available at the time. Complicated though DVD creation seemed back then, the authoring of a passably interactive DVD is today within the reach of an average 14-year old.

We have all become used to the low prices and disposable character of DVD titles, which are thrown in a two-for-one bin at the supermarket and used as a loss-leader to attract customers into the store. *Avatar*, discounted on first release from £28.95 to £8 in UK stores, is a typical example.

*Rovi's 'TV Guide on Screen'*

For DVD, saving money by dumbing down is an understandable economy, since the format appears increasingly slow and "clunky" when compared to the interactive screens of today. Unfortunately, the simplification requested by that mythical CEO back in the 1990s is continuing today with Blu-ray, as interfaces are commissioned on the mistaken basis that BD titles are little more than high-quality DVDs.

It is a deeply flawed way of promoting a premium product. The competition that Blu-ray faces for the ears and eyeballs of the consumer comes not from DVD, but from the increasingly sophisticated offerings on cable, satellite TV, smart phones and the web. Unless there is a significant change in the attitude towards Blu-ray design, the discs will be relegated to the role of high-density video storage, and their money-making potential will be handed over to other digital devices.

The launch of Blu-ray presented an opportunity for a radical rethink in UI design and, enlivened by the opportunities, the authoring community started to plan an exciting new approach, taking on additional staff and investing in the hardware and software required.

Unlike the speed with which phone designers rowed in a different direction, however, the innate conservatism of some of the major content owners has all but killed those original hopes for Blu-ray innovation. Authoring companies have been forced to cut back, amalgamate with competitors and even close down completely, as budgets have shrunk to DVD proportions and smaller.

There is some good news on the horizon. The introduction of development platforms such as Kaleidoscope from Sofatronic have made advanced Blu-ray titles like the Skynet edition of *Terminator 2* possible. Authored by Blink Digital using Kaleidoscope, discs like *T2* reveal just what the format is capable of and offer a guide to what might be possible in the increasingly competitive future.

It is a future that will include Fibre-to-the-

Home (FTTH) broadband, with HD video content already delivered on demand to over 3 million households in the US by operators such as Verizon with FiOS TV. How the user interacts with these new Video-on-Demand (VOD) services is a key element in generating the revenues that will be needed to justify an investment of over $20 billion to bury glass underground.

An important part of the UI is content discovery, an area that is receiving substantial investment from IPTV and VOD operators. Getting and keeping customers is seen vital to the success of broadband services and the providers are aware that money can be made or lost with the click of a remote control.

Rovi (the renamed Macrovision) is playing a major part in "personalised entertainment guidance" with its "TV Guide on Screen," a customisable interface for CE manufacturers. Designed to be incorporated in the next generation of connected screens, it could become the controlling hub for digital entertainment devices throughout the home. Behind the scenes, Rovi also provides the in-depth data that enables viewers to explore the added value extras and content information that have previously been only available on DVD and Blu-ray discs.

An innovative UI replaces the Electronic Programme Guide (EPG), which is no longer the blue, white and yellow grid that is limited to up/down and left/right navigation. Rovi's next generation Interactive Programme Guide (IPG), together with similar offerings from cable, satellite and broadband operators, could change the way the viewer accesses film and television content.

Always there at the touch of a button, providing access to social networks, consumer photo and video libraries and actively promoting VOD content, both free and paid-for, the IPG will challenge Blu-ray producers to ask whether their traditional model of "press button, play movie" is good enough for the decade to come.

The IPG is an essential asset for the VOD operator and its cost is balanced by revenues from almost every part of the business. The full cost of the BD interface is assigned to a single release and has to be recouped from sales of one Blu-ray title. It is not hard to imaging a superb (and expensive) UI accompanying a poorly-performing film and the damage this would do to the producer's reputation for budget management.

On the other hand, a dud movie on VOD has little or no impact on the IPG budget; instead it is seen as a way to recoup losses by cross-promoting forthcoming blockbusters, signing up viewers for new products and services, recommending content, merchandising and informing the audience of new releases.

The interactive real-estate that is taken for granted on a Blu-ray title and which is frequently produced at minimum cost, needs to be seen as a lost earning opportunity that others could gladly exploit. Discs menus like *T2 Skynet edition* show what can be done technically with the Blu-ray UI. What is needed now is a generation of BD producers who can market and monetise the connected interface.

In part, it is an educational job, using the best of what is currently on offer and moving on from there. It is not about selling advertising space between chapters either, there are better opportunities to promote lifestyle products, but the revenue-earning potential of sponsorship and product placement in the UI should not be neglected. Blu-ray should shamelessly borrow from the Apps, IPGs and websites of the competition; then do it better and in HD.

Otherwise, Blu-ray is reduced to a simple carrier of data, maybe even just a "token of ownership", and the disc ceases to be a premium product that justifies a high price. The "keep it simple" mentality has the potential to relegate Blu-ray to a low-cost also-ran in an era of HD, 3D and digital delivery.

It is up to everyone in the chain, from commissioning and authoring to marketing and point-of-sale to ensure that Blu-ray evolves and improves. If the opportunity is missed, it won't be because the technology is not up to it, but because no-one explained to the CEO that "Simple is not an option."

## BIOGRAPHY

BOB AUGER was founder and MD of top London DVD authoring house Electric Switch in 1990, then produced over 400 educational DVDs for the Ohana Foundation in Hawaii. He is now head of Newmérique, a technology and new media consultancy. Bob is a specialist on the range of video delivery technologies. Contact: bob@newmerique.com