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## Movies

# Blogs the latest twist in the film marketing game

## Directors reach out to fans in a more personal way

By Chris Lee  
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Consternation spread quickly across the Internet movie fan universe. In April, Peter Jackson, director of the big-budget remake of King Kong, broadcast his plans to expand the ape epic (due in theaters in December) into a trilogy of films. But his "exclusive announcement" wasn't delivered through the usual channels -- the obligatory news release or television interview. News came via his video production diary on the fan Web site kongisking.net.

Using his weekly Weblog, Jackson presented digital mock-ups and demonstrated motion-capture technology to be used in the sequel, intercut with an interview with its star, Naomi Watts. Most alarming to Kong purists, however, were details about the second installment, *Son of Kong: Kong's spawn*, a gigantic albino gorilla with machine guns mounted on his back, would battle genetically mutated Nazis during World War II.

Within hours, news of the sequel's far-fetched plot dominated movie chat room discussions and had been repeated throughout cyberspace.

What all but the most astute netizens failed to consider was the video diary's date: April Fool's Day.

While it is hardly surprising that cyberspace can be fertile soil for misinformation, Jackson's ruse underscores a newer phenomenon: the rapid evolution of Weblogs -- or blogs -- as movie marketing tools.

Costing almost nothing to maintain, the vast majority of blogs are mental clearinghouses for their authors, lo-fi Web confessionals or bully pulpits that vary from current events to niche pastimes to sex. Directors' blogs, by contrast, are slickly engineered to virally market their movies -- to stoke fan ardor.

Some observers say this approach allows studios to put a spin on moviemaking -- and, by playing to fan interest, head off potential controversies. Movie marketers say the sites allow blogger-directors to reach out to fans in an up-close-and-personal way.

"People are looking for 'real content,'" said Adrian Sexton, vice president of digital marketing for Lions Gate

Films, which hosts several directors' blogs. "With a blog, people can look for themselves at the way you handle your choices creatively, where you got the money for the film, how you landed the talent. They can see something outside the usual way moviemaking is presented."

X-Men director Brian Singer, in production in Australia on a Superman remake for Warner Bros., posts a weekly video diary on bluetights.net -- a site that is unaffiliated with the studio but for which Warner Bros. has bought additional bandwidth to support the increased Internet traffic. He describes the blog as "a mini-TV show about the making of Superman," which is slated to arrive in theaters next June.

"The studio Web sites [for movies] are a bit stagnant," Singer said. "They're just so traditional." Viewed with that in mind, bluetights.net footage of the director discussing film color corrections and managing extras doesn't exactly shatter the traditional movie marketing paradigm. But in one of the site's most widely discussed postings, Jackson invites Singer to the New Zealand set of Kong. There, an apparently exhausted Jackson pretends to snooze in a La-Z-Boy recliner while a bewildered Singer directs a scene in Jackson's movie.

"There's a kind of theater that occurs during the making of a movie that's unique to each production," Singer said. "If you're willing to expose yourself a bit, it can be a wonderful method of getting the word out and sharing that experience with the people who are most interested -- the fans."

According to Stephanie Allen, vice president of marketing for Fox Searchlight Pictures, which created blogs for its films Garden State and Club Dread, such Web sites will backfire unless they establish an intimate -- and honest -- dialogue with their savvy audience. "They can tell when they're being marketed to," she said. "And they can tell when there's an authenticity to the conversation."

Buffy the Vampire Slayer creator Joss Whedon blogs semiregularly about his coming first feature, Serenity, at serenitymovie.com. Like many nonmovie blogs, his postings are full of personal musings and wry asides such as, "People who are prettier than me are not supposed to be funnier than me."

Asked if he viewed blogging as a promotional responsibility, he replied: "It is in the sense that if we're having a screening of the movie for fans, I think it's more fun to get on and tell them myself instead of having some official announcement."

Michael Regina, editor in chief of The One Ring Inc., a company that specializes in constructing movie fan sites, said fans are interested in the minutiae of movie magic, in whatever format they are conveyed.

The numbers are starting to bear out such marketing wisdom. Regina says kongis king.net's blog for Jackson has logged as many as 100,000 downloads a week. And according to Warner Bros. records, bluetights.net's blog is viewed 50,000 to 60,000 times a day.

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