



By Michael Epstein and Conor Boyle

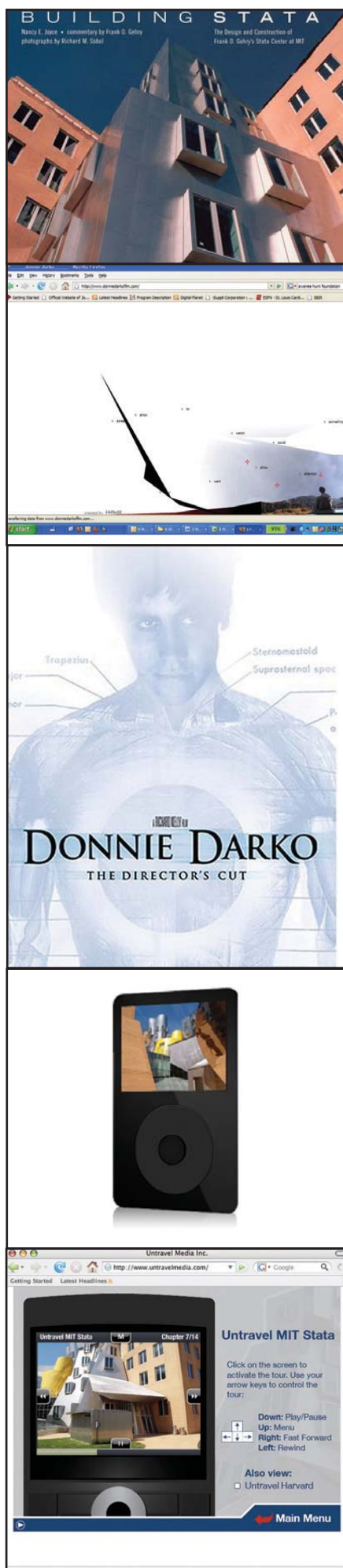
# The Mobile High Ground

Media migrates. Not always as the author intended it. In 2001 Jonathan Franzen's book, "The Corrections" was uplifted by a television dynasty to: "Oprah's List." When Franzen declined to have the Big "O" stamped on his cover, there were cries of snootiness. At the time Franzen felt, "This is my book, my creation, and I didn't want that logo of corporate ownership on it." While we can admire Franzen's need to keep his work pure, it also begs the question of when marketing cheapens and when it expands a story's depth. Deepening a story as it migrates from media to medium is known as transmedia production. Professor Henry Jenkins of MIT notes that "the most gifted transmedia artists surf these marketplace pressures to create a more expansive and immersive story than would have been possible otherwise." This article unpacks this notion of transmedia as it applies to filmmakers who might not only be working to market their films through new media such as web, mobile, and print, but also expand on the stories and characters they develop. We are mobile media producers, so after we lay out the general basis for transmedia production, we will focus on our work with the cinematic productions for cell phones and iPods (see: [www.untravelmedia.com](http://www.untravelmedia.com).)

## Transmedia

Whether you're curious about blogging, vlogging, mobisodes, downloads, or podcasting, a transmedia approach may help simplify your approach to any new medium. Froghop, a mobile video game platform, advocates, "The key to transmedial access is not to simply convert a fixed application into a portable one, but rather to respect the differences of each platform and leverage its unique strengths." ([www.froghop.com](http://www.froghop.com).) In the last ten years, the most successful filmmakers have approached new media not primarily as a marketing platform, but as a way to extend their storytelling process. Take the film DONNY DARKO, which had a poor American theatrical release, but really came into its own on DVD and through its clever website. On the site, Darko-heads can extend the storyline of the movie and interactively gather information on the film's time-traveling jet engine, Donnie's whereabouts prior to the start of film, and uncover evidence of a "singularity" by exploring the site's funky interactive world. The film went on to open new possibilities with its extended director's cut DVD and novel with both the screenplay and director bios.

While this is commonly known as licensing, there is something savvier in the way Richard Kelly brought his story to bear on new media. He approaches each platform as a fresh page and production challenging the telling of an open-ended sci-fi thriller. Transmedia approaches have also been successful in documentary projects, such as AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH. This slide show turned film turned website turned blog turned educator's resource center demonstrates the additive effects of a transmedia production. In other words,



from top to bottom, Nancy E. Joyce Design for the Frank O. Gehry's Stata Center at MIT. Image courtesy of Nancy E. Joyce.

Donnie Darko's backstory is revealed interactive words floating above an image of the opening scene. From [www.donniedarkofilm.com](http://www.donniedarkofilm.com).

DONNIE DARKO, DVD cover. From [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

"Untravel Stata" running on an iPod: Author Image from [www.untravelmedia.com](http://www.untravelmedia.com).

"Untravel Stata" displayed on website. Author Image from [www.untravelmedia.com](http://www.untravelmedia.com).

there are many paths to find your way into the story and issues the film brings up. One of our favorites from the website is the Carbon Calculator.

## Transmedia on Mobile

In our work, we have used the concept of transmedia to develop unique narrative techniques and technologies specifically suited for the mobile platform. We believe that just as the above web-based transmedia storytelling takes advantage of the interactivity, hyperlinking, and networking of the "www," mobile storytelling should take advantage of the mobility, location awareness, and site-based potential of the mobile platform. Mobile is finally moving out of the wallpaper and ringtone ghetto and beginning to support serious storytelling. While ESPN highlights and MSNBC clips port well to the short video or "mobisode" format, Untravel believes that many more long-form mobile formats will evolve. Untravel is working specifically with the concept that some narratives lend themselves to site-based storytelling, especially documentary films. For example, this year the MIT Press released a book on MIT's architecture, "Imagining MIT." Untravel worked with the authors of the book and the builders of Frank Gehry's Stata Center to design a site-based "Mobile Media Documentary" based on the book and the building process. The Documentary was a step-by-step guide through the building telling the story of the design and the concepts contained in the buildings functionality. Visitors to the building appreciated walking with voices, images, and interactive media that led them into the story of the building's construction. While phone and iPod were the target devices for the 50 minute production, DVDs and web-based versions were also popular. We believe this vision of mobile storytelling may play out well with filmmakers. If developments continue in this field (which are likely with 2.6B mobile phones in the world), we believe that the mobile platform will present filmmakers with a much more physical, "mixed-reality" way to present their films. Thus a transmedia approach to mobile devices is less one of conceiving a smaller screen version of your film for iPods and more one of conceiving an active one, that gets people moving through particular locales, connecting the viewer to elements of the visual environment through voices, video, and interactive elements of your story.

## Top Five Links in Becoming Transmedia:

We would be remiss if we didn't give you a few pointers of really cool places to begin to get into new media if you haven't already.

5. Get a Blog: Although it's a huge phenomenon, it's a great way to get closer to the topics and the niche audiences your film really deals with. We recommend [wordpress.com](http://wordpress.com). Check out exemplar sites such as: [www.ticklebooth.com](http://www.ticklebooth.com) (mixing favorite videos with personal videos) and [coudal.com](http://coudal.com).

4. Apply to become a label on iTunes. These are approved distributors of content and the application process can take months, years, never. [http://www.shortsinternational.com/html/submission\\_frame\\_si.html](http://www.shortsinternational.com/html/submission_frame_si.html)

3. Post Your Video For Real: Beyond a YouTube post, [HeySpread.com](http://HeySpread.com) aggregates and distributes your video to many sites with one upload. You might also find [Vimeo.com](http://Vimeo.com) and [Ourstage.com](http://Ourstage.com) good places to post for young audiences.

2. Use withoutabox: It has tons of online film promotion tools. <http://www.withoutabox.com/index.php?cmd=filmpromotion.index>

1. Untravelmedia.com: Our first work with Boston filmmakers, CREEPING THROUGH BOSTON premieres here in October. Also check the website for our next production RFP this winter. Our production software will be available for mass use in 2008. To inquire about beta test send an e-mail to: [beta@untravelmedia.com](mailto:beta@untravelmedia.com).

Michael Epstein is founder and CEO of Untravel Media ([www.untravelmedia.com](http://www.untravelmedia.com)) and has a background in audio and flash production, having reported on NPR's Morning Edition and written two books on multimedia in the classroom for Macromedia. Michael is a pioneer in mobile narrative, who in 2005 developed a first-ever location-aware multimedia mobile phone tour in Venice, Italy in partnership with MIT's Media Lab, Dell, Motorola and the Venice Biennale. The tour was featured on BBC Radio, in The London Times, Wired and Reuters (<http://web.mit.edu/frontiers>). He started working in this field, developing a mobile technology project in Boston in partnership with the Freedom Trail Foundation. In 2003 Michael designed and directed a GPS-based mobile tour of Beacon Hill featuring clips of a PBS documentary on the area.

Conor Boyle is currently the head producer and editor of mobile content for Untravel Media. His previous work includes television, digital and new media production. He is a 2005 graduate of the Savannah College of Art & Design.