Moving Stories
Aesthetics and Production in Mobile Media

Geoffrey Long
with Dr. Henry Jenkins
and Dr. Joshua Green and Dr. William Uricchio
Executive Summary

Now that the vast majority of the market already carries a cell phone, cellular phone carriers are turning to mobile media as a possible engine for growth. This new emerging market offers an exciting opportunity not just for carriers but for content providers as well – the question is how to develop it.

Some of the roadblocks currently facing widespread mobile media adoption include expensive phones, expensive plans, and expensive episodes. Some of these barriers will drop as technology advances, but proponents of mobile media should consider alternative methods to broaden their markets, including delivering content through podcasts or subsidizing mobisodes through advertising or product placement.

Early assumptions about mobile media also need to be questioned -- duration need not be constrained to only a few minutes if the content is truly compelling, and most content need not be reframed if the screen is of a high enough quality. While repurposing existing content is often sufficient (and welcomed by consumers), content developed exclusively for the small screen should mind the features and constraints of the media form, including location awareness, the ability to communicate with other mobile devices and (of course) portability.

Storytellers should also carefully consider whether to develop a new franchise or extend an existing one through transmedia storytelling. If attempting the latter, the early mobisode experiment 24: Conspiracy serves as a cautionary tale by demonstrating the importance of using existing characters, having an impact on a larger storyline, allowing sufficient time to develop the story and having an adequate budget.

Mobile media offers new, rich opportunities for both creative and commercial development. However, the key to success in mobile media is the same as in every other media form: telling the best possible story to the widest possible audience.
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Created for MIT Convergence Culture Consortium
in partnership with Turner Broadcasting, GSD&M, MTV, Fidelity Investments and Yahoo!

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I. Introduction

As we move into an age of mobility, interactivity, attraction, and time stress, we will rely more and more on our screens for information, entertainment, communication, transactions, and engagement. Screens are the campfire storytellers of today. They connect us viscerally and emotionally through sight, sound, and motion. They are within arm’s length, all the time, for all of us. And we’re lovin’ it.


We live in a culture that’s always on the move. We cram more and more events into our daily routines, squeeze those events into smaller and smaller chunks of time, and when there’s still not enough time to do everything, we figure out how to do multiple things at once. A 2005 Kaiser Foundation study noted that Americans ages 8 to 18 spend an average of 6.5 hours a day consuming media – thanks to multitasking, however, in that time they consume 8.5 hours worth of media. It’s no wonder, then, that the entertainment industry is showing so much interest in mobile media: as viewers’ lives become even more hectic, experiencing their favorite music, movies and shows will be slotted into the tiny pockets of time found between appointments or even during other events, like commuting or taking a lunch break.

Of course, that level of efficiency requires some additional hardware. Just as VCRs and DVRs uncouple the viewing audience from a fixed viewing schedule, mobile media devices free viewers from a fixed viewing location. As consumers seek out content for their iPods, mobile phones and portable game systems, media producers and advertisers alike scramble to accommodate them. A new generation of storytellers is figuring out how to best navigate the opportunities and restrictions of this new media space – and in doing so, they are developing new methods for creation and distribution of content as well as advertising.

Suddenly there’s much, much more than the living room in play.
Why Mobile Media? Why Now?

Imagine a world in which the TV in your living room isn’t getting its signal from a cable company, but from your cell phone provider. If the United States follows the development path being set by Europe and Asia, within a few short years the nation will be covered in a blanket of high-speed, always-on wireless connectivity – not necessarily through Wi-Fi hotspots, but potentially through next-generation cellular phone services. In this scenario, it’s easy to imagine the same tiny, low-power chipset that delivers 4G-level wireless video and television to your mobile phone also delivering content to your TV set, your computer display, your microwave, your refrigerator, the dashboard of your car... Similarly, it’s almost as easy to imagine a universe where every phone call, wired or wireless, is placed over the Internet using Voice Over Internet Protocol VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) services like Skype.

In truth, these scenarios are almost here. It’s already possible to buy Netgear’s SPH101, a mobile phone that’s exclusively connected to the Skype VOIP network via Wi-Fi, and in early October 2006, Sprint committed to building out a nationwide WIMAX network for 4G high-speed connectivity. Make no mistake: the cellular companies and the cable companies are locked in a white-hot war to bring high-speed connectivity to the USA. The battle lines have been drawn, the race is on, and things are getting nasty.

The fact of the matter is that both sides are running scared. Cable providers are growing increasingly concerned about the rise of television services delivered over the Internet and cellular networks, but this is nothing compared to the nightmare scenario presenting itself to the phone companies. With some exceptions, almost everyone who needs a cell phone already has a cell phone. If the phone works and the service is decent, why would anyone need anything more complicated than the simplest of headsets and the simplest of plans?

Mobile media is one such concept being positioned as a way to convince existing customers to upgrade their service contracts and hardware. True, a segment of the market will purchase the latest and greatest phone no matter what, but relying on this bleeding-edge niche market of early adapters and fashionistas (in other words, cell phone fans) as the primary growth engine would be akin to Nike relying on hardcore urban sneaker culture for the bulk of their sales. This can be referred to as the 10/90 problem – 10% of the market may passionately follow and support a given property or product, but reaching the other 90% is the challenge.

4-What?

Any discussion of mobile media requires a peculiar flavor of alphabet soup.

3G. Shorthand for the “3rd generation” of wireless communications infrastructure. 3G networks provide data transfer rates of several Mbits per second. (Zheng 12)

4G. Shorthand for the “4th generation” of wireless communications infrastructure. 4G networks are currently being tested in Europe and Asia, where data transfer rates have reached 300 Mbits per second. (Zheng 12)

Mobisode. An abbreviation of “mobile episode”, any segment of episodic content designed for delivery on cellular phones. Invented by Mitch Feinman and trademarked by Twentieth Century Fox Entertainment.

Third Screen and Fourth Screen. Refers to the hierarchy of screens across which content can appear, although there is some debate as to which is which. To some, the ‘first screen’ is a movie theater, the ‘second screen’ is a TV screen, the ‘third screen’ is a desktop or laptop computer and the ‘fourth screen’ can refer specifically to a cell phone or to any handheld media device. To others, TV is the first screen, computers are second, and phones are third.
Mobile media already has its early adopters and fans. This 10% (if that) carries phones loaded with mobisodes of 24: Conspiracy, Prison Break, or Li’l Bush, and iPods with TV shows and movies downloaded from the iTunes store. A recent study by research firm In-Stat found that sales of smartphones, whose larger, more high-resolution screens are ideal for mobile video, nearly tripled from 2004 to 2005 and increased by 50% in the first half of 2006 over 2005. Even more tantalizing is a new report from Jupiter Research predicting the total global entertainment market will be worth $17.3 billion in 2006, $47 billion by 2009 and hit nearly $77 billion by 2011.

The market is new and expanding, but there is still a vast portion that has yet to be tapped. This paper explores some possible ways to do just that using narrative and aesthetic approaches for small screens and delivery options made possible via high-speed data connections. These observations should prove useful for content owners looking to extend existing franchises, cellular companies looking to develop content for mobile devices, and any storyteller looking to make content for the ‘fourth screen’.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cellular carriers are using mobile media to convince a saturated market to improve their contracts and hardware.

- Consumers are using mobile devices to further supersaturate a media diet that already consumes 8.5 hours’ worth of media in 6.5 hours every day.

- The challenge now is how to overcome the 10/90 problem, expanding the adoption of mobile media from the approximately 10% of early adopters into the remaining 90% of the market.
Barriers to Entry

One of the biggest challenges facing mobile media is the staggering number of barriers to entry. Even if the marketing department does its job and convinces a user to try mobile content, the user needs:

- the right phone
- the right service provider
- the right service contract

On top of that, the user often has to pay for:

- the episode itself
- the time involved in downloading that episode
- the premium contract required to access that episode

It is no wonder mobile media is having difficulty reaching the majority. Imagine if this were regular non-mobile television. How many people would watch 24 if it was viewable on only the most expensive TV set that only Magnavox made, if Fox was only available on the most expensive plan offered by Comcast (and you could only get NBC on RCN’s super-deluxe plan, which only worked on premium Sony TVs), and then each episode was pay-per-view – and you were billed by the minute for the time it took to access each episode? Any company interested in creating or distributing mobile media needs to figure out how to lower these barriers as much as possible.

Making the Right Phone Affordable

Some barriers will naturally come down in time as technologies advance. For example, concerns about the power drain inherent in playing full-motion video on bright, colorful small screens are being lessened as you
read this. A first-generation video-enabled iPod could barely play a full-length film on a full charge, but the second-generation model upped its battery performance to eight hours of video play – and new technologies (such as fuel cells) promise to improve future battery performances exponentially.

While these improvements will be taken up by the early adopters, due to the high cost of the top-of-the-line model, as soon as the next model is introduced the previous top-of-the-line features trickle down to the mid-range model, and the mid-range features trickle down to the entry-level model. This is a feature of hardware evolution that obviously extends to phones and other mobile devices as well. Couple this process with incentives offered by the service providers (cellular companies often sell a $400 handset for $150 after rebates and other promotions by amortizing the cost of the device across the life of the service contract, and cable companies often use similar techniques to defray the costs of the cable box/DVR hardware) and within a relatively short amount of time, these “right phones” will become the standard.

Making Any Service Provider the Right Service Provider

Cellular companies aren’t going to want to hear this, but the practice of signing exclusive contracts with specific content providers is long-term suicide for mobile media as a whole. If Telco A signs an exclusive contract with Fox, then to remain competitive Telco B rushes to sign an exclusive contract with NBC. This forces Joe Customer, who likes programming from both Fox and NBC, to decide which network’s programs he likes the best. (This is, of course, assuming all other features of Telco A and Telco B, including little things like call quality, price and frequency of dropped calls are equal -- a highly improbable assumption, but necessary for the sake of this argument.) Joe Customer will probably either grit his teeth and pick either Telco A or Telco B, but still feel dissatisfied and frustrated because he couldn’t get what he really wanted (which was both programs), or, perhaps more likely, he will decide access to only a portion of his preferred shows simply isn’t worth the added cost of a premium contract from either one.

We’ve seen this before on the iTunes Music Store. Exclusive contracts with competing services meant certain albums (such as those of the Dave Matthews Band) weren’t available. Some exclusive content can be expected to be offered on one service over another toweeten a deal, such as an extra track available only on the retail-channel version of an album, but core content should remain available on as many services as possible in order to prevent the platform as a whole from collapsing in on itself.

Disturbingly, this is exactly the trouble we’re currently seeing play itself out on the IPTV market. Every company involved in IPTV, from the networks to the studios to the computer companies themselves, are taking notes from Apple’s runaway success in the music arena and have seemingly sworn to prevent that from happening again with video. In November 2006, Time Warner CEO Richard Parsons announced that Warner Brothers would be launching their own digital movie delivery service in the first half of 2007. This led PVRWire’s Brad Linder to make the following comment:

I think there’s a risk that consumers will be confused by their choices as more and more content producers get into the digital distribution game. One of the reasons the iTunes music store became so popular so quickly was that users could easily find most of the music they were looking for, no matter what record label it was on. The holy grail for digital video consumers should be a similar service, but right now if you want a movie or TV show, you may have to try several different web stores before you can find it, if it’s available at all. Being able to download directly from the movie studio’s web site doesn’t simplify matters, it only makes it more complicated.
A similar scenario played itself out in my own house early in the season when I attempted to find the premiere episode of NBC’s Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip online. For the show’s first two weeks of existence, it couldn’t be found on the iTunes store. It appeared briefly on YouTube (whether posted by the studio or by a fan is debatable), but it was eventually yanked. It wasn’t on Amazon’s new video service, Amazon Unboxed. It couldn’t be found on my Sprint cellular service. The only place Studio 60 could initially be viewed online was on NBC’s own site, and then only in a particular web browser, and then only on the latest Intel chipset for PCs (presumably for intellectual property reasons).

If I’m a potential viewer who wants to check out the show, this is way too much work. After being defeated by NBC’s site (I use a Mac), iTunes and YouTube, I gave up. Finding it was just too much work. If NBC wants to use the web to broaden its audience for shows like Studio 60, the program needs to be available on all the services. Distributors should consider iTunes, YouTube, and their own websites as equal distribution opportunities instead of exclusive competitors. Similarly, NBC should make Studio 60 equally available on the IPTV services of Sprint, Verizon, and Cingular. While exclusive deals may bring in large amounts of money in the short term, they are greatly outweighed by the long-term value of developing the Internet and mobile devices as additional delivery mechanisms for ad-supported or subscription-based content.

Eventually, Studio 60 did appear on the iTunes store; if Apple ever makes their statistics public, it will be interesting to see how many times each episode was downloaded, and how its rankings online compare to the show’s Nielsen ratings in living rooms. As I outlined in my article piece “GOOGTUBE: TV 2.0, or Bubble 2.0?” for MIT C3 Weekly Update, one feature the Internet and mobisodes offer over traditional network-based television is much more specific metrics – when it is possible to know exactly who downloaded an episode, as well as when and where they did so, advertising delivered with those episodes become much more valuable.

Making the Episodes Free

Perhaps the biggest thing that anyone could do to improve the size of the mobile media market is eliminating the cost-per-episode barrier, and one way to do that is to follow the road already paved by broadcast television: advertising. Of course, mobile media faces one issue broadcast TV does not: cost-per-minute billing. If users are forced to pay for the time it takes to download not just the content they want, but also a number of advertisements, they’re going to feel ripped off. Resentment of this “double dipping” is growing among moviegoers, who are often forced to shell out over ten bucks per ticket and then forced to sit through ten minutes of ads before the trailers begin - which are, of course, just fancier ads.

Interestingly, much less of this resentment exists among TV viewers. While viewers armed with VCRs and TiVos feel no qualms about fast-forwarding through advertisements, their presence is begrudgingly accepted because viewers accept ads are what makes the content itself ‘free’. Again, ads on an episode you pay to download would be akin to advertising on HBO, and would breed resentment. But ads on ‘free’ broadcast channels like NBC are accepted, even expected. By making mobisodes free, the door is thrown wide open to sell advertising time.

A second option is intelligently integrating the ads into the content itself. This is where product placement enters the picture. Product placement is difficult to get right in full-sized media, but on the small screen it becomes even more so. Large objects like cars are easy enough to display on a tiny screen, but small objects become more problematic. On a laptop, for example, the logo needs to be visible without being
too overbearing. In 24: Conspiracy, there are several times when the logo on an Apple laptop features prominently in the shot. When reduced to a very small screen, that logo is likely to only be a few pixels across — and the logo on an Apple laptop is pretty large. Laptops without such an easily recognized brand on the product itself, such as those by HP, Dell or Sony, could be difficult to make noticeable on a small screen. One of the basic rules of creative writing is “show, don’t tell,” but more brazen advertising execs may pressure writers into subverting this concept into “tell, don’t show,” insisting the brands be integrated directly into the dialogue. This can be done, and done well, as long as it is done organically. “Quick, check your PowerBook” works, since it’s a fairly well-known brand and is decently interchangeable with “Quick, check your laptop” or “Quick, check your computer.” Be aware, however, how just one additional word can make the product placement obnoxious: “Quick, check your Apple PowerBook!” Even better is when the brand refers very specifically to the particular object, such as an iPod or a Xerox machine.

Understanding the difficulty of effective product placement, consider the clumsiness of recent webisode series The Mudds, which was an only mildly tongue-in-cheek promo for Jeep. Viewers stayed away in droves because the show’s purpose was so blatantly to sell rather than entertain. Brands that successfully blend entertainment with overt marketing are difficult to find; Burger King has struck success with its mix of irony, entertainment and quirky delivery, but for every The King there’s a thousand The Mudds. A good rule of thumb is to keep the product placement subtle, and be careful not to mistake the product for the content.

In short, the best approach is to use advertising to avoid having to charge for mobile content, and then keep that advertising to a minimum. Companies like RadioTail already exist to place ads into podcasts, and it’s easy to imagine how a system similar to Google’s AdWords could be adopted to dynamically add a single, highly-targeted ad to the beginning of a mobisode when the download is requested. If each user is required to fill out a profile with their interests when they sign up for the service, delivering extremely targeted ads could be very simple indeed. This, coupled with intelligent, skillful product placement, could render mobisodes a very profitable model for content.

HIGHLIGHTS

• The hurdles facing mobile media adoption include finding the right phone, the right service provider, and the right service contract. Once those are in place, further hurdles arise, including paying for the episode itself, the time involved in downloading the episode, and the premium contract required to access that episode.

• Exclusive contracts that ensure that content from one network is only available on one cellular carrier, while often lucrative, are life-threatening to the entire mobile media market in the long run and should be avoided.

• Removing these barriers to entry will both broaden the market and enable the mobile space to be used to sell advertising. If advertising is sold in content that audiences already pay for, a sense of “double dipping” will result in resentment.

• Content providers should consider using product placement in mobile media very carefully, especially given the size and time constraints of the form.
Compressed Storytelling: Duration and Reframing

Spending $100 million on production costs and another $100 million on P&A makes no sense. For that same $200 million, I can make 50-60 two-hour movies. That’s 120 hours as opposed to two hours. In the future market, that’s where it’s going to land, because it’s going to be all pay-per-view and downloadable.

– George Lucas

For a medium so early in its development, mobile media content development already has a few bits of “accepted wisdom”. The biggest greatest of these says that mobisode viewers won’t watch anything longer than three minutes.

Poppycock.

True, there are a certain number of physical limitations endemic to mobile media that distinguish the platform from television or the cinema. On the whole, however, these would not seem to limit the usefulness of the medium. Four of the most commonly-cited reasons for keeping mobile media content short are:

1. **Duration of attention span in a transient environment.** Long-form entertainment works well in the living room or in a theater because of the (relative) exclusion of outside distractions. People know how disruptive the demands of small children or telemarketers can be to a viewing experience – multiply that by a thousand and you begin to approximate the experience of trying to watch something on a small screen while walking down a street or through a moderately crowded shopping mall. Further, it is not only more difficult to follow a narrative when surrounded by external stimuli, but mobile media differs from standard phone use because the majority of a telephone conversation only requires aural attention. If states such as New York are banning mobile phones while driving because of the distraction inherent in only one sense being diverted, imagine the legal nightmare inherent in having entertainment diverting
multiple senses while moving through the world.

2. **Download time.** People in our modern culture want what we want, when we want it. A short mobisode will download quickly, while a typical hour-long drama can take a sizeable amount of time to download from the web, and a full-length feature film is even worse. No one wants to spend that kind of time waiting.

3. **Battery drain.** A small screen bright enough to be easily viewed in a “normal” range of environments, such as regular daylight, is a major power sink. Watching a full episode of Firefly, much less an entire film, would wipe out a full battery charge on an early video-enabled iPod.

4. **Length of time a viewer is willing to hold a small portable device up to eye level.** Anyone who has tried to hold a phone up to eye level for more than several minutes knows that before long one’s hand begins to hurt.

However, each of these four can be countered fairly easily.

1. **Mobile media isn’t necessarily consumed while mobile.** Music is often consumed on the go because our sense of hearing is easily separated from the rest of our senses. We listen to radios in cars, music in elevators, music while jogging, even music while reading, and only minimum problems arise. Overzealous critics point out that we can’t consume mobile video content in the same way that we can consume mobile audio content – but the failure of their argument is whether anyone would want to.

   Mobile video is more commonly consumed either while stationary somewhere outside of the home or while someone else is responsible for guiding the motion. When mobile media is truly mobile it is being consumed by passengers of planes, trains and automobiles – not the pilots, engineers and drivers. Personally, my best experience with mobile media has been watching episodes of my favorite TV shows in an overstuffed armchair at Starbucks, my iPod in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. The media is being consumed out of the home, but I myself am far from mobile while I’m consuming it.

2. **New technology will solve the download speed problem.** Making these kinds of prophetic declarations is just begging for trouble, but as outlined earlier, both the cable companies and the cellular companies have new infrastructure waiting in the wings that will either obliterate the download speed problem or render it much more manageable. Between the corporate interests in broadening their markets and governmental interests in narrowing the digital divide, high-speed infrastructure will be on the market in the near future. Couple this with new improvements in video codecs (compression/decompression code) that will slash the sizes of the files being transferred, and it’s easy to see how transferring video files will soon be as easy as transferring text and images.

3. **New technology will also solve the power problem.** Many of mobile media’s specific challenges aren’t being immediately addressed due to the niche nature of the mobile media market – but power consumption is a big, popular problem. Considerable time and resources are being funneled into improving battery life. Already the second generation of the video iPod has nearly doubled the amount of viewing time per single charge, and new technologies on the near horizon, such as fuel cells, offer genuinely radical improvements.

4. **Compelling content outweighs muscle cramps.** Anyone who has ever played Tetris on a handheld device, or even read a good page-turner, knows that muscle complaints fade when outweighed by a compelling experience. When watching longer-form content on a small device, one props the device
up on a knee or a table, or just ignores any muscle complaints. On its very first day of release, 5 million people purchased the massive brick that is Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, and the loudest complaint wasn’t having to hold up a book for hours but that the next one couldn’t come soon enough. If your content is good enough, no one will care about holding up an iPod or a cell phone. If there’s a mantra to this paper, it’s this: don’t suck.

How Long is Too Long?
If your content is compelling enough, people will happily watch it on a small screen no matter how long it is. What this means is that, given the right hardware and infrastructure, repurposed full-length episodes can work very well in mobile form.

There are, obviously, exceptions to this. It will be a while before anyone is willing to download Roots to their RAZR – but even that isn’t distinctly outside the realm of possibility. Long-form narratives could theoretically work very well in mobile form for the same reason that people schlep huge novels along to the beach or in their bags to thumb through on the train. This similarity is actually very practical, because looking at the way people consume long-form texts while in transit enables us to determine what additional metadata is necessary for long-form video to be ported to mobile devices.

Perhaps the most utilitarian thing about a book being pulled out of the backpack isn’t a part of the book itself – whether it’s a strip of cloth, an expensive silver knickknack or even a crumpled 7-11 receipt, a bookmark is a piece of metadata. Narratives that are longer than can conceivably be consumed in one sitting need to have the capacity for being bookmarked. This level of metadata can conceivably be done in the player software, but what if the metadata was also grafted onto the file at the content level? By pushing a button on the device, a bookmark file is created that also provides a quick summary of what’s happening in the scene, so that someone who wants to pull it up the next time they sit down on the subway has a one-glance hint to where they left off.

Bookmarking also lends itself to more social use – when two fans are both reading Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, a common conversation starter is “Have you gotten to the scene where…?” Through the use of content-level bookmarking tags, friends could text bookmark files back and forth to socially direct attention to specific points in the content. In narratives, this could be annoying because a friend might jump me ahead to a spoiler point, but imagine how useful this could be for comedies like Saturday Night Live or The Daily Show? Watercooler conversations could be seeded during the morning commute through simple text messages and common-reference video files. (This is discussed further below, in the section called ‘Making Mobile Media Sexy.’)

Perhaps the literally biggest drawback to carrying around a Harry Potter book, especially in hardcover, is the girth. In the same way that a big, huge novel is heavy to carry around, long-form episodes can take up a mammoth large amount of storage space on small devices. This means that it may be beneficial to split up long-form content into smaller pieces, such as ten-minute bites instead of sixty-minute bites. It’s interesting to hypothesize that in the same way that the dramatic structure of TV shows has been affected by the number of advertising breaks commonly imposed on each episode, mobisode structure could be affected by the most common duration of mobile device use.

A recent Nielsen survey showed that around 2.2% of the content items played by video-enabled iPod users
were videos, and video only represented 11% of the time spent using a video-enabled iPod. These numbers seem dangerous, but Playlist’s Christopher Breen makes a salient point of criticism:

I work at my desk all day and sometimes have iTunes play music in the background. I have a TV/TiVo/DVD player with more than enough content to keep me busy in my off hours. If I ever, you know, went outside and wasn’t driving or interacting with people and stuck on a plane for like a jillion hours maybe I’d spend more hours watching video on my computer or iPod but, ya know, I’ve got stuff to do and more appropriate alternatives. Does that make the iPod a failure as a video player? Maybe people watch just exactly as much video as is appropriate for a portable video device given that we consume video differently than we consume music.

Does this mean that mobile media is doomed to nothing more than three-minute YouTube clips? Not at all – but it does mean that the content delivered to mobile devices needs to take into consideration the environment in which it’s being consumed, which means making the content – especially long-form content – bookmarkable, resumable, and social. Just like a beach novel.

In fact, long-form narratives can work much better than mobisodes that are actually too short. This leads us to the next obvious question, how short is too short?

**How Short is Too Short?**

As suggested above, mobisodes don’t have to be less than three minutes in length, but since mobile project outlines often mandate they be kept short, let us examine examples of short-form storytelling in other media. Short narratives have been told since the beginning of the written word, from hieroglyphics to comic strips to comic books to “flash fictions” to short stories to novellas. In each of the examples discussed below, these stories tend to fall into one of two categories: encapsulated “one-off” stories or longer narratives broken up into serial installments.

**One-Offs**

When experimenting with new narrative forms, both creators and distributors may want to follow the same model used by the print industry: look for stories that work well as a one-off but can conceivably be extended under the umbrella of some larger brand. Currently, finding media for a portable device can be a challenging and arduous task and mobile consumers are unlikely to appreciate having to hunt down new, unproven content each time they want to watch something on their portable device. This is an excellent need for an existing network to fill – as the “coolfinder” that collects shorts by multiple creators under one thematic umbrella. An Adult Swim mobile “channel” could first deliver a series of shorts from different animators, and once a particular short gains traction, the network could fund further development for either the property itself (*The Venture Brothers*) or the property’s creators (*Robot Chicken*). This “channel” becomes a ‘go-to’ site for consumers seeking content that matches their taste. This is nothing revolutionary; it’s the same general philosophy behind network TV and new IPTV experiments like Turner Broadcasting’s *Super Deluxe*.

Good examples of short-form one-offs can be found easily in the animation arena. From Disney’s *Steamboat Willie* to Pixar’s *Geri’s Game*, animators have been producing excellent one-offs for years. Sites like www.smallcarrot.com are good sources for new animation and motion design work aimed squarely at the mobile market. That said, short-form one-offs need not be constrained to children’s animation. Another excellent
short film that can be found online is *The Cat With Hands*, which is a delightfully creepy story tinged with folklore-horror elements. While it uses a dash of 3-D animation, the majority of the film is live-action – but even if the animation were removed altogether, it demonstrates how the short form isn’t constrained to only humor. In only a few short minutes, *The Cat With Hands* creates a better mood and more satisfying sense of the willies than most 2-hour horror films.

**Serialized Narratives**

The other option for short-form storytelling is serializing a longer narrative. This is the predominant form for television, admittedly in half-hour or hour-long segments, though. It’s no surprise, therefore, that one of the earliest mobisode experiments was *24: Conspiracy*, a spin-off of *24*. The series escapes the limitations of mobile media by successfully porting a taste of the parent property’s explosive action and exciting pace to the small screen, but it stumbles in its concession to the form by limiting each episode to only 60 seconds long. The mobisode producers decided one-hour episodes were untenable at this stage of the technology (or, presumably, their allotted budget), so they compressed the narrative from one-hour episodes to one-minute episodes. The idea that the story unfolds in precisely real time was also jettisoned (since just getting the characters from one side of town to the other could take up an entire season), but it remains an interesting gimmick, if only because it throws some of the constraints of the form into such sharp relief that it resembles caricature. By examining some of these points, we can see how these philosophical changes increase in importance in inverse proportion to the length of the mobisode, and provide some valuable answers to “How short is too short?”

**Tell, Don’t Show**

As I mentioned earlier in my passage about product placement, a fundamental rule to any Creative Writing 101 course is “Show, don’t tell.” When writing for a compressed format, however, “Tell, don’t show” may be more useful: precious minutes, if not hours, can be lopped off a story through the use of exposition. The first episode of *24: Conspiracy* opens on a generic-looking room as a couple bursts through the door. “The last thing in the world I thought I would ever do is pick up a guy in a bar and bring him to my hotel room,” breathes the woman. An episode of the regular *24* television series is less likely to resort to such clumsy exposition, but the mobisode manages to cram a large amounts of information and narrative into just one sentence. We’ve immediately established the setting, who the guy is, what’s happening, and some sense of the woman’s character as well.

In addition to exaggerated expository language, the mobisode resorts to exaggerated expository action as well. After the opening line the couple resumes their passionate kissing. A second or two later the woman pulls back, smiles, seizes the man by the throat and breaks his neck. Any fan of action movies should be cocking a skeptical eyebrow at this point - there’s no way that the woman could exert that kind of force, especially at that awkward angle - but given the time constraints, viewers are likely to cut the storytellers some slack. A quick break of the neck is much more efficient than poison or even a knife in the stomach, either of which would require several seconds to be spent showing the victim clutching his throat or his stomach. One might argue that this is even more “show” than normal, but in truth this degree of accelerated, obvious development is the visual equivalent of being told that the character is killed. They don’t show him dying, they show him instantly dead.

“Tell, don’t show” is an extremely efficient storytelling technique, but that doesn’t mean it’s a necessarily good one. A second common storytelling rule is that a story should never start with an explosion, because then the story’s pace has no place to go but down from there. While *24* is known for its breakneck pace and
relentless explosions, it’s actually very good at including enough downtime between action sequences to develop its characters into people audiences care about. “Show, don’t tell” is critical here – by taking the time to show how events transpire, a story also takes the time for audiences to build attachment to the characters. When that time is removed, a story can easily struggle with two-dimensional characters, an affliction from which 24: Conspiracy suffers acutely.

**Stock Characters**

Much more than its parent show, 24: Conspiracy relies on stereotypes and clear visual archetypes. The Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU) in the parent program relied on a team of computer geeks, including the overweight, socially awkward geek and the cranky, sarcastic blonde geek; The CTU computer team in the mobisodes is apparently comprised of only a single Asian woman. Similarly, where the parent program has a group of suits that manage CTU and a team of scruffy field operatives; the mobisode series includes only one of each.

The reasons for this are twofold. First, with almost zero time for character growth, it’s imperative that each character be almost instantly established, shaped and identified. Second, on a relatively low-resolution small screen (like that of a cell phone), it can be difficult to make out the visual differences between people that are of relatively the same proportion or wardrobe. Essentially, if you have multiple characters that serve approximately the same role then they need to be differentiated through either personality type or physical appearance. On 24, the geeks on the tech squad differentiate themselves by their personalities more than by their physical forms, but their personalities emerge through dialogue, body language, and above all else screen time. The Asian woman in the mobisodes only has a few lines of dialogue – and she eventually emerges as a major player in the plot. Relying on stereotypes or archetypes, as well as keeping the cast miniscule, help to keep the characters easy to follow with almost zero development time.

The trouble with this is that it is not only often politically incorrect, but it makes the work as a whole feel a little like a bad farce. 24: Conspiracy relies on archetypes to an almost absurd extent - the head of the department is a balding man in a suit, the hero a clean-cut guy in his twenties, the techie an Asian woman, and the bad guys include the token scruffy computer hacker thug. Trying to develop one character past anything more than 2-D cardboard under these stringent constraints is incredibly difficult, and trying to do it with an entire cast becomes almost impossible. I have faith that some true masters of the form will emerge that can pull it off, but it’s no surprise that early attempts like 24: Conspiracy feel like pantomimes or melodramas.

**So How Short Is Too Short?**

So, when writing for mobisodes, how short is too short? A mobisode is too short when it doesn’t take the time to develop its characters to the point where an audience can engage with them in a meaningful manner. Without characters that mean something to the audience, all the explosions and car chases in the world will be nothing more than little blurs and bursts of pixels. In other, more classical words, they’ll be just so much sound and fury signifying nothing.

This is not to say that short form stories are doomed to shallow plots and characters – far from it. The Star Wars: Clone Wars series of animated 3-minute shorts that Genndy Tartakovsky and Lucasfilm produced for The Cartoon Network in 2003 pulls off an impressive narrative feat by delivering an astounding amount of action, character development and quality narrative in a series of three-minute chunks. (Many fans argue that Tartakovsky does a much better job than Lucas does in the full-length prequels.) Tartakovsky’s series
succeeds much better than *24: Conspiracy* partly due to much tighter integration with the existing franchise.

This is a significant point worth considering further. Before discussing whether storytellers should focus on developing new properties or extending existing ones, however, it is worth considering another characteristic of the mobile form Tartakovsky’s *Clone Wars* handled exceptionally well: reframing.

**Reframing**

Another nugget of questionable mobile media “wisdom” is the idea of reframing content for the small screen. The argument is that since screens on cell phones and iPods are so small, then content destined for these platforms requires a special form of cinematography. Every bit of dialogue has to be in close-up! Bullet holes have to be the size of paper plates! In practice, however, this often rings false.

Genndy Tartakovsky’s *Star Wars: Clone Wars* shorts are available for purchase from the Cartoon Network on the iTunes store. Despite knowing these episodes were likely to end up on video iPods, the show’s creators didn’t produce a special pan-and-scan version. Each episode is still presented in widescreen, which means that not only are the Jedi Knights waving around teensy-tiny lightsabers, fully one quarter of the screen is black and unused.

Overall, the presentation works perfectly well.

Part of this is because the screen on a video iPod doesn’t just display a decent number of pixels, it also offers a higher dot pitch, which translates into a higher-resolution experience. A video-enabled iPod uses a 2.5-inch LCD display at a resolution of 320 by 240 pixels, with a dot pitch of .156 mm. By contrast, a Palm Treo 650’s display has a resolution of 320 by 320 pixels, but with a dot pitch of .25 mm, so images displayed on its screen aren’t as sharp. According to Wikipedia, “measured in millimeters, a smaller [dot pitch] number generally means a sharper image (as there are more dots in an area of any given size), and vice versa.” Some early-generation mobile video devices may be constrained by very low-resolution screens (the Motorola RAZR only has a 176 by 220 pixel screen), but many more recent or more media-friendly models are improving their screens (the 2.4-inch screen on the newer Motorola Q measures 320 by 240 pixels). As devices improve the quality of their displays, the need to reframe existing content drops considerably.

A second argument against reframing content comes from the human capacity for negative capability, where the imagination fills in any missing details. If someone is shot on-screen and stumbles backwards clutching their chest, audiences don’t need to actually “see” the bullet hole. If the director’s vision was to show two enemies locked in combat on the giant branches of an enormous plant (as Tartakovsky does in the nineteenth episode of *Clone Wars*), audiences don’t need to be able to make out all the details of each character to know what’s going on. In fact, purists will argue that it’s much more important to keep the director’s vision intact; even if we only see two little blurs, the critical aspect of the shot is the scale of the setting and the composition of the shot, not the details on the combatants.

Sites like smallcarrot.com already offer short films for download with options for phones, iPods or PSPs; it’s easy to imagine adding one.
more tier of choice, or, within a generation or two of mobile processor and infrastructure upgrades, the
device itself being able to switch from original to magnified modes on the fly.

Of course, there are some exceptions. Content for people with weaker eyes probably should be reframed; if
a particularly tech-savvy elderly grandmother wanted to watch old episodes of *Murder, She Wrote* on a cell
phone, for example, magnification would be appropriate. Similarly, an extremely detail-oriented piece of
content might not port well to very small screens. It’s easy to imagine how a video version of *Where’s Waldo?*
on a 2.5-inch screen could be absolutely infuriating.

In short, while reframing seems largely unnecessary, both content and audience should be evaluated on a
case-by-case basis. If magnification is deemed necessary by either the nature of the content or the particular
audience (or if requests for magnification begin to roll in from audiences), the best approach may be to offer
mobile media in multiple formats, the way DVDs are often available in either widescreen or pan-and-scan.
This will satisfy the needs of these audiences without alienating purists.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- The accepted wisdom that mobile media consumers won’t watch anything longer than three minutes
  is false. When presented with compelling content, consumers will remain engaged with the content
  for hours.

- Mobile media isn’t always consumed while literally mobile. Most mobile video content is consumed
  while seated someplace away from home, or, if consumed while in transit, is done by passengers, not
  drivers or pilots.

- New technology will solve problems with download times and power drains.

- Mobile media providers should look to consumption patterns of existing media forms like beach
  novels for cues as to how to shape their content. Some examples of this are bookmarking functions,
  the ability to share bookmarks or snippets, and breaking long-form content up into smaller
  components for easier file sharing and portability.

- Content providers responsible for creating mobile media may want to consider launching coolfinder
  channels to provide pointers to user-generated or indie-developed content, then consider the most
  popular offerings for potential mainstream development.

- Mobile content developers consider other genres than comedy for development – short films like *The
  Cat With Hands* demonstrate the viability of genres like horror in the short form.

- Serialized narratives seem ideally suited to mobile media, but creators need to be careful to not make
  the short episodes too short. While the mantra “tell, don’t show” can be useful, episodes still need
  to have sufficient time to establish and develop strong, non-stock characters. Three minutes may be
  enough; one minute probably won’t be.

- If possible, customers should be presented with a choice as to whether they want their mobile media
  reframed or delivered in its original proportions. Much like the widescreen versus pan-and-scan
  debate, many purists will demand that their content be delivered intact, despite the limitations of the
  small screen.
New Property or Existing Property?  
New Content or Existing Content?

The first question that storytellers looking to work in the mobile space have to ask is whether their project should focus on a wholly new property or extend an existing one. This question is often asked not by the storytellers but by the executives signing the storytellers’ checks; and often the question that has to be answered first is even more basic: should our mobile media project deliver all-new content or just repurpose existing content?

At the risk of sounding too simplistic, it depends.

Existing Content

There are several undeniably compelling reasons to use simple repackaged content for a mobile media project.

- **Portability.** Most iPod owners didn’t buy their iPods to listen to iPod-exclusive music, but to take the music they already have with them; the same can be said for video. The need driving these purchases is the customers’ desire to liberate themselves from a fixed viewing location – they want to watch The Daily Show while on their daily commute, or watch Studio 60 while sitting in Starbucks between classes. For these customers, new content is nice, but it isn’t key.

- **Affordability.** Porting existing content to mobile devices may be more cost-effective than financing the creation of all-new content, if the right contracts are in place. Without the right contracts, it could be costly to secure the rights to distribute the content in a new format. Nevertheless, many studios and networks have vast back catalogs of content that can be easily monetized by making them available in a new format – for examples of this, check out the wildly profitable practice of putting old TV shows out on DVD or on the iTunes video store.

Mobile media is media first and mobile second. When DVDs first began to appear on the market, their champions trumpeted the new format’s ability to include new, radical options for presenting content.
Branching paths! Alternate camera angles! In truth, while these options are often appreciated by die-hard fans or technophiles, most people who buy the DVD of *Jurassic Park* just want a higher quality of picture and sound when watching a T-Rex chow down on a lawyer. Mobile media is likely to see a similar development path – personally speaking, I religiously purchase every episode of *Studio 60* as soon as they show up on the iTunes store because I want them in my collection, and I want to take them with me on my iPod. There is other, exclusive content available on the iTunes store, and every so often I’ll try some of it out, but for the most part I’m happy with just having the latest Aaron Sorkin in my pocket.

**New Content**

The primary reasoning for developing new content on mobile devices is fundamentally different than delivering existing content on mobile devices. Repurposing existing content may be the best course of action if the ultimate goal is to move content. Until the mobile media market is deemed large enough to warrant it, and/or barring a story concept that takes advantage of the unique offerings of the mobile format, developing new content may only be the best thing to do if the ultimate goal is to move devices.

Consider how this problem constantly presents itself in the video game market. For Bungie, the game developer behind the blockbuster game *Halo*, the best course of action is to develop a super-smash game and then release it on as many platforms as possible – Xbox, Xbox 360, GameCube, Wii, PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, PSP, DS, PC, Mac... If you can plug a controller into it and get a framerate higher than 10 frames a second, it’s an additional revenue source. Port it, ship it and bank it.

What actually happened, though, was quite different. Microsoft realized that they needed a blockbuster exclusive like *Halo* to drive sales of their Xbox hardware, so they bought Bungie. By doing so, Microsoft could ensure that *Halo* would only appear on the Xbox, so any gamer that wanted to play Halo would have to purchase one. This reduced the number of potential consumers of the game to a mere fraction of its previous size, but Microsoft had the money to (presumably) make up for these lost markets. This scenario plays itself out again and again on almost every gaming platform: the *Super Mario Brothers* games drove Nintendo sales, *Sonic the Hedgehog* games drove Sega sales, and later *Final Fantasy* games drove Sony PlayStation sales.

We’re currently seeing a similar scenario play out in the cell phone market. Cingular, Sprint and other telcos are all scrambling to ink exclusive deals to ensure certain mobile media franchises will only be available on specific phones and services. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, this course of action is good for phone companies but bad for both consumers and content developers. Exclusive deals to syndicate existing content are bad enough, but why would a content developer create works that are only ever available ever on mobile devices – especially in a system when it’s likely to only be seen on one of the major carriers, and then only on a fraction of their phones? Why would content developers take the gamble of developing new content for such an untested niche market?

At this early stage, barring outside factors like partial ownership or corporate partnerships, the only time that it appears to make sense for a content provider to develop new content for mobile devices is when that content provider perceives a large untapped market hungry for mobile content, or when new content presents itself that caters specifically to the opportunities specific unique to mobile devices. If that need exists, and if the mobile devices offer enough opportunities to warrant that development, or if the companies making devices are willing to fund the development of new content, then we arrive at the question posed earlier: should original mobile media content focus on new franchises or extend existing franchises?
Extending Existing Franchises

The most straightforward way to draw new audiences to new devices is to lure them in with existing franchises. Simply making Studio 60 available in a portable format is good, but it won’t compel fans of the show to try your mobile content unless that content offers something they can’t get elsewhere. This banks on the concept of transmedia storytelling – telling a story across multiple media forms, where each installment in each additional form brings something new to the story as a whole.

Both 24: Conspiracy and Star Wars: Clone Wars are strong examples of transmedia storytelling, but the ways in which they differ serve as a compelling case study in how transmedia storytelling can succeed or fail based on one simple narrative decision – namely, what is the existing investment on the part of the audience?

24: Conspiracy

To return to an earlier example, Fox’s 24 mobile spin-off was promoted as featuring “New Characters. New Storyline. New Technology. Worldwide in 2005.” Unfortunately, with the exception of “New Technology” and “Worldwide”, the first two features fairly well sum up the reasons why 24: Conspiracy failed as a narrative.

First, let’s look at what these mobisodes do well: borrow wisely from the aesthetic of its parent franchise. The mobisodes use the same theme music and the general style of tension-building background music as the parent franchise. The sound effects are largely the same, including the signature chirp from the phones in the CTU headquarters. The brief logo animation opening each episode is the same as the parent 24, with the digital “24” flickering into view on a black backdrop, except for the addition of “CONSPIRACY” written under it in a matching font. The cinematography is also essentially the same, cutting between shots with an occasional quick zoom-in to keep a viewer jittery. Further, the mobisodes include enough high-tech toys to keep the fanboys in the audience happy.

The trouble is everything else. If it weren’t for these swiped elements, it would be almost impossible to tell that this was a part of the 24 franchise. The mobisodes abandon Jack Bauer, the lead from the main TV show, and instead follow a different agent in a different CTU office. The mobisodes center on Agent Martin, who is tracking down his ex-partner and ex-lover Susan Walker, who has apparently gone rogue and killed Donald Frick, a Special Agent for the U.S. Department of Defense. It’s a decent premise, and would be right at home in any of a thousand different pulp novels, but its tenuous connection to the primary 24 universe means that the audience has almost no investment in what happens to these characters.

The mobisodes make a halfhearted attempt to tie themselves into the larger story arc by making a quick reference to a plot point in the fourth season of 24, but for the most part there is no sense that anything that’s happening in the mobisodes has any impact whatsoever on the world in the TV show. We’ve never seen any of these characters before, and there’s a palpable sense that we’ll never see any of them again. There’s no mention of these characters or their actions in the parent program. In short, there is no sense that watching the mobisodes will enrich the viewing experience of the main TV series, or vice versa.

Perhaps the most damning aspect of the mobisodes is how the show just feels cheap. In the opening logo animation, the digital “24” is animated
but the word “CONSPIRACY” is completely static, not even reflecting the changes in light source from the animation behind it. This makes it resemble an exercise from a freshman-level compositing class at a third-rate film school. This same bargain-basement feel extends to the rest of the show, which feels like it was written by interns and was shot with whichever extras were hanging around the back lot that day. Viewers wince when the hero barks clichés like “I need answers and I need them now!” through clenched teeth while pointing a gun at a thug. The awkwardness intensifies when the next line is “You have no idea what they’ll do to me if I tell you!”, and the pain becomes completely unbearable when the hero responds, “You have no idea what I’ll do to you if you don’t!” This is the kind of stuff that gets laughed out of Creative Writing 101. It’s not bad for an amateur film with absolutely zero budget, but for something that’s meant to extend an Emmy-winning multimillion-dollar franchise, 24: Conspiracy is an embarrassment.

**Star Wars: Clone Wars**

By contrast, Genndy Tartakovsky’s Star Wars: Clone Wars stands as an excellent example of what the short form can do. In two seasons, each of which only contains about a single hour of content, Tartakovsky bridges the gap between the second and third Star Wars prequels and packs each three-minute segment with action, clever dialogue and style.

There are few examples of negative capability being put to better use in a story than in Star Wars. George Lucas successfully developed a broad mythology, providing enough material to spawn hundreds of books, comics, video games and other spin-offs exploring the empty spaces that he built into his films. The original trilogy is rife with negative capability, from the multitude of references to the Clone Wars and the Old Republic to the mysterious histories of characters like Darth Vader and Boba Fett. Perhaps most interesting from a transmedia standpoint was the huge chronological gap that Lucas left open between the second and third prequels, a time that was referred to in all the other films as a period of great drama and glory.

Not only was Tartakovsky invited to explore this extremely fertile narrative space, he was also handed the reins for primary protagonists from the films. In its two seasons, Tartakovsky explores key moments in the lives of these characters, including how young Anakin Skywalker transitions from student to a full Jedi knight and how Skywalker gets the jagged scar he sports over his right eye at the beginning of Episode III. Audiences of Clone Wars come away with a greater understanding of events in the parent property, and in fact some things in the films barely make sense without seeing the animated series. Tartakovsky, for instance, offered his viewers the first appearance of General Grievous, one of the primary villains in Episode III. In Clone Wars, Grevious is a major force to be reckoned with, easily wiping the floor with whole teams of Jedi knights. In Episode III, reference is made to Grevious’ skills but audiences don’t get to see very much of them in action. Without seeing Clone Wars, viewers don’t have a clear sense of Grievous as a character, or understand why he’s coughing and wheezing through most of the film – a character trait Tartakovsky explains at the end of the animated series.
Finally, it’s important not to neglect the critical factor that Tartakovsky is very, very good at what he does. Throughout the *Clone Wars* series, Tartakovsky displays the same virtuoso sense of cinematography he deployed to great effect in his award-winning animated series *Samurai Jack*. Tartakovsky shares a similar sensibility to Lucas: both show panache for magnificent battles, sweeping vistas, fascinating characters, and exquisitely crafted senses of mood and character. One scene near the end of the first season features a slow pan shot along a lit lightsaber, tracking across the blade as raindrops sizzle and hiss on its surface. Even on a tiny screen this cinematic sensibility is breathtaking, and the fact that Tartakovsky takes the time in a three-minute short for these little strokes makes all the difference between *Clone Wars* feeling like a work of art and *24: Conspiracy* feeling like a half-baked weekend project.

**Lessons in Transmediation**

These two contrasting franchise extensions offer different lessons for developing content for mobile media.

1. **Don’t skimp on the budget.** An experimental foray into a new, untested market like mobile media is a gamble – but anything worth doing is worth doing well. Be sure to budget enough money for the project to enable its creators to do something that will add to the overall quality of the franchise, not detract from it. It would seem the success of *Clone Wars* is due in part to a decent budget and widespread release with an established and well-targeted audience (each short premiered in prime time on The Cartoon Network).

2. **Use established characters.** *24: Conspiracy* suffered from a lack of audience involvement because it didn’t use any characters that viewers of the existing franchise would care about. This is not to say a spin-off series must include the primary characters from the parent property. The *Enter the Matrix* video game succeeded by focusing on the crew of the Osiris, most of which had already appeared in the second *Matrix* film, and the *Stargate: Atlantis* TV series had sufficient success as a spin-off of the hit show *Stargate SG-1* that it’s now well into its third season, partly thanks to starring several secondary characters from the parent property. Stories succeed or fail based on their characters, and transmedia experiments can gain a lot of traction by using characters an audience already cares about.

3. **Have some impact on a larger story.** Ideally, a parent property should build room in its main narrative for a secondary transmedia experiment to flourish. In the most extreme cases, this takes the form of large gaps in time or events concurrent to the main story arc that are all happening off-screen. More subtle cases may simply use throw-away lines of dialogue as starting points for transmediation. The key here is to find places where the audience wonders “I wonder what happened there?” and then tell them – but the new story has to in some way enrich the parent narrative, and not feel optional or superfluous.

4. **Take the time for craftsmanship.** To return to an earlier theme, each episode of *24: Conspiracy* is simply too short. Without sufficient time for character development a story cannot flesh out existing characters, much less develop new ones. This doesn’t require a great deal of time – *Clone Wars* introduced characters...
that didn’t exist outside of the animated series but still felt decently well-rounded, but enough time is
still required to install some sense of growth. Additionally, taking the time for cinematography is well
worth it, as mood and craft are the things that set art apart from the mundane. It’s remarkable how
much quality can be gained in a three-minute episode over a 60-second one.

It’s also worth noting that once mobile media comes into its own, extending an existing franchise into
mobile media can serve as a form of colonization. 24: Conspiracy may currently sell Cingular phones to some
hardcore fans of the TV series 24, but once the mobisodes are available to a wider audience, it becomes
possible to imagine that some consumers might eventually first experience the franchise through the
mobisodes, and might become motivated to watch the parent TV series.

Creating New Franchises

This line of reasoning suggests mobile platforms will predominantly serve as a sort of satellite to existing
media forms and properties, but that’s not necessarily the case. It makes sense to create wholly new stories
for mobile devices when it’s too expensive to secure the rights to an existing franchise, or when the storyteller
believes there is enough opportunity in the new format to do something that couldn’t have been done before
in other media forms.

Li’l Bush stands as an example of a mobisode series that could have easily been done in other media. In fact,
the first episode is available for viewing online, and works perfectly well in a browser instead of on a phone.
However, Amp’d Mobile secured the exclusive contract to the content in hopes of offering their customers
exclusive content. The possible market for the content is bigger without that exclusive contract, but without
Amp’d spending the money to promote the content, it might well have never made it in front of any
audience at all. Again, this is nothing new – it’s similar to the market model used by existing network TV.

Where franchises unique to mobile media get particularly interesting is when those stories take advantage
of features exclusive to the media form. While the mobile platform suffers from a number of quirks, it also
offers some unique advantages that could be used to craft some fascinating new works.

Location Awareness

A story being told on a device that can move around is one thing, but a story being told on a device that
can sense where it is currently located in the physical world is something else. The new field of ubiquitous
computing, or “ucomp” for short, studies the conceptual shift between computing in one location and
moving through a computer-enabled universe that reacts to you. Mobile media has already had some success
with narratives that might be considered “ubiquitous storytelling.” By coupling a handheld device with a
network of sensory devices like RFID tags or wireless network nodes, it’s possible to craft stories specially
customized according to the physical location of the audience at the time.

Imagine a device that unreels a horror story set in a creepy old castle installed in an actual creepy old castle,
funded by a European tourism board. Or perhaps a device that tells a story to children making their way
through Walt Disney World, telling the story of how Mickey Mouse goes about his day based on the order
in which the children visit the attractions in the park. By storing a number of possible narrative clips for the
device to display based on where the device is located, the device can entertain the child with a story that
seems to be designed just for her.
Another possibility for location-aware storytelling could arise through a strategic partnership between a content company and a retail company with a number of physical locations. Recently Starbucks has been making increasingly large inroads into the entertainment industry by funding new music, film and print projects. Given this interest and the overwhelming number of physical Starbucks cafes around the world, it’s possible to imagine a promotion where chapters of a film or novella are only available for download at particular Starbucks locations -- to experience the whole story, an audience member must physically travel to different locations to “collect” each one. Such a project would probably require a fairly high-profile author in order to overcome the perceived amount of labor involved in hearing the whole story, but Starbucks certainly has the financial wherewithal to strike a deal with Nora Ephron or Stephen King. Places like Starbucks, McDonald’s, Borders or Barnes and Noble are all excellent candidates for such a project because many of them already have wi-fi nodes already in place.

Sound far-fetched? Not at all. In 2005 MIT alumni Michael Epstein and Cristobal Garcia launched History Unwired, a mobile media project that did almost exactly this in the streets of Venice. From the project’s web site:

*History Unwired* is a walking tour through one of Venice’s more hidden neighborhoods, delivered over location-aware, multimedia phones and PDAs. The content is a first-ever mix of mobile video, animation, audio, and installation art for the tourism sector. The tour takes visitors around the neighborhood of Castello, guided by the voices of Venetian citizens whose work and perspectives depict a particularly local experience of art and craft, history and folklore, public and private spaces.

*History Unwired* focused on the history of one particular location and served as an excellent tool for tourism, not as a fictional narrative, but it’s easy to imagine how this system could be deployed for entertainment. For more information on ubiquitous computing, check out Adam Greenfield’s excellent 2006 book *Everyware: The Dawning Age of Ubiquitous Computing*.

**Peer Awareness**

The previous example outlined a device that shapes its content based on *what* is nearby, but another option that mobile media makes available to storytellers is a story customized based on *who* is nearby. The same types of sensors that tell a cell phone where it’s currently located in the Magic Kingdom can also be used to tell the device what other devices are currently within range, and through the use of profile data, learn something about their owners.

In his seminal 2002 work *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, Howard Rheingold describes the Japanese service ImaHima (“are you free now?”):

> When you join, you fill out a profile and set up a buddy list similar to the kind used with Internet chat messaging; each person must give permission before someone else can know automatically where they are. You also list your favorite places. When you select the “update” link on your mobile’s ImaHima menu, everyone on your buddy list knows, for example, that you are within a few blocks of Shibuya station and are free for lunch. (Rheingold 166)

Services like Dodgeball (www.dodgeball.com) and Plazes (www.plazes.com) already offer services similar to this in the US, but little-to-no use has been made of these kinds of services for narrative purposes. Perhaps
even more interesting for entertainment purposes is the notion of lovegeties, which Rheingold describes as follows:

“Interpersonal awareness devices” have been evolving for several years. Since 1998, hundreds of thousands of Japanese have used Lovegety keychain devices, which signal when another Lovegety owner of the opposite sex and a compatible profile is within fifteen feet. (Rheingold 164)

Imagine the narrative possibilities with such a service. There is already a “Big Games” movement afoot, as described in C3 researcher Ivan Askwith's paper “It’s Not (Just) a Game”. Alternate Reality Games (or ARGs) use everything from tombstones to mobile devices as elements of a ubiquitous game, which intentionally blurs the line between what's the game and what’s ‘real’ (hence the title). Live Action Role-Playing Games, or LARPs, predate ARGs by decades, but it’s easy to imagine how a Lovegety-style service could be used in such a game. Hold up your phone to ‘scan’ the player next to you for stats, character history and even artwork of his or her avatar.

Simpler implementations of the same technology are also equally exciting. Gamers have been congregating for years to engage in LAN parties, where players lug their desktops or laptops to one physical location for hours of games like DOOM or World of Warcraft. Now mobile devices like the Nintendo DS have built-in Wi-Fi connectivity, so gamers can challenge each other to head-to-head combat in New Super Mario Brothers, Clubhouse Games or Metroid Prime Hunters. Take this idea to the next level and you get a game similar to World of Warcraft, where your avatar's party could be joined in the game world by another player who is located physically next to you. It's a reversal of Internet-based gaming, requiring a physical proximity in order to generate virtual one, but if properly implemented it could be extremely cool.

**Always-On Connectivity**

Speaking of World of Warcraft, another opportunity mobile devices present to storytellers is the ability to connect to a digital world almost as easily as picking up a paperback novel. While some gamers carry their handheld systems with them wherever they go, mobile phones are much more pervasive throughout the general public – and many game companies are now taking advantage of that fact. The exploding casual games market aside, new games allow players to connect a game on their cell phones to the primary game on their PCs. Ragnarok Mobile Mage, for example, “gives you the same great play and user experience as the online version. Build your character’s wealth and status, and purchase the tools of the trade as you encounter those who would stop you. You can even securely transfer your money, ‘Zeny’, to your online Ragnarok account”. Gamers can sneak in some resource-building while they’re waiting on the bus or over lunch, then use it in their main games when they get home. It isn’t a full-fledged mobile UI for a larger MMO like World of Warcraft, but there are multiple companies hard at work on just such a project, including Boston-based Froghop and id's John Carmack, the creator of DOOM.

Another option, which takes a page from the ARG playbook, is to create a story that’s time-sensitive. A narrative could be crafted that follows the same logical lines as the reality shows Big Brother or Most Haunted Live – viewers can “tune in” to a story unfolding in real time whenever they get a chance to flip open their cell phone. This can be interactive (“Press the 6 key at exactly 3:25 PM to open the Gates of Parnassus!”) or passive (“I’ll meet you back here at 7,” whispered Diana, says the text, and then the story follows other things until Diana reappears at 7). This model seems like it’s likely to be more trouble than it’s worth, but imagine a 24-hour special live event of 24, and the concept begins to gain some traction.
Mobile Devices as Story Recorders

Finally, as the idea of user-generated content grows more and more popular, it’s important not to overlook the possibility of using mobile devices to record stories as well as tell them.

The tools are already in place. YouTube offers a tool to upload video clips straight from your cell phone, and Flickr offers a similar feature for still photographs. A new service called Twitter allows bloggers to update a small section of their websites through a SMS service – but also enables users to subscribe to one another’s updates, which are then delivered via SMS to subscriber’s phones. While the messages are restricted to 160 characters, it’s possible to imagine a story told in these little bursts.

Author Warren Ellis took some early steps down this path with his 2002 book Visible Light, which was a collection of very short pieces written on his Handspring Visor to accompany photos taken on the same device. The result is a collection of beautiful, often eerie short pieces. Ellis transmitted the stories from his handheld to his PC for eventual publication, but it’s possible to imagine a similar experiment being delivered to audience members’ handheld devices via a regular cellular network – and being paid for by subscription fees.

The Future is Wide Open

These are just a few of the options mobile devices offer, and innovative storytellers are coming up with new ones all the time. Consider the following snippet from the comments on Warren Ellis’ weblog:

I still think you should consider stitching your fiction into this somehow – I’m not sufficiently tech-minded to make more than a vague suggestion but at least one way of guaranteeing a certain standard of content would be to create data shadows of characters you are currently writing for on-going series. Say you have a friend in L.A with appropriate phone and nothing to do on the weekend. You propose that you will do something they like if they spend their Saturday simulating a Michael Jones datashadow which co-relates with the current story arc or single issue.

Comment by RMC | September 4, 2006

Way ahead of you.

Comment by warrenellis | September 4, 2006

The critical thing to remember, again, is that mobile media is media first and mobile second. By all means, use the advantages of the form to craft new and interesting narratives, but the key factor is to tell new and interesting narratives. The simplest rule is often the hardest to adhere to: don’t suck.

The list of storytellers and companies exploring mobile games and entertainment franchises is growing every day. To keep abreast of the latest developments, here are just a few sites to bookmark:

Engadget Mobile – http://www.engadgetmobile.com
Carnival of the Mobilists – http://www.mobili.st
Textually – http://www.textually.org
GoToMobile – http://www.gotomobile.com
Wireless Week – http://www.wirelessweek.com
SmallCarrot – http://www.smallcarrot.com
HIGHLIGHTS

• Storytellers looking to work in mobile media need to carefully weigh whether they should create a transmedia extension of an existing franchise or create a wholly new intellectual property, or if they should just repackage existing content.

• Most people don’t buy mobile devices to experience mobile-specific content – yet.

• Transmedia extensions should use existing characters and make some considerable contribution to the experience of the franchise as a whole. *24: Conspiracy* failed from a narrative standpoint partly because it was too isolated from the parent franchise. *Star Wars: Clone Wars* succeeds because it weaves itself tightly into the empty spaces left by the parent franchise.

• It makes sense to create wholly new series for mobile devices when it’s too expensive to properly expand an existing franchise or when a story utilizes the unique features of mobile devices, including location awareness, peer awareness, always-on connectivity and mobile devices as story recorders.

• Mobile media is media first and mobile second. In any form, the critical factor is to tell new and interesting narratives. Time should be taken for cinematography and narrative development. Take the time for craftsmanship, and don’t skimp on the budget.

• *Don’t suck.*
The Last, Most Treacherous Mile

You have a compelling story. The narrative is tight, the acting is excellent, the music is absolutely perfect. Your marketing department has managed to whip your would-be audience up into a frothy frenzy. There’s only one thing left to do: get it to them.

This is not necessarily as easy as one might think.

As I outlined in the Barriers to Entry section of this white paper, actually getting content onto mobile devices can be a long, convoluted process. The content can be difficult to find, it can take a long time to download, and there is often no easy way to be notified when a new mobisode is available. Often, this process is so arduous that this complexity alone is enough to turn would-be customers away from purchasing mobile content.

Personally, I chalk this up to cellular companies stumbling through terra incognita as they attempt to morph from utility companies into entertainment companies. The worst thing about all this confusion is that it may be, for the most part, unnecessary. A more viable business model for mobile media delivery may be right under all of our noses.

What’s the Difference Between Mobisodes and Podcasts?

Almost from the beginning, the Internet was perceived as a rich, fertile ground for personal expression. Personal homepages evolved into personal websites, which eventually evolved into weblogs. The vast majority of weblogs still consist primarily of text with the occasional static image, but now weblogs are beginning to evolve into something else. In a way that’s almost fractal-like, the evolution of weblogs mirrors the growth of the web as a whole – as the web expanded to incorporate text, then images, then audio, and then video, so too is weblogging.

In recent years, some blogging tools have begun to offer two new key features: the ability to publish files as well as text in weblog entries, and something called Really Simple Syndication (RSS). An RSS feed is the
weblog’s content freed from the rest of the site – content that includes text, images or these new ‘enclosed’ files. By combining the two features, webloggers began to enclose audio files into their weblog entries and the practice of ‘podcasting’ was born.

With podcasts, webloggers can create scheduled audio transmissions over the web. While podcasts started out as almost exclusively audio programs, it wasn’t long before it expanded to include video podcasts as well (often referred to as ‘vodcasts’ or ‘vlogging’). Listeners could subscribe to podcasts using specific applications for the task (called ‘podcatchers’) or, eventually, in Apple’s own iTunes application. The downloaded files could then be experienced on the subscriber’s computer or uploaded to their iPod for listening or watching on the go. One of the major benefits of this format was how it eliminated the need for consumers to continually check back for new episodes – the podcatching applications would regularly check for new episodes and, if so configured, would download each new episode and sync it between the computer and the iPod without any involvement by the user. The user could simply pluck their iPod from its syncing cradle on the way out the door in the morning, and then, once they’re comfortably situated on the train for their morning commute or on their coffee break, thumb through to see what new content had been uploaded while they slept.

This model could easily be applied to the mobile media market. Smart phones like Palm Treos and Danger Hiptops need to be recharged and can be synced with desktop computers anyway – configuring them to subscribe to the same types of RSS feeds that power podcasts would theoretically require only a few modifications or software applications. By piggybacking off the user’s home Internet connection, this also helps to alleviate many of the concerns and costs inherent in trying to download content over a cellular network.

Podcasters are starting to make inroads into this particular market themselves. A quick search on the iTunes store will turn up a number of video podcasts, including interview shows such as CrankyGeeks or style and design shows like Cool Hunting. As of this writing there hasn’t been a great deal of exploration into this format as a narrative delivery system; the closest thing that’s appeared so far was the lonelygirl15 phenomenon in mid-2006, which was a story that unfolded as a series of diary-style talking head videos from a YouTube user calling herself ‘lonelygirl15’. While the series initially posed as reality, the girl was eventually exposed as an actor and the entire thing was revealed to be a publicity hoax similar to the early promotional campaign employed by the horror film The Blair Witch Project. This was a clever mash-up of cultural memes, mixing video podcasting with YouTube and alternate reality games (ARGs) like ilovebees, but it smacked more of a gimmick than of a real exploration of IPTV as a viable delivery medium for episodic content.

Of course, there is some concern about piracy when delivering content to the user’s computers instead of merely making it available for streaming from a (relatively) secure website. How, then, can we assuage those concerns and perhaps even turn the desire to share one’s media collection with others as a marketing tool? How can mobile media be made sexy? One place we can look for a possible solution is Microsoft.

**Making Mobile Media Sexy**

“Sexy” means ‘attractive to others.’ Mobile media is sexy when it becomes something you want to be seen using. There’s an often-told, somewhat apocryphal story, in the blogosphere about iPod users offering one of their earbuds to strangers so they can share their musical discoveries. This is an extreme example, but it
demonstrates the second degree of sexy -- the “in-the-know”, cool factor. When someone finds something new and cool, they want to share their discovery with others. Being the one who recommends the next big thing is worth a ton of social capital. This process is one Sam Ford discusses in his white paper on dorm room media consumption as fan proselytizing. This same social behavior is exhibited online in the spread of viral websites and videos. Advertisers are coming to realize the value in viral marketing, and films such as the Summer 2006 adventure-comedy Snakes on a Plane are now relying heavily on this tactic.

We're seeing some of this social/viral mentality appear on phones already through the use of cameraphones -- one person sees something cool, snaps a low-resolution photo of it and then sends it out to all their friends’ phones. Mobile media could use a similar tactic to spread content virally. Robert Tercek sums up the concept, as well as its currently dismal state of implementation, as follows:

In the content business, the best way to defeat consumer fatigue is peer marketing. Savvy movie marketers know that word-of-mouth can drive box office ticket sales. Likewise, in television, the “water cooler effect” generates awareness within a peer group.

This should apply to mobile, too. After all, a telecommunications network ought to be the best network for word-of-mouth marketing. But carriers have failed to harness this powerful mechanism. They provide no easy way for a fan to connect content to friends.

Some of this hesitation is understandable. Obviously content providers are going to be reluctant to permit full viral spreading of their content from phone to phone, fearful of an all-new outbreak of Napster-level piracy... But what if you used P2P software built into a wireless phone in order to temporarily broadcast the media you're currently consuming to those around you? What if video clips are sharable from your phone? Using technologies like Bluetooth, it's possible to extend the “here, you have to try this” mentality to those immediately around you.

Some mobile media devices already understand this concept -- many Nintendo DS games, for example, enable wireless multiplayer games across multiple devices to be spawned from only one copy of the game. One DS hosts the game and the others wirelessly download temporary ‘client’ versions of the game, which disappear from their devices once the game session has ended. Apple's iTunes already offers a similar function as well, enabling other computers on the same network to listen to music that someone decides to share. It’s not available to everyone in the world, only to those around them, and the number of people with whom it can be shared is limited, but these options still offer the “here, you have to try this” function - and, by extension, make the host sexy.

Bizarrely, the company that may be implementing this concept the best is Microsoft.

**Social Media and the Zune**

Music wants to be spread around. It wants to be shared, discovered, let loose.

- Intro movie from comingzune.com

This sentiment is straight out of Web 1.0, the kind of thing one would expect to come from Shawn Fanning, the founder of Napster. Instead, it’s the very first thing a visitor sees once the site for Microsoft’s new iPod competitor, the Zune, finishes loading. Microsoft is making sharing the cornerstone of its marketing
Moving Stories: Aesthetics and Production in Mobile Media

campaign for the Zune, so much so that the promo copy constantly refers to “Connected Entertainment.” Unlike the iPod, the Zune uses built-in 802.11b/g Wi-Fi connectivity to allow each Zune to search for other Zunes nearby. Once a second Zune has been located, the two devices can establish an ad hoc network to exchange media – with some limitations. According to Zunester.com, the blog of Zunester team member David Caulton:

- You can search for nearby Zune owners to interact with.
- You can send them a song, album, etc... for a 3-day/3-play trial listen. Songs come over with metadata and album art (neat). After the 3 days or 3 plays are up, the song gets deleted from the Zune on the next sync, but the info on the song stays in a “journal” on your PC for later purchase or acquisition.
- You can send them photos for unlimited viewing (and these can sync back onto the recipient’s PC).

This already has some sites tearing their hair out. Writing for the highly-popular tech blog Engadget, Ryan Block points out what the Zune can’t do:

- Connect to the Internet.
- Download songs directly from the Zune store via Wi-Fi.
- Sync to your computer via Wi-Fi.

The article continues:

Sorry Microsoft, we think you have it backward. The killer app of having wireless in a portable media device isn’t sharing DRMed files – it’s downloading music from a near infinitely large library no matter where you’re at. That’s why the MusicGremlin was and is so freaking cool. All the music, none of the bother with PCs. So to find out the Zune won’t even match that device in terms of use for wireless is a little disappointing, to say the least.

Other sites echo Engadget’s trepidations. Predictably, Apple CEO Steve Jobs is among them. In a Newsweek interview, Jobs had this to say:

Microsoft has announced its new iPod competitor, Zune. It says that this device is all about building communities. Are you worried?
In a word, no. I’ve seen the demonstrations on the Internet about how you can find another person using a Zune and give them a song they can play three times. It takes forever. By the time you’ve gone through all that, the girl’s got up and left! You’re much better off to take one of your earbuds out and put it in her ear. Then you’re connected with about two feet of headphone cable.

On top of this, what’s to prevent hackers from figuring out ways to keep the downloaded media on their devices, instead of making it just temporary? Often the answer is nothing - such piracy already exists. Hacks already exist that enable determined pirates to copy this shared content, but this represents only a small sliver of the market - most likely the same sliver whose ancestors diligently pirated papyrus scrolls by hand. Some piracy is always inevitable.
The secret to defeating mass piracy is simple: make it easier to obtain the content legally than to do so illegally. In the same *Newsweek* interview, Jobs says:

> Our core initial strategy on the [iTunes Music Store] was that if you want to stop piracy, the way to stop it is by competing with it, by offering a better product at a fair price. In essence, we would make a deal with people. If they would pay a fair price, we would give them a better product and they would stop being pirates.

The key here is to understand that not all sharing is piracy. Some “piracy” is good - the one function that Napster offered that the iTunes store has yet to fully duplicate is the ability to find new music. A search for music by one particular band would result in a list of tracks found in others’ musical libraries. If those users allowed anyone to freely browse their entire libraries, it became possible to find other, similar music. In this way, a search for a popular band like Barenaked Ladies would turn listeners on to more obscure bands like Moxy Früvous or the Arrogant Worms. Some of this functionality does exist in the iTunes store now, but it’s currently limited to the “people who bought X also bought Y and Z” function that’s also easily found at other retailers like Amazon, and is usually limited to only a few recommendations. What the Zune offers above and beyond its competitors is allow for personal social proselytization – taking the facelessness out of Napster and relying on face-to-face, one-to-one sharing of personal media collections, and then limiting the lifespan of the media that’s shared. If the recipient likes the shared content enough after three days (or three plays), they’re presented with the option to buy it for themselves.

Other options a clever mobile media provider might provide:

- Enable a track to be wirelessly shared from one phone to another for the duration of the song, but with a “buy this track now” button displayed on the screen along with the track’s title and artist.
- Playlists might be wirelessly shared from one phone to another, with only the first 30 seconds of each song made available freely before they have to be purchased from a store like iTunes.
- Movie trailers can be shared freely, or movie clips, but with an option at the bottom of the screen (that does not block any of the actual content of the trailer) to download the film to your own phone for only a few dollars.

Naysaying aside, there is still a palpable sense of curiosity to see how well the Zune is widely received – and if it proves to be extremely successful, it probably won’t be long before a similar feature appears in the iPod. While Jobs is correct in that the Zune’s sharing feature is likely to still require some tweaking before it works seamlessly, being able to share the new cool song, TV show, photo, game, or whatever you’ve just found realizes the social capital potential of mobile media – and in so doing makes mobile media sexy.

**Who Says Mobisodes are Just for Mobile Phones?**

Despite the desperate scramblings of the cellular companies, the future of mobile media isn’t likely to stay confined to proprietary single-carrier models for long. There are simply too many competitors coming into the fight swinging, and many of them are far more experienced with delivering mobile content.

As I write this, Sony has just finished yet another round of demonstrations of its upcoming PlayStation 3 hardware to the press. Yes, the machine is going to be insanely powerful (and priced to match), but buried
halfway down a report from *MacWorld* comes the following nugget:

**The PSP will connect via Wi-Fi to the PS3’s hard drive**
While using the PSP as a rear-view mirror in *Gran Turismo* would necessitate a mutation of controllable limbs, Sony has come up with something much more intriguing lately. You can access the PS3’s system menus via the PSP, wirelessly, using a feature called “Remote Play.” Big Kahuna Phil Harrison also says that the PSP will eventually be able to access the PS3’s hard drive from any Wi-Fi spot in the world, rather than just on your local wireless network.

The final missing pieces are already falling into place to wirelessly stream video content from your computer to your TV; companies like TiVo and Slingbox have been tinkering with this functionality for years, and in mid-2006 Apple announced a new product scheduled for early 2007 which will do the same thing. I can already print wirelessly from my house in Somerville to a printer on-campus at MIT, from one wi-fi node to another via the Internet. So what, then, is to stop a user from streaming other content the same way? Not much from a hardware and software standpoint, actually – and if Sony delivers on this promise, it’s almost a sure bet that Microsoft and Apple will follow suit with the Zune and the iPod. In the same way that a TiVo can now link wirelessly to the music and video collection on your computer, a handheld device will be able to do the same thing from almost anywhere. It won’t be a question of whether or not Sprint offers Studio 60 on their exclusive store, but whether or not I’ve already purchased it from the iTunes store on my Mac at home.

“Bah,” the cellular companies may scoff. “No one wants to carry another bulky device in their pockets.” Despite the fact that the ‘convergence’ in ‘Convergence Culture Consortium’ refers to the way old and new media combine, for the sake of this discussion, let us discuss ‘convergence’ as it refers to the combination of multiple devices. Portable music players took off in the 80s with the Sony Walkman, and when cellular phones became small enough consumers slipped those into their Levi’s as well. Millions of people around the world now saunter cowboy-style down the streets with a cell phone in their left pocket and an iPod in their right. Adding a third device into the mix gets problematic, sure, but the iPod, the PSP and the Zune all play multiple media formats, as do high-end smartphones like the Palm Treo.

Further, we’re only a few steps away from closing the last gap in the convergence model – rumors have been swirling for months that Apple is set to launch a new combination iPod-phone-PDA sometime in 2007. If Apple manages to navigate the quagmire of rights issues inherent in such a device the way they managed to pull off the original iTunes Music Store, they may have not only given birth to the ultimate convergence device, but also broken down the barrier between webisodes, mobisodes and plain old TV episodes. And, if this new device succeeds, it’s a no-brainer that Sony, Microsoft and every other company on the block will be sure to follow.
HIGHLIGHTS

• Companies interested in mobile media should evaluate podcasting as an alternative delivery mechanism, due to its open format and ability to notify subscribers when new content is available.

• Despite some missteps, the Microsoft Zune is on the right track when it comes to making mobile media social. In order to make mobile media more widely accepted, mobile media must be made sexy – in other words, people must want to be seen using mobile media.

• Mobile media can sidestep concerns about piracy by making it easier to obtain legally than illegally, and can use social sharing (or “piracy”) to its advantage by embedding ads in the files and using P2P as a distribution system.

• Mobisodes aren’t just for mobile phones. Mobile media can and will be streamed from desktop computers or consoles to other mobile devices including PDAs and handheld game systems.
Conclusion

A few important things to remember when entering the mobile market:

• **Question “wisdom.”** Yes, mobile media does have some restraints – but “accepted knowledge” about the form is often only considered true because no one has pushed the technology or the content far enough yet. Don’t feel constrained by the limitations of the form – look for ways to turn them into opportunities.

• **Compelling content **uberm alles.** “Experts” who assert that mobile content must be a certain length forget that a compelling game like Tetris will keep players’ elbows locked in place for hours. Compelling content over everything else.

• **Barriers to entry must be brought down.** Mobile media is still in its infancy, but proponents of the form should work to broaden their audiences as much as possible if the medium is to flourish. Cellular providers will pressure content producers into entering exclusive contracts, but doing so is not in the best interests of either the content producers or the consumers. Producers should evaluate methods of making their content free on as many devices as possible, including considering alternative revenue streams such as advertising or product placement.

• **Repurposed content is often welcomed by audiences.** Many consumers purchase mobile video devices to liberate themselves from a fixed viewing location – they want to watch The Daily Show while on their daily commute, or watch Studio 60 while sitting in Starbucks between classes. For these customers, new content is nice, but it isn’t key.

• **Extending existing franchises must be done carefully.** Transmediation of an existing franchise should incorporate existing characters, have an impact on a larger storyline, allow sufficient time to develop the characters and be done with an adequate budget. A mobile media extension of a multimillion-dollar established property should enrich that property, not detract from it.

• **New content for mobile devices should cater to mobile media’s strengths.** Mobile media offers
a number of built-in opportunities for innovative storytelling, including location awareness, peer awareness, always-on connectivity, and the possibility to use mobile devices as story recorders. Innovative storytellers should attempt to experiment with these features in order to make their narrative projects more engaging.

- **Use social media to your advantage.** Content producers often fear releasing their properties out into the wild without heavy-handed DRM for fear of rampant piracy, but it’s important to remember that not all sharing is piracy. Mobile devices offer a unique opportunity for extremely personalized peer-to-peer sharing that translates into social capital for audience members. Content producers should attempt to use this “look what I found” factor to their advantage.

- **Consider alternative distribution methods.** Who says mobile media is just for mobile phones? Storytellers should evaluate established alternative distribution methods such as vodcasting in order to facilitate getting their content out to a wide audience on as many devices as possible.

In short, mobile content is content first and foremost. As long as it tells a good story, it should port from one platform to another as easily as water being poured into different cups.

There is nothing stopping content providers from repurposing their original content for smaller devices, but mobisodes may evolve into a specific art form of its own as storytellers embrace the particular quirks and features of mobile media. The two greatest challenges facing mobile media aren’t the hardware or the software, but clearing the bramble patches of cellular companies desperate to stay relevant and the ever-present, most difficult challenge that faces any storyteller in any medium: simply telling a great story to as wide an audience as possible.
Appendix: Where to Find Talent

As I’ve argued in this paper, long-form content will work just as well as short-form content on a small screen, given compelling content and the right infrastructure. However, if companies are looking for content that is designed specifically for the mobile space, there are a number of places to find content creators that should be ideally suited to this purpose experienced in condensed storytelling and willing to work within the often-limited budgets inherent to an experimental medium.

Short Filmmakers

The 48 Hour Film Project and the National Film Challenge are two annual contests that pit teams against each other to create short films that are only 7 or 8 minutes long, and many of these are fairly excellent (even for work by amateur filmmakers). For more information, check out 48hourfilm.com and nationalfilmchallenge.com.

Playwrights and Stage Actors

If we concede that one limitation of the small screen is a restriction on noticeable details, then perhaps mobile media requires the kind of exaggerated facial features and physical motions that are required for stage performances. Many playwrights and stage actors are experienced with producing one-act plays, which may translate well into short-form mobile media. (Note: many one-act plays often run towards the 30-minute to 1-hour mark, but there are exceptions.)

Flash Animators and Machinima Makers

In 2006, Amp’d Mobile launched an exclusive animated series of mobisodes featuring Li’l Bush, a snarky political commentary produced using Adobe Flash, a $500 off-the-shelf piece of software that has been revolutionizing the animation world for almost a decade. Flash-animated series like Homestar Runner (www.homestarrunner.com) and Happy Tree Friends (mondo.happytreefriends.com) demonstrate how stories
exploding with character and humor can be created on an absolute shoestring budget. Another source of new stories is the emerging art form of machinima, where storytellers create films using existing video game engines. The machinima troupe Rooster Teeth Productions rose to fame with their series *Red vs. Blue* (rvb.roosterteeth.com), which was produced using the *Halo* engine produced by Bungie Entertainment (a subsidiary of Microsoft). Many professional-level projects are already springing from these sources, and the best of these are already striking deals for marketing and merchandising of their franchises. Rooster Teeth struck a deal with Microsoft, and now they're making a tidy profit selling DVDs of their series on their site. The folks behind *Homestar Runner* have so far rebuffed all efforts to bring their franchise to “mainstream” entertainment, but they too are making a handsome pile off merchandise on their site. The Web is bursting with more of these would-be storytellers already experienced in delivering short, often serial content. If a media company’s talent scouts reach them before they hit it big, it’s possible they can be brought onto existing projects. If talent scouts find them once they’re well-established, it’s possible that the company can employ those franchises to attract new customers.

**Comics Creators**

Another entertainment medium that has been revolutionized by the web is the comic book. Examples of comic franchises with rags-to-riches stories similar to *Red vs. Blue* or *Homestar Runner* abound, including Scott Kurtz’ *PVP: Player vs. Player* (www.pvp.com) and R. Stevens’ *Diesel Sweeties* (www.clango.org). Both of these creators have entered the big leagues in recent years; Kurtz’s strip is now sold in comic-book form by Image Comics, and Stevens’ strip recently became the first webcomic to be picked up by the United Artists Syndicate for publication in newspapers across America. Webcomic creators could bring their compressed storytelling skills and established audiences to mobile media in much the same way as Flash or machinima animators.

Another potential source for mobile content talent is the regular comics market. Recent years have seen an explosion of cross-pollination between comics and Hollywood, with just as many creator names bouncing back and forth as properties. Joss Whedon, whose *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly* generated massive fan followings, is now writing *Astonishing X-Men* for Marvel Comics. Neil Gaiman, whose *Sandman* series of graphic novels revolutionized comics-as-literature in the 1990s, penned the English translation of Hiyao Miyazaki’s *Princess Mononoke*, the Henson-produced fantasy film *Mirrormask* and the upcoming films *Stardust* and *Beowulf*. Warren Ellis, whose comics successes include *Transmetropolitan* for DC Comics and *NextWave* for Marvel, is now penning a direct-to-DVD film version of the video game *Castlevania*. Jeff Smith, whose self-published series *Bone* broke all kinds of sales records and hauled in shelves full of awards, had sizeable success porting his series to the small-format *Disney Adventures* magazine for kids and is now republishing *Bone* in multiple languages around the world through a partnership with Scholastic. Each of these comics creators has extensive experience telling short, exquisitely-crafted stories and has an audience that would be interested in following their work into new media forms.

**Print Authors**

Regular print authors are often interested in conducting experiments in new media forms. Stephen King is known for tinkering with new forms with his serialized experiment *The Green Mile* and his e-book *The Plant*. These were met with radically different levels of success; *The Green Mile* succeeded commercially and then found even bigger success as a film on the big screen, while *The Plant* was eventually abandoned as a failure because it didn’t meet King’s financial demands. This latter example is telling – big-name authors can be a major draw to a project, both in their skills and in their name as a brand, but they still need to be fed.
King took on *The Plant* as an independent experiment without backing from a major publisher, which is potentially part of why it faltered. Michael Crichton was certainly a strong component of the success that was enjoyed by the medical TV drama *ER*, but it still required the financial support and distribution of NBC to come into existence.

Print is a particularly volatile area to go seeking creators for new media forms. Many authors who have terrific experience in creating serialized narratives might not fare so well creating short serialized narratives; fantasy authors R. R. Martin and Robert Jordan excel at creating long-running serial dramas but each installment runs to nearly thousands of pages. These authors’ skills could translate very well into equally long-running mobisode series, but they may need some retraining to function in the compressed form. Another author whose work might port exceptionally well into the mobile market is comedic genius Terry Pratchett, whose *Discworld* series of books has been shattering sales records for years and who is also no stranger to new media experiments, both good and bad; while his work has been ported into other media before, his novel *Good Omens* (penned with the aforementioned Neil Gaiman, and championed by director Terry Gilliam) has been stuck in film-development hell for years. Experiences like these, which are no stranger to most popular authors, are likely to make attempts to woo them into the wild and woolly frontier of mobile media a challenging project.

**Non-Narrative Characters**

The majority of this paper has focused explicitly on storytellers, but it’s important to not exclude personalities with devoted followings that might generate valuable mobisode content that isn’t narrative-based. Mobile media is media first and foremost, which means that the small screen might also be extremely well suited to regular episodes of content for financial markets, cooking markets, political markets, and so on. A gourmand may wish to be delivered episodes of Jamie Oliver’s *Naked Chef* that can be sorted by particular food type, which can then be referenced on a phone or an iPod while stuck for ideas at the grocery store. What similar scenarios can be imagined for personalities like Jim Cramer, Garrison Keillor, Nicholas Negroponte or the guys from *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*?

**The Big Lesson**

Each of these lists is made up of people who are arguably “long tail” creators, which has its pluses and minuses. The media franchises these creators have produced are each considered ‘nichebusters,’ proving extremely popular to a devoted, if somewhat narrow, fanbase. What they all have in common, though, is that they have each demonstrated, in whatever media form they’ve chosen, that they don’t suck.

It is absolutely critical to remember that mobile media is media first and mobile second. Companies and storytellers alike must remember that any work in any form will live and die based on the quality of the content, not the quirks of the form. If there’s one piece of advice that any reader should take from this piece, it’s this: don’t suck. Screen sizes, battery lives, delivery systems and other quirks of the form will change at near-light speed as technologies evolve, but the demand for high quality content will never change.

As always, the simplest objective is the hardest to achieve: *don’t suck.*
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Geoffrey Long is a Masters of Science Candidate in the Comparative Media Studies program at MIT, where his current research examines new forms of commercial narrative entertainment, digital art and transmedia storytelling. He comes to Cambridge by way of Ohio, Chicago and Washington, DC, where he served as the Web Producer to The Advisory Board Company. He is a founding member of the award-winning film troupe Tohubohu, a founding member of the transatlantic software development collective Untyped, the founder of the creative consulting company Dreamsbay, and the editor-in-chief of Inkblots, an occasional journal of literature, culture and technology which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2005. He also serves as an occasional consultant to CollaborationTown, an off-Broadway theater company in NYC, and he organized and emceed the Washington, DC installment of the international storytelling event Fray Day 7 in 2003. In addition to MIT, he has studied at The College of Wooster, The University of Exeter in England and Kenyon College, where he received his BA in English and Philosophy with concentrations in Creative Writing and IPHS in 2000. His writing has appeared in Polaris, Gothik, Hika and [fray], and his storytelling can be found on the iTunes store. His personal site/portfolio is available at www.geoffreylong.com.

The Convergence Culture Consortium at MIT (C3) is a partnership between thinkers and researchers from/affiliated with the Comparative Media Studies program at MIT and companies with a keen interest in deciphering convergence culture and the implications it can have for their business. Members of the consortium gain new insights and ideas about a very intractable and urgent set of questions that they are already grappling with in the current business environment. We aim to expand the role of industrial leaders by informing them of dynamic humanistic scholarship while providing them with early access to the cutting-edge ideas that emerge through the consortium. For more information, please visit our group’s website at www.convergenceculture.org.