

## **Spielberg Nation: With digital camcorders, PCs and easy-to-use software, anyone can become a film auteur.**

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The Dorothy Chandler Pavilion wasn't available that night, so the premiere was held in the first-floor party room of a Bethesda, Md., condo building. Not coincidentally, the film's auteur, 34-year-old Jeff Breslow, was himself a resident. He dragged down his VCR and 27-inch TV to the room and arranged the couches and chairs in an approximation of stadium seating. Then he passed out popcorn to the 40 or so friends who came to see "L.A. Tour Guide," his satirical pseudo-documentary (a la "Spinal Tap") of Hollywood-sightseeing tours. It was co-written, produced and directed by Breslow during a grueling two-week shoot, on vacation time he'd taken from his day job as a lawyer. The final cut was edited in his apartment, on his Dell computer. As his audience viewed the work, actually laughing in the right places, the Spielberg wanna-be was sailing. "I'd always had moviemaking in the back of my mind," says Breslow, "but thought it was unrealistic unless you spent thousands of dollars." The actual cost of shooting "Tour Guide"? Five hundred dollars. And much of that was spent on dinner for the otherwise unpaid actors.

Until recently, the best a lawyer could hope for in Hollywood was sitting beside Winona Ryder at the defense table. But now attorneys (and everyone else) are thinking director's chair. To understand why, check out the latest feature playing in an electronics store near you. You can call it "My Big Fat Moviemaking Computer," the wildly popular sequel to such blockbusters as "The Spreadsheet That Ate the Business World," and "I Know What You've Been Desktop Publishing." The elements of this project include fast computers, affordable digital camcorders and powerful but easy-to-use video-editing software. Armed with their Sonys and Macs, and their iMovie or Adobe editing software, just plain people--as well as their kids--not only can capture relatively high-quality moving images, but have access to postproduction functions (high-speed editing, exotic transitions, special effects) previously accessible only to high-end pros.

"We wanted the public to enjoy the same benefits with moviemaking that they've experienced in other aspects of computing, like photography," says Apple Computer's Peter Lowe, in charge of the iMovie software that ships with every Macintosh. (Microsoft has a competing consumer product, Movie-Maker; sidebar.) The hard-to-mess-up software has spurred a whole new approach to home movies. Just plug the camera into the computer and your footage instantly loads into clips that you can quickly edit into discrete scenes. Next step is stitching together the scenes with preset, eye-catching transitions. Augment with an MP3 soundtrack, type in the titles and credits, and you're ready for your closeup.

"These videos won't win Academy Awards, but you won't believe how good they get," says Sue Eskridge, an education professor at the University of the Pacific who teaches iMovie techniques to computer virgins. "People can't believe they can so easily make projects for their kids or their parents that will last forever."

The days of storing old tapes and film rolls in the shoebox are over. "We had stacks of VHS tapes lying around the house that had long sections of the dog licking the camera or

whatever," says Richard Loper, a social worker and father of six. On a whim, he bought an iMac and stumbled onto the iMovie software. A star was born. "Suddenly I had the ability to take out all the boring stuff and leave the funny and interesting stuff." Now Loper displays his oeuvre to family and friends on the Internet (a process that requires only a few mouseclicks). Cahiers du Cinema might want to ponder his slapstick short starring Loper's toddling grandson chasing his shadow on the beach, or his then 7-year-old's dramatic turn as Robin Hood, who shows great courage while Loper threatens him with a chainsaw. Next is a Ken Burns-style documentary tracing the family history back to the 1800s.

But the most avid adopters of the technology are kids. If you're over 30, you might remember fighting for access to the single Super 8 camera owned by your school; now thousands of schools have media labs where kids can do desktop moviemaking. At San Fernando (Calif.) High School, teacher Marco Torres says the equipment "gives them creative tools to tell their stories," and helps keep them involved in a school where half the students drop out before graduation. It can also be frustrating, as was the case when a girl working on the final edit of her movie lost the whole thing when the computer crashed. Talk about a project in turnaround. "She was so upset she got sick in class," says Torres.

Kids clearly take their filmmaking seriously. Fourteen-year-old Alex Loucas of Carlsbad, Calif., already has one skate boarding movie in the can, and has formed a production company with his three friends to produce a subsequent epic. "Digital editing is the great equalizer," says his teacher Doug Green. "Some of these movies look like they could be found at the Sundance festival." (We won't mention fame-seekers who wind up getting torched or battered while trying to video-capture their emulations of the tricks they saw on "Jackass.")

Alexandra Pelosi is proof that in home-brew moviemaking, the sky's the limit. No one thought much of it when she took her little Sony TRV900 camcorder onto the George Bush press plane during the 2000 campaign, which she helped cover for NBC. "I didn't know anything about cameras," she says. "I had no microphone or lighting--all I did was shove the camera in Bush's face and push the little red button." The candidate himself didn't consider the sub-\$1,000 camera a threat, so he didn't modulate his behavior; at times, he even agreed to do the narrating, and even the shooting itself. After 18 months on the trail, Pelosi quit her job, hired a film student fresh out of college to assist her and spent the next year with a laptop in the living room of her Manhattan apartment, editing stacks of raw tape into "Journeys With George," which premiered not in a condo party room, but in a real New York theater--on its way to a national rollout as a heavily publicized HBO special. "There is no difference now between me editing this documentary about the leader of the free world, and my sister making home movies about her three sons," says Pelosi. And these days, the home movies might be better than what you see in the theaters.

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