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The Fantasy of Interactive Porn Becomes a Reality

By DANA KENNEDY

IN 1995, a long piece in *The New Yorker* called "Waiting for Wood" examined, among other things, the curious supremacy that female porn stars have over men in pornographic movies — at least when it comes to earning power. The men, the article argued, are little more than props on a porn set, often earning at least 50 percent less than the women.

Now, with the rise of DVD's, the men are in danger of being rendered almost obsolete, or at least almost invisible, in one fast-growing area of porn. And new technology involving holographic porn, developed in part from DVD's, will not require the participation of male performers at all.

In 1980, when the technology was introduced, video revolutionized what is still archly called the adult film industry, bringing porn into living rooms and allowing almost anyone with a video camera to become a porn auteur. But DVD's — which now make up more than 65 percent of porn movie sales — are now enabling the viewer to be the director and sometimes a defacto participant, as well.

Most adult DVD's still consist of what is commonly known as gonzo porn, the raw, sometimes degrading films involving frenzied scenes with many performers, or slightly softer-edged movies with an attempt at a plot, like "Girligan's Island" or "The School of Hard Knockers."

But one of the biggest sellers — and among the most expensive at about \$31 each — is a series of nine fully interactive DVD's, the first of which was released in 1998, called "Virtual Sex With . . .," say, Jenna Jameson or Tera Patrick, two reigning stars.

The actress is shown looking at the camera the whole time and talking directly to the viewer. Her co-star is never fully revealed. Only his hands and other crucial appendages are visible, depending on the sex act that the viewer gets to choose.

"It's the closest you'll ever get to having sex with our girls without really having sex with them," said Joone, who goes by one name. He is the 35-year-old creator and co-owner of Digital Playground, who also directed the "Virtual Sex" series. Digital Playground, which was formed in 1993, unlike the older companies in the so-called Porn Valley outside Los Angeles, began releasing its interactive products on CD-ROM's.

"When you're watching a regular porn movie, you're watching it in the third person," Joone said by telephone. "You're basically a voyeur. This way it's a first-person experience. If the girl is in the missionary position, the camera is looking down at her as you would be if you were actually there with her. You're the god of your world at that moment."

In "Virtual Sex With Devon," the DVD starts with a brief introduction: "I'm Devon. Are you ready to play with me?" At that point Devon's head bobs robotically back into place and the same greeting is repeated until the viewer chooses from four features offered on the on-screen menu: "Strip," "Stories," "Foreplay" and "Sex."

If the viewer chooses the "Foreplay" or "Sex" option, he can choose one of four sexual positions and even Devon's "demeanor" — like "innocent" or "nasty" (when she "talks dirty and gets dominant"). There are also little icons on screen in the shape of tongues, vibrators and fingers to choose from to further direct the action.

"You choose the sexual positions!" screams the box text for the "Virtual Sex" series. "You choose the camera angles! You can choose her moods between innocent and nasty! You ask her to strip naked for you! You control this gorgeous sexual animal and enjoy her countless times!"

Porn veterans like Paul Thomas, 52, who began as a performer in the 1976 porn classic "Autobiography of a Flea" and has directed more than 200 adult films, are dismissive of the fully interactive DVD's because they are devoid of storyline. Mr. Thomas prefers to make what he calls "the highest-end porn in the business," plot-driven films. His next project is a remake of "The Devil in Miss Jones" (1972), with Ms. Jameson.

"Video took porn out of the downtown theater and into your house," Mr. Thomas said. "It made it more palatable even though it brought the quality way down. DVD's are making us even more acceptable in society. Seeing a porno tape in a DVD box just gives it a better smell and a better sheen."

Just as with regular movies, the typical adult DVD — whether directed towards men, women, straights or gays — offers "bonus scenes" of the stars, alternative angles, behind-the-scenes outtakes and interviews. Mercedes, 25, who performs for Vivid Entertainment, made her first adult movie, "So I Married a Porn Star," last November. She said the most popular feature of the "So I Married a Porn Star" DVD is not the movie itself but the behind-the-scenes "countdown" to her actual first scene. She is shown watching other performers while a clock counts down the time before she makes her debut. "I guess they just like seeing me going through what I actually went through," she said. "They like the real stuff."

Today, the merchants of porn are gazing toward even newer horizons.

Digital Playground is working with a company that specializes in hologram technology with the hope that it can someday soon offer porn that seems to bring the performer into the viewer's living room.

"We already shoot our girls against a black background for our interactive DVD's," Joone said. "That way, when we perfect hologram technology, we can cancel out the black background and bring the subject into three-dimensional space. Men will love it. They'll sit in front of their giant-screen TV, turn off the lights and the only thing lit will be the girl."

Dana Kennedy is an entertainment reporter for MSNBC.