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Toolkit Case Study: The Transmedia Conspiracy of Vladan Nikolic's "Zenith"

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by Eric Kohn (January 18, 2011)

With the Sundance Film Festival set to begin Thursday, filmmakers must decide the best approach for standing out in the crowd. A strategy worth considering is found in "Zenith," a film that has had virtually no festival exposure but begins its theatrical release Jan. 19.

Directed by Serbian-American filmmaker Vladan Nikolic, science-fiction thriller "Zenith" alternately takes place in the year 2044 and the present day. Nikolic imagines a bleak future in which science's attempt to genetically modify the human race and make everyone feel eternally happy instead turns people into cold, alienated creatures in search of physical stimuli — mainly in the form of drugs. Ed (Jason Robards III), a young dealer, discovers a series of 10 tapes recorded by his missing father, Jack (Peter Scanavino). Seen as a crazed conspiracy theorist in his own time, Jack's

ramblings about a vast scheme by unseen forces to unravel the foundations of society strike Ed as eerily pre-Under constant scrutiny, he embarks on an ominous mission to unearth more of his father's research.



A scene from Vladan Nikolic's "Zenith." Image courtesy of Cinema Purgatorio.

Starting with the initial production work in late 2008, Nikolic hired a small team of web designers to expand the world of "Zenith" across a variety of fictional websites and cryptic videos featuring Jack's dark prophesies. "The idea started with my obsession with the human mind and how we react to things," Nikolic said. "That led to the idea of using conspiracy theories as an anchor of the story."

Nikolic's high concept for the "Zenith" experience brought him a palpable amount of early attention: Real websites took note and became involved in the release plan. While special midnight screenings of the film began