

American cinema chain AMC Entertainment recently announced it was considering allowing the use of mobile phones in some of its movie theatres. A viral social media backlash quickly forced what read like an apology.

“With your advice in hand, there will be NO TEXTING ALLOWED in any of the auditoriums at AMC Theatres...” tweeted CEO Adam Aron. “Not today, not tomorrow and not in the foreseeable future.”

But what if texting was part of the cinema experience? What if there were “Bullet Screens”, for instance, which gave audience members in Australia the opportunity to write SMS comments directly on the screen – in the style of Q&A – as the movie plays?

[Bullet screens](#) have been a cult hit in Niconico, Japan (where the idea began) for some time. Beijing and Shanghai cinemas have also offered filmgoers this option since 2013.

More than passive consumers of content, audience members at a bullet screen cinema become producers of the screen narrative. No two screenings are ever the same. Japanese exhibitors say bullet screen sessions have become their most popular. Most screenings run at 90% capacity.

Clearly, bullet screens would only work for some films (well known cheesy ones, such as Grease, say, or action blockbusters). But flash screenings that encourage an outpouring of emotion could be an ideal use of this technology – for instance films played in the wake of a celebrity’s death. Prince’s [Purple Rain](#) perhaps?

Bullet screens provide new ways of thinking about mobile use in the cinema. They are different from the current problem of filmgoers using their phones randomly at a cinema screening, which brings us back to the AMC controversy.

Was the American chain chastised a little too harshly for merely voicing an idea? At no point did

they announce mobile friendly screenings as a new policy. Nor did they even intend to implement such ideas into every screening. Rather, the idea was to allow texting at select screenings for particular films.

Would it be such a bad thing if serial texters during movies chose to segregate themselves with other like minded texters? “Good riddance,” I hear some say.

And let’s not forget that the cinema has always been a hub of social activity. In the early days of silent movies, moviegoers often watched with the house lights on. Audience members were encouraged to boo and cheer at the screen.

Should we expect today to be any different? Not so long ago, filmgoers could smoke in their cinema seats. And what about the noise of people snacking on loud foods like crisps and popcorn? (English film buff, Mike Shotton, is currently running a fruitless campaign to ban eating in cinemas.)

One appeal of bullet screens is that they allow audiences to shift between screens as they do when watching a movie on a television or mobile screen. But rather than the second screen being a distraction, it requires audiences to engage and comment on the film while in the (stream of consciousness) moment.

Nevertheless, the central argument against bullet screens and the reason why filmmakers are not endorsing them is that their narratives were not produced with the idea of bullet comments appearing as the film plays.

Still, the children’s film [Angry Birds](#) (2016), currently playing in Australia, may be a step towards filmmakers thinking more seriously about mobiles being a central part of the film experience.

As the credits roll, fans (well – parents of fans...) are asked to open their Angry Birds app and point the camera of their smartphone at the screen to scan the code for the pinball-inspired game – “Angry Birds Action!” It can be played on smartphones (well, parents' phones...) for

hours of cross-promotional fun.

This is an inbuilt product tie in. But the bigger question is how and when such ideas will go to the next stage and become part of a movie's plot – almost in a choose-your-own-adventure sense?

Whereas bullet screens and “Angry Birds Action!” offer interesting examples of how mobiles can enhance the movie experience for its filmgoers, the general, unregulated use of mobiles at the cinema does nothing but distract and annoy other filmgoers.

There seems to be a place for mobiles at the cinema, but let's think seriously about when and where that place is (and is not).

Angry Birds is now playing. Please don't forget to leave your phones ON. For all other films: Please turn your phones OFF. For now, anyway.

*Stephen Gaunson does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

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