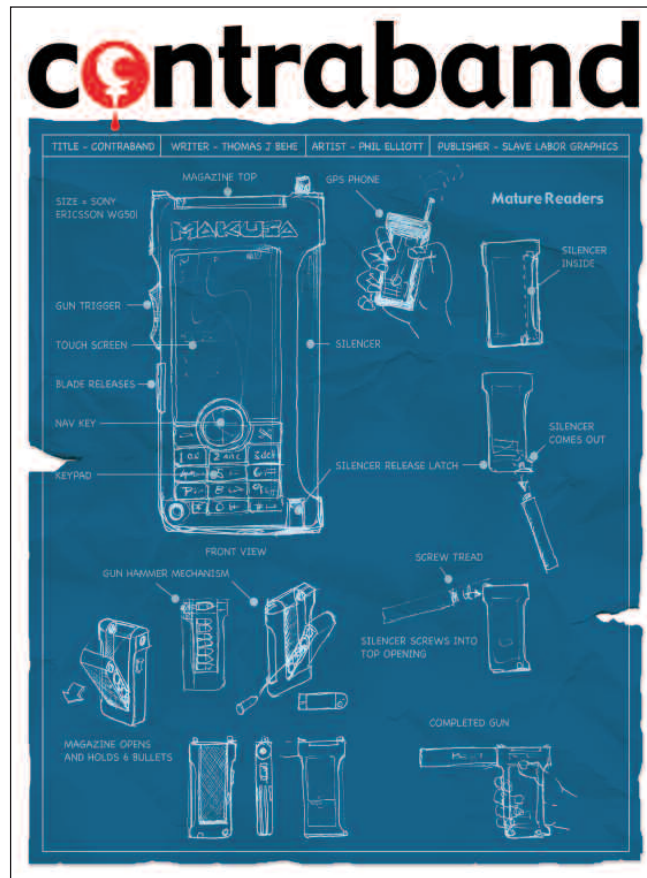


Future Noir: CONTRABAND

Contraband warns of the dangers of HD technology in a near future dystopian society
By Simon Wakelin



Picture YouTube in HD with illegal content downloadable on your hi-tech cell phone. Envision “voyeur violence” captured by bands of amateurs, recorded and broadcast worldwide on an illicit cell phone network to be distributed directly to your mobile. Picture this, and you have the basis of the new graphic novel, *Contraband*.

This dark noir paints a bleak picture of our future, a society where profit-hungry youths prowl the streets armed with camera phones to record violent scenes, some of which they instigate to satisfy society’s accelerated demand for sensational, violent, erotic, on-the-go entertainment.

HDVideoPro caught up with Thomas Behe over in the UK, the architect of *Contraband* who teamed up with artist Phil Elliott to create the book. Behe gave his views on our hi-tech future and what it could mean to our techno-centric society.

HDVP: *Contraband* is a shocking view of the near future, but one that can easily be imagined. Is today’s YouTube generation

evolving into tomorrow’s *Contraband*?

Thomas Behe: Yes, I do believe capturing video on cell phones is next stage in this so-called social networking evolution. Today, footage of cool news, freaky events or celebrity meltdowns hit the Internet within a few hours. But imagine if you had millions of people armed with high-res, user-friendly camera phones ready to run on the fly? The lead-time suddenly shrinks to minutes—or even seconds!

HDVP: I understand you have a background in developing mobile phone content. Did this lead to the creation of *Contraband*?

Behe: The initial idea for *Contraband* came about while working on a user-generated portal project at a UK cell phone



operator that top brass described as a “high-priority initiative.”

The company was keen to move beyond basic clip broadcast and clumsy text services, so it blew billions on a 3G license to (among other things) enable smooth TV/web-like video playback.

We launched the portal, and of course the soft adult/lad magazine crap and stupid stunt clips soon flooded the network. But it was humming along nicely, making a tidy sum each month until a sneaky kid posted a live clip shot up a woman’s skirt on an underground train.

While senior management were implementing an over-18 age-verification application, I was thinking that if a nasty bloke were to offer a big enough chunk of cash (revenue share), he could probably motivate plenty of shit-disturbing kids to send in more. My antagonist Tucker—and his violent mobile video channel *Contraband*—were thus born.

HDVP: You mentioned our shift from worrying about physical tumors and such (from cell phone use) toward more socio-economic concerns. What did you uncover in your research?

Behe: I did some primary research interviewing people in focus groups and was intrigued by an odd range of concerns that they had about cell phones. Although most had heard of the potential physical risks (such as handsets heating heads, batteries melting in pockets, being used as bomb detonators),

they mostly talked about issues relating to social abuse, issues such as sending intimidating text or video messages to work or school friends. Some had been spammed with ads via third-party providers or renegade marketeers who’d bluetoothed them promo messages.

HDVP: How far are we from a society of *Contraband* where technology not only affects our minds but also our bodies? In many ways modern society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and the human experience (such as watching content on a cell phone) is of a simulation of reality rather than reality itself...

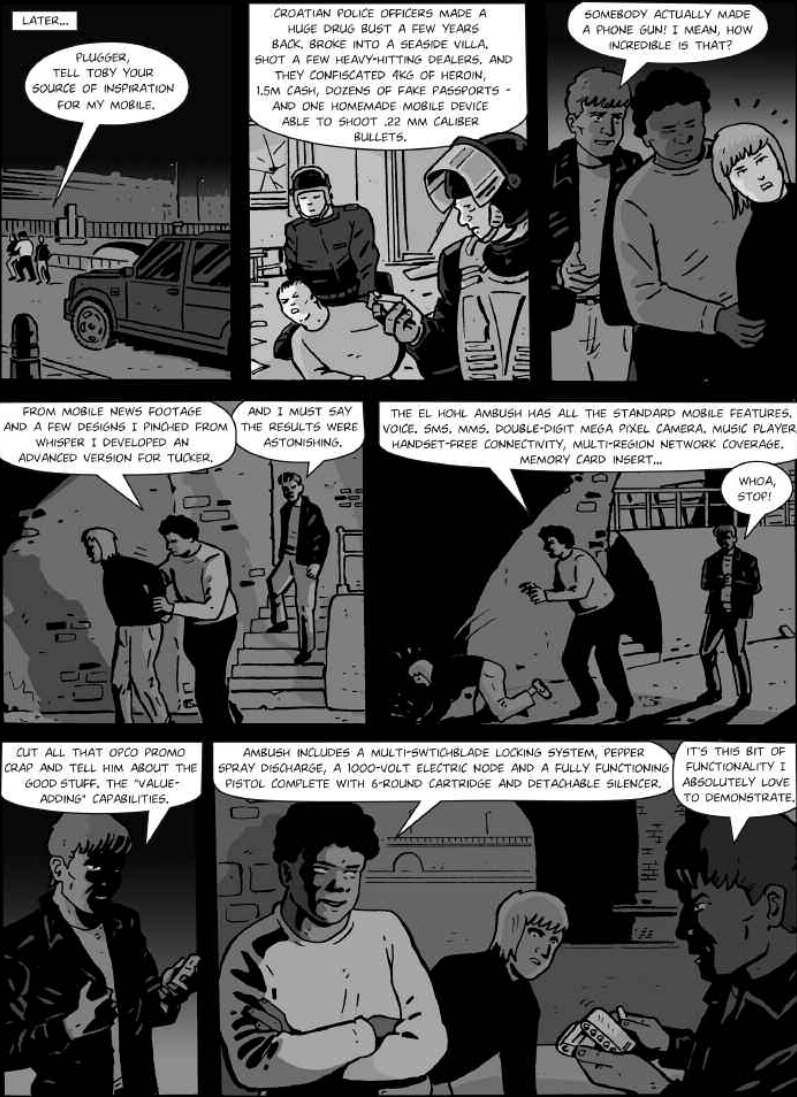
Behe: It’s an interesting discussion. There’s no doubt people believe their cell phone is one of most important things in their lives. But how many think about how this affects their privacy? Network operators track both their calls *and* their whereabouts. Most people don’t know the police can check their phone records while driving to their exact location for questioning.

A few older folks liked the authorities’ new help lines, which encourage citizens to send in video footage of potential criminal activity. To me, this is the really frightening shit. It’s like you’re telling everyone to use their own personal CCTV camera to film you whenever they want.

The news is already reporting voyeur camera-capture from all over the world, including the U.S. Here in the UK there’s been talk about the government trying to ban people from secretly filming others. Much of this has been in reaction to the growing mobile bullying, youth fights and other antisocial

“High definition devices that show people exercising upon their instinctive urges. The best stuff can draw out every type of emotion...”





because I’m amazed at how many users offer up raw but lengthy opinions on how they feel. These meaty (and often passionate) digressions often come with a personal signature, a banner or perhaps some sort of animated icon or other digital representation. It’s their 15-second chance to be heard, so they really try to make it count. The core characters in *Contraband* (active, social, mobile savvy) fit into this category of forum users so it seemed appropriate to integrate this into the narrative.

HDVP: Do you have any influences per se?
Behe: I’ve always liked reading different indie comics, but my writing is more influenced from recent foreign-language movies. I also love pigging out on cool American flicks like *Fight Club* and *Blade Runner*, so there’s probably some of that stuff in there too.

HDVP: Hyper-real violence such as seen in the *Saw* movie franchise merely sensationalize bloodshed. Do you think snuff videos are the wave of future? Will corporations such as *Contraband* be around to foster a public lobotomized by overt Americana big-dick-look-at-my-gun tv/movie violence?

Behe: There will always be market for sensationalized violence. People love a buzz and having the shit scared out of them. *Contraband* imagines an “urban theatre” where youths prowled city streets secretly filming strangers, then posting these sensational, erotic and violent mobile videos for people to see.

This is a place where men can no longer shower in gyms, where women in dresses avoid seats on trains, where teens run daily exhibitionist mobile blogs featuring candid clips of close friends and family members. But no matter how cool/weird/radical the videos are, *Contraband* only becomes big business because society demands more and more. And that’s the bottom line.

HDVP

behavior. But I feel this is just the beginning.

HDVP: How did artist Phil Elliot join the project?

Behe: I spend a month checking out about a dozen professional artists who could create a unique indie graphic novel, guys from Brazil, the U.S., Canada and Italy. There’s lots of great manga and dark cyber-punk stuff out there, but I wanted something different. I kept coming back to Phil’s more European “ligne clair” style.

The timing was perfect. Not only had he over 20 years working for heavy hitters like Marvel, DC, Image and Fantagraphics, but was nearly mugged by some kids, one of whom filmed the intimidating incident on her cell phone!

HDVP: What is your background as a writer, and how long did it take to write *Contraband*? The writing is very unique.

Behe: *Contraband* is my first comic. I had written the story a few times over an eight-month period before approaching Phil. I developed a dialogue that mimicked the behaviour of youths posting conversation on mobile social networking channels

