



Progress comes with an X-rating

Review by Drew Turney
If you've ever booked a flight online or enjoyed an unexpected upgrade in the data allowance from your ISP, the Canadian science and technology journalist Patchen Barss thinks you owe a debt to pornography.

Most of us have a vague sense of the part erotica played in advancing technology. The most common example cited is the VCR format war between VHS and Betamax, which was replayed a quarter of a century later between Blu-ray and HD DVD. This enjoyable book makes it clear that porn was not the deciding battlefield because adult titles were available on both formats. While porn unquestionably enabled the VCR in general, the exploding porn industry was cashed up enough to bet both ways and ride the wave as commercial happenstance did its work declaring the winner.

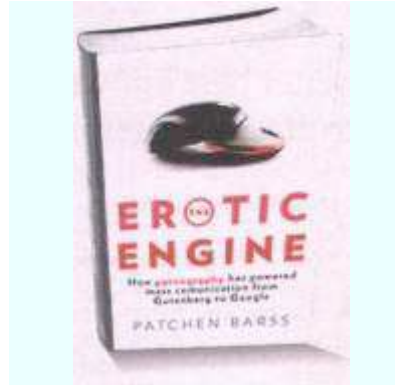
But unlike other books that have studied the influence of media from CinemaScope to YouTube, *The Erotic Engine* sets a far weightier task for itself than mere media theory. It's out to prove erotica has been instrumental not just in modern technology but in mass communication through history.

Many of the stories Barss uses to make his case are as charming as they are compelling. Even as mov-

able type conquered Europe, aristocrats would commission custom Bibles or other tomes from hand scribes as the ultimate statement of wealth. Close scrutiny of surviving manuscripts reveals outrageous scenes of carnality buried in margins or larger illustrations, the 15th-century equivalent of a sly smile to the video shop assistant to ask about the hot stuff under the counter.

But *The Erotic Engine* claims the story is even older than that. We've all seen pictures of the Cerne Giant north of Dorchester with his proudly erect member, and Barss wonders whether the amply endowed Venus of Willendorf stone carvings (which we'd consider morbidly obese today) were simply to stir the lust of half-starved homo sapiens circa 22,000BC.

Of course, most of the discourse on erotica belongs in the industrial era and Barss speaks with authority on everything from virtual worlds and MMORPGs to teledildonics – the mechanics of sexual stimulation by electronics along with erotic visuals. And he has discovered that, like no other human compulsion, the pursuit of sexual imagery alone gave early adopters the incentive to program top-loading VCRs, buy a 56k modem, learn to use a camera or give their credit card number to



Communications

THE EROTIC ENGINE
 Patchen Barss

UQP, 310pp, \$34.95

someone over the internet – skills that are now second nature to us all.

The linchpin of *The Erotic Engine's* argument is the critical tipping point at which the desire to consume erotica outweighs the learning curve. When enough people on the bleeding edge take up a technology, capitalism does its work. With profit margins the rest of us could only dream of, pornography producers do the R&D on which we all eventually rely. Before they hit the mainstream, such technologies are proven by people who've put the effort in because the payoff is so titillating.

After all, men (rarely women) spent the years from the Lumiere brothers right up to the 1970s maintaining unwieldy projection equipment to collect, swap and watch stag films, not films about sunsets and steam trains.

Despite talking about machinery and gadgetry, *The Erotic Engine's* most successful aspect is as a prism to examine what we want from technology rather than fetishising technology itself. A thoughtful, entertaining and sometimes hilarious book, it revels in the accomplishments of our species but reminds us that – whether using ochre hand paints on cave walls or wireless broadband – humanity has always had one thing on its mind.