

Popular Mechanics

6 Geekiest South By Southwest Films

There's one time of year when it is impossible to get a hotel room in Austin, Texas: **South By Southwest**, the gargantuan showcase for **emerging technology**, music, and film. While the festival's music hogs most of the headlines, its film festival (which runs this year March 13–21) has quickly carved out a place for itself as one of the premiere places in the U.S. to debut a new film. This year's **Sundance Film Festival** took a noticeable turn towards the sci-fi, while the lion's share of SXSW's science and technology-related movies this year are documentaries. Here are the six films at this year's festival that are most likely to pique the interest of sci-tech geeks.

By Seth Porges

The Hurt Locker

Director: Kathryn Bigelow

It's hard to imagine a more dangerous job than disarming bombs in the middle of urban combat. This Iraq War thriller follows such a squad, assigned to Baghdad in the thick of war. At this year's New York Comic Con, actor Jeremy Renner told the crowd that he trained with actual ordinance-bomb-disposal personnel before filming *The Hurt Locker*. About 12 minutes of the film screened at Comic Con, and if that clip was any indication, the training paid off with suspense and authenticity. The movie has some major star-power (Ralph Fiennes, Evangeline Lilly, Guy Pierce), so look for this movie to be a big one.

Monsters from the ID

Director: David Gargani

There is a continued call from politicians and researchers alike for greater numbers of American scientists in order to keep the U.S. ahead of the **technology** curve. And while getting us there is going to involve an **overhaul of our country's science education**, some argue that's not enough. Children need to *want* to be scientists.

David Gargani created a documentary that looks back to Hollywood in the 1950s, when onscreen scientists shed their mad-scientist image in favor of square-jawed, monster-busting heroism (less Igor and Dr. Strangelove and more Flash Gordon). This shift in popular culture, Gargani argues, is the first step towards making science cool again (and making a generation want to once again become astronauts, get to the lab and advance science)

Calling E.T.

Director: Prosper de Roos

When it comes to the search for extraterrestrial life, contributors fall into a few distinct categories. There are the millions of people who have donated their idle PC **processing power** to SETI's efforts to scan the skies, and then there are the people for whom the search is a way of life. This documentary takes a close look at the scientists who, despite endless hours of deadening intergalactic radio silence, get up every day in the hope that this will be the day we make first contact. To some of these scientists, the search for extraterrestrial life presents mankind's best hope of uniting beyond petty disputes and international borders (which are not, as the film points out, visible from space). For them, making contact with another species may be the only way humans can save their own.

The Dungeon Masters

Director: Keven McAlester

When it comes to role-playing escapism, video games such as *World of Warcraft* do all the heavy lifting for you. But where big-budget video games rely on intricately rendered 3D environments to transport players to fantasy worlds, *Dungeons & Dragons* depends on the gamers' own imaginations.

The Dungeon Masters is a documentary that follows three such gamers as they attempt to balance the terror and disappointment of real life with the swashbuckling successes of *D&D*. Think of it as *Trekies* with a 12-sided die.

Crude Independence

Director: Noah Hutton

Stanley, North Dakota, was once wholly unremarkable town. Its population: 1300. Its chief industry: agriculture.

But, as *The Beverly Hillbillies* taught us, oil changes everything. *Crude Independence* follows Stanley's rise from small agricultural town to an oil giant that happens to sit on top of the Bakken Formation, which holds one of the largest oil fields in North America—accessible by **new drilling techniques** that have helped attract money and workers to Stanley from all over the country. *Crude Independence* comes from 21-year-old filmmaker Noah Hutton, who is still finishing his undergraduate degree at Wesleyan University.

Objectified

Director: Gary Hustwit

Good product **design** is about more than just looking good—a well-designed product is intuitive enough to act as its own instruction manual and beckons users to make it a part of their lives.

This industrial design documentary will be most anticipated by those who have seen the director's previous documentary, *Helvetica*—a compelling film that explores the history and impact of the font. *Objectified* features interviews with an all-star cast of some of the world's most influential living industrial designers, including iPod designer Jonathan Ive, controversial BMW designer Chris Bangle and former Braun design chief Dieter Rams.