

Back to the Future: Reflections on the ‘site’ of contemporary digital film culture through the Year 2000

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Abstract. When speculating about the state of moving image in 2021, it might be instructive to explore the ‘pre-history’ of the current streaming era – and therefore this paper will initially focus on a particular cultural/historical moment, the year 2000 (and the very early 2000s); the start of a new millennium and the peak of the ‘dot com era’. This period was characterized by a huge burst of creative and technological energy related to moving image on the web, manifested in the emergence of specialised web portals such as Atomfilms, Shockwave, Heavy, Brickfilms; independent creators such as Evan Mather and hi.res; a global plethora of Fanfilms (particularly based around Star Wars); as well as digital moving image festivals such as One Dot Zero (UK) and Res.Fest (US), which purported to be a window into the future, or at least the ‘bleeding edge’ of new media aesthetics intersecting with cinema. In this pre-Broadband and pre-YouTube period, the web was a ‘clunky’ and unreliable platform for a variety of technically complicated moving image files. However, it is possible to look back on the early 2000s as a liminal moment between the celluloid/video/physical media era and our remotely hosted, high-definition present. This paper will describe it as a fertile and open space, where artists and curators had the opportunity to dream of what the future might become, grappling with how moving image on the web (and their narrative language and aesthetics) could be envisioned differently from what had come before. If the Internet was a ‘site’, what types of moving image work could be ‘site-specific’? The paper will offer up key examples from that period and then jump forward in time to apply a similar framework of speculation to moving image online in the year 2021, and in the latter stages will explore what if any radical new ways of storytelling might arise as we move forward into an uncertain ‘future’.

Keywords. Digital Film, Digital Cinema, Online Film, Webfilm, Digital Storytelling, Digital Aesthetics, New Media, Interactive Narrative, Future Narratives.

1. Introduction

When I was presented the theme of this conference: ‘Visual Storytelling in Digital Society’ I immediately felt a sense of nostalgic. *Nostalgia* in the original meaning of the word - a ‘homesickness’ for the past, and in particular a past in which we were dreaming about the future. So, this paper will be in part a gesture of returning to a moment (a time and a place) that was the beginning of many of the developments in media, technology and storytelling that we have today, and in my fragmented recollections I hope to illuminate not just the huge steps taken in working with and adapting to digital technology in telling our

stories, and to highlight some of the pitfalls of melding of technology and creativity, but also to see what hasn't changed, and what questions have yet to be answered. My intention here is to envision the future of Visual Storytelling in a Digital Society as something that is still open, yet to be determined, and a 'work in progress' to which we can contribute.

The trigger for my nostalgia was the word *digital*. There was a time when its usage in culture was a novelty, superseding the word *electronic* in the late 1980s. *Digital* as an adjective, as in Digital Art, Digital Film or Digital Storytelling, was describing both form and content, for instance Digital Art was art created using digital tools (to some extent) and at the same time it was expected to critically reflect upon its own *digital*-ness. The '90s was a time of 'peak digital' in which almost all established forms and media were becoming self-consciously *digital*, and in the cultural sector it was essential to 'go digital' in order to remain relevant. Today, *digital* is so omnipresent and ubiquitous that it's rarer for a cultural work to be made without digital tools. *Digital* is default, and we no longer expect or hope for cultural products to comment on their materiality (or lack of), the way we did between 1995 and 2005.

Digital is also my gateway to memory, to the spring of the year 2000, at the height of what became known as the 'dot com bubble', when I moved from the city of Bristol, in the south-west of England, to Sheffield in the north (South Yorkshire, to be precise), in order to take up a position in an independent (i.e. non-commercial, government funded) cinema called The Showroom.

A key city during the industrial revolution in England, Sheffield prospered as a centre of steelwork and cutlery production, but in the 1980s, when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, Sheffield, like other Northern cities, was de-industrialised in line with economic policies that sought to modernize the UK and to reduce the power of leftist worker's unions, and there was a steep decline in the city's fortunes. When I arrived in 2000, a process of revitalization was ongoing, and the cinema where I worked was part of the Cultural Industries Quarter – a major component in a plan to use culture to improve city and society.^[1] In fact, my role as 'Events Programmer' was fully funded by European cultural bodies who had a remit to lift up cities like Sheffield – seen as dangerously impoverished. This idea – of deploying the soft power of culture, of deliberately creating a 'space' for arts in various forms – to invigorate a city with an eye on economic value as an end-goal, is a strategy I've seen adapted and imitated in Singapore, where I've lived for 20 years, and other Asian cities since the turn of the millennium.^[2]

In Sheffield digital technology was a key part of this process, and it informed everything I encountered, especially as I began to research and curate and to collaborate with other organisations. There were myriad arts groups, galleries, arts centres, events, and cultural committees, all competing for funding and all promising a glimpse of a digital future. Just to set the digital landscape: in the year 2000, offices in the UK were networked to the internet via ADSL cables, an early form of broadband, that made use of analog phone networks, but at home almost everyone was still using a dial-up modem on their landline. The public internet was made up mostly of 'homepages' for businesses, organisations and individuals. Social media took the form of 'chat rooms', 'forums' or 'message boards' where people could post comments and have discussions, there were also custom-made web-diaries or personal news updates on homepages, which you had to regularly check for updates.

Two memories I have of that period, related to the internet: Firstly, spending hours of office-time 'playing' the Alternative Reality Game known as *The Beast*, launched to promote the film *Artificial Intelligence* (2001) You experienced the narrative through a network of fictional futuristic websites, and then went to fan-made message boards to discuss the mystery. I wondered, as many did, if this was the future of online storytelling. It was not. And secondly, going to see the film *High Fidelity* (2000), loving Jack Black's performance, going online, finding the home-page for his comedy-rock duo Tenacious D which had his personal email address, and sending him an invite him to come to the UK to do an event. He did not reply.

Dogme 95 hung heavy over all of us thinking about digital film in 2000. This manifesto, written by a collective of Danish directors led by Lars Von Trier, advocated filmmaking using digital cameras but rejected film-making apparatus such as lighting, non-diegetic sound and the then-emerging field of digital Visual Effects^[3]. Dogme 95 celebrated the digital camera for its dramaturgical possibilities (intimacy with the actors and 'home movie' aesthetics), its democratic implications (anyone could make a film, from any part of society), but at the same it was austere traditionalist. The first two Dogme films, Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* (1998) and Lars Von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998), reveled in their *digital*-ness because we experienced them on blown-up 35mm film prints. Arguably the movement had creatively fizzled out by Dogme #3, the point at which the *digital* qualities no longer seemed to matter to the filmmakers. This seemed like a betrayal at the time, but it was inevitable.

Quite the opposite of Dogme (although able to accommodate low-fi aesthetics when suited) was the emergence of two annual digital film festivals that promised visions of digital futures – RESfest from the US and onedotzero from the UK, both founded in the mid-90s, but at their most relevant in the early 2000s. onedotzero, subtitled 'Adventures in Motion' was image-based and interdisciplinary, promoting the interface between moving image, graphic design, advertising, music, architecture, and CGI, whereas RESfest tended towards a more conventional view of filmic storytelling – digital experiments were 'calling cards' pointing to Hollywood. What both festivals shared, along with a roster of filmmakers – including then-poster boys Spike Jonze, Chris Cunningham, Michel Gondry, Richard Fenwick, Tim Hope, among others – was a utopian and largely uncritical embrace of all things *digital*. onedotzero had a programme called 'Wow and Flutter', which perfectly summed up the pleasures of the 'eye-candy' on offer, although it would be unfair to say there weren't moments of wonder and excitement to behold at both festivals. They elevated the 'bleeding edge' into a realm beyond politics, where it was acceptable to take corporate dollars (and even advertise corporate products) if you were making something 'cool', and the mostly white, male artists creating the content operated in a zone of extraordinary privilege. Sponsored and supported by companies, corporations and institutions looking for guidance in the new, confusing digital society, RESfest and onedotzero toured the world, exporting their curatorial brands to Asia (Hong Kong, Tokyo and Singapore), among other places. But as the years went by *digital* could no longer be fetishized as the new, and with so much content available online, and cinemas going truly digital, the festivals faded away. RESfest's last edition was in 2006^[4], onedotzero still exists as a creative agency^[5], but their last festival was in 2012.

In 2000 and the years that followed I was looking at them with envy, they owned the territory of what was being framed as the future of both film aesthetics and storytelling, leaving a curator like me with very little space to explore – so I decided to look more closely at what was happening online. I was collaborating now with Lovebytes in Sheffield, a 'Digital Arts' festival best known for its avant-garde electronic music programme and interactive art installations in spaces in the city. I was their film curator for four years and would attempt to map out a broad space to think about digital film, and storytelling in a digital society.

Viewing films on the internet circa the Year 2000 was a clunky and technically challenging experience. Video files, embedded into html pages needed to fully load in order to play, and were, more often or not, "still buffering". With little standardization for file compression and online players, videos required a wide range of software and plug-ins, to decode and play – including Flash from Macromedia, the Windows-based Realplayer, the Mac-based Quicktime, among others; some files wouldn't play on PC and some wouldn't play on Mac. The films themselves were scattered all over the internet, with some notable attempts at aggregation. The most prominent platform for online video was AtomFilms, which shared content with RESfest and onedotzero, and had a similar tech-positivist philosophy, but their content – well-made as it could be – was frustratingly familiar and conventional. These were short films on the internet. I was searching for the *digital* work that articulated something more distinctive.

I found it in unexpected places, mostly away from Art with a capital 'A'. I was drawn to the growing world of fanfilms, in particular for *Star Wars*, as George Lucas understood that such amateur efforts enhanced the brand rather than exploited it. There was something uniquely *digital* and poignant (in its sincere appropriation of Lucas's All-American iconography) about a Hungarian-language *Star Wars* film, which made superb use of wintry European landscapes and had excellent desktop-created VFX. Then there were hundreds of lego films – from painstaking recreations of other films (including *Star Wars*), to nihilistic orgies of plastic destruction. Then there was the work of Evan Mather, which blended online conspiracy theories, fanfilms, lego films, alongside autobiography. Mather's work was not conventionally 'good', but it felt site-specific to the web – it belonged online, as opposed to a 'well-made' short film on Atomfilms.com that could be showing anywhere.

For one edition of Lovebytes, myself and Jon Harrison (one of the founders and directors of the festival), gathered a compilation of these quirky oddities, alongside home movies, lush flash animations from South America, some calculated comedy skits, bits of TV archive that had been digitized and posted online, and, perhaps regrettably, found footage of the Twin Tower attacks on 9/11, and created a programme called 'Search Engine Cinema'. It was ugly, frustrating, ridiculous and hopefully provocative – an attempt to understand how moving images lived and existed on the web. It proved divisive – one funder's report was particularly angry. As I recall he felt it was a collection of garbage, but in some ways that was the point. The future might not look futuristic as per onedotzero or RESfest, in fact might look like some teenagers with a video camera dropping water bombs down into the atria of very tall building.^[6]

'Search Engine Cinema' anticipated YouTube and the idea that *digital* meant that users, as well as artists or professionals, might have a contribution to make. But our intentions were not so different from the festivals. We were still, naively hunting for the *new*, assuming that when you put digital tools in the hands of a diverse range of people there would be paradigm-shifts occurring in individual works. Even 'Search Engine Cinema' was bound up in the romantic idea that the future lay "in the hands of the creators".

What none of us realized was that the significance of the *new* was not necessarily in the content itself. Digital tools allowed for the making of a lot more content, while – and this should not be underestimated – creating space for stories from peoples and places who wouldn't have previously had the means of production. Much of this content looked like what we already had before, but its presence was vital. When I arrived in Singapore in 2002, I was also able to witness for the next five years, through the lens of the Singapore International Film Festival, the rise (and fall) of new waves of young filmmakers from Southeast Asian cities, working outside of their domestic film industries to make low-budget shorts and features. One could argue that in the past these same filmmakers would have used analog equipment to achieve the same goal, but consumer cameras and pirated software undoubtedly allowed for more voices, content, and experimentation. A filmmaker like Khavn De La Cruz from the Philippines, whether you love or hate his films, has created a truly *digital* body of work, and Khavn's conception of 'filmless films' is a response to Dogme 95.^[7]

The *new* wasn't in the content but in the systems that delivered it to the public. For 'Search Engine Cinema', two curators spending months scouring the web to put something on a screen for one afternoon was not sustainable, and neither was the onedotzero/RESfest model. If society was becoming *digital* then moving image content had to go the same way. The conglomeration and corporatization of streaming media was the ultimate solution to the 'Wild West' of the early 2000s. Firstly it offered consumers the very exciting possibility of becoming the curators – an empowering notion – but this was short-lived. It turned out to be far more effective to construct algorithmic systems to push content towards consumers based on personal data, including what they searched. A feedback loop was created designed to satisfy our desires by not only providing suggestions for content, but also acquiring and

creating content that has already been searched for and proved popular. This is the fatal logic of the search-based content algorithm. You get more of the same, in a cycle of infinite regress. Film industries have tried to do this for decades, but now the hard data allowed for a finely tuned process. We can see this at its most blatant on YouTube, in videos targeted at children and far-right conspiracy theorists, and on porn-sharing sites^[8], which arguably innovated the entire paradigm, and finally Netflix, Disney Plus, HBO Max, Apple TV, etc, where series and feature films don't just belong to the same genre or franchise, but derive entire story arcs, themes, tropes, aesthetic concepts and character types from previously attention-generating works.

Bandersnatch, the interactive film commissioned by Netflix, created by the team behind the *Black Mirror* series, was a rare outlier. A truly *digital* work (and directed by David Slade who started off in Sheffield), *Bandersnatch* succeeds because it does that old-fashioned thing so useful for critics, curators and educators – it reflects upon its own digital form, and in particular the idea of choice, simultaneously at the heart of its story and its storytelling. But this also means it is not easily imitated, and its ideas can't simply be exported to other kinds of work^[9]. While there have been other interactive content on Netflix, nothing has developed its ideas further or deeper. We can be sure that the algorithm did not demand it, and we have to trust the overlords of streaming media to keep throwing in anomalies once in a while to try out new concepts and refresh the whole platform, but that cannot be guaranteed.

If we were to curate 'Search Engine Cinema' today, we'd be looking at short-form video on social media such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. Places which have created their own dense and often incomprehensible languages and (sub)cultures, from every possible subgenre of a person talking, dancing, and doing funny things in front of a camera. There are always inventive gems amidst the dross, but their tropes and memes evolve so rapidly that by the time we could curate anything it would be hopelessly out of date. The very point of this self-expression is an ephemerality that is almost nihilistic – generated out of boredom and often strategic idiocy. It is empowering because anyone with a phone (of any age, gender, race, sexuality, class) has the possibility of creating a few seconds of truly dazzling brilliance, going viral, and then disappearing again.

Another way of considering the future of film and storytelling has been in the notion of 'post-cinema', an explosion of the limits of the screen itself, a concept that dates back to the 1960s but given a new life in the digital era^[10]. Breaking or expanding the frame has been an artistic and commercial strategy for much of the history of cinema, and it finds its latest incarnation in Virtual Reality – a form that brings me back to the nostalgia of imagining the future. We dreamed of VR before it was properly invented, and now it does exist we may have already moved past it. VR promises so much in terms of immersion, interactivity, sensory excitement and narrative possibilities, if the onedotzero and RESfest festivals still existed VR would be a major component of their programmes, but it has enormous technical and physical barriers to access as a creator and audience. I was involved in the creation of a VR work over the last few years, an attempt to imagine a lost work from Singapore's film history, *Pontianak* from 1957, for which we created a pivotal scene from the film and placed the audience inside the moment. The sequence itself was relatively simple – a couple walking and talking through a village – but in VR, leaving aside the immensely complex technical issues the team faced, it is challenging to even understand the position of the audience in the narrative, these are akin to the problems of early cinema.^[11]

The question we had back in 2000 has not changed: Has *digital* transformed the ways in which we tell stories with moving images? And the answer for 2021, and I now suspect always will be, is yes and no. While the technology, digital systems and infrastructure have radically changed (and will yet again) – the mainstream of storytelling, with some superficial tweaks, is proving remarkably robust. The nether world of user-created content will continue to evolve in ways that are largely unpredictable, and occasionally these worlds will make contact, before retreating again. VR, like other media technologies, was supposed to be the future of narrative entertainment, but it's likely to be better used by independent

game developers or artists. And that is a key point to end on – the role of artists in experimenting with these forms. Ideally, the artist can approach them as an outsider with a critical perspective – they can recognize the need not to just make things with digital tools for digital distribution, but that the *digital*-ness of the work needs to be considered and questioned. The artist can resist the fetishization of the new. The artist can point out the dangers of celebrating and embracing technology for its own sake. The artist can connect their work with communities and sites. The artist can have a knowledge of history. The artist can be nostalgic, while accepting that they can't go home again and have to keep moving forward.

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