

Understanding Interactive Film's Past to Inform its Future Growth

The world of mediums that blur the line between Choose Your Own Adventure story, video game, and film is a complicated one whose past is full of conflicting opinions and fluctuating popularity. In order to properly delve into the nuances of both the history and potential future for interactive film or FMVs, it is necessary to define and outline specific terms and contexts. What is an interactive film and an FMV? FMV stands for full-motion video which refers to a video game narration technique that relies on either live-action or animated video files to convey the story or action of a game. Interactive film is generally understood as a video game whose gameplay relies on displaying video files that the player can interact with. Often these two terms are used interchangeably; however, some differentiate the terms by referring to interactive films as having less interactivity and FMVs as having more.

Interactivity is a divisive term in the interactive film realm, for people argue whether one has to consciously make decisions in order for the medium to be considered interactive. A common definition views these types of “film as a series of conscious decisions rather than unconscious experiences.”¹ However, this definition minimizes the importance of interactive films such as *The Angry River* which tracks a viewer's unconscious eye movement in order to make the decisions that influence the plot². This example encapsulates a substantial subset of emerging interactive film work that utilizes biosensing in order to inform the plot, music, or other elements of the film one is watching, typically in an unconscious way that does not disrupt

¹ Kirke, Alexis, “Why Interactive Films Will Never Work,” Medium, June 26, 2020.
<https://alexiskirke.medium.com/why-interactive-films-will-never-work-d33b1e8680d3>.

² “The Angry River: Interactive Film Tracks Eye Movement,” *StoryFix Media*, March 1, 2019.
<https://thestoryfix.blog/2019/03/01/the-angry-river-interactive-film-tracks-eye-movement/#:~:text=Armen%20Perian%20earned%20himself%20a,to%20trigger%20its%20branching%20narrative>.

the immersion of the audience³. Therefore, this analysis will consider any involvement, conscious or unconscious, as interactive. Another aspect of these definitions is that, despite the surprisingly extensive history these mediums have, especially when considering the deep roots in Choose Your Own Adventure novels and roleplaying games, the term FMV typically has a heavy association with works that arose in the 90s as opposed to interactive film which is a term commonly aligned with the medium's recent resurgence.

Now that those terms are established, it is equally important to challenge them. Categorizing this multifaceted and complicated art form into the already established mediums of video games and films can be detrimental to one's understanding and experience of the hybrid medium of interactive film and FMVs. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper and challenging this notion of limitation, interactive film and FMV will be used interchangeably. Moreover, the hybridity that interactive film embodies is significantly important when understanding the medium's potential. Due to FMVs' historical path such as its surge in the 1990s, interactive film remains largely underdeveloped, unrespected, and limited to specific genres and contexts. But if these limitations are understood and analyzed, the form can have a meaningful impact on the future of viewing experiences, especially when critically made for certain audiences such as children. Therefore, it is crucial to undergo this analysis now, as there is an emerging recurrence of interactive film due to developments in online platforms. Overall, interactive film's history reveals that society's generally narrow-minded perspective on this form in terms of genre effectiveness, categorization, and aesthetic execution has limited its growth; however, interactive

³ Kirke, Alexis, "Films That Watch You While You Watch Them: A Brief History of Interactive Movies," Medium, Startup It Up, April 24, 2020.
<https://medium.com/swlh/films-that-watch-you-while-you-watch-them-a-brief-history-of-interactive-movies-820fb5e2ee25>.

film has significant potential if it is considered separate from existing mediums and is utilized in more critical and experimental ways, specifically in the genre of children's media.

Historical context is vitally important when analyzing the current connotations of interactive film, the significance of this current moment in time, and the medium's potential for growth. As stated by *Variety*'s Jack Yarwood in "Return of the Full Motion Video Game," when analyzing FMVs, in order "to understand the future of the genre, however, you first have to look into its past."⁴ A vague timeline overview of interactive film follows Choose Your Own Adventure novels and roleplaying games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, then text and graphic adventure games, then arcade and Laserdisc games such as *Dragon's Lair* (1983), then CD-ROM FMVs such as *Night Trap* (1992), then full on FMVs or interactive film as we know it today such as *Bandersnatch* (2018) which are primarily hosted on platforms like Netflix or Steam⁵. More specifically in this timeline, it is important to note popularity trends in the medium which ultimately served to shape both what it became and people's view of FMVs. As previously stated, interactive film's development began early on, for instance in 1983 "for many people, *Dragon's Lair* was the first game that made them feel like they were playing through a movie" which, in its essence, is the core of interactive film⁶. However, one of the most significant aspects of interactive film's timeline is during the 1990s, for "the early-to-late '90s became inundated with games that either were full FMV or contained elements of the format."⁷ The majority of its popularity and surge during this time capitalized on novelty and new technology,

⁴ Yarwood, Jack, "Return of the Full Motion Video Game," *Variety*, May 7, 2018.

<https://variety.com/2018/gaming/features/full-motion-video-games-return-1202800967/>.

⁵ Gladstone, Darren, "Netflix Interactive Movies Let You Control the Adventure," *SuperParent*, March 12, 2020.

<https://superparent.com/article/1129/netflix-interactive-movies-let-you-control-the-adventure>.

⁶ Gwaltney, Javy, "When FMV Ruled The World And Why It's Coming Back," *Game Informer*, August 4, 2018.

<https://www.gameinformer.com/2018/08/04/when-fmv-ruled-the-world-and-why-its-coming-back>.

⁷ Gwaltney, Javy, "When FMV Ruled."

but there were a myriad of weaknesses which led to a sharp decline in the amount of FMVs created later. For example, the early 2000s saw extremely little development of this medium in comparison to the 1990s. This moment in the timeline is interesting, since during the peak development period in the 90s, FMVs were hailed as the future. Even “Bill Gates lauded it as ‘the new standard in interactive entertainment’” which ultimately can be attributed to the 90s FMVs’ emphasis on novelty, technology, and being a fad rather than critically using the medium⁸. This brings the timeline to today where a recent resurgence of interactive film one can claim is occurring with works such as *Her Story* (2015), *Life is Strange* (2015), *Bandersnatch* (2018), *Erica* (2019), and a growing number of Netflix interactive TV and films. This recent point in the timeline is particularly fascinating given the failed past of FMVs. For many, FMVs still carry the connotation of the works from the 1990s, and those criticisms remain relevant today. However, nostalgia is not the primary factor for today’s resurgence, and if the history of this medium is critically understood and the mistakes of the past are avoided, the future of interactive film could be especially bright.

Although many of the negative associations many people have with interactive film and FMVs stem from the 1990s, the criticisms that are held of the medium are still poignant today and are necessary to analyze in order for the medium to progress. Largely stemming from the cheap quality of most FMVs in the 1990s, many have negative associations with interactive film which “includes questionable acting, terrible green screen environments, and less than stellar picture quality.”⁹ A main reason these associations and close ties to B movies were established in the 90s was due to budgetary restrictions, for the technology to create these experiences was so

⁸ Boo, Bernard, “Black Mirror, Her Story, and the Return of FMV Games,” *Den of Geek*, September 25, 2019. www.denofgeek.com/games/black-mirror-fmv-games/.

⁹ Yarwood, Jack, “Return of the Full Motion Video Game.”

expensive that acting and visual aesthetics were not prioritized in the financial planning, aside from a possible cameo from a celebrity like Mark Hamill. Although many FMVs today do not retain these same qualities, the wider connotations of general tackiness and unprofessionalism continue into many people's associations of the medium, even in relation to highly polished works such as interactive films on Netflix.

Furthermore, interactive film's emphasis on novelty during the 90s was a huge weakness that needs to be understood in order for today's interactive films to progress. During this surge of FMVs, the major selling point was the newness and originality of the technology; however, "the problem with making the crux of your game the technology it runs on is that whatever is going to kill your game's appeal is just right around the bend. So it was for FMV."¹⁰ Although the medium is decades old now, creators still fall into this trap of leaning heavily on novelty to support their project rather than intentional use of the technology to bolster their story. Therefore, in order to improve from these criticisms and learn from past mistakes, future FMVs must not rely on the 'uniqueness' of the technology and interactivity as a concept to propel their work and must instead use interactivity to improve and support the story.

However, no matter what time period interactive films are analyzed in, criticism about engagement and empathy in its storytelling persist. Mainly, these concerns and negative reviews condemn the medium claiming it is not engaging enough nor carries the emotional power of other storytelling forms. For example, in interactive gameplay, it is typical for the player to attempt a task repeatedly and receive multiple do-overs when they make a mistake. However, some say this common convention "also gets in the way of meaningful storytelling" because the

¹⁰ Gwaltney, Javy, "When FMV Ruled."

ability to redo any error eliminates stakes, empathy, or accountability in the narrative¹¹. Although this is a challenge, empathy and meaningful storytelling in interactive film is not impossible, it is just different and requires a new framework of engagement that is distinct from traditional storytelling or video games. It is on the individual storyteller to figure out creative solutions to critically using the medium to elevate empathy, stakes, and engagement which requires thoughtfulness in its implementation. In a similar vein, many say where interactive films “are more lacking is in their means of engagement with the player.”¹² Often the term ‘Wallpaper Games’ is used to criticize the lack of engagement the player has with the story and the world as a whole, especially when compared to 3D exploration games which contain both narrative and freedom to increase engagement¹³. Again, this criticism is incredibly seeped in viewpoints of preconceived notions of storytelling within certain mediums such as video games or film. Interactive film, although it overlaps with these creative fields, is its own art form and evaluating its value on its ability to conform to other mediums could inhibit its growth. Jamin Smith, creator of the multifaceted FMV work *Headspun*, beautifully states this concept about the disjointness of interactive films from other mediums in this interview:

I don't think we should be trying to create an experience where you can control the character you're following in this type of game. I don't think that it is the right medium for that. FMV is not designed for that. It shouldn't be. It's not economical. It's not efficient. It's getting the right blend of genre and the right story. I don't think it's perfect for every story. But, certainly, some stories are told better through this lens.

¹¹ “Narrative vs Interactivity: Why Video Games Are NOT a Good Story-Telling Medium,” *AirShowFan.com*, May 2003. <http://www.airshowfan.com/videogames-narrative-storytelling-medium.htm>.

¹² Leftover Culture Review, “The Failure of 90’s FMV Gaming,” *Medium*, February 6, 2018. <https://medium.com/@leftoverculture/the-failure-of-90s-fmv-gaming-e273fe9e5773>.

¹³ Yarwood, Jack, “Return of the Full Motion Video Game.”

Smith perfectly encapsulates this notion that some aspects of interactive film that critics view as weaknesses, as actually its strengths¹⁴. FMVs are not about total control or freedom, and they do not incorporate all the elements generally praised in video games or film, and that is exactly the point. Critics of this standpoint argue that FMVs are then just a fundamentally boring medium and they would rather just “challenge [their] reflexes with shoot ’em ups, run ‘n guns and other intense genres” which brings into question the idea of purpose for these works¹⁵. One unanswered question for FMVs that remains to this day, is that “it’s still unclear who these projects are actually for, and therefore who should be financing or covering them” which is heavily tied to the previous critic’s commentary on engagement and purpose¹⁶. However, to this point there is an incredibly underexplored audience which could provide a meaningful answer to these questions.

When analyzing who stands to gain the most from entertainment experiences that are interactive, an audience that seems wildly ignored but would benefit greatly is children. This is a common frustration, as emphasized in a study in “The Universal Access in the Information Society” conducted in 2011, for in relation to children’s engagement with interactive film “there is very little in the literature about interactive television for children” which persists to be an issue even a decade later.¹⁷ In the 1990s, several FMVs were created with children in mind such as *Dragon’s Lair* from the renowned animator for numerous children’s movies Don Bluth. However, quickly these roots were lost and the majority of interactive films exist in the genres of horror, thriller, and mystery. Many critics have stated that these are the only genres in which

¹⁴ Yarwood, Jack, “Return of the Full Motion Video Game.”

¹⁵ Leftover Culture Review, “The Failure of 90’s FMV Gaming.”

¹⁶ Yarwood, Jack, “Return of the Full Motion Video Game.”

¹⁷ Hulshof, Ana, et al, “Design Principles for Preschool Children’s Interactive TV,” *Universal Access in the Information Society*, vol. 12, no. 1, November 20, 2011, pp. 21–35.
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10209-011-0263-7#Abs1>.

interactive film can thrive; however, it can be argued that these are simply the easiest and primary genres that have been developed and explored for this medium. Children's media is one genre that is not only under emphasized by interactive film, but could serve to have potential benefits for children's engagement in entertainment and their education. This is in no means to supplement children's education, but instead improve current television and digital storytelling aimed at youth audiences that many children consume on a daily basis. Studies have been conducted which show that incorporating experimental technology and interactive methods teaching among children, specifically around fourth grade, can lead to improved retainment of knowledge.¹⁸ With the recent resurgence of FMVs on Netflix in particular, more interactive films for children are being made available such as *Buddy Thunderstruck* (2017), *Stretch Armstrong: The Breakout* (2018), *Carmen Sandiego* (2020), *The Last Kids on Earth: Happy Apocalypse to You* (2021). Specifically tailoring interactive films for youth audiences could be extremely valuable comparatively to children passively consuming entertainment and instead fully engaging them in the content. Therefore, proper analysis and utilization of this medium could serve to increase attention, accountability, engagement, excitement, and provide general benefits during children's screen time with digital entertainment.

Overall, the medium of interactive film and FMVs is one full of nuance and complicated grey area but also of potential. Despite FMVs peculiar timeline throughout the decades, by intentionally analyzing and learning from past mistakes, the future of interactive film can be both expansive and important. Particularly, if it is understood that interactive film is an art form that needs to be respected disjointly from the confines of similar art fields such as film and video

¹⁸ Arcos, Claudia, et al, "Playful and Interactive Environment-Based Augmented Reality to Stimulate Learning of Children," *2016 18th Mediterranean Electrotechnical Conference (MELECON)*, June 23, 2016. <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/7495421>.

games, the potential for growth and acceptance is significant. With this reframing of interactive film, it is possible to explore its implementation within underdeveloped genres such as in children's media which could prove to be particularly meaningful. In the words of Alexis Kirke, creator of the interactive film *Many Worlds*, "we will never develop a way of discussing our answers unless we accept that interactive cinema is neither this nor that."¹⁹ Therefore, in order to grow the future of this medium, it is vital to learn from its past, accept the unique qualities of the medium at present, and push its exploration in genre and implementation for the future.

¹⁹ Kirke, Alexis, "Why Interactive Films Will Never Work."

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