Searching for District 9 in the archives: An archaeology of a film transmedia campaign

Introduction

It used to be that once posters, programmes and publicity materials had served their purpose promoting the theatrical release of forthcoming films, the job was done and they were discarded as detritus. If they did survive, a few might find their way into the hands of collectors and circulate through a network of dealers, auctions, shops and web sites. Some universities and museums have recognised the value of these artefacts. Organisations like The Bill Douglas Museum at the University of Exeter, the Special Collection at the British Film Institute and the National Media Museum here in Bradford, with its collection of motion picture marketing including posters from the turn of the century, have championed their preservation. But, aside from this, for the most part film promotion and publicity continue to be regarded as ephemera.

With the advent of digitization, the role of such ephemera began to change. Before the digital era, a film's marketing campaign would typically consist of trailers, posters and press releases and last about six weeks, but in 1999 a low budget American independent film named *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez1999) altered everything.

The film is about a group of film students who decide to make a documentary about the legendary 'Blair witch' in Burkittsville, Maryland. They set off on a trek through the woods and one by one they disappear until all that is left is the footage they filmed on the journey which in its turn becomes the *Blair Witch Project* film. To promote the film, the production company Haxan Films created a web site extending the film's story. The web site comes complete with 'found' footage left behind by the students, posters seeking the missing students and a history of the Blair witch mythology, all presented as if it were real. The web site ran for a year before the film was released and on its opening weekend an advertisement for the film in *Variety* didn't advertise the film, it simply proclaimed 'Blairwitch.com 21,222,589 hits to date' signalling a high level of interest in the film's pre-release. Partly as a result of this innovative use of the web in the promotional campaign, the film's performance at the box office exceeded all expectations for a small independent film (Ndalianis, 2012: 136). But the significance of this was that the Blair Witch web site did not simply advertise the film, it became an extension of the narrative.

Since then and increasingly film web sites no longer just consist of just promotion but plot expansions too, to the extent that the distinction between content and promotion has become increasingly blurred. Indeed recently award winning promotions campaigns like *whysoserious?* for *Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) and *Flynn Lives* for *Tron: Legacy* (Joseph Kosinski, 2010) ran for over a year before the film's release and were arguably just as entertaining, if not more than the films they promoted.

Transmedia Film marketing

Transmedia film marketing has grown exponentially in recent years and a measure of this can be seen in the proportion of film budgets now dedicated to marketing (Gray, 2010: 7). In an article in *The Hollywood Reporter*, it was reported that the major six US studios spend on average between 34-37% (around a third of their budget) on what is traditionally known as P&A (prints and advertising) in the domestic market and today it is conventional for a film marketing campaign to include several different versions of trailers as well as TV 'spot' advertisements, online viral campaigns and 'live' events (Gerbrandt, 2010).[1]

Film trailers themselves may be turned into events with countdowns to their screenings and on-line premieres. Where once film trailers were confined to the marginal spaces of 'coming soon' previews in cinemas and on DVDs an in TV ad breaks, now trailers circulate on social platforms like Face Book and YouTube. And because they are available for on-demand repeat viewings, they have been subjected to unprecedented levels of scrutiny. You need only look at the discussion boards of blockbuster films to see the depth of analysis accorded to trailers for films like *Prometheus* (Scott, 2012)*.* In his book *Show Sold Separately*, Jonathan Gray has asserted that promotional media no longer occupies a liminal position in relation to film but often provide the first encounter with a film setting up 'interpretive frames' and therefore trailers, web sites and the like play an increasingly significant role in establishing the meaning of a film (Gray 2010:26).In this transmedia framework the film itself is one among several elements and much of what was previously promotion and advertising takes on a new role or becomes additionally significant in the overall consumption of the narrative and message of the film.

In turn, the growing significance of such transmedia marketing activities has given rise to numerous awards, honours and prizes. To date I have identified over twenty awards in the field of transmedia and as the field has become more crowded so the awards have become more and more clearly and narrowly defined. There are awards which are set up by technology sponsors such as Adobe Flash, by professional associations for web marketing and themed entertainment, but also by bodies like the International Academy for the Digital Arts and Sciences which hosts The Webbys as well as fan awards like the Movie Virals. All in one way or another are keen to celebrate this emerging form of promotion , articulating what it is and what it might be in the future and whilst these artefacts may have little or no intrinsic monetary value, they do have symbolic value in what has been called 'the economy of prestige'(English 2005).

So, clearly there is a growing recognition from both the creative industries and academia of the cultural significance of film transmedia, and as this is a significant emergent cultural activity, there is a need to research it, even as it emerges. When I embarked on my research , the initial aim of the project was to investigate what film transmedia contributed to the

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[1]This article goes on to report that within the figure of 34-37% , the "P" portion of prints and advertising represented less than 10% of the overall spend by 2010 and it continues to decrease steadily as digital distribution becomes more widespread.

narrative ecology of the film and I elected to take the award winning web campaign for Neil Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) as my starting point.

District 9's transmediations

District 9 is a science fiction thriller set in South Africa where a spaceship of aliens has landed and are being contained in refugee-style camps in a slum district on the fringes of Johannesburg. Designed by Trigger – a digital agency based in Los Angeles, *District 9*'s transmedia promotional campaign consisted of a number of elements. There are four web sites, several short films on YouTube, a number of social media sites for the film and for the main characters, Twitter accounts, a telephone answering service, billboard advertising and even signs on park benches in America's biggest cities.

A key strategy of on-line material was to invoke a District 9 story world, an 'as-if-real' extension of the film's narrative and setting, deploying a similar strategy to the Blair Witch Project. Providing an entry point to the online storyworld was an in-movie corporate web site for Multi-National United, (MNU), complete with interactive components for audiences to engage with such as training programmes, job vacancies to apply for and a community watch site mapping the district and monitoring the activities of the aliens (see fig 1). What makes this site particularly engaging is that there are two versions of the site: one for humans and one for aliens (see fig 2)
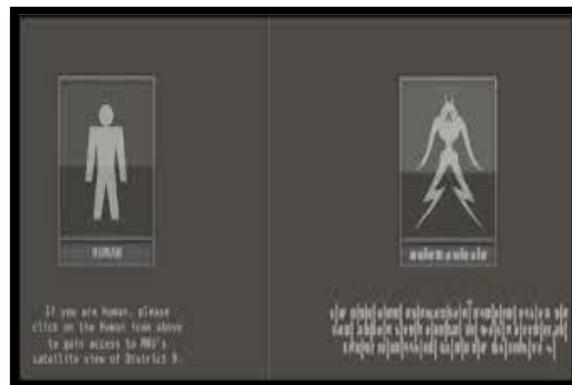

Fig 1: MNU Community Watch web site   Fig 2: MNU's corporate web site entrance

On YouTube this storyworld continued with fictional corporate videos and public information films on how to deal with aliens. As well as an expository function to map this storyworld, a further ingredient was added to the transmedia campaign. The *MNU Spreads Lies* web site sees things from the perspective of the Aliens or 'prawns' (as they are called by the humans) and <u>thereby</u> constructs what Henry Jenkins described as a 'counter reading' to the narrative of the film. This 'as-if-real' web site opposes other on-line material and by so doing opens up space for ambiguity about how reliable the information on the 'official site' (and indeed the film) might be (2009) (see fig 3). All told, this transmedia campaign distinguished itself from conventional marketing by elaborating on the film's narrative

through storyworld building as well as articulating character subjectivities extending the pleasures of the fiction across media forms more commonly used for marketing.

Fig 3. MNU Spreads Lies

The *D-9* campaign garnered much attention both on and offline as well as becoming the focus of the *Digifest* at the American Film Institute in 2009 The site went onto win awards from *The Hollywood Reporter's* Key Arts awards, the *Webbys* and the *Movie Virals* fan awards which confirmed the campaign as a notable example of film transmedia. But the research project did not get off to an auspicious start because shortly after it began, the site disappeared.

Searching for D-9.Com

 D-9 and its satellite sites vanished from the Sony Picture's studio site and were replaced with an online 'shop window' displaying DVD and Blu-ray formats leaving only the film's theatrical trailer in its wake. However when I began searching further afield it became clear that the studios digital housekeeping had not been comprehensive. On YouTube, the videos were still available. The fan blog *Movieviral.com* had made collections of the virals and these were still available to view on their YouTube site. The film's Facebook site was still there and contained clips of deleted scenes and 'Making of ' featurettes in the months around the release of the film but now was mostly populated with ads for forthcoming films of a similar generic disposition and then was repurposed to promote Blomkamp's next film, *Elysium* (2013). Character pages for the main characters Wikus Van Der Merwe and the alien, Christopher were still there too but they contained little more than a few pictures as all references to the core D-9 web site were gone.

My search for material turned to the awards. Both the Webbys and Key Arts awards have archives. But while Key Arts' archive is a recent initiative and only covers the last three years, the Webbys archive is a much more extensive going back to the year 2000. However after initially looking quite promising, it soon became apparent that the Webbys 'archive' keeps a record of the site, but not the site itself. Links to the site itself are broken as the studio has withdrawn its 'assets' from the web so, de facto, this 'archive' operates as a catalogue rather than a repository.

The next location I explored was the *Movie Marketing Madness* blog written and curated by a media marketing professional and enthusiast, Chris Thilke. Over a period of nearly 10 years from December 2003 until October 2012, Thilke blogs about his interest in marketing and movies and now it constitutes a sizable archive with commentary on nearly 500 film marketing campaigns during this period.

During the first year the blogger developed an editorial policy and states that he plans to focus his attention on the marketing campaigns for big studio releases and settles into a modus operandi whereby he considers each week's releases and then choose one to look at in more detail, this he describes as a 'manifesto of intent' (Thilke,2005). Over the following 10 years, he develops a curatorial approach to analysing transmedia promotional campaigns which he regards as a form of 'public service.'(Thilke, 2004) He considers the idea of citizen journalism and indeed I would suggest his blog is the work of a 'citizen curator' (Thilke, 2005).

However in the event, the search for District 9's campaign in this archive proves to be disappointing too for it turns out that Thilke didn't choose to cover the marketing campaign for *District 9* in August 2009[2].

It is this omission which reveals the limitations of this personal media form of archiving and raises questions about the role of subjectivity in archives. The blog-archive is dependent on a single individual and what we see over the years is that with the pressures of work and private life – he gets married, becomes a father and changes jobs - the blog ebbs and flows according to the time he has available. In the end the blogger simply runs out of enthusiasm and this together with the fact that the blog's host is hit by a security breach which infects his site with malware, results in him closing down *Movie Marketing Madness*. Whilst the blog is preserved on his personal blog (for the time being, at least) it suffers from the same 'link rot' we saw in the award archives which render it a set of commentaries without a collection, a discussion without materials.

The last port of call in this search for *District 9*'s film transmediations was the Internet archive. The Internet archive was founded in 1996 as a non profit making organisation by computer scientist and Internet entrepreneur Brewster Kahle in San Francisco California. In essence, the Internet Archive is a database aiming to create nothing less than 'a library of the Internet' which one journalist excitedly described as 'the digital Age's equivalent of the ancient library of Alexandria' (Green, 2002). The archive offers storage and free access to

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[2] There are several possible reasons why *District 9*'s campaign was not covered. Firstly its release coincided with the release of Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorius Basterds* and this was simply a bigger film. Moreover the advent of Twitter was changing the marketing landscape. Thilke notes how visitor traffic to the site had dropped whilst RSS traffic had increased significantly (Thilke 2009). In other words the way people were using the web changed at this time from regarding web sites as a destination to reading updates delivered to them.

collections of digitised materials including moving images, music and public domain books but its largest collection is its web archive.

The web archive is created by automated domain archiving .Its open source software tools crawl and download all publically accessible WWW pages and web sites and takes 'snapshots' of those web sites[3]. Its home page declares that '423 billion web pages have been saved since the Internet Archive began' and the archive's search engine is playfully called the *Wayback Machine* taking its name from a cartoon from early 60s known as *The Rocky and Bullwinkle show* (Wikipedia 2014) .The cartoon features a small white dog called Mr Peabody who made a WABAC (pronounced Wayback) machine to travel back in time to witness various historical events to teach his 'boy' Sherman about the past.(Wikipedia 2014)

However time travel with the Wayback Machine into the Internet Archive did not prove as easy as it looked in the cartoon animation as the search engine only works with web addresses (URLs). But once the film web site's address was established, I was able to see how many times http://d-9.com had been crawled

The site first appeared on August 27 2008 with a MNU logo and Adobe Flash Player plug in. Following the trailer, hidden from view I was surprised to find what I had been searching for - the web site! In the event, the site was not there in its entirety but in a stripped down version of its former self. Many aspects of the D-9 'movie experience' ,as it is called, were stripped out and gone including the 'D-9 MNU Alert Game', 'MNU Training Simulation' as well as the 'MNU Spreads Lies' site and the 'Maths from Outer Space site' . But the main site was still there and working for the most part. The Wayback Machine search engine may have its limitations but it had archived the site. Moreover it provides an illuminating insight into the life span of this artefact. By tracking the site on Wayback, I was able to trace it until the spring 2013 when it disappeared.

Reflections on a 'virtual' archaeology

During the course of this search, I encountered several different kinds of a new generation of digital archives. Indeed as Jussi Parikka observes, software based culture is littered with archival metaphors offering up digital repositories such as cloud storage and blog hosts as well as social media platforms such as Tumblr, Pintrest and Face book too (Parikka in Ernst 2013: 1-2) . The assumption is that digital archives will provide the panacea to all material challenges that film archives have encountered in the past such as flammable nitrate based films, degrading celluloid and stretched video tape and the premise underpinning all of

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[3] The protocol for their operation is that these Internet Archive crawlers cannot collect all information available on the web since much of the data is restricted by the publisher and stored in databases which are not accessible. They also respect the robot exclusion standard for web sites wishing to opt out.

these 'new 'archives is that they are always available and always 'on' (Chun in Parikka,2011:188).

It has been suggested that, culturally speaking, the main characteristic we attribute to digital media is memory and indeed the notion of memory is inscribed in the very nomenclature of the media with CD ROMs (read only memory), RAM (random access memory) and USBs popularly known as 'memory' sticks (Chun in Parikka,2011:188) . At first glance digital media promise the possibility of everlasting memory. But as Chun points out in her article *The Enduring Ephemeral, or The Future is a memory*, ' the 'conflation of memory with storage that both underlies and undermines digital media's 'archival promise' is an illusion and the permanence of archives based upon it, are therefore a myth (Chun in Parikka 2011:184). As I discovered in the search for *District 9*'s promotional campaign, digital links disappear, digital archives degenerate and digital assets can be subject to erasure which bears out Chun's observation that whilst in many ways the Internet is about memory, it has no memory in itself. (Chun in Parikka 2011:199)

In order to understand what distinguishes digital archives from their analogue predecessors and how this shapes the way things are archived as well as what can be archived, it may be helpful to understand the materiality of the archive or what Wolfgang Ernst referred to as the 'agency of the machine'(Ernst in Owens,2013)

The Machine Perspective

The German media archaeologist, Friedrich Kittler was interested, not just in knowledge but in the conditions in which knowledge arises and he famously concluded, 'media determine our situation' (Kittler1999:1). To comprehend how the digital platforms are shaping what we can know about the past, we need to examine their materiality, that is to say the material conditions under which media operate. For digital computer technologies this includes the micro temporalities of machine time or 'eigenzeit' (literally 'in their own time') such as processor speeds, refresh rates and so forth which are invisible to the human eye (Ernst 2013: 58).

Ernst points out that we can't just assume that digital archives provide storage space or act as depositories for artefacts in the traditional understanding of the term. Indeed technical operations, he argues reveal that digital archives should be thought of not so much as repositories, but as cybernetic systems and that the pictures, sounds, texts and movies displayed materially exist only as binary data and algorithms which are the instructions for how to build the display, in response to machine event or user action (Peacock, 2012 pers. comms 28 August). The image and movie assets of a web page are not embedded in the page; they exist separately and are called for algorithmically when the page is built in the browser. (Peacock, 2012 pers. comms 28 August).

It is this Ernst argues that makes digital archives 'dynamic' rather than static as browsers are replaced and versions of operating systems and software supersede one another (Ernst 2013:99). Cookies allow web objects to be presented to different people differently while with web 2.0, the 'social life' of the artefact is defined by the uses to which it is put by different users and at different times as well as co-created artefacts such as the blog on 'MNU Tell Lies' web site (Meyer,2012: 19). For digital archives, this experience raises questions about where digital artefacts begin and end as well as questions of cultural value and the meaning of an object which changes over time (Meyer: 2012: 19).

If software generated media objects only exist as 'latent' rather than real objects, manifest in the algorithmic process, then they cannot be archived in the conventional sense , only documented and by examining the 'agency of the machine' archival metaphors for (storage) space need to be replaced by metaphors of (dynamic) time (Owens 2013).

Implications

So, what are the implications of this virtual archaeology through the 'new archives' of the web in search of *District 9*'s transmediations?

Despite the archival 'promise' of digital media, clearly for the most part, *D-9* is no longer available, or, at least, not in its original form. But on reflection it seems that that as much can be learned from the search as what can be found at the destination. This investigation has illustrated some of the ways in which digital archives differ from their real world counterparts, as well as the consequences for the cultural form I am looking at in my research.

In short, digital archives are less repositories of material objects, and more a network of information relations in which links are activated and reactivated as required. The consequence is that digital artefacts like this cannot be archived per se, only documented (Ernst, 2013:77). Whilst archives continue to be concerned with evidence, information and systems of ordering and classification, it is the meta data describing the object which is archived for the most part rather than the material object. So, *de facto,* the first generation of transmedia narratives are being lost and the concern is that an ephemerality of new media cultural forms means there is the problem they will disappear before they have been appraised as new forms of storytelling.

 Moreover whilst my interest is in film transmedia, of course the issue of the digital cultural memory is not confined to film transmedia, but raises wider concerns how culture is remembered and indeed what culture remembers. Clearly not everything can be archived and indeed, wherever there are archives, whether it is the *Movie Marketing Madness* blog or the British Museum, collections are always preconditioned by selection. It is also true that archivists have their priorities and agendas which inevitably lead to blind spots and absences in the record of the past. But in the case of emerging cultural forms like

transmedia storytelling here we have an instance of concern. Without putting too finer point on it, this experience is concomitant with the position articulated in an article in *Wired* magazine last year titled 'We need to act to prevent a digital dark age' which raised concerns about the preservation of data for future generations (Koehl 2013).

For digital archives there is a tension between the perils of permanence and the perils of ephemerality and the implications are not confined to the world of museums. This is illustrated by instances such as the disappearance of Geocities, first established in 1995. Geocities was a free web hosting service on which the first generation of digital pioneers set up homesteads in the form of DIY homepages made of hand coded profile pages, vernacular gifs and self made buttons which some now regard as constituting a significant manifestation of early web culture (Lialina and Espenschied, 2013). But a few years after it was brought by Yahoo, it was unceremoniously shut down in 2009 and lost to history (Lialina and Espenschied, 2013).[4]

Whilst at the other end of the spectrum, recent debates about individuals rights over what are being described as their 'digital footprints' and the 'right to be forgotten' have developed in response to concerns about the way social media such as Facebook retain and handle information, an businesses such as Google glean and use personal information. To mitigate against the permanence of the digital records and its facility for retaining records of old embarrassments and past troubles, the European Court of Justice recently ruled in favour of requiring search engines like Google to remove links to web pages containing personal information unless the public interest outweighs the interests of individual privacy (Posner, 2014). Clearly the challenges encountered in the archive are not confined to questions of how to preserve the past but how to manage the present too.

In this virtual archaeological excavation of the recent digital past to search for the *District 9*'s transmediations of film, what I encountered was not the artefacts themselves which materially speaking to all intents and purposes were disappeared, but impressions of where the artefact had once been. But by so doing I have learned more about the ways in which we know about the past in a digital culture. As Wolfgang Ernst reminds us, in media archaeology we need to be mindful of the silences, gaps and the disappearances as much as the presences (Ernst 2013:194).

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