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Film for the Web

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A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of
Communication at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with departmental honors.

April 20, 2012

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Film for the Web

Rachel E. Rodgers

Honors Thesis for the Department of Communication at Trinity University

Spring 2012

Film for the Web

1. Introduction

The web has redefined how we present content and tell stories. It allows us a kind of versatile creative freedom and the opportunity to renovate mediums and artistic conventions. This is a shift that is being explored in greater depth, playfully, academically and commercially. Medium theorists have a fresh opportunity to examine the web's impact on other art forms and media content. Does the web transform the purpose of a photograph, a song, or a film? By altering the means by which the art is delivered to its audience it seems that the medium can be fundamentally transformed.

For the purpose of this honors thesis film will be the primary case study. In medium specificity theory, a film developed to be viewed on the web can be considered inherently different from a film designed to be viewed on the big screen (Carroll 1). One supposes a physically passive but cognitively active viewing experience; the other offers the opportunity for an audience that is both cognitively and physically involved. This is interactivity, a two-way flow of communication, either physical or mental, between the viewer and the content medium. But how would a film take advantage of the opportunity for interactivity? And what does a film designed for the web need to look like? From the perspective of a medium specificity theorist the problem should first be approached by examining the core properties of the web. In defining the aspects that make the web its own medium - even art form- isolated characteristics can then be applied to film theory.

This is the approach which this honors thesis will take. It will begin by defining the web as a medium of its own and then use interactive film theory as a foundation for uniting the two

mediums into a single, successful model. The thesis will culminate in the production of this model as a creative film project. The goal is to demonstrate how a film could best take advantage of the web as a unique medium and highlight potential future avenues for interactive narrative.

2. Medium Specificity of the Web

Perhaps the most fundamental component of the web is interactivity. We cannot navigate to a page, view an image or send an email without interacting through a user interface on some level. This is the aspect of the web that sets it apart from other more passive methods of experiencing media content. Interactivity, described previously as a two-way flow of communication, becomes the foundation for this thesis.

Because the viewer is able to interact with the content, they are actively personalizing the media. The web offers direct implementations of this: search engines and social media sites tailor advertisements to the user's recent searches and interests. Although this has possible negative implications- intrusive surveillance for one- when applied to aesthetics it has the potential of creating a unique bond with the individual viewer.

A mechanism that often drives interest in web content is gamification. This may present itself on a number of levels. It may rely on gaining points through likes, reblogging, or number of views. It may hinge on social interaction and levels of involvement in online communities. Or, it may be found in the act of actual gaming. Although the social aspects mentioned might be difficult to apply to a film format, the underlying concept of gamification could be easily adapted to the interactive film medium.

Last of all, the web is not bound to one platform. Content is viewed across a quickly growing array of devices: phones, tablets, and computers. Further, these devices are constantly

changing, and their requirements for media content and the interactive functions they offer vary greatly (Knight 1). A film designed for the web would need to be adaptable to these individual displays and if possible, take advantage of the versatility that they offer.

2.1 Interactive Film Theory

Having explored the aspects of the web that seem to define it as a medium we can now explore the impact that these aspects might have on film form. The interactivity that is fundamental to the web has already been applied experimentally to film. Interactive films have not been highly successful as a genre. Film theorists have complained that “present narrative interactive film experiments often lead only to frustration, distraction of shallow, narrow-band engagement of the user”(Ben-Shaul 152). In order to give the viewer, or “interactor” choices, the flow of the film is interrupted (Cavus 129). While past attempts at developing interactive films have failed to capture large audience following, theorists have suggested potential solutions. Examining recent interactive films, their respective successes and failures, and the critical analysis of these works, potential alternative routes for interactive film come to the forefront (Ben-Shaul 159). The interactive film itself seems an excellent building block for the film designed for the web.

The earliest interactive films were viewed in theaters. Large audiences voted on potential narrative routes, the majority vote leading the narrative forward (Hales 1). The 1967 film *One Man and His House* used this format. While this offers the opportunity for a brand of social interactivity it also hinders the flow of the film presentation. Recent projects have attempted to mediate this by acting on the audience’s observed physical and mental responses. In several projects the heart-rate and movement of audience members was collectively monitored.

Depending on the group response the film's narrative intensity was adjusted (Zuckerman 1). Although this presents an interesting alternative, for the purpose of this case study the focus will remain on catering to an audience of individuals. Web based content is typically designed to accommodate a single -rather than collective- viewer.

What interactive film does require is an active audience. While physical action is not necessary, there must be reciprocated passing of information between the viewer and content. This is in contrast with the cognitively active but otherwise passive audience of classic film form. Traditionally, the viewer constantly interacts on a mental level with the media (Cavus 128). An interactive film pushes this activity to a direct exchange between the medium and the viewer, forcing the viewer not only to directly participate, but to question the impact that their choices will have on the outcome of the story. This most fundamental aspect of the interactive film presents the most challenging set of obstacles.

Handing interactivity to the viewer implies that they have control over the story: in a contradictory way the audience, although on a very limited level, becomes “[the] co-author of [an] emergent text” (Abba 24). This introduces a number of side-effects for the interactive film: aspects that are unavoidable yet detrimental to the narrative structure. The positive take on interactive film is that it offers its audience a line of direct involvement into the story world. It is easy to imagine that this would more fully engage the viewer in the outcome of the narrative. It seems that typically the opposite is true: the viewer is alienated by their involvement. “Much of cinema's power over us is our lack of power over it” (Weinbern 262).

The most typical form of interactive film suffers from this obstacle. The branching narrative, or multi-thread structure, presents viewers with a crossroads format. In the classic

example of this format, *Cause and Effect*, interactors were required to select an outcome for the scene or make a decision for a character (Abba 19). The decision alters the course of the story, not unlike the “Choose your own Adventure” books (Packard). This means that the viewer is constantly required to make decisions that will affect the film’s outcome. The concept behind this brand of interactivity is that it engages its audience by placing its life in their hands. Where this structure fails is in its inability to make the choice matter for the viewer.

A good story engages us because we are interested in discovering where it leads us next. Generally we are not interested in controlling the course of the narrative until after it concludes: A favorite character dies, or a piece of the narrative is left unresolved (Abba 23). In these cases the lure of an alternative ending is strong. However, while in the flow of the narrative, a viewer has little use for choice. Blind to the consequences of any decision they make, their preference has no significant bearing on the progression of events (Cavus 131). For the viewer, choices are fairly arbitrary.

Further, when faced with such options, viewers still attempt to guess which decision might present the most promising outcome. This introduces the distraction factor. They must separate themselves from the narrative in an attempt to objectively consider how their choices will affect events and characters (Ben-Shaul 149). They are no longer deeply engaged in the narrative but called out of the reality of the story world. Some film theorists see this as structuring that promotes a restless attention span and shallow engagement: “Introducing the viewer with too much power automatically reduces the element of surprise and excitement” (Cavus 131). The lack of a concrete conclusion to the film is also problematic, leaving the narrative structure broken or unresolved (Abba 22). This is perhaps the greatest flaw of the interactive film: offering meaningless choices that distract from the narrative.

Another type of narrative that deals with these same hurdles is the early CD-ROM interactive film. These works, such as *Immemory* for example, used a combination of video, still images, sound and hyperlinked pages (Ben-Shaul, 151). The viewer underwent a gradual process of discovery with no set timeline to limit them. This structure allowed for virtual wandering but left the narrative ungrounded. This appears to be an issue of too many choices and too little narrative. Certainly this format seems to be more of a game than a film. Critics objected to it for this reason, rejecting it for its lack of narrative structure or closure (Ben-Shaul, 151). While this might still be an interesting combination of media to explore, it seems to be too great a deviation from traditional film form.

The next obstacle is that almost all structured interactive films have more than one potential route for the narrative. The end result is that there are multiple timelines: more than one story may be told. While this is not an inherently negative factor, it easily lends itself to a film for that is distracting or fragmented. Some interactive films attempt to take advantage of the multiple timeline structure. Projects such as *Sonata* and *Timecode* ask the viewer to construct their own progression of time. These projects allow more than one set of events to play out at once: multiple screens present multiple events which are played simultaneously. While a creative approach to dealing with multiple narrative paths, again, this structure results in a highly distracting experience for the viewer (Cavus 136). Multiple screens fragment the story and leave the viewer unfocused.

Other attempts to create a more fluid experience of decision-making tend to result in something akin to a video game, for example, the *Oz Project* (CMU). They use virtually constructed worlds where other computerized characters react to the viewer's avatar. By

definition this is much more closely representative of gaming than of film. Here the narrative structure necessary to qualify it as a film has been removed.

The problems that repeatedly arise from attempts at creating interactive films can be simplified into two core issues. First, choices given to the interactor are distracting and meaningless. Second: films need defined narrative structure. Acknowledging this creates a difficult set of criteria for the genre. However, it also suggests possible directions for filmmakers to take in the future.

1.2 Solutions

The first criterion mentioned can be easily dealt with: the film should refrain from offering direct choices. It should avoid placing the interactor in situations where they are forced into making binary decisions about the narrative's course. The second criterion is more complicated to ensure. A defined and structured narrative is difficult to maintain, especially since, by nature of the medium, change and personalization based on involvement are required. Creating a narrative flow becomes a balancing act.

However, in combination these two conditions offer a potentially successful solution for interactive filmmaking. Instead of using viewer involvement to alter or interrupt the narrative flow, interactivity should be used as a device to drive the narrative forward. For instance, the interactor briefly enters the story world and takes on the role of a character. Ben-Shaul recommends a scenario in which the viewer completes a puzzle around which the narrative hinges. By successfully solving the puzzle the story is driven forward into the next scene (Ben-Shaul 158). Such a model on its surface might appear similar to the CD-ROM style film. The significant difference is that here the viewer remains bound to well-defined narrative pathways.

An interactor is not free to roam a virtual world; they are working to remain in it. This structure has the potential to more deeply invest the viewer in the narrative by aligning their success or failure directly with that of the protagonist.

If the viewer fails to solve the puzzle they should not be completely derailed from the narrative. Although their failure should be reflected in the course of the storyline, it should not bring the film to a complete halt. This is necessary in order to keep the narrative from feeling as though it has dead ends or lacks a conclusion. Further, solving the puzzle should not require developing a complex set of skills (Ben-Shaul 159). Using gamification to drive the plot of the film forward might be natural on a theoretical level. However, interrupting the narrative to teach the viewer a complex set of rules is precariously close to creating a distraction. Skills required for the interactor should be minimal and reusable. Keeping the level of involvement in check should protect the narrative flow.

This structure, when applied correctly, is promising. In addition, it seems as though it could easily fit with the requirements for web content. Aside from the ensured interactivity, this format could allow for the incorporation of aspects such as personalization, gamification, and cross-platform compatibility. Personalization could be attained through the potential of more than one outcome to the story, or, by allowing for unique tasks with each new interactor. Gamification is inherent in this structure: tasks and puzzles are games. The film itself takes on a secondary role as a kind of casual game. Finally, cross-platform accessibility could be easily achieved provided that the interactive functions involved are designed to be adaptable for phones, tablets and computers alike. From the perspective of a medium specificity theorist, interactive film fits easily into the mediums specific requirements of web content. This seems to answer the question posed in this paper: what should a film for the web look like? A film for the

web is a cross-platform, interactive narrative and relies on gamification to motivate the story and the viewers involvement.

3. Theory in Practice

Using the model outlined in this paper I have constructed a short, interactive film designed to be viewed on the web. Conceptually, the film is driven by a series of short, casual games. These games manifest themselves as challenges that the film's characters must complete successfully in order to continue moving forward in the narrative. Losing a game sends the characters into an alternate storyline which reflects their failure to complete a challenge. Designing the relationship between the film narrative and interactive game was a complex process.

The initial decisions I made on how to handle this process dealt with the way in which the content would be delivered to the viewer. The landscape of interactive multimedia is quickly changing; even recent methods of media delivery are quickly becoming obsolete. However, while the technology may be transient, the questions being answered in this project are permanent. I decided on using Adobe Flash Professional as my primary content managing program. The film itself was edited in Adobe Premier and was then embedded in Flash using an mp4 codec. The structure and programming of the film is controlled through as a series of linked AS3 files.

3.1 Pre-production

The concept for the narrative was derived directly from the decision to use games or challenges as the protagonists motivating force. The storyline focuses on a young man, James, who is being interviewed for job at large corporation. He is unwittingly dragged into an alternate

reality by his interviewer. In this virtual world he is put through a series of tests, yet is convinced he is protecting his prospective employers from corporate espionage. The tests manifest themselves as the casual games designed to be played by the viewer. The challenges include hacking a passcode through a hangman game, fighting off evil henchmen with a basic first person shooter routine, and disarming a bomb with a deduction based puzzle. If James, or rather the viewer, succeeds at passing all three tests, James is given the job. If, however, at any point a game is lost, James is pulled out of the alternate reality and informed that he still needs to prove himself. At this point James and the viewer are given the option to re-enter the alternate reality and given a second attempt to pass the three tests. (See appendix , figure 1).

The script for this film does not have a straightforward narrative flow. At the end of each game there are two potential outcomes for the scene. This reverts to the branching narrative format as there are multiple, possible timelines. In order to simplify the script and the branching sequences, the number of concluding scenes was limited to two: one for winning all three games and one for losing any one of the games. Further, a method of moving the film in and out of each challenge had to be formulated. My goal was for the games to still feel as though they were an integral portion of the film. They would be crafted to appear as though they were a point of view shot from the perspective of the protagonist. Maintaining the sense that this was the world of the film was key to the concept. So, the games on a visual level would be based on real, live-action footage.

This design decision deeply affected the way that I conceptualized the games. The hangman game and the deduction puzzle could easily be created with still graphics. Single frames from the video footage were the basis for the games. The first person shooter however,

was much more of a theoretical challenge. I used three separate visual layers to simulate the look of a live action shooter game. This became my most challenging portion of the project.

Factors concerning the film production also played greatly into how the script was formulated. As few characters as possible were used; the story revolves around the interactions between James and his interviewer. This minimized production costs and helped condense the narrative. Location was an additional challenge. The majority of the scenes took place in a single meeting room. The rest could be filmed in an indoor parking garage where the lighting was controllable. This helped simplify the shooting schedule and made the production process run more smoothly. Aspects of the script continued to be cut down to their bare essentials in order to reduce the amount of filming and production time necessary.

3.2 Film Production

Production itself consisted of five partial days of shooting. Filming was done with a single handheld camera. The shaky, real-world perspective offered a “you are there” aesthetic which was appropriate for the film’s theme. Multi-camera filming would have been difficult to achieve as lighting setups only worked from one angle. Audio was captured with a boom microphone during production. However all of the dialogue which took place outside of the meeting room had to be dubbed with ADR in post production. The noise on set, especially in the parking garage location, tended to overwhelm the actor’s spoken dialogue.

The lighting presented a few challenges which are evident in the film. In the meeting room scenes the lighting sometimes appears strong and unbalanced. A kino flo was used to enhance the daylight already present in the room. This was then contrasted with a tungsten,

Fresnel backlight. The challenge was the automated overhead lamps of the meeting room. Ideally, I would have used a flag to cut out this unwanted light.

The lighting in the garage proved slightly easier to manipulate. Here a traditional three light setup was used, in particular for the scenes surrounding the shooter game. The actors were given a strong backlight in an attempt to separate them from the dark environment. Further, blue-party gels were added in these scenes for a surreal effect. The goal was for the alternate reality sequences to appear visually distinct from the rest of the film.

This differentiation of the alternate reality was something which was addressed in postproduction as well. Color balancing was used in Adobe Premiere to reduce the level of the color red in the film while enhancing the blues, blacks and greens. I also worked to differentiate the world through sound design. Eerie sound effects were added but only in the alternate reality. All of the sound outside of this virtual world (apart from the opening explanation of the film) is diegetic.

3.3 Post-production

The editing process also played a role in structuring and segmenting the scenes. Individual sequences had to be separated and matched against the two possible outcomes for continuity. This became an even greater challenge as games were incorporated into the flow of the film. Other challenges encountered in the editing process dealt with the audio. It was a struggle to keep the audio consistent across platforms and different systems. Played on a set of headphones the audio sounded well balanced; however, played from computer speakers it came out weak, the ambient sound too faint to be heard. When adjusted to play on computer speakers, the dialogue was drowned out by ambient sounds. This was a difficulty for which I never found a

concrete solution. In the end compromises were made between the three systems in hopes of findings an acceptable average. To some degree this made it less likely the film would be easily transferable across multiple platforms.

It was not only the audio, however, that I was concerned about transferring from one device to another. The need to find a middle ground in terms of picture quality was also present. The video was recorded at a resolution of 1920 x 1080 pixels. While the high resolution was preferable for the big screen, the content was being created for much smaller displays where loading time would be a factor. In the end the resolution was lowered to YouTube's high definition standards: 1280 x 720. This would allow for a clear, clean picture while lowering files sizes a significant amount.

3.4 Game Creation

At this point the individual games could be pieced together. The first game that was constructed was hangman. The interaction was built around a keyboard graphic. Clicking on a key selects that letter. Once the letter has been clicked it becomes unresponsive. The code for this game randomly selects the mystery passcode from a library of themed words. Initial testing of the game showed that it caused some confusion. It became clear that a set of concrete instructions and a more intuitive library of words needed to be offered to the viewer. To fix this, a set of audio instructions were delivered by the Interviewer along with an optional hint. Although this game is structurally simple it became one of the most complex to integrate into the flow of the narrative. (See appendix, figures 2,3).

The first person shooter, on the other hand, was by far the most difficult to design and program. In order to simulate a live-action shooter game animated graphics were layered and

compiled in Flash. The first layer is a background image, the room in which the game takes place. The second layer is an intricate compilation of moving graphics. Each image sequence is a target: an evil henchman bobbing up and down, dodging bullets, and attempting to return fire. The player's goal is to "shoot" or click on the figures as they pop up from behind objects. In order to capture the henchmen on independent layers, they were filmed individually in front of a green-screen. In post-production the background was keyed-out, leaving video of actors on a clean, transparent background. The short clips were then exported as a sequence of vector graphic images which could be easily imported into a Flash movieclip timeline. Creating the illusion of live-action figure movement was relatively straightforward; making them interactive required a few tricks.

The individual graphics could not easily be cut down to contain just the visible figure; the images still held transparent space. And, because the figures move through this transparent space, it was difficult to minimize the size of the graphic. This meant that the interactive object was very large, much larger than the visible moving figures. Clicking on one object could set off a response from a completely separate character object if their transparent portions happened to overlap. So, instead of having the interactivity stem from the moving figure an empty, transparent clip was layered over the moving characters. This clip was made into a motion tween which followed the henchmen as they went through their patterned motion. The result of this alteration is that interactivity is generated from an unseen object. However, the effect produced is still visually and functionally the same as my original attempts at creating the interactivity.

The final layer of this game consisted of movie clips that acted as shields for the hiding figures. These clips were covered over seamlessly with images of cars, trashcans and overturned tables. When the Interactor mouses over these objects the mouse click is automatically

deactivated. They are unable to register a hit on the hidden henchmen. (See appendix, figures 4,5,6,7).

If the viewer manages to click on a revealed character a response is triggered. Once an object is clicked it is replaced by another sequence of images: a henchman reacting to being shot. The movieclips are swapped when a mouse click is registered. Although the swap is never perfectly seamless, it communicates the idea effectively. The new video stops after it runs through the first loop. The figure has disappeared and is registered as dead. Once all of the characters have been shot the game concludes. (See appendix, figures 8,9).

This was by far the most involved game to build. During the process library sizes were an additional problem. The information-heavy sequences caused the program to drag and crash frequently. Although I never discovered a workaround, any additional experimentation with this type of game would require stronger support from the program. The coding process was held up by this recurring issue. Although the creative process was a trial by fire, the end product used the simplest mechanics and could be integrated into the film most easily.

The final game was a challenge in that it required the viewer to learn a fairly complex set of rules. Although the concept of the game seemed to fit with the task of disarming the bomb, it required detailed instructions. In order to manage this, an instruction page was added, devoted to rules of the game. The result however, was that there was a greater disconnect between the game and the film narrative. In an attempt to minimize this transition a text overlay was used in the film during the moments leading up to the instruction page, incorporating the written instructions as a text message. Nevertheless, it was an inelegant transition. Although this is perhaps the most

enjoyable game to play, it is also the one I would consider replacing in future versions of this project. (See appendix, figures 10,11).

After completing the individual games, they were pieced together through a series of AS3 files. These became the logic of the film, pointing the compiled game file to the right video clip based on wins and losses, the next game, set of instructions, or start page. This was the point at which I also added countdown timers to each game. These allotted short amounts of time to each challenge. They became another mechanism for losing the games if the viewer failed to win the challenge before the clock ran out. Timers were necessary in order to keep the game flowing, preventing a viewer from pausing the narrative flow to fixate on the outcome of a single game. The other final piece added to the games was audio. Suspenseful music, in the same vein as the soundtrack, was used to link the games back to the film. These sound clips made a significant difference in bridging the gap between the video and the game. After these final pieces were added the film fell into place. It was then ready to be tested and played across multiple devices.

4. Results

This short film was meant to demonstrate the potential for using simple, casual games to enhance the flow of a film plot. On this level the project was fairly successful. The short film hinges on each game as an important moment in the story. On a conceptual level, this demonstrates how a film for the web might be composed. However, for future projects, there were a number of aspects that could be reworked or improved.

From a theoretical perspective, this film did not meet all of the criteria that described the web as a unique medium. The personalization available in this film is limited. Because there is a “correct” path that should be taken, personalization through the construction of the narrative is

not possible. While the majority of the games generate random answers, the key word is random: this function may make the game more enjoyable to play a second time around; however, it is not generating the answer specifically for the viewer. This idea of personalization might be an interesting function to work into the game, enhancing the viewer's bond with the narrative.

As was mentioned, there certainly seems to be a correct route for this film to take. The concern is that, as a player fails they are forced to re-experience portions of the film. It is easy to imagine that this could lead to an exasperated viewer, tired of the games and repeated sequences. Such repetition was enforced by a limited budget, an obstacle specific to this thesis, not to the medium in general. This selectiveness for all purposes created a dead end in the narrative. While this was played off as nuance of the storytelling and the alternate reality, it still amounted to breaking the narrative flow. In the future, a different method of handling losses would benefit the concept. For example, losing the game would still be detrimental, perhaps resulting in injury or the loss of a character, but not the end of the storyline or the interactivity.

A final criticism was that the potential of the games and their interactivity was not fully exploited. First of all, in designing the games a single game mechanic was used: the mouse tap or click. While this choice made it easy to transition the game across devices it did not push the boundaries of the platforms that were being worked with. Tilts used in tablet game design, dragging and steering code-able for all devices were left out for simplicity's sake. In order to fully take advantage of the web medium it would make sense to put these functions to use. Further, not all of the games seemed to become seamlessly integrated in the film. The final game in particular required a significant amount of explanation and the mastering of a new skill set. In the future I would avoid using games this complex. The danger here is that the film could revert

to structure much more closely related to the early CD-ROM interactive films, interactivity distracting from the narrative.

With these considerations in mind it is also important to take into account that the web is appreciated for its versatility and the opportunity it offers for unabridged creativity. There are no real set of guidelines which determine exactly what is effective. This thesis endeavored to find a formula for successfully constructing a film for the web in medium specificity terms. However, it is not the only method of telling such a narrative. The aim was very specifically to create a web film with a structured narrative using informed, interactive film theory.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Game Outline.

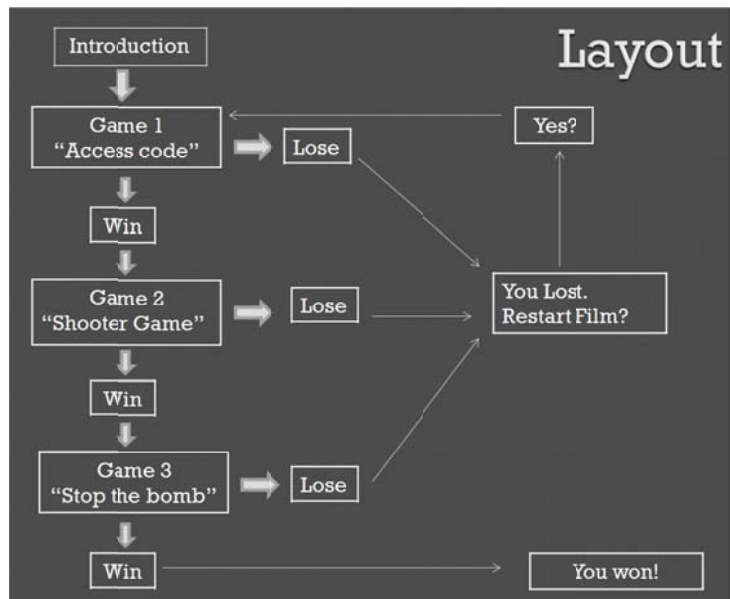


Figure 2. Introduction to game 1.



Figure 3. Game 1.



Figure 4. Game 2, layer 1: Background.

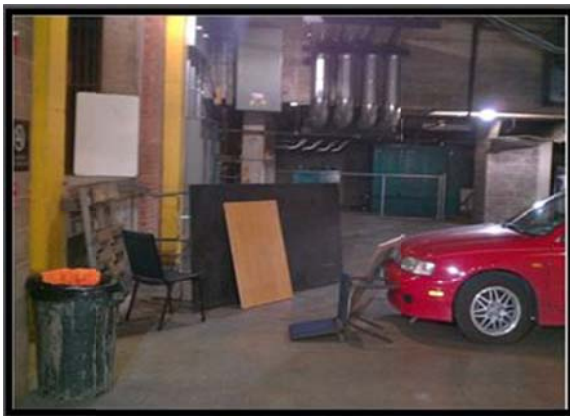


Figure 5. Game 2, layer 2: Interactive Characters.

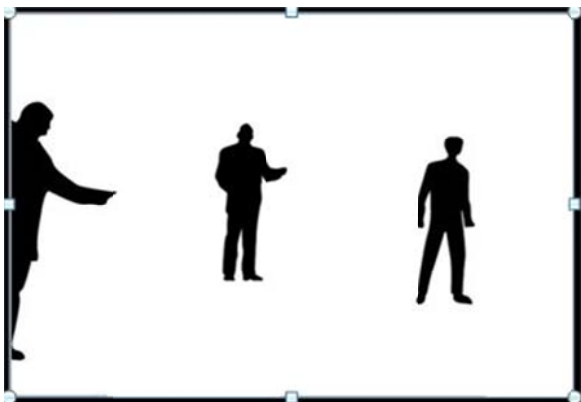


Figure 6. Game 2, layer 3: Deflective layer.



Figure 7. Game 2, layer compilation.



Figure 8. Introduction to game 2



Figure 9. Game 2.



Figure 10. Introduction to game 3.

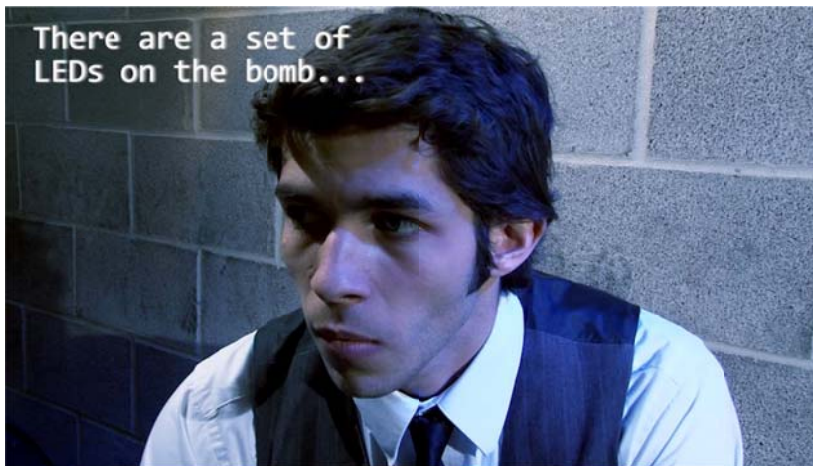


Figure 11. Game 3.

