

Some introductory remarks

Whereas rules can be about setting standards for conformity, I want to argue the case for claiming ownership, because I believe that the digital playing fields offer not only competition, but opportunity—a chance to w00t¹ in the most creative way. In the discussion that follows, ‘rulz’ means to win and own; to take over new territory.

My entrée into the ranks of the digital was serendipitous. Twenty years ago, a chance encounter with the latest developments in computer graphics for film convinced me that computer graphics were a valuable storytelling tool. In my view, the enrichment of storytelling through the narrative use of computer graphics is one of the great benefits of computerisation. Not everyone agrees with this: many argue that ‘all this digital stuff’ is cold and hard. People often assert that digital imagery is obvious and that their use drains warmth from narratives. Furthermore, these views are not confined to computer graphics in films, for many, digital tools are at odds with the humanity that should be at the core of ‘real’ art forms.

There is nothing like the threat of the new to draw nay-sayers like seagulls to a hot chip. In the

mid-1990s, when I wanted to make a short computer-generated film, I faced opposition from every quarter. It was too expensive, they said, and computer graphics weren't very good because no-one knew how to do them properly. Many argued that computer-generated films weren't 'real' films and it was clear they hoped that if they said this enough it would make this new technology go away. I was not persuaded by these arguments. On graduating from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), I decided to find out what filmmakers needed to know if they wanted to use computer graphics. The research I undertook, supported by the AFTRS Kenneth Myer Fellowship, resulted in a book, *So What's This All About Then: a non-user's guide to digital effects in filmmaking*.² (It has been updated for Screen Australia's *Satchel*.³) Not only did I want to refute the nay-saying, I wanted others to do it, too.

As a consequence, I was looked upon as 'one of those digital people' and wound up in endless discussions with those who wanted to persuade me that computer graphics were ruining films. Incensed by these arguments, I wrote *Digital Storytelling: the narrative power of visual effects in film*.⁴ The focus of this book is classic feature-film narratives and how visual effects have expanded narrative tools for filmmakers. However, as I wrote it, I found myself taking up the wider cause of emerging narrative experiences—and it is with these that I want to engage in this essay.

The changes we have seen have happened so quickly that there is a tendency for people to conflate all things digital. On my website I have the tagline,

‘Digital doesn’t mean I can fix your computer’. Although my interest is computer graphics, I find myself consulted on digital sound, digital editing, digital photography, email, how to use the Microsoft suite of applications... while at the same time having to listen to rants about how access to the Internet means the end of civilisation as we know it. And yes, in spite of the tagline, I still get asked to fix computers.

Most often the arguments I encounter about digital technologies arise out of fear about what these changes will bring, even though the impact of these technologies across almost every form of human endeavour heralds profound—and largely positive—change. I am particularly persuaded by how we are using them to enhance the way we tell stories. I love storytelling. It is one of the cleverest, most important things we analogue creatures do, and we are on the cusp of being able to realise story in ways that we have always yearned to do. Fundamental to this is the fact that the technologies we are developing through our use of digital tools will allow audiences to experience stories in ways that work best for them and allow them to be active participants in the story.

Storytelling has always been a means of passing on knowledge and wisdom. It is a vital link from one generation to the next. It is one of the ways in which we make sense of ourselves. To our great good fortune, though wind may have scoured the stone on which our earliest stories were recorded and many a great library has been lost to fire and human conflict, stories have endured. Endurance is their mission and redundancy