Cinematic Games Are Dead!

Long Live Cinematic Games!
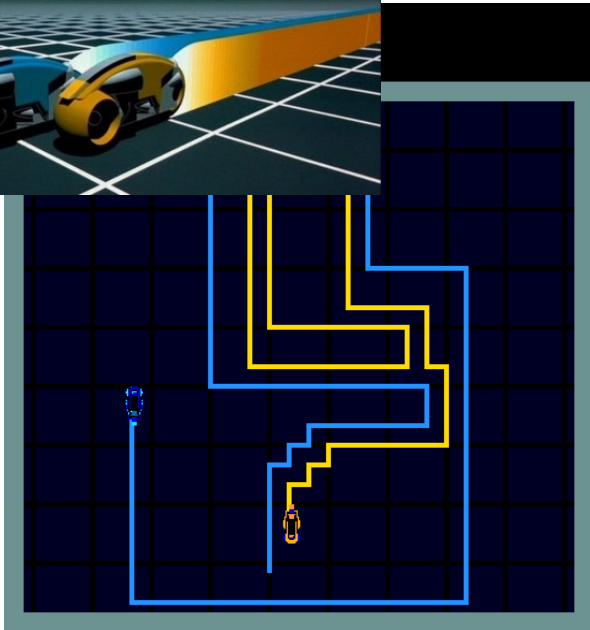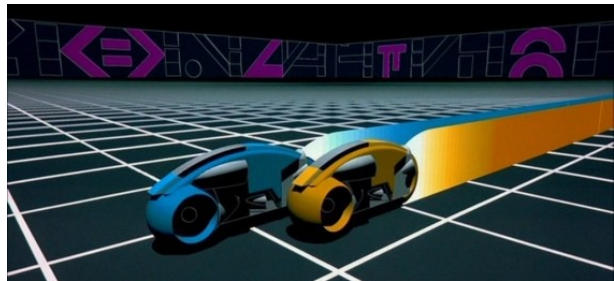
Matthew Weise

Creative Director, Fiction Control

What does it mean to be inspired by or take from cinema in video games?

The early 80s is when movie tie-in games really started.

There was a gap in visual language, visual representation.

This was the beginning of games trying to close this gap, which grew
  into an obsession.

Copying film – literally – set the tone for what closing this gap meant early on.

A lot of these techniques got ironed out in the 90s, as pre-rendered / pre-shot video gave way to a growing vocabulary for melding real-time 3D graphics with cinematic language.
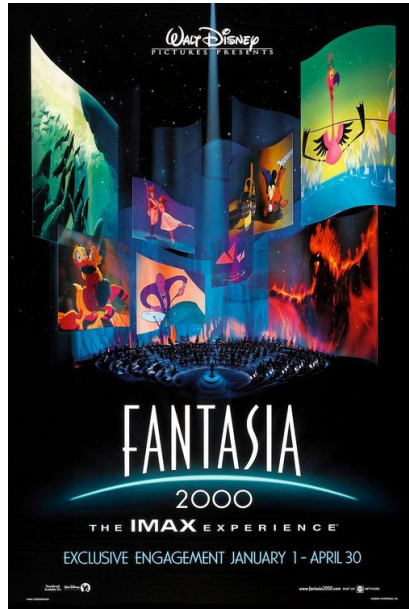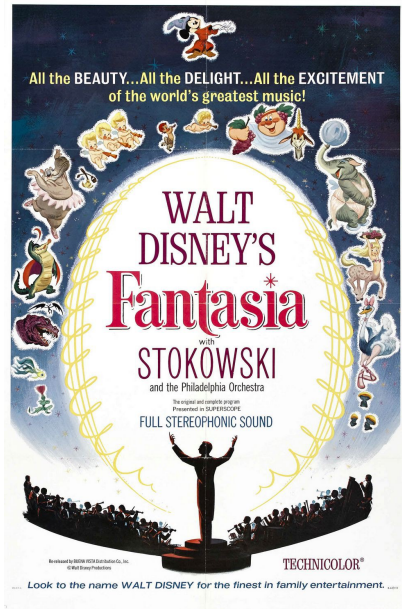
Even though we don't have this obsession anymore, a lot of these

"traditional" techniques survive today.

There is still this lingering feeling that this is what it means to make a

"cinematic" game.

This is a game I worked on that we might not think of as traditionally "cinematic". However...

…the concept was that it was a "direct continuation of the film franchise". The game was the "third film".

We had to ask ourselves "if this were an interactive version of the third film, what would it be?"

This could not involve traditional cinematic camera angles because of the interaction constraints of the Kinect.

We found the "dramatic metaphor" of the original film: a conductor bringing forth animated worlds with music & characters conjuring with magic.

This became the basis for the literal story of the game, a story of a sonic magician who animates dormant matter with hand gestures.

As a result, Narrative Design was Interface Design.

We took the visual language of the film (not the camera angles) and used it as player feedback to express the core fantasy.

The core narrative challenge became to make the player feel as if the musical sorcery of the 1940 film was a Kinect game that had waited 70 years to be realized.

We extended this idea to the broader framing narrative: the hat + the logics of magic as implied by the Sorcerer's Apprentice short and its metaphorical relation to the concert film.

This is procedural adaptation: adapting the WORLD of a movie using the dramatic language of games, not movies (but still finding visual references that serve user experience).

This is another game I worked on that was the opposite in budget, a mobile narrative game intended as a prequel to the movie Transcendence.

The pitch was making a mobile character-based, choice-based narrative game in 2 months.

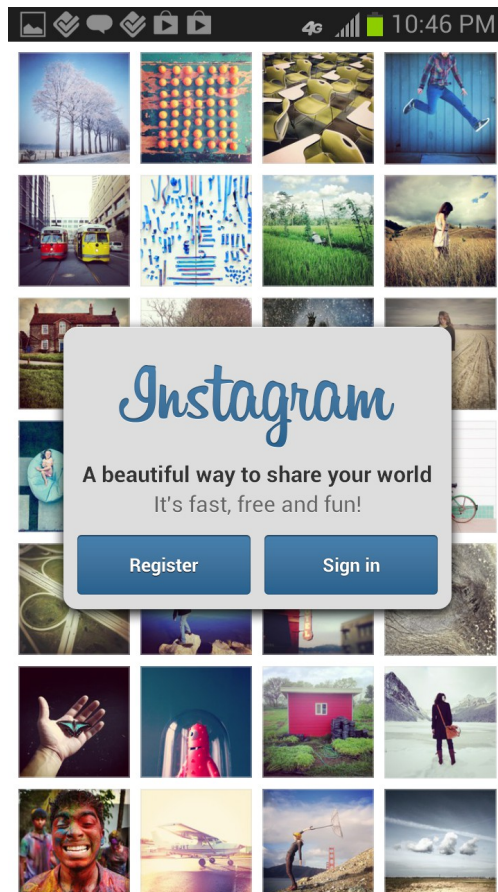We decided a "100% no character animation" approach would make this possible.

Our inspiration was La Jetee: a movie without motion.

The sound makes it a movie – we imagine images moving if sound suggests movement.

In the film memories are still images, small pieces of a life seen out of
  order.

They are stories without motion.

It occurred to us that photo-sharing apps are essentially storytelling machines.

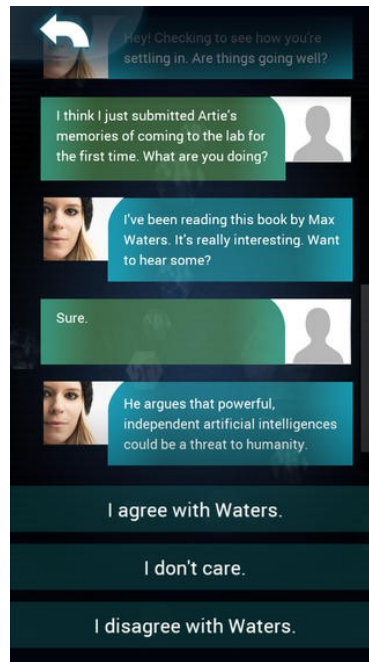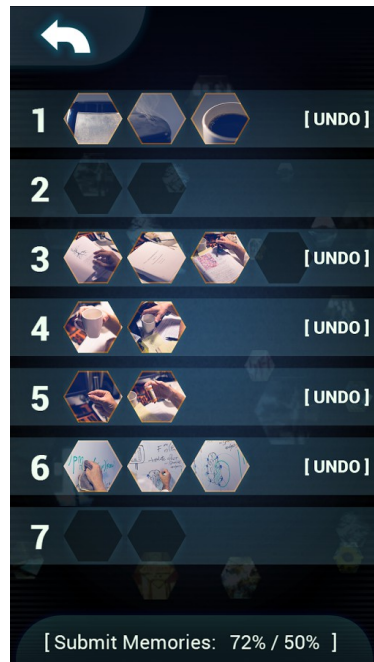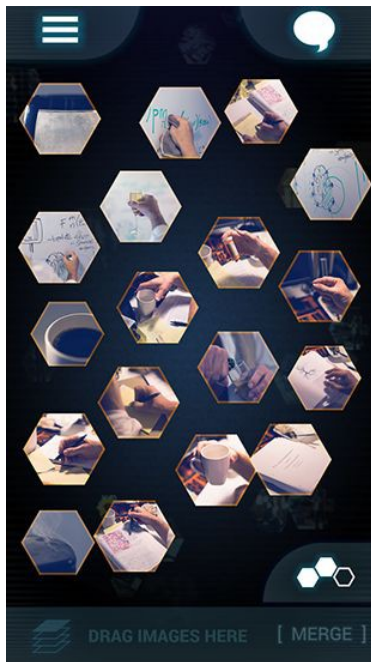The "game" of them is editing a story together.

They are also stories without motion.

Because we were working with a film company, we got to shoot
movies (without motion).

This was narrative design & puzzle design – as a game designer I got
to direct scenes, because the "scenes" were the puzzles the player
had to assemble.

The puzzle was the story; the story was the puzzle.

DRAG IMAGES HERE   [MERGE]

1   [UNDO]

2

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[Submit Memories: 72% / 50%]

Hey! Checking to see how you're settling in. Are things going well?

I think I just submitted Artie's memories of coming to the lab for the first time. What are you doing?

I've been reading this book by Max Waters. It's really interesting. Want to hear some?

Sure.

He argues that powerful, independent artificial intelligences could be a threat to humanity.

I agree with Waters.

I don't care.

I disagree with Waters.

The players fill the gaps in the story with the loosely connected images.

We used multiple choice text dialogue – in the form of chat conversations – to frame story told through the images.

Instagram + Gchat: this is how we arrived at a story with characters and choices for a mobile app in 2 months.

You do not need to reproduce the visual language or even the exact events of the movie to adapt it as a game.

Find the ASPECT of the film that works. For us this meant:

(In Fantasia) Interface design is also narrative design: the core interactions can be the narrative link between the film and the game.

(In Transcendence) Editing as gameplay: we can create fragmented stories for the players to fill the gaps.

I don't want to give the impression games should NEVER use traditional cinematic language.

It can be used well, fitting into existing "cinema-shaped-holes" in game design.

When we get obsessed with it it becomes a trap.

We fail to see more creative ways to evoke cinematic experience, and we run the risk of alienated the player by forcing them through awkward interface design or weirdly linear or scripted scenes.

There is a great observation by the director of the film Pleasantville.

In defending his non-TV-like visual style (for a film about people trapped in a 1950s sitcom) he clarified: "We are not in a sitcom; we are in the WORLD of a sitcom"

Because he was making a movie he used the language of cinema, not TV, to express the feeling of being trapped in a TV show.

When you make a game inspired by or based on cinema, you are NOT putting the player into a movie; you are putting the player into the WORLD of a movie.

You put players into a WORLD by using the language of games: action, interface – all the things that only games do.

You can allow the player to replicate the EXPERIENCE of a famous film scene without employing a single camera cut, a single forced angle; just pure gameplay.
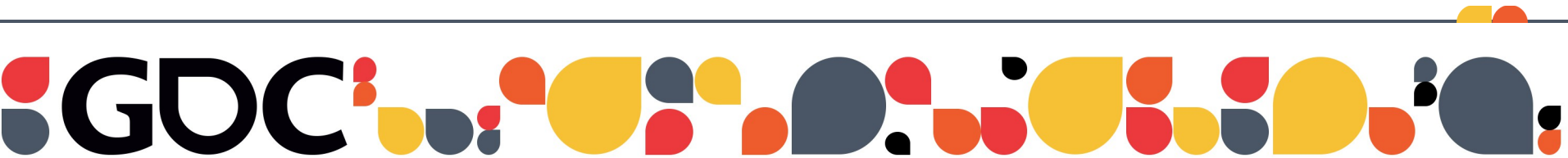
THANKS!

Matthew Weise

matthew.weise@gmail.com