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GIFCinema

GIFCinema is a net art website generating audio-visual experiences that are constructed in real-time and are unique to each viewer and view. Initiated by the viewer's search for a film title (the 'seed'), three generative systems and several different APIs – animated visuals, real-time speech synthesis and search algorithms that prove to be fairly unexpected – are combined to create a new type of generative experience. The *GIFCinema* web app works as follows: upon the viewer's search for a film title, the search algorithm instantly finds its subtitles on the net. Playback then begins in the original timing and rhythm, but instead of displaying the original movie visuals, it reconstructs the movie based on animated GIFs and a machine-voice rendering of the dialogue text. The result is a new type of film, crowd-sourced from the visual wisdom of the web, constructing a visual *zeitgeist* of web pop-culture in real time.

Description

Do you remember that distant period when our state-of-the-art technology was so primitive, we had to wait 30 minutes to download a movie, and still naively believed in an emerging technology called BitTorrent? With the advent of pirated and mainstream commercial streaming services, we have become accustomed to much more immediate media experiences. If it takes more than a few seconds we start to lose interest and move on to the next craving...

But what is a good film if not script, dialogue and timing? As artist and designer Ben Benhorin's *GIFCinema* web app demonstrates, you do not need much more than that for a rich multimedia experience: you can give up the video and audio altogether (the larger components in the world of digital files) and stick with the basics. For every movie out there, the *GIFCinema* web app allows you to use the film's downloaded il/legal subtitles file (a small text file containing the entire script, dialogue and timing), and experience the movie instantly in a new format using the vast media databases available on the web.

Fig. 1. *GIFCinema* website screenshots.
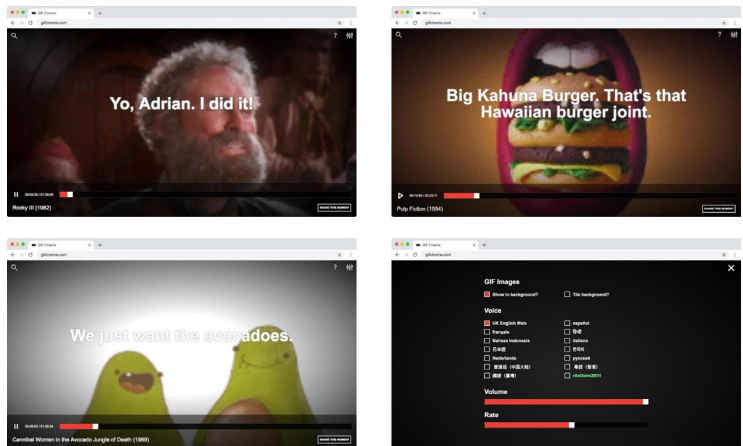
As you type your favorite film name into the search box, the *GIFCinema* web app fetches and downloads the subtitles — but it won't show you the movie you've chosen. Instead, it reassembles the movie with animated GIFs based on each word and sentence in the subtitles and re-enacts all the dialogue in one (or many) of the robotic voices available through the text-to-speech API. The result is a completely new 'film', a real-time generative construction of visual net culture created by different generative systems: subtitles from the

opensubtitles.org API, animated visuals from the giphy.com API, speech synthesis via the web text speech API, and search algorithms that sometimes prove to be smarter than expected, making cross-cultural references and returning unexpected results.

This work was first created out of pure curiosity, an exploratory journey by an artist / designer / coder fascinated by the feasibility of the idea. By combining a few search algorithms and public APIs of various online data services, an infinite series of generative media works are created, placing cultural landmarks and fashionable internet memes in a completely different artistic context.

The experience starts by asking the viewer to type a query into the search field. The query is sent to opensubtitles.org, and leveraging the search capabilities of that platform, a subtitles file (.srt) is returned. The file is then parsed, and playback begins. Each line of text is displayed in the correct timing of the original film, and as each line is encountered it is both read out loud by the text-to-speech API, and also sent to giphy.com. The search algorithm of that API returns a set of results for each query, and one image or animated GIF is then randomly picked and displayed. This adds an inherent element of randomness and surprise to the result, creating an unexpected, often humorous and rewarding experience. While playing the animated images, the text-to-speech algorithm reads out the film's original dialogue in a robotic voice.

The interface also offers a variety of options for customizing the user's experience. One can watch the movie in a variety of voices and accents and experience it through films & TV series from all genres and periods. For example, you can choose to play spaghetti westerns in an Italian accent ('Alice' or 'Luca'), romantic comedies in Korean ('Yuna') or actually hear the text sung and not read ('Good News'). It can also be customized to show no visuals at all – transforming the experience to be more similar to a podcast or the bygone 'radio drama'.

The work raises the question of originality, copyright, piracy, and the cultural aspect of media duplication and distribution today. Who is the creator of each of these unique generative films? The original creator of the film? The collective that contributed to creating the visuals? The creator of the code who published it on the web? Or is it the viewer who actually uses it?

Crowd-sourced subtitles for pirated films are presented alongside visual memes of duplicated content, which present an up-to-date picture of the visual world of pop web culture. The current network culture is based almost entirely on referents and endless duplications, and this work happily joins the celebration.

Available at: https://www.gifcinema.com