

SILICON SPIRIT:  
THE IMPACT OF  
DIGITAL VISUAL EFFECTS  
ON STORYCRAFT  
IN  
FILMMAKING

BY  
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## CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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This thesis grew out of research undertaken for my book, *So What's This All About Then: A Non-User's Guide to Digital Effects In Filmmaking*. The book itself came about from my being awarded the Kenneth Myer Fellowship upon graduating from the Australian Film Television and Radio School. So in the first instance, I would like to thank Andrew Myer and his family for the generous endowment of that award.

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A version of Chapter Nine - “Trick or Treat: a framework for the narrative uses of digital visual effects”, has previously been published as part of the proceedings of the 2004 Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities.

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## ABSTRACT

Since 1984, there has been a growing use of digital visual effects in feature films. However, because the scope of digital visual effects and how they work is not widely understood, the primary focus of discussion has been on the spectacular nature of effects, an approach that follows from considerations of traditional optical and other special effects. Implicit in these discussions is the view that digital visual effects are self-reflexive and spectacular in some manner. However, in “Silicon Spirit: the impact of digital visual effects on storycraft in filmmaking”, I argue that digital visual effects practice extends beyond apparent effects usage and I examine the narrative implications of the full range of digital visual effects practices.

To do this, how digital visual effects work, the scope of their application, and their relationship to classical narrative storycraft, are examined. Issues such as the role of the hero, remakes, genres, and franchise filmmaking are used as paradigms for examination of the impact of digital visual effects. Steven Spielberg’s body of work is also considered in order to assess how a filmmaker considered to be ‘an effects director’ has used effects throughout the period of film history under review. Finally, the traditional applications of effects - the creation of imaginary worlds and images of the future - are looked at in light of the implications of using digital technologies to create these images.

It is my argument that digital visual effects practice offers more than self-reflexive and spectacular use of technology. While not dismissing those usages, my thesis examines the issue of spectacularity and expands upon these theories, drawing attention to other usages and their narrative applications. The argument that classical narrative cohesion and spectacular images are a point of tension, where digital visual effects has skewed the emphasis toward spectacularity, is shown to be an over-estimation, with flaws in narrative structure proving to be the primary reason for ‘effects-laden’ films. Further, the argument that effects are particular to the genres of science fiction and fantasy is shown to be an increasingly less common practice with digital visual effects becoming an integral part of storycraft and an effective means of presenting fundamental story information for all genres of classical narratives.