

You Down with MCP?

Twenty-five years later, 'Tron' and other 'geek' classics are more compelling than ever

~ BY MIKE WINDER ~



"WHAT'S A NICE PROGRAM LIKE YOU DOING IN A COMPUTER LIKE THIS?" CINDY MORGAN AND BRUCE MORGAN AND BRUCE BOXLEITER IN TRON

"OH MAN, THIS ISN'T HAPPENING. It only thinks it's happening." So says computer programmer extraordinaire Kevin Flynn in Disney's 1982 film *Tron*, after he's zapped into the electronic world of the computer.

Though this line is never fully explained, it does provoke several metaphysical questions. Does Flynn — played with child-like enthusiasm by Jeff Bridges — think he's dreaming? Is he playing a bit role in an elaborate manipulated reality? Is his digitized incarnation any less real than his flesh-and-blood self?

Wait a nanosecond! Wasn't *Tron* set inside a video game? Didn't this film feature guys wearing glowing helmets and tight spandex? Throwing Frisbees at each other? Riding neon motorcycles?

Yes, yes, and yes. And while *Tron* was undoubtedly a special effects summer extravaganza, the film also had enough style and brainy notions to make it enjoyable and relevant today.

To help celebrate the silver anniversary of *Tron* and several other genre films released that same year, the American Cinematheque and *Geek Monthly* magazine are presenting **1982: Greatest Geek Movie Year Ever!** at the Aero Theatre in Santa Monica from June 15 through 17. In addition to *Tron*, the festival will present *Cat People*, *The Thing*, *The Dark Crystal*, *Poltergeist*, and *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. Various cast and crew are scheduled to make appearances.

"The classics of 1982 were all boldly original visions," says Mark A. Altman, editorial director of *Geek Monthly*. "They're also some of the last great visual effects films from the pre-computer-generated imagery era. Or, in the case of *Tron*, a precursor to that era."

The monumental task of supervising the computer-generated imagery for *Tron* went to Richard Taylor, whom director Steven Lisberger had initially approached for advice on doing a two-

dimensional animated film about characters made of light.

As one of the film's visual effects supervisors, Taylor worked closely on various designs with visual futurist Syd Mead (*Blade Runner*) and French comic book artist Jean "Moebius" Giraud (*The Fifth Element*) and oversaw the four different computer graphic houses that created imagery for the film. While *Tron* made history as the first film to make extensive use of computer graphics, many of its otherworldly effects were achieved with traditional animation techniques.

"The process to make *Tron* was only used to make *Tron*, and it will never be used again," says Taylor. This was, after all, the pre-digital era. Everything was done optically, which was highly labor-intensive.

For example, Taylor created the effects that gave the characters and objects in the electronic world their distinctive internal glow. To achieve the effect, actors were first shot against all black sets using 65mm black-and-white film. Several high-contrast negatives and prints were created from this footage, then they were back-lit, and eventually the cells were hand-painted.

The *Tron* glow evolved from techniques Taylor had invented earlier for advertisements and on-air graphics, but its origins date back to Rainbow Jam, his light show and graphics company, which toured for six months with the Grateful Dead. "I was a full-on hippie at one point," he laughs. "We did shows at the Fillmore, the Avalon, all those places in San Francisco. Unlike other light shows, we were really painting-by-number with light. We were using slide and motion picture projectors. It was like lithography made of light."

The film's extreme stylization — dark backgrounds, glowing neon colors, polygonal landscapes, geometric vehicles, and an absence of external lighting

— was an aesthetic decision that embraced the limitations of computer-generated imagery. "The actual process of making something out of polygons, then shading it, became a design influence," explains Taylor. "Not only was the film made with computers, but it was about cyberspace."

Tron's groundbreaking visuals were not recognized by the Academy Awards that year — the visual effects Oscar went to Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* — but the techniques *Tron* pioneered earned it a place in film history. The Visual Effects Society (VES) has ranked *Tron* number six on a list of the 50 most influential visual effects films of all time. VES member Gene Kozicki, of the L.A.-based visual effects house Rhythm & Hues, believes *Tron*'s legacy was in moving computer-generated visuals into the realm of storytelling. "Research into this type of imagery had been going on for over 15 years, but it was more scientific in nature," Kozicki says. "Once artists began to share their ideas and treat the computer as a tool, it moved away from strict research and towards an art form."

Tron's story of humans interacting with sentient computer programs in an electronic world placed the narrative ahead of its time as well. In 1982, the term "cyberspace" had just been coined by science fiction author William Gibson. In another two years, Gibson's seminal work *Neuromancer* would launch the cyberpunk genre.

To help flesh out this new electronic frontier, director Lisberger drew inspi-

ration from gladiator films (*Spartacus*), video games (*Pong*), and the writings of Carl Jung. "I was studying Jungian imagery and his notion of the higher self," says Lisberger. "Jung calls that process of trying to communicate with the higher version of one's self 'individuation.' When I saw computer programmers in the early days, trying to communicate with programs they created, it was obvious to me they were trying to reach [their] maximum potential."

Tron calls individuals in the electronic world "programs" and the programmers who created them "users." Though they can't quite comprehend their creators, "programs" nevertheless hold "users" in high esteem. So high, in fact, that their reverence takes on religious overtones. This angers the megalomaniacal Master Control Program (affectionately known as MCP) — a malicious piece of software, brilliantly conceived and animated as a gigantic spinning cylinder, and voiced with panache by David Warner — who believes it has grown smarter and more powerful than the "users" and is hell-bent on conquering both the electronic and real worlds.

Lisberger, another product of the '60s, explored alternative forms of spirituality. He offers an unconventional interpretation for the relationship between "programs" and their "users."

"When the characters in *Tron* are saying the 'users' are up there and they're perfect and they're going to take care of us, it's exactly like being in our world and thinking angels and God are going to take care of us," he says. "The difference is, in the world of computers there isn't one sole entity — each 'program' has a 'user.' I believe the closest we can get to spirituality is not to externalize it, but to try to find it in ourselves. There's no daddy with white hair sitting on a throne who's going to make everything right if I behave correctly."

Lisberger's enthusiasm and love for *Tron* is still going strong 25 years later. Unfortunately, audiences back then didn't reflect his enthusiasm, and *Tron* failed to meet its box office expectations.

Chalk it up to poor timing or mismanaged marketing — it opened one month following *E.T.* — but perhaps the message of the film was a bit anachronistic.

"These are not the times for what we were talking about," Lisberger ponders. "If anything embodies the times we live in, it's Johnny Depp's character in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. He's ready to take every chance on any fly-by-night scheme to get rich. If the spiritual quest we're talking about harkens back to the '60s, then that's where we're at right now. I'm not condemning it. It's just the backlash." *

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1982: Greatest Geek Movie Year Ever! June 15-17 at the American Cinematheque's Max Palevsky Theatre at the Aero Theatre, 1328 Montana Ave., Santa Monica, (323) 466-3456. Aerotheatre.com. *Tron* screens June 17 at 5 p.m.; writer-director Steven Lisberger, actress Cindy Morgan, and visual effects supervisors Harrison Ellenshaw and Richard Taylor will be present.