

REVIEW

SALT (2023) – WOULD YOU WATCH AN AI-PRODUCED SYNTHETIC MOVIE ?

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Fabian Stelzer, a German entrepreneur, began creating *Salt*, a 1970s dark sci-fi film, in 2021. The visuals come from *Midjourney*, *DALL-E*, *Stable Diffusion*, and other AI image generators. Nearly all the voices are also generated by AI using *Synthesia* and *Murf* software, while other sounds come from the AI tool *Ableton*.

After posting the first clip of *Salt* on Twitter, Stelzer started collecting Twitter community votes to decide where the story should go from there. The result is a non-linear exploration of an AI-created universe - created using a 'choose-your-own-adventure' book mechanic. The movie is coming together clip-by-clip and should be finished in 2023.



A still from Salt (2023) by Fabian Stelzer, created via Stable Diffusion software.

As a computer science professor who runs graduate seminars in Transhumanism, I am often asked about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the impact on the future. There is no doubt that AI

will transform our world, it will have an impact as transformative on society as the industrial and digital revolutions, but the changes will probably happen a lot faster.

Currently, there is a lot of buzz around ChatGPT, the latest incarnation of the GPT3 text generator. Many creative industries are in turmoil, as they see that AI text and image generators are able to produce high quality output instantly and cheaply (often for free). It is obvious that this is just the beginning, film is next.

In 2016, computer scientists at IBM collaborated with 20th Century Fox to create the first-ever computer-generated movie trailer for the movie *Morgan* (2016). The Watson AI system (the one that beat Gary Kasparov at chess) analyzed hundreds of horror/thriller movie trailers. Watson then picked the best moments from the film which should be used in the trailer and then edited and arranged them together. The AI generated trailer was indistinguishable from the hundreds of others created by human editors.

To a greater or lesser degree, most modern filmmakers integrate computer-generated imagery in their films or use software in their postproduction techniques. For many years, audiences have become used to seeing actors appear in movies long after they have passed on - for example, Laurence Olivier's appearance in *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004) and Marlon Brando playing Jor-El in *Superman Returns* (2006) two years after his death.

In the film *The Congress* (2013), Robin Wright plays a fictionalized version of herself as an aging actress. A film production company offers to buy her likeness and digitize her into a computer-animated version of herself. After her body is digitally scanned, the studio makes films starring her, using only computer-generated characters. Although this sounds like science fiction, Bruce Willis after his recent retirement, became the first Hollywood actor to sell his likeness for use by AI systems. Already the actor has appeared in a number of phone service commercials in Russia, without physically being involved at all – his performance was computer generated.

The director Guillermo del Toro echoed the words of Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki when recently asked about animation created by AI as an insult to life itself. He went on to say :

“I consume and love art made by humans, I am completely moved by that. And I am not interested in illustrations made by machines. AI can interpolate information, but it can never capture a feeling or a countenance or the softness of a human face”

It seems to me that Guillermo del Toro, like many creatives, is naturally being protective, and reacting against this new technology which threatens to transform his industry. However, statements like this ignore the inescapable reality that we have reached another Turing Test moment with AI. If consumers can't tell whether a novel, poem, painting, or film was made by an AI or a human, then surely comments like this become irrelevant. Saying that you prefer art created by humans becomes nonsensical when you can't determine if a work of art was created by a human or a machine.

And so, we come back to the AI generated film experiment *Salt* (2023), at the end of the day it is not a very good film. The narrative is confusing, the voices sound choppy and the visuals vary

between definitely looking animated and teetering on the edge of an uncanny valley. But it is a start, in twenty years' time we may look back at Salt as affectionally as we now watch those early computer-generated graphics in the science fiction movies of the 80s and 90s.

As I sit here, in my home office, looking out over a snowy upstate New York winter landscape, I wonder why I am taking time to write this film essay/review when an AI text generator could probably write it better than me almost instantly. Then again, maybe I did use a text generator, how would you know ?

Find out more about the SALT film : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdYqwSyg7Ys>

Join the @SALT_VERSE Twitter thread : https://twitter.com/salt_verse

Watch the *Morgan* (2016) trailer : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJEzuYynaiw>

Note : Damian Schofield did actually write this essay, but GPT3 wrote the abstract.

Editor's Note: Screen Thought Journal does not permit content to use AI generated text unless it is used as part of the argument or discussion about AI automation. We acknowledge and support this review's use of AI authorship of the abstract as this is conceptually part of what the review is digressing.