

“The FMV Interval”: The Long Dormant Period of Full Motion Video games 1998 – 2015

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Full motion video (FMV) games, characterised by their reliance on pre-recorded live-action, or less frequently, animated video sequences, only had a brief heyday, beginning in 1992 with titles such as the controversial *Night Trap* and concluding already in 1997 (Majewski & Knight 2025). While FMV eventually came to be reinvented two decades later, starting with Sam Barlow’s *Her Story* in 2015, there is an almost two-decade gap between the collapse of the FMV game and its return. It is this period the current paper examines from a game history perspective.

It is proposed that this period of relative inactivity in FMV development be referred to as ‘The FMV Interval’, of which it is argued that even though the number of FMV games released was small in comparison to the preceding years of the 1990s, game developers continued to persist with the genre as well as employing FMV for cut-scenes (Klevjer 2014) in non-FMV games.

Released in late 1997 and early 1998 respectively, two significant games signal the twilight of the classic FMV era – *Riven: The Sequel to Myst*, and the fifth entry in the Tex Murphy series, *Tex Murphy: Overseer*. While both titles were successful, both signalled in their own ways the decline of the attraction of FMV. Regarding *Riven*, the *Myst* series showed that while developers no longer saw FMV as a necessary “crutch” to tell complex narratives (Majewski & Knight 2026), they did not abandon FMV entirely, retaining it where justified by the desire to maintain storytelling continuity within a franchise, or where a more direct connection to a film was needed.

Following the viable possibilities of 3D graphics and such indicators as the failure of the promise of the 3DO console in 1997 and its explicit association with FMV, industry players sensed a distinct shift away from the fortunes of FMV as a worthwhile genre and so by 1998, in the words of the *Gabriel Knight* series’ designer Jane Jensen, “FMV was dead and 3D was the future.” (Jensen cited in Salter 2017, 55). It is worth highlighting here the somewhat underexplored umbilical connection between FMV in its 1993-1997 heyday

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with the adventure game genre. While FMV never came to be the dominant mode of production for adventure games, the low-action, low-interactivity nature of adventure games made them a natural site for FMV experimentation. From this perspective, the steady decline of the adventure genre setting on in the late 1990s effectively cut off one of the most promising branches of development for FMV.

The pattern of using FMV to maintain franchise continuity was also employed in a few film-to-game adaptations and extensions. In the case of the *Lord of the Rings* and *King Kong* franchises, game adaptations would incorporate footage from the films either in their introductions or as bonus content. A more complex and ambitious example could be found in *Enter the Matrix* (2003), which did not adapt, but rather extended the film *The Matrix Reloaded* (2002), and for which additional footage was filmed alongside the film (Jenkins, 2006).

The late 1990s were also notable for the rise of the DVD as a PC storage device and separately, the DVD player as a platform for home video with interactive features. Affording 10x more space than CDs, the DVD facilitated substantial increase in video quality in PC releases such as *Tex Murphy: Overseer*, as well as fostering a little-noticed alternate continuation of FMV development on the DVD player. Key pioneers in this effort were Rob Landeros and David Wheeler, earlier responsible for two important FMV games of the first wave developed at Trilobyte, *The 7th Guest* (1993) and *The 11th Hour* (1995). After parting with Trilobyte, Landeros and Wheeler released their next title, the psychological thriller, *Tender Loving Care* (Perron 2003), on the PC-DVD in 1998, followed by a DVD player format release in 1999. They would then develop one more title, *Point of View: An Interactive Movie* (2001), but the lack of success with these titles ultimately led to their company shutting down. Nonetheless, the DVD would occasionally be used as a format for interactive movies (Barlow 2004) and a location for tie-in games, like *Return to House on Haunted Hill* (2007) with its so-called 'navigational cinema' mode, or *Adventure at the Center of the Earth* (2008).

While FMV games have frequently been discussed as a disreputable format associated with low quality in its heyday (Peron 2003, Russell 2012), FMV as a mode of production was in fact comparatively expensive. It would not be until the digital video revolution of the early 21st century that FMV would become convincingly viable for smaller studios. It is at this point that titles such as *Yoomurjak's Ring* (2006) and *Darkstar* (2010) emerge, as well as a slew of low-cost FMV-based hidden object games in the *Mystery Case Files* series (2005-2012) from Big Fish Games.

As the second decade of the 21st century opened, the development of new FMV games remained infrequent, but the format maintained an ongoing low-key nostalgia-fuelled popularity as evidenced by a wave of adaptations and re-releases. Numerous interactive movies (Perron 2008) from the FMV heyday like *The 7th Guest* were adapted to the iPhone and iPad. This nostalgia factor, combined with the new possibilities of low-cost video production and the advent of alternative financing through crowdfunding, ultimately led to the end of 'the FMV Interval'. Appropriately, if *Tex Murphy: Overseer* (1998) led FMV into this period, then it may be argued that the next, crowdfunded Tex Murphy game, *Tesla Effect: A Tex Murphy Adventure* (2014) signalled a rebirth for FMV games. A year later, the critically-acclaimed *Her Story* would open a new chapter for the format, leading to countless new interactive movies.

Keywords

FMV, Full Motion Video, videogame history, DVD, interactive movies

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