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TCM THIS MONTH



SPECIAL EVENT

Tron



Considered one of the precursors of film's digital era, **Tron** (1982) stands today as an impressive achievement, and a sweet reminder of the optimism held at the brink of the computer age. Starring Jeff Bridges, Bruce Boxleitner and David Warner, **Tron** is like a modern *Metropolis* (1927), pushing to new technical frontiers, telling the story of tyranny in a strange yet familiar world, and creating unforgettably beautiful moments of neon-glow filmmaking. Bridges plays Flynn, a whiz-kid programmer who has had all of his game ideas stolen by Dillinger (played to perfection by David Warner), head of ENCOM. Meanwhile, Master Control Program (MCP), installed by Dillinger, is gaining power in the ENCOM system and running amuck, failing to fear even its maker. Flynn tries repeatedly to hack into the ENCOM computers to retrieve the evidence that will prove the games are his, while his friend and ex-coworker Alan (Boxleitner), tries in vain to implement a guardian program, Tron (also played by Boxleitner), which would monitor Master Control. Needless to say, MCP is not interested in having its activities overseen or its system hacked. Through a clever sequence of events, Flynn is digitized and brought inside the domain of MCP, who now hopes to have him destroyed in its gladiator-type games, like so many other programs MCP has kidnapped for destructive entertainment (the characters even wear togas over their circuitry). MCP would also like to put an end to the meddling Tron, who is far too good at the games and difficult to control.

It took 36 outlines and 18 rewrites of the script before director/writer Steven Lisberger and producer Donald Kushner felt they'd gotten the story right. In a 1998 interview with *Realhollywood.com*, Lisberger, who came to film via animation, explains the genesis of **Tron**: "The idea was to come up with a character made out of light and one of our designer/animators, John Norton, designed this warrior who was made up of neon -- looked like neon. . . . And, he looked electronic and from that came Tron. . . . once that footage existed it was alive and couldn't be stopped. Here's this interesting character -- where do we put him? And, it made sense to put him



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in an electronic dimension. One thing lead to another."

Unable to secure initial financing, Lisberger and Kushner put up \$300,000 out of their own pockets to create a development package to present to major studios. It included a script, the entire film in storyboards, designs and a sample reel of proposed effects. Disney bought it, securing the deal several months before the computerized video game craze took off. Though **Tron** didn't provide the jump-start to Disney's slumping family film market that studio executives had hoped for, it did exemplify the risk-taking sensibilities that had been a hallmark of the studio's earlier days with its production of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), for example. Unfortunately, filmgoers in the early '80s didn't know quite what to make of **Tron**, though a successful **Tron** video game, released later in 1982, out-grossed the film's box-office take. Over time, the movie and the game have built a cult following and there are rumors that a film sequel may be in the works.

Tron represents the first use of computer-generated, 3-D imagery to produce effects that had previously been done with miniatures, model sets and matte paintings. The film contains 40 minutes of computer animation, much of it combined with live action elements shot against a black screen. The live action that occurs inside the computer was filmed in black and white and later colorized with photographic and rotoscopic techniques -- giving the film that magical silent-era look. These new techniques posed a challenge for the actors. Reportedly, Peter O'Toole was offered the role of Dillinger/Sark but balked at the black-screen notion and passed. "A lot of the time we had no idea what kind of world we would be in," says Jeff Bridges. "But Steven kept video games right on the set. If you were on a streak, people would gather around and he would postpone shooting. Then you'd pop right into the scene with this adrenaline buzz."

The demand of the work was extreme. In some of the film's more complex sequences, like the Solar Sailer moving through metal canyons, it took up to six hours to generate individual frames. "The medium *is* the message of this film," Lisberger told *Rolling Stone* in 1982. "The main character is sent into an electronic world that he's helped create, and has to deal with it. The filmmakers were put in a very similar situation."

Producer: Donald Kushner
 Director: Steven M. Lisberger
 Screenplay: Steven M. Lisberger, Charles Haas
 Art Direction: Al Y. Roelofs, John Mansbridge
 Cinematography: Bruce Logan
 Editing: Jeff Gourson
 Music: Wendy Carlos
 Principal Cast: Jeff Bridges (Kevin Flynn/Clu), Bruce Boxleitner (Alan Bradley/Tron), David Warner (Ed Dillinger/Sark), Cindy Morgan (Lora/Yori), Barnard Hughes (Dr. Walter Gibbs/Dumont).
 C-96m. Letterboxed. Closed captioning.

by Emily Soares



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