

SEFM *Lockdown*

Issue 1

Welcome to the first issue of **SEFM Lockdown**. I hope to make this a monthly newsletter until we are able to meet again in person. But this will depend in part on the willingness of members to contribute, whether a whole article, an anecdote, or just a few words and a link to your favourite YouTube video or channel. Let's hope I don't have to produce too many issues.



Some members are now taking part in what has become a weekly video chat using the Zoom app. Some of you have not been able to join in, for various reasons, and I didn't want you too feel too left out.

Geoff Partridge - Editor

In this Issue -

Running a Club in Lockdown - Geoff Partridge

The Ramblings of a Movie-maker - Don Mouatt

My Exploits in Animation - David White

What is DAT all about? - John Ford

HDMI Capture Devices - Geoff Partridge

Best Wishes from Colchester Filmmakers Club



Running a Club in Lockdown

Faced with the prospect of not being able to attend various groups in person for a number of weeks or months I considered what possible ways there were, other than e-mail or social media, I set about finding a solution.

The first option was to produce talks and put these on YouTube. Although it is possible for people to comment on videos and to ask questions, unless it is done as a live stream, it can hardly be called interactive. I did test live streaming at this point but then a new tool appeared in the news - Zoom Meetings - and it was free, although with limitations.

I installed the software on my laptop, desktop PC and Samsung tablet. I happen to have a couple of internet domain names and can set up multiple e-mail addresses, so was able to sign up for three free Zoom accounts. I then set up a meeting with my three selves to check out the features of the software and decided it was capable of enabling run a virtual club.

I then investigated whether it was possible to use a video camera as a web camera. I found a number of devices that could interface between the HDMI output of a camera and a USB port on a PC or laptop. I will cover these devices in another article, but I ended up with two, a Magewell HDMI capture USB interface and an Avermedia HDMI capture USB interface. These devices are not cheap but I have other uses in mind for them.

I had already carried out a test of Zoom with Ken Pratt and we decided to set up our first SEFM virtual meeting.

Instructions for installing the software were sent to members and this raised a number of issues, with Avast anti-virus software highlighting an issue with Zoom and other security issues also being raised. The Avast issue was most likely what is known as a false-positive, essentially part of the Zoom software code is the same as the segment of virus code that it used to detect a virus. The other security issues were resolved fairly quickly by Zoom. I do have a certain amount of computer security and ascertained that if used correctly, Zoom was safe to use for our purpose.

The other issue that cropped up was that some people did not have working webcams.

It was clear that some members would not be able to join in. But Zoom has the facility to record the meeting, and this could then be shared with other members on YouTube.

So, with invites sent out, we had our first inaugural virtual meeting on Easter Monday and this was relatively successful. In fact it was successful enough that we have been holding weekly meetings.

The free version of Zoom has a 40 minute limit on meeting of 3 or more people, so I decided to invest in a paid account which not only removed the time limit but gave added security features, cloud based recording of the meeting which reduced the load on the laptop, and the ability to live stream the meeting to YouTube. This last feature was tested on Monday 4th May. The live stream worked well and was only a second or two delayed.

I am only aware of Don looking at the YouTube feed, but he was unable to interact with the meeting. I believe this may be due to having to be signed in to YouTube to be able to comment. So this requires further testing.

On the second meeting I tried to present as well as hosting the meeting. There is a certain level of monitoring and management of the meeting, e.g., people joining, and doing this at the same time as presenting is a bit of a handful. Fortunately others have driven the recent meeting and this will enable me to concentrate on the techie bits and if we get YouTube fully working to communicate with the non-Zoom participants.

The YouTube feed is not publicly available and you need a link to the live video to view it. For technical reasons I can only get this link when the meeting starts and then e-mail it at that point. I try to send the e-mail by 7:50 PM, so keep an eye out for it.

I have enjoyed the meetings so far and hope we can keep them going until we meet again for real.



My YouTube favourites

After the Rain



A loyal dog helps his master turn sheep's wool into clouds.

<https://youtu.be/qEaoaRpRRzo>



The Ramblings of a Movie-maker

By Don Mouatt

Part 1

Picture - Don on a camel in Egypt

Around the mid-Fifties I was a Government Auditor employed by what is now called the National Audit Office. At that point in time about one third of my working time was spent auditing the Isle of Man Government. I had a full time assistant who did most of what we termed voucher bashing and he used to accompany me to Island twice a year in order to carry out various checks and examinations. My assistant was into filming with his cine camera and on occasions he would take his unedited reels to show to one of the Island's Government staff, who reciprocated.

I was invited along for an evening viewing and I soon realized that neither of them attempted any editing and the camerawork was dreadful. Bags of panning, constant tromboning as well as considerable camera unsteadiness. Despite all of this I thought that I could do a lot better and it might well be a fascinating hobby. Unfortunately I could not afford to do so at that time so the idea went onto the back-burner.

Several years passed and in the early 60s I was posted to Blackpool where a friend of my daughter showed her a Standard 8 cine camera which she had bought for £5 from her employer Boots the chemist. She said that it was sold to her as shop-soiled although there was no trace as such. I asked if she could get me a similar one for that price and she did. Again it was not shop soiled. I doubt whether it was nicked but who knows

As I knew absolutely nothing about cinematography I went to the local library and borrowed several books about the subject. I was now ready to become the next Alfred Hitchcock, However not being a complete idiot and realizing that might take a little while I decided that my first masterpiece would be the Christmas festivities at home which was fast approaching. The film started with the opening of gifts and then went on to show the dinner and whatever else went on that day. Having got all of that in the can I remembered that the books I had read emphasized that films should have a decent beginning, middle and end. For the latter I decided that the final shots would be along the lines of "back to normal" This scene consisted of my wife being in the bath, with lots of soap suds covering you know what and eating chips. I had to keep adding bath salts between shots. I was happy that none of my press-ganged audience (i.e. all three of them) did not suddenly remember that they had an appointment elsewhere but a few words of encouragement or a bit of clapping would have been nice. It showed that they had no taste.

A further few months passed during which nothing remarkable had been filmed until came up with the idea of making one about a search for the Yeti or Abominable Snowman. The location would be in the Lake District where on occasions myself and a couple of Workmates would go climbing the Fells. Initially filming went as planned with shots of three of us allegedly climbing up in places vertical and almost impossible terrain, leastways for us non Edmund Hillary types. Easily achieved by positioning the camera accordingly. Finally when we reached the top we were supposed to see the Yeti and in a panic my colleagues would flee downhill. Unfortunately I did not realize that there are no Yetis in the Lake District so instead I had to make do with a shot of a polar bear taken on an earlier occasion. I was clever enough to know that running downhill until they disappeared out of camera view could be dangerous because of the nature of the terrain but I thought this could be faked simply by taking one of the batteries out of the camera. I'm not very technical minded and much to my dismay it could not so I asked them to run as fast as they could but be careful at the same time because hey could easily fall and break a leg or something. Much to my amazement they agreed and that sequence went OK without mishap. It looked quite convincing when screened.

When editing because at that time standard 8 cameras could not record sound I had to use some "Letraset" titles and subtitles but all in all I was quite satisfied with the final outcome. The father of one of the two colleagues involved was quite knowledgeable about cine and he showed the film was shown to him. He was complimentary and said that "it showed promise" He didn't actually say what that meant! Was he just being polite?

Part 2 of this series will show if that promise was realized

Another from YouTube

Lost and Found



A crochet dinosaur must unravel itself to save the love of its life

<https://youtu.be/VBps1lvCyj0>

My Exploits in Animation

by

David White

I have always been fascinated by animation films and suspect this goes back to my childhood days of watching Popeye and Walt Disney cartoons and then there were those Hanna Barbera (now part of Warner Bros) cartoons such as Flintstones, Yogi Bear and the ever-popular Tom and Jerry.

I recall as a child I would draw those rather crude stickman images on the corner of a book page and flick through to make them come alive; simple pleasures.

As some will know, I made a very basic animation film to enter into one of last year's competitions. Whilst I was reasonably happy with the end result considering it was my first attempt at animation, I was not at all surprised to find it didn't make the podium.



My initial inspiration had come from seeing the animated short film involving a number of Roman soldiers that was shown at one of our club meetings several months earlier, if I recall, we were shown a collection of different short film genres shared by one of the other film clubs in our region. I thought that animation was cleverly and very simply carried out and remembered thinking to myself, that looks simple enough, only to discover ... oh no it isn't!

I thought I would share with other members my experiences to date in creating my own animations.

I started as I, and I suspect many others do, by carrying out a search on the internet. I was looking for software that might help me in the process of creating a cartoon. I was a little overwhelmed by just how much is out there and after spending a few hours hunting and looking I decided to take a punt at a programme called Crazytalk Animator 3. The level of output was way above what I was ever likely to need and it seemed relatively easy to learn. Not only that, I found an offer to purchase the software at a decent discount. However, you soon learn that to do anything much you need to upgrade from Pro to the Pipeline version. In conversation with the company selling it (Reallusion) about upgrading, they did offer a free upgrade to the next generation of the software due out, at the time, a few months later (now available and also renamed to Cartoon Animator 4). So, I parted with more of my hard earned cash and set about the challenge of learning this new software. As usual, there are plenty of tutorials on YouTube but always a bit disjointed and none catered for a complete newby. More money needed to be spent buying the introductory learning course from Reallusion – yep I'd been sucked into the money machine.

Well my drawing skills leave a lot to be desired so I decided I would hunt high and low for suitable images on the internet that I might be able to use in the cartoon planned.

Of course, with an unlimited budget finding images is relatively easy but with a zero budget it's not quite so simple; however, there are a number of sites and with a bit of effort I was able to find some suitable vector graphics in a format that allowed me to also manipulate and alter with software I already owned.

With cartoon software loaded, images available and learning resources at hand, I was away ... that is until you discover nothing ever quite goes how you had planned in your mind and the software never quite seems to work in the way those lessons made it look so easy.

So, one cartoon down, more hours spent watching tutorials than I care to think about and several more ideas for other cartoons, I have been determined to make a second cartoon during this enforced coronavirus lock down. Have I got far? No, but I am still watching loads of tutorials, trying to work out how to do things and searching for images; plus of course always being side-tracked into something new to explore. Anyone want to join me and share this currently rather slow and, at times, painful but fun journey?



From the editor - The above image, Underground, already sets my imagination working. I have used Crazytalk Animator and have characters that would fit in this scene.

For those that want to take the risk, you might get hooked, there is a 30 day trial version available - <https://www.reallusion.com/cartoon-animator/download.html#comparison>

There used to be a Standard edition at USD\$39 of the software but now they start with the Pro edition at USD\$99. I never got as far as buying the Pipeline edition at USD\$199.

There is a section on the web site - <https://marketplace.reallusion.com/cartoon-animator> - where you can buy characters and other assets for your animation. They have a strange pricing arrangement - You buy DA (Direct Access) Points which cost \$10 for 1,000, \$50 for 5,000 or \$100 for 10,000 DA Points.

What is DAT all about?

By John Ford

June and I were due to cruise along the Elbe river from 19th April until 1st May this year. The Wuhan Flu pandemic put a stop to that. We decided that, to keep in the holiday mood, we would watch some of our old holiday slide shows and videos. We started with a slide show from 2003 but the Blu-ray player connected to the television refused to play it. Time for an investigation. Fortunately, I could open the disc on my PC and look at the files. They all ended with the extension DAT.

DAT files are VCD Video files used for playing video from a Video CD (VCD) optical disc. The .DAT file is commonly saved in the MPEG-1 or MPEG-2 format and contains video data from the VCD optical disc. The VCD format is a home video format and was the first format used to distribute movies on standard 120mm optical discs. VCDs could hold up to 800 MB which equals approximately 80 minutes of video. The format was created in 1993 by Sony, JVC, Philips, and Matsushita.

My old DVD player must have been programmed to play these discs but my newer Blu-ray player has dropped this old format for the newer ones. What to do? Fortunately, I have a piece of free software called Potplayer which opens and plays many video formats, including DAT, but there are other free players also available including File Viewer Lite which does the same thing.

I store all of my digital photographs on a terabyte drive plus a further archive terabyte drive and finally on optical disc so my slide shows can be reproduced. Not so easy with the movies though. Because of their large size and the smaller and expensive hard drives of the past, once the film was finalised and burnt to disc, I then had to delete the raw footage. Did this mean that I would now lose some of those memories? Surely there must be a way of getting to the embedded MPEG file inside the DAT. Luckily for me, after some searching on the internet, I found a piece of software called Wondershare Uniconvertor, which turns the DAT file into an MP4 file. As these earlier files were only DV the resultant resolution is not fantastic but after burning to a Blu-ray disc they are still watchable and at least we still have the memories which is more important. The slide shows did not look so good so, with the DAT file open in Potplayer, I rebuilt the slide shows in Proshow Producer and now have improved versions of my earlier shows.

The lesson here is to keep an eye on the formats you have used in the past just in case they become obsolete and you lose the ability to watch some special films.

Other consumer video Formats from the past

By Geoff Partridge

John's article reminded me that I once had a Canon Hi8 camera that used 8mm cassette tapes. I didn't keep it for long and I don't seem to have any tapes from those days. I don't remember what I filmed with it and whether I transferred it to SVHS. Did you use a now obsolete video format? If so, let us know for our next newsletter - geoff@alectoris.co.uk

HDMI Capture Devices

By Geoff Partridge

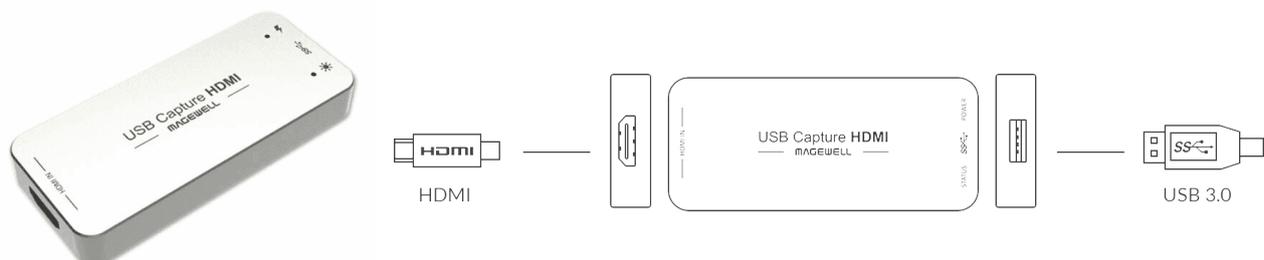
My first HDMI (High-Definition Multimedia Interface) capture device was the Blackmagic Design Intensity Pro. This is a card that plugs into a PC PCIe slot. As well as HDMI it could capture from analogue component, NTSC/Pal and S-Video. I used it mainly for transferring video from my SVHS tapes and latterly from my Canon HV30 miniDV tape camera.

Since adding a more powerful graphics card to the PC, for running Davinci Resolve, I have lost a slot in the PC and have had to remove the card. This card is no longer available. It has been replaced by the Intensity Pro 4K (approx. £200), which adds Ultra HD to the capabilities of it's predecessor.

When I was looking for an interface to enable me to connect my current video cameras (Panasonic HC-X1 and Lumix FZ2000) to my laptop so that I could use them as a web camera for streaming to YouTube, I needed a device that would plug into a USB socket.

There are a number of suitable devices and the biggest difference I could find, apart from price, was where the HDMI format from the camera was converted for use by the the streaming or videoconferencing software. Some process the camera output in the device and others use a software driver on the PC to do this. The latter method adds to the workload of the computer and also has a noticeable lag in the signal.

My first choice, and purchase, was the Magewell USB Capture HDMI Gen 2, Full HD USB 3.0 Video Capture Dongle, which set me back £295. I have been using this device with my HC-X1 for the clubs Zoom meetings.



I then considered the possibility of also using my FZ 2000 at the same time, using OBS (Open Broadcaster Software). More on OBS in next months issue. I didn't want to spend as much this time, although in hindsight it would have been the right choice. Instead I opted for the Avermedia Live Gamer Portable Lite GL310 (£75). This also encodes in the device but I do get lag which is noticeable, but not an issue for my intended use. Unlike the Magewell, this also has HDMI out for connecting a monitor and also separate audio in and out connections.

This device also comes with it's own capture software.



Copy protection on DVDs and Blu-Ray discs is likely to prevent these devices from copying or capturing material from commercial discs. But that is illegal anyway.

Best Wishes from Colchester Filmmakers Club

Following an email to the Beeleigh Mill Restoration Group, which I just happened to receive, I exchanged a couple of emails with the chair of the Colchester Filmmakers Club, Barrie Gibbard. They managed to hold an on-line competition with follow up discussion on Zoom. They are also planning to hold their AGM on Zoom.

Our exchange ended with the following -

“Anyway, thanks for the exchange. It’s good to touch base and please circulate the best wishes of all our CFMC members to our colleagues in film at SEFM.

Regards

Barrie”

Next Issue

I hope to see some more members articles. The deadline for these is June 12th and they should be sent to geoff@alectoris.co.uk. I prefer either plain text or .doc, .docx, format. If possible, please include a personal photo.

I would also like to receive your thoughts on this question. “Do I take video or photographs as a main hobby, or as a part of another hobby?”. I will be giving my own answer.

There will be a Questions & Answers section, provided I get some questions. Some of the answers may be covered in future Zoom or Club meetings.

I will be putting together some tips on using Zoom, and will also be writing an article on OBS, the Open Broadcasting System.

I will also be looking at the Lumix FZ2000 and the Lumix FZ1000 and why I chose the former.

Geoff Partridge - Editor