



External Space

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Doorcuts

Zak Tatham

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Following an anonymous character (played by artist Jesi the Younger) as she passes through a series of real and digital doors, Zak Tatham's short film *Doorcuts* invites the viewer to consider the ways in which online platforms mediate identity.

In the 1990s—the early days of the public Internet—‘doorways’ were ‘built’ to allow users access to the Web. These doors were called “web portals.”¹ Public portals included Yahoo!, MSN, iGoogle, and many other chat rooms, message boards, and search engines; these online spaces were gateways to a new world of connections and data. As the Internet became more easily accessible and the creation of online communities began, entering an online portal could mean taking on a new identity. Logging onto the Web meant passing through a door to a separate plane of existence, where no one knew who you were or what you looked like. Chat rooms and message boards allowed users to stay as anonymous as they wanted; with the ability to identify yourself only by a chosen username, you could easily present yourself to strangers from around the world as whomever you wanted to be. And when you were tired of being online, you logged off, hit the computer's power button, and went out into the real world again.

As the Internet becomes more and more an ever-present part of our daily lives, not only is it much more challenging to disconnect from the Net, the old possibility of total online anonymity is rapidly disappearing. It's becoming more common for users to link different parts of their Internet identities together, pushing Twitter and Instagram posts through to Facebook, and registering dozens of different accounts onto one email. The Internet is less and less a space for subversive exploration and expression and more simply another part of daily life. This means that the same day-to-day care is now required to maintain an online presence as you put into your personal appearance. Self-curating begins to feel like a constant necessity,

¹ Joe Zhou, “A History of Web Portals and Their Development in Libraries.” *Information Technology and Libraries* 22, no. 3 (2003): 119.

as nonstop connection to social networks is now available via the ubiquity of smartphones² and the access they grant to websites and apps like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. With the possibility to be online at all times comes the desire to be constantly updating and reaffirming one's online presence. This practice, at first novel, can become a burden, as the pressure to respond to online comments and provide new content for friends and/or followers never lets up.³

The film's eponymous doors evoke the anxiety induced by both the possibilities and demands of continual online connection. While the portals featured in Tatham's work grant access to new horizons, they are also portrayed as dangerous: at one point chasing the protagonist down a corridor, at other moments falling and crushing her. Every time she passes through a door, she changes not only her surroundings but also her outfit: moving through a doorway allows her to alter her identity as well as her location. However, as the narrative progresses, it ends up going too far; ultimately, the protagonist loses the power to determine the location to which she'll be transported. Her real self and the digital afterimage she leaves behind as she passes through each doorway becomes mixed up, until the viewer is no longer certain who is real and who is a digital reflection. At one moment, two versions of the protagonist's self meet: with a look of fear, one self pulls shut the door that had just opened between them. This scene is one example of the way in which *Doorcuts* depicts the digital fragmentation of identity as anxiety inducing. Think about the sense of alienation you sometimes feel when glancing at your Facebook profile or reading over sent emails: did I really write those words, or was that some different, digital version of me? It can be difficult to feel that the online self is congruent to the self away from the keyboard.

There are several moments in *Doorcuts* when digitally rendered space (computerised stars, black-and-green grids, pixelated galaxies) can be seen peeking out from behind doorways. It is as if the doors are guarding against a fall into some kind of deep-space netherworld; maybe there is a reason that they chase Tatham's protagonist away. These brief glimpses of the world behind the doors seem like glitches. They invoke an anxiety similar to the feeling of discovering a "404 Page Not Found" error when navigating through a website—or of realising that the persona you present online may not be exactly who you are. Abruptly, the artifice of the Internet drops away, the flashy graphics are gone, and behind there is nothing but a blank space. Is this what the protagonist of *Doorcuts* is running from? She is running, after all: at first navigating through the doors seems fun and exciting, but quickly it appears to grow stressful, even frightening, as "she goes too deep" in exploring where the doors can take her.⁴

² As of 2015, two-thirds of the population in both the USA and Canada have been identified as smartphone users, and high percentages of households pay for Internet access. Aaron Smith, "U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015." Pew Research Center. 1 April 2016. Web. CRTC, "Smartphone and tablet use on the rise," news release, 27 Oct 2016, <http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en.do?nid=1018749>

³ Hannah Richardson, "Twenty-four hour social media 'link to teenage anxiety'." BBC News. 11 September 2015. Web.

⁴ In conversation with the artist, 14 April 2016.

The redemptive possibilities of the *Doorcuts* narrative may seem slim at first, but Tatham wants to leave the story open to interpretation.⁵ To view the film as a cautionary tale against the dangers of getting lost in online experiences would be to disregard the extent to which *Doorcuts* is a playful example of the real and digital blurring together. The animation, mostly reminiscent of early 2000s video games, is sometimes eerily real, in the sense that it can be difficult at times to know which doors are artificially rendered and which are photographed. The nostalgic feeling of the whole film only adds to this sense of reality flattening out, with references to fantasy-based literature furthering *Doorcuts*' surreal atmosphere. For example, the frequent mirrored doors bring to mind Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, while the passage from a bedroom closet filled with leaves into a forest recalls plot points in childhood classics like Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. Tatham cites *Narnia* as an influence, along with the science fiction franchise *Star Trek*, the 1988 film *Beetlejuice*, and Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* series.⁶ These narratives all have in common with *Doorcuts* a focus on border crossing and a tension between real and imagined worlds.

Ultimately, not only does reality flatten out in *Doorcuts*, but the protagonist does as well, folding up into a 2D cube like the victim of some kind of horrifying glitch in *The Sims* video game. This cube-self pushes through one final door and out into an unexpected landscape⁷ of vast, beautiful mountains covered in lush verdant forests, mist hanging overhead. The cube falls down a cliff in silence and then, catching on a tree branch, disintegrates, clothes coming undone, flattening out into nothingness, returning to nature at last.

Now that the Internet seems to be all around us at all times, the idea of accessing online information by passing through a web portal is quaint, strange, and as magical as opening up a door in the air and stepping into another place. How should we respond to the possibility—made very real by the ubiquity of smartphone technology and social media—that the border between offline and online life might eventually disappear? That instead of choosing to log on by opening a door online, we will always be connected, constantly passing through one realm of online space after another as we navigate lives which have become just as real online as they are offline? In *Doorcuts*, Tatham visualises the anxiety this question creates and the impact it has on our identities, blurring the distinction between real and digital passageways until it is as murky and uncertain as mist moving over a mountain.

– Jill Blackmore Evans

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Tatham explains that while the rest of the film was shot in Toronto over a period of three years, these final scenes were shot in Thailand. In conversation with the artist, 14 April 2016.