
Contextual Information for REF2021

Francesco Tacchini

INTERFACE CHAOS

Output identifier: FT01



Ravensbourne
University London

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Output and Description

The output is a short fictional film about offshore finance and nonhuman agency, entitled INTERFACE CHAOS, first screened on June 21st, 2019. Three key excerpts from the film can be seen on <https://interfacechaos.com/>.

The short film explores the struggle for survival of two entities confined to the archipelago and tax haven of the Seychelles: an endemic palm tree - populating its natural landscape, and the technology of money - populating its artificial landscape.

The project is a collaboration between Francesco Tacchini of Ravensbourne University London (submitting this portfolio outcome) and Oliver Smith of London College of Communication, working collectively under the pseudonym [Demystification Committee](#). As such, the researchers are equally involved in all phases of the project, from gathering research through the method described underneath, to writing, producing, directing and editing the short film. The REF outcome is thus equally split between Ravensbourne University London and London College of Communication.

Research Narrative

Funding

The project was funded through three sources:

- three Ravensbourne University London research grants (4000£) awarded in 2018/19, reviewed by an independent anonymous panel
- a London College of Communication research grant (1000£) awarded in 2018, reviewed by an independent anonymous panel
- a Porto Design Biennale 2019 production grant (500£) awarded by invitation

Introduction

The project aims to propose a new perspective to represent the issue of offshore finance. At first, a gap will be identified in the representation of the issue as discussed by global news outlets. Then, a research methodology will be devised, including quantitative data gathering and qualitative in-situ exploration. Finally, a production methodology will be unpacked to describe how fictional film as a medium and non-linear narration as a technique are used to resolve the research into an output, namely a short fictional film entitled *INTERFACE CHAOS*.

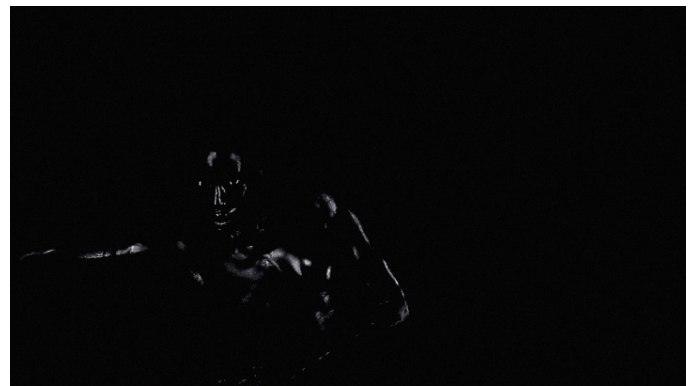


Fig 1: Screenshot from INTERFACE CHAOS (2019), image by Demystification Committee, showing “money”, seen throughout the short film as an androgenous alien entity in a distressing dance

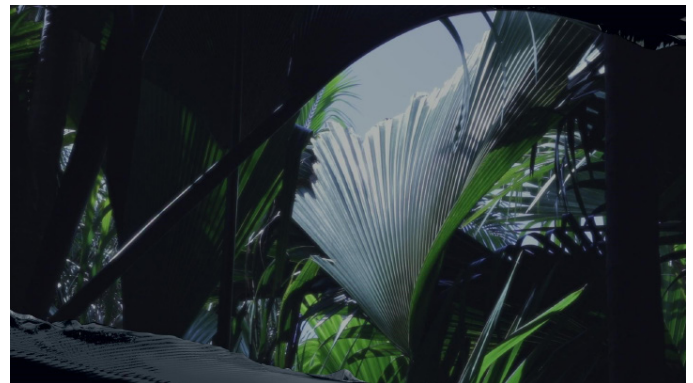


Fig 2: Screenshot from INTERFACE CHAOS (2019), image by Demystification Committee, showing a Lodoicea Maldivica, a palm tree endemic to the Seychelles and the second subject of the short film

Research Narrative

Literature Review

According to the Tax Justice Network (2011) a third of the produced global wealth is calculated to be hidden in jurisdictions with relaxed legal frameworks around taxation and secrecy - jurisdictions colloquially known as “tax havens”. The decade 2010-2020 has seen the publishing of documents such as the Offshore Leaks or the Panama Papers - namely private documents detailing financial and attorney-client information for thousands of corporate entities across the world’s tax havens. Following the sudden availability of otherwise private information, a surge in the representation of the issue across global news outlets brought the practices of corporate offshore finance to a global audience.

Given the searchable nature of the databases collecting the documents, the issue has largely been discussed through two lenses: a sensationalistic one, focusing on celebrity financial malpractice; and a narrow tax-justice one, advocating for the need to rebalance a State’s balance sheet by recovering lost money through taxation of wrongdoers. This can lead to a black-and-white representation of the topic of offshore finance, often represented as an illicit exception and exceptional byproduct of the otherwise licit, controllable movements of money.

An example of how this narrative unfolds is found in Michael Oswald’s *The Spider’s Web: Britain’s Second Empire* (2018). The documentary describes offshore finance as a network of former British secrecy jurisdictions, perpetuating the representation of tax havens as a “deviation” of and from otherwise-governable money. Alongside notable examples such as Harold Cook’s *The Price We Pay* (2014) and Steven Soderbergh’s *The Laundromat* (2019), the documentary is one in a series of recent-year films built around the black-and-white representation of money as an artificial, and thus controllable, technology which occasionally deviates from licit use.

The lack of any forms of critique of money in the films mentioned above constitutes a gap in the representation of the issue. As no precedents challenging this representation could be identified within the field of film by the researchers, their aim is to contribute to the debate around offshore finance through a short fictional film, framing the issue under a new, critical perspective.

Research Question

The researchers’ aim is to investigate money as more than human-made technology, representing it as a nonhuman entity. The researchers identified fictional film as a medium and non-linear narrative as a technique to best achieve this.

The research resolves itself in a short film where money is fictionally represented as a nonhuman entity escaping human control, problematising the simplistic representation and imaginary of offshore finance described above.



Fig. 3: Screenshot from INTERFACE CHAOS (2019), image by Demystification Committee, showing the facade of a tax service provider in Victoria, Seychelles



Fig 4: Screenshot from INTERFACE CHAOS (2019), image by Demystification Committee, showing PO boxes sold by tax service providers as incorporating addresses for offshore companies

Research Narrative

Research Method

A large amount of geospatial data concerning the location of offshore entities across the world was initially gathered by the researchers. The data was analysed and mapped so as to provide an understanding of the spread of publicly known offshore entities.

Following this mapping, the tax haven of the Seychelles were chosen as a location for qualitative exploration, given the high number of offshore companies present in-situ. Furthermore, the Seychelles were chosen for their flora and fauna, a backdrop rich in natural entities and devoid of human ones. The latter criteria is of relevance to the fictional, world-building capacity of the film, which is seeking to foreground the entity of money alongside other nonhuman entities.

A qualitative observation of offshore entities followed, analysed through in-situ comparison. The researchers gathered audiovisual material from the locations visited, as well as from the natural surroundings, with particular focus on an endemic palm tree known as *Lodoicea Maldivica*, producing the largest seed on earth.

The researchers edited the material together in a short fictional film entitled *INTERFACE CHAOS* (26' 45"), exploring the journey for survival of money and of the *Lodoicea Maldivica*, confined to the same locality. Both entities show agency in their ability to leave signs behind to mark the world they find themselves existing in.

Fictional film as a medium allowed the researchers the ability to world-build, constructing a reality or a space around money and palm-tree that is part perceived and part imagined. Non-linear narrative was deployed aiming to render the timescale of the film unclear or irrelevant, in an attempt to reset viewers' impressions of the locality - detaching any existing bias they may have from the film's settings.

The writings of Marcel Proust and Friedrich Nietzsche on "marking the world through art signs" and "accepting chaos as world order" were introduced by breaking the fourth wall and reading directly to imaginary viewers, in an attempt to both reframe art's ability to interpret and affect the world, and reframe money as a nonhuman entity with its own agency.

Research Outcome

INTERFACE CHAOS aimed to refocus the discussion of offshore finance around a movement of money fundamental to money's own survival.

By problematising the representation of tax havens through the medium of fictional film as infrastructural spaces of their own and as inevitable, rather than exceptional, byproducts of money, the researchers aimed to offer a new, critical perspective of offshore finance, filling a gap identified in the debate around the issue.

The researchers identify online interviews and printed publishing (listed underneath) as a tangible impact of the research, in that further audiences were able to engage with the output than those present at screenings (and their Q&As), possibly impacting their perception of the topic through the problematisation of the subject of "money".

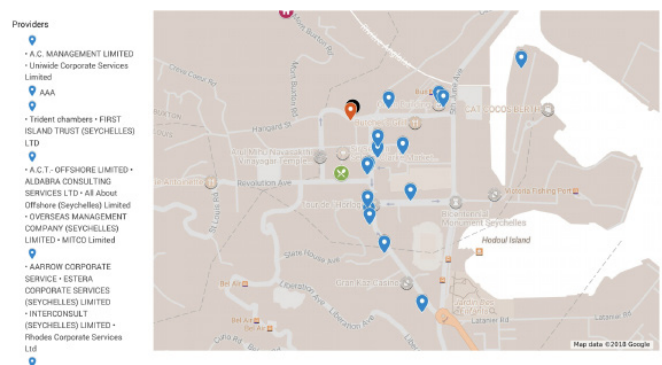


Fig 5: A geospatial mapping of tax service providers in Victoria, Seychelles, where the researchers filmed. Image by Demystification Committee

Research Narrative

Conclusion

The research aimed to propose new ways to represent the issue of offshore finance. At first, a gap was identified in the representation of the issue as discussed by global news outlets. Then, a research methodology was devised, including quantitative data gathering and qualitative in-situ exploration. Finally, a production methodology was unpacked, showing how and why specific media, such as fictional film, and specific techniques, such as non-linear narrative, are used to resolve the research into an output - namely a short film entitled INTERFACE CHAOS.

For fuller accounts of the research please view the following interview unpacking the themes behind the short film, published on [NERO](#), a critical theory and art book publisher.

INTERFACE CHAOS was screened and discussed nationally and internationally, for a total audience of 400 viewers. A list of screenings by invitation or open call are listed:

- AntiUniveristy Now Festival, London, June 2019 (invited by [Evening Class](#))
- Porto Design Biennale, Porto, October 2019 (invited by the director)
- Trust, Berlin, October 2019 (selected from open call)
- Forum Stadtpark, Gratz, January 2020 (invited by event curator)
- [NEROEDITIONS.COM](#), streaming online, February—March 2020 (invited by director)
- Cafe OTO, London, September 2021 (successfully pitched by the researchers to the artistic director)

The film was made available to the libraries of:

- London College of Communication
- Ravensbourne University London

A printed account of the research was published in the design journal [Modes of Criticism 5](#), Onomatopee (Eindhoven: 2019).

From late 2021, the film will be freely streamable on [INTERFACECHAOS.COM](#).

Invitations to screen and discuss INTERFACE CHAOS, including screening events being organised for 2021 and 2022 in art venues across Berlin, Brussels and Cyprus, demonstrate a positive reception of the output within and beyond the researchers' networks.



Ravensbourne
University London
6 Penrose Way
Greenwich Peninsula
London
SE10 0EW
United Kingdom

ravensbourne.ac.uk
info@rave.ac.uk
+44 20 3040 3500

@RavensbourneUK
