# The art and challenges of trailer editing in the age of AI



A few years ago, the Hollywood studio that produced the science-fiction thriller "Morgan" approached IBM to create an artificial intelligence (AI)-generated trailer for their film. This experiment marked what was billed as the first AI-made movie trailer. IBM’s AI system, Watson, was trained on 100 horror trailers before analyzing the 90-minute film. A human editor then stitched together the chosen clips to produce the promotional video. However, the result was widely criticised for its unnerving pacing and narrative incoherence, with features such as slow, pause-filled exchanges, unexplained black screen flashes, and incongruous expressions from actor Toby Jones. At the trailer’s end, an understated title card simply read: “Morgan … September 2.”

The director of "Morgan" may have had an interest in the trailer intentionally underperforming, since the film itself focused on the dangers of AI technology. Nevertheless, the tone-deaf outcome highlighted the challenges AI faces in recreating the art of trailer editing, an intricate craft developed and honed by professional human editors. As the entertainment world renews interest in AI-driven trailers—evidenced by Netflix’s recent patent for personalised algorithmic trailer technology—this earlier experiment with "Morgan" serves as an example of where AI might fall short in capturing audience attention.

Trailer editing is a specialised skill distinct from film directing, expertly practiced by editors who often remain anonymous despite the central role they play in promoting films within strict time limits—typically 150 seconds or less, as mandated by the US Motion Picture Association, with some cinemas preferring two-minute cuts. Zoe Carey, a trailer editor at Create Advertising with credits including "Nomadland," "Paddington," and "The White Lotus," described the profession as akin to composing poetry, distilling the essence and mood of a project into a succinct narrative that may differ significantly from the film itself. This process involves layering music, rearranging audio dialogue, and graphical elements to convey a compelling story. The trailer editor frequently engages in iterative back-and-forth with clients to refine the final cut.

The prestige and competition in trailer editing have evolved considerably. Mike DiBenedetto, known for trailers such as Disney’s "Enchanted" and various Marvel films, recalled his early career where agencies competed intensely for trailer commissions, sometimes producing numerous versions of trailers for a single movie. Some trailers succeeded artistically or commercially, while others failed entirely. The profession's culture was once marked by toxic elements; Carey recounts a past boss who claimed credit for her work in client meetings, though she noted that such practices have largely disappeared in recent years.

A shift from voiceover-driven trailers to ones that let the film’s own dialogue and atmosphere carry the narrative marked a turning point. DiBenedetto said this evolution was exciting: “You could no longer just write a script, put music underneath it and call it a day.” Trailer editing moved from merely technical work to an art form, enhanced by editors’ diverse backgrounds, including their experiences with skateboarding videos and Quentin Tarantino films.

The Golden Trailer Awards, established in 1999 by sisters Monica Brady and Evelyn Watters to recognise excellence in this invisible craft, has since become a celebrated event. Initially seeking to highlight top trailer editors, the awards now include categories spanning feature films, animation, action, TV shows, and digital content. Their “Golden Fleece” award, given annually to the best trailer for a poor-quality film, exemplifies the editor’s skill in showcasing the best possible version of even flawed projects.

Carey was nominated for a Golden Fleece in 2019 for her trailer of "Welcome to Marwen," a film which itself performed poorly at the box office. She described it as “hard to crack,” but the trailer managed to evoke emotional engagement using carefully crafted music and narrative structure. Other editors view "service" as integral to their work, focusing on appealing to a film’s potential audience regardless of the film’s overall quality. DiBenedetto commented: “My ex-father-in-law loved Baby Geniuses, the terrible movie with the talking babies. Getting him in front of that film – that was a win for everybody.”

However, trailer marketing is not without controversies. For instance, the 2019 film "Yesterday" featured actress Ana de Armas in its trailer, but she did not appear in the finished film. Two ardent fans attempted legal action against the trailer creators, underscoring audience expectations and the impact of promotional materials.

In recent years, budgets and timeframes for trailer production have tightened. Where two weeks were once allotted for a first trailer cut, many agencies now have just one. Despite this, trailer editors’ earnings and influence remain substantial. DiBenedetto noted the significant incomes possible in the industry, while Carey mused on the enduring cultural footprint of the 2006 film "The Holiday," which prominently featured a trailer editor character (who, she clarified, was actually a trailer producer).

The rise of streaming platforms has transformed trailer distribution and consumption. Traditional theatrical marketing has diminished as platforms like Netflix prioritise subscriber acquisition over individual title promotion. DiBenedetto explained Netflix’s preference for using brief show snippets over full trailers, reflecting a shift in marketing strategy. Nevertheless, Carey continues to work mainly on streaming projects, with high-profile series like "The White Lotus" offering new opportunities and challenges.

Despite the growth of AI, trail editors remain confident in their human touch. Dan Noall, an editor working with independent studios, described AI-produced trailers as “incredibly lazy” due to their formulaic nature. Brady compared bespoke trailer editing to tailored clothing versus mass-produced suits from department stores, suggesting that high-quality human creativity will remain essential.

Ultimately, the success of a trailer lies in its ability to evoke emotional resonance, capturing a film’s spirit in a few minutes. John Piedot recalled the excitement stirred by the memorable teaser for "Terminator 2," which he watched repeatedly in 1991. Reflecting on memorable trailers’ tendency to age badly, DiBenedetto noted their role as ephemeral cultural snapshots, shaped by the immediate context of their release.

Brady and Watters continue developing their original feature film project, inspired by a scene centred on the anticipation and hope trailers can inspire at a drive-in cinema. Brady recalled with a smile: “I always have to watch the trailers … because they give me hope there’s something coming in the future.” This sentiment captures the enduring significance of trailers as a distinct art form within the cinematic landscape.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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