

The New Statesman:

The movie that doesn't exist and the Redditors who think it does

Over the years, hundreds of people online have shared memories of a cheesy Nineties movie called “Shazaam”. There is no evidence that such a film was ever made. What does this tell us about the quirks of collective memory?

By Amelia Tait

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In the early Nineties, roughly around 1994, a now 52-year-old man named Don ordered two copies of a brand new video for the rental store his uncle owned and he helped to run.

“I had to handle the two copies we owned dozens of times over the years,” says Don (who wishes to give his first name only). “And I had to watch it multiple times to look for reported damages to the tape, rewind it and check it in, rent it out, and put the boxes out on display for rental.”

In these ways, the film Don is speaking of is exactly like the hundreds of others in his uncle's shop. In one crucial way, however, it is not. The movie that Don is referring to doesn't actually exist.

“It feels like a part of my childhood has now been stolen from me. How does a movie simply vanish from our history?”

This isn't Don speaking, but another man – who he has never met – named Carl. Carl, whose name has been changed because he wishes to remain anonymous, recalls watching a movie called *Shazaam* with his sister in the early Nineties, and has fond memories of discussing it with her over the last 20 years. In their recollections, the movie starred the American stand-up comedian Sinbad – real name David Adkins – as an incompetent genie who granted wishes to two young children.

“I've taken to Craigslist and have posted a bounty of \$1,000 for anyone that can turn up a copy of this movie, whether it was ‘accidentally’ kept from Blockbuster or if

someone made their own bootleg VHS copy. I want to be able to make it known that the movie is indeed real,” says Carl.

Meredith Upton, a 25-year-old videographer from Nashville, Tennessee, also remembers the same film. “Whenever I would see Sinbad anywhere in the media I would recall him playing a genie,” she says. “I remember the name of the film as *Shazaam*. I remember two children accidentally summoning a genie... and they try and wish for their dad to fall in love again after their mother’s passing, and Sinbad can’t [grant the wish].”

Don goes even further. Although he is not certain that the movie was called *Shazaam*, he has detailed scene-by-scene recollections of the film, which include the children wishing for a new wife for their father, the little girl wishing for her broken doll to be fixed, and the movie finale taking place at a pool party. Don says he remembers the film so vividly because customers would bring the video back to his rental store claiming it didn’t work, and he watched it multiple times to try and find the “problem with the tape”.

Meredith, Don, and Carl are three of hundreds of Redditors who have used the popular social news site to discuss their memories of *Shazaam*. Together they have scoured the internet to find evidence that the movie existed but each has repeatedly come up empty-handed. Sinbad himself has even taken to Twitter to deny that he ever played such a role.

Have you noticed no one my age has seen this so called Sinbad Genie movie,
only you people who were kids in the 90’s. The young mind !
— Sinbad (@sinbadbad) September 7, 2016

How did this Reddit community grow? It all began in 2009. An anonymous individual took to the question-and-answer website Yahoo! Answers to pose its users a simple question. “Do you remember that sinbad movie?” they wrote. “Wasnt there a movie in the early 90s where sinbad the entertainer / comedian played a genie? ... help its driving me nuts!”

At the time, nobody remembered the film, and it took another two years for somebody else to ask about it again online. Reddit user MJGSimple wrote on the site: “It’s a conspiracy! I swear this movie exists, anyone have a copy or know where I can find proof!” Replies to the post were sceptical, claiming MJGSimple simply had a false memory.

@careuhhh I must hve played a genie. Everyone says I did. Smile
— Sinbad (@sinbadbad) September 20, 2009

It wasn't until last year that things took a dramatic turn.

On 11 August 2015, the popular gonzo news site VICE published a story about a conspiracy theory surrounding the children's storybook characters the Berenstain Bears. The theory went like this: many people remember that the bears' name was spelt "Berenstein" – with an "e" – but pictures and old copies proved it was always spelt with an "a". The fact that so many people had the same false memory was seen as concrete proof of the supernatural.

"Berenstein" truthers believe in something called the "Mandela Effect": a theory that a large group of people with the same false memory used to live in a parallel universe (the name comes from those who fervently believe that Nelson Mandela died while in prison). VICE's article about the theory was shared widely, leading thousands of people to r/MandelaEffect, a subreddit for those with false memories to share their experiences.

It was there, just a few hours after the article was posted, that discussions of Shazaam – or the "Sinbad Genie movie" – took off.

"I was dumbfounded to see that there was no evidence of the movie ever being made," says Carl. "I quickly searched the internet, scouring every way I know how to search, crafting Boolean strings into Google, doing insite: searches, and nothing. Not a damn thing."

On the subreddit, discussions about the film went into great detail. Unlike other false memories on r/MandelaEffect, the issue wasn't a simple misspelling or logo-change, but an entire film's disappearance. Many Redditors revealed they had distinct memories of the cover art of the movie. "It said 'Sinbad' in big letters that dwarfed the other print," says Don, who goes by EpicJourneyMan on Reddit, and also remembers how Sinbad posed on the cover – facing left, with his arms crossed and an eyebrow raised. Jessica*, a 27-year-old office worker from Canada, also remembers the cover. "[It had] a purple background, featuring Sinbad dressed as a genie, back to back with a boy who looks about 11 or 12 years old. Sinbad has an annoyed expression on his face," she says.

At this point I should mention something I have neglected to mention so far. In 1996, the basketball player Shaquille O'Neal played a genie who helped a young boy find his estranged father in a commercially unsuccessful film. The cover art of the film features Shaq with his arms folded, laughing, in front of a purple background. His name, "Shaq", dominates the top half of the cover. The movie's name is *Kazaam*.

Imagine if you woke up this morning and Disney's 1998 animation *A Bug's Life* did not exist. After endlessly scouring the internet, you'd come up with nothing, despite your

own distinct memories of a bunch of ants going on wild hijinks through the undergrowth. You'd turn to your best friend, your brother, your mum, and say, "Hey, remember *A Bug's Life*? It was about ants", and your friend/brother/mum would turn to you and says: "No, darling. You're thinking about *Antz*."

This is how those who believe in the "Sinbad genie movie" feel when people say they are simply getting confused about Shaq's *Kazaam*. Twin films – remarkably similar movies that are released at the same time – are relatively common, and include *Turner & Hooch* and *K-9* in 1989, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and *Robin Hood* in 1991, *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line* in 1998, and *Finding Nemo* and *Shark Tale* in 2003-4.

"I remember thinking Shaq's *Kazaam* was a rip-off or a revamp of a failed first run, like how the 1991 film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* bombed but the late Nineties TV reboot was a sensation," says Meredith, who is one of many who claim to remember both *Shazaam* and *Kazaam*. Don remembers ordering two copies of the former and only one of the latter for the store, while Carl says: "I am one of several people who specifically never saw *Kazaam* because it looked ridiculous to rip off *Shazaam* just a few years after it had been released." When Carl first realised there was no evidence of the Sinbad movie existing, he texted his sister to ask if she remembered the film.

"Her response [was] 'Of course.' I told her, 'Try and look it up, it doesn't exist'. She tried and texted back with only: 'What was it called?' – there was never a question of if it existed, only not remembering the title."

I remember, as a child, that every time my mother bought me a fresh pair of Clarks shoes for the new school year, the shop would offer me a free gift to go with them. It was the late Nineties or early Noughties, and I distinctly remember receiving a lilac pencil case to accompany my new leather numbers. It had different compartments for pencils, rubbers, and sharpeners, and I spent the last week of the holidays drawing a comic book with it by my side on our caravan kitchen table.

There is no evidence that such a promotional offer ever existed. When I ask around, no one remembers it, but when I also ask about another memory I have – of Marks & Spencers' chicken nuggets shaped like Bugs Bunny – no one remembers those either, despite the fact a Guardian article proves they were real.

I can't find evidence of the Clarks offer on the internet, though my sister remembers it and a poll that I conducted online shows that at least 500 other people do, too. Does this mean my memory is real? We have become very used to the idea that you can find anything on the internet, yet what do we accept as "proof"? Do we need pictures, videos, and articles, or is the fact that hundreds of others share our memory enough?

Dr Henry Roediger, a professor at the Washington University Memory Lab, doesn't think so. "Lots of people remember detailed, but utterly false, memories. In fact, we all have them," he says. "I have published on what we named 'the social contagion of memory' and what others call 'memory conformity' – that may be at work here." Roediger explains that frequently one person's report of a memory influences another's, and that false memories can spread in this way. "One person's memory infects another," he says.

It is clear that this contagion would only be exacerbated online, where an individual can be influenced by multiple people from all around the world in an instant. The existence of the *Shazaam* Reddit community, therefore, arguably helps a false memory to spread.

@WillyBeamen_ ain't Nuthin hidden in This internet universe. It should be easy to find if I did a genie movie
— Sinbad (@sinbadbad) September 7, 2016

"We often forget whether we actually saw something or whether someone told us about a detail later and we filled in our memories," he goes on. "People infer events and then remember the inferences as if they actually happened. If someone hears 'The karate champion hit the cinder block' they will often later remember that he 'broke the cinder block.' But maybe not: maybe he broke his hand. So the inference is remembered as 'the way it happened.'"

Like accusations that they are misremembering *Kazaam* however, *Shazaam* truthers balk at the idea they simply have false memories that have been influenced by one another.

"I try not to read other's full descriptions of the film because I don't want to subconsciously influence my own recollection," says Meredith, while Jessica says that before she started reading about the film she jotted down her own memories, to avoid being influenced by others'. "After doing so, I read what other people remembered about the poster and a few people remembered the exact same poster that I did."

It is also worth noting that many people seemingly remember the movie independently of the subreddit – with someone different tweeting about it nearly every single day.

Who has that 90s, Sinbad, Genie movie on DVD?
— Bored Vegas (@Bakarii) December 21, 2016

Here I am trying to go to bed at a decent time only to find out that Sinbad never played a Genie in a movie! Even though I know Ive seen it!

— Chase Burgess (@LeadBurgess) December 16, 2016

So what do these Redditors think has actually happened?

Some truly believe in the Mandela Effect, that there has been some glitch in the world, there are parallel universes, or a timeline has been altered and as such little things have got lost. Some are very active in the r/MandelaEffect community, and have many other false memories, suggesting an element of bandwagon-hopping or a penchant for conspiracy theories.

Others, however, have less fantastical theories. Meredith leans towards the explanation being “some previously undocumented psychological phenomenon”, while Don believes the movie was intentionally “disappeared” because it embarrassed Sinbad and Phil Hartman, who he believes was a writer and producer on the film. Jessica also thinks the film was recalled and destroyed.

Carl’s explanation, however, is the most detailed. Although he considers the movie may have been recalled if DC Comics sued the film’s production company (because of their similarly-named TV show *Shazam!*), he believes more in either a timeline shift or a computer simulation.

“University of Oxford’s philosopher Nick Bostrom suggested that members of an advanced civilization with enormous computing power might decide to run simulations of their ancestors,” he says, also arguing that quantum computers are now able to run such simulations. “In a day where we can now run these simulations, is this a far-fetched theory?” he argues, noting that the famous scientist Neil deGrasse Tyson put the odds we are living in a computer simulation at 50-50 earlier this year.

“Does it make more sense to argue with the scientific minds of our time exposed to the greatest understanding of the capabilities of modern technology, or to argue with the masses of people who simply write off these effects we are noticing as faulty memories?” Carl asks.

As of today, there is no concrete evidence that *Shazaam* ever existed. A few months ago, Redditors thought they had a breakthrough when they discovered an image of Sinbad in a genie costume on eBay. Sinbad himself, however, tweeted to say that he was dressed that way because he was hosting a Sinbad the Sailor movie marathon.

Some said the image demonstrated where the false memory had originated, others continue to hunt for evidence of a movie they are certain exists.

