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Design Your Library Video Like a Hollywood Blockbuster: Using Screenplay Structure to Engage Viewers

By Leo S. Lo

Library instruction has moved beyond the traditional classroom based, face-to-face model of delivery, to the “any place, any time” model. Our users expect to have access to information in formats convenient to them. One of these formats is video delivered over the internet. The popular video sharing website, *Youtube*, even dedicates a section of their site to educational institutions - youtube.com/edu. Librarians have begun producing videos to promote their services and to provide information literacy instructions. The dynamic medium of online video offers a multitude of possibilities in instructional design. However, a research conducted by TubeMogul (2008) reveals that viewers of web videos have extremely short attention spans, and “most online video viewers watch mere seconds, rather than minutes, of a video”. Less than 50% of the viewers in the studies watched over sixty seconds of a video, and only 9.42% watched over five minutes of any video. In other words, if a video doesn’t capture viewers’ attention straight away and continue to engage them, it is unlikely that it will be watched in its entirety.

Even though the multimedia aspect of web video offers librarians all kinds of instructional possibilities, using sight and sound to communicate is a specialized skill. Knowledge of filmmaking and screenwriting principles is necessary to produce engaging videos. This article seeks to provide librarians a framework of storytelling principles used in successful Hollywood movies to help them create interesting and compelling videos for their users.

There are two basic types of library video: dramatized, and non-dramatized. The most common type of dramatized video instructions typically involves a protagonist who faces

a problem and needs to find solutions. The purpose of the video is to demonstrate the answers to the problems. The advantage of this type of video is the viewer can easily identify with the protagonist. The non-dramatized types are typically lecture style videos, where the viewers tend not to identify with any “character” in the video. This article focuses on the dramatized type of videos, but many of the principles can be applied to both types of video. A dramatized video could be a fictional short film, or it could be an Adobe Captivate type video demonstration, or it could be a straightforward slide presentation. What makes a dramatized video is the presence of a story. Any movie you see at the theaters, whether they are fictional or documentaries, have stories. The good movies have strong stories that engage you all the way. What happens when there is no story? Just think back to all those home videos of your friends and family that you have ever had to sit through.

Storytelling and Instructional Design

The art of storytelling has garnered increased attention in a variety of settings. Business leaders turn to screenwriting gurus to learn how to use stories to make them better communicators. In an interview with Robert McKee, one of the world’s best known screenwriting lecturers, he explains that there are two ways to persuade people – 1. Conventional rhetoric, or 2. Unite an idea with emotion – by telling a compelling story. The problem with conventional rhetoric is that it is an intellectual process and people are not inspired to act by reason alone. “In a story, you not only weave a lot of information into the telling, you also arouse your listeners’ emotions and energy” (Fryer, 2003, p.52). In education, many researchers argue for

the benefits of using stories. Jonassen and Hernandez-Serrano (2002, p.76) believe that stories should form the basis for learning how to solve complex, everyday, and professional problems as "learning throughout the ages has relied on narrative for the communication of ideas and culture". Eagn proposes that story telling is a more effective alternative for education content planning and delivery than traditional teaching methods, and "Heo has shown how story telling works in e-learning environment" (as cited in Sharda, 2007, p.97). To craft an engaging story, however, requires imagination, creativity, and knowledge of storytelling principles.

An effective story contains many important elements, but there are two that every good story must have: 1. Structure, and 2. Conflict. Structure is the most important element in the construction of a story. Aristotle worked out the three act model of story structure over two thousand years ago - a story must have a beginning, middle and end. Drama is what makes stories engaging. "A common problem for amateur storytellers is they only relate a series of events in sequence and believe those events alone define a story" (McDonald, 2009, p.116). What they fail to understand is, to create drama, there must be conflicts. Conflicts come in all shapes and forms. Conflicts happen when something is preventing the character from reaching his or her goal. For example, the guys in *The Hangover* (Phillips & Goldberg, 2009) need to find their missing buddy in time for his wedding but they don't know where he is and they cannot remember what happened the previous night; or in *The Proposal* (Hoberman, Lieberman, Chiarelli, 2009), Sandra Bullock is a Canadian who needs to fake marry her American assistant to avoid deportation but a skeptical immigration officer vows to test the authenticity of the marriage; or in *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet, Darondeau, Lioud, Priou, 2005), (although it is a French production and a documentary, it follows the standard Hollywood narrative structure), the penguins need to reproduce but have to battle the harsh environment of Antarctica; and in *Zombieland* (Polone & Fleischer, 2009), the characters want to live, but well, there are zombies that want to eat them. There is always a "but". There must always be obstacles in front of the characters.

If there were no obstacles, the stories would be incredibly boring. If the buddies in *The Hangover* had no trouble remembering and finding their friend, the movie would be over in two minutes. Similarly, there would not be a movie if Sandra Bullock did not have any visa problems in *The Proposal*; or if the penguins did not need to march that far to lay their eggs; or if the zombies in *Zombieland* were a friendly bunch and did not want to eat our heroes.

By understanding and applying storytelling principles, instructional designers can create "new and innovative instructional situations" (McDonald, 2009, p.119). Even when there is not a story, instructional designers could still apply the storytelling principles and make their instruction become stories. The presence of conflicts, or obstacles, could give learners an opportunity to explore the topics and formulate their own solutions.

Screenplay Basics

To tell a story with pictures, we need a screenplay. Just like Aristotle's structure of stories, a screenplay has a definite beginning, middle, and end. Syd Field (1979, p.7-8) dissected the structures of successful movies in his influential screenwriting manual, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, and came up with a screenplay paradigm. The beginning is Act I, which is the "setup". It should be about thirty pages long with plot point I at around page twenty-five to twenty-seven. The middle is act II, and it is the "confrontation". Act II is the longest act, and it should be between page thirty and page ninety, with the second plot point appearing at around page eighty-five to ninety. The end is act III, and it is the "resolution". It should run from page ninety to page one hundred and twenty.

A page of screenplay equals approximately one minute of screen time. A two-hour movie would have a screenplay of approximately 120 pages long. Therefore, if we were to make a two minute web video, the screenplay should be about two pages long. Adapting Syd Field's paradigm for our two minute short video, Act I would be about thirty seconds long (half a page), Act II would be about sixty seconds

(one page), and Act III would be about thirty seconds (half a page). However, this is just a guideline. For a video this short, the length of each segment can be more flexible. The order of the segments, however, must be the same.

The Beginning (Act I)

The first act of a feature length movie is about twenty-five to thirty minutes. The first act has to “hook” the audience as most viewers make up their mind whether they “like” or “dislike” a movie in the first ten minutes or so. For web videos, the attention span of an average viewer is even shorter, therefore the opening of the video becomes extremely crucial. Similar to a television commercial, a short web video must convey information concisely and efficiently in an entertaining manner. The structure of the first act consists of the following important elements: 1 The Opening Image; 2. The Set Up; 3. The Inciting Event; 4. The Central Question; and 5. Plot Point I.

The Opening Image and the Set Up

The opening image is similar to the opening sentence of a story. “The very first impression of what the movie is – its tone, its mood, the type and scope of the film – are all found in the opening image” (Synder, 2005, p.72). It is a hugely powerful moment and when it works well, it helps hook the audience right into your story. For example, the opening images of *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet et al, 2005) transport the audience immediately to “another world” of alien-planet-like giant ice caps of Antarctica basked in surreal lights. *The Proposal* (Hoberman et al, 2009) opens with a point of view shot of someone riding a bike in a wood, which turns out to be just a video. As we pull away from the TV, we see Sandra Bullock (in full biking gears) riding an exercise bike in her urban, nicely decorated, high rise apartment with a view of Central Park. She pays no attention to the video, but is reading a manuscript instead. As she finishes her workout, she stops her stopwatch. This opening shot is only thirty-eight seconds long, but it efficiently introduces the protagonist (urban, no-nonsense, workaholic, professional, successful), and one of the themes of the movie (city versus nature) without the use of a single line of dialogue.

The first ten minutes of a typical Hollywood movie sets up the “ordinary” world of the protagonist. In this world, the protagonist’s life is normal, everything is in balance. For example, in *The Proposal* (Hoberman et al, 2009), we see that Sandra Bullock is a feared and disliked boss in the office. Or in *Up in the Air* (Clifford, Dubiecki, Reitman, I., Reitman, J., 2009) George Clooney flies all over the country for his job and never stays home, and he loves it. Those are their ordinary worlds before the real stories begin. Adapted to a two minute library video, we would only have ten seconds or so for the set up. With such a time constraint, it is not uncommon for the opening image to also be the set up. It is therefore paramount to fully utilize the strength of the medium, namely the visuals, to convey as much information as possible.

The Inciting Event

After introducing the protagonist and setting up the “ordinary” world, there must be an “inciting event”. “The inciting event radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist’s life” (McKee, 1997, p. 189). This is the event the sets the story in motion, and “the protagonist must react to the inciting event” (McKee, 1997, p. 191). Some examples of inciting event: In *The Proposal* (Hoberman et al, 2009), Sandra Bullock is informed by her bosses that her work visa has expired and she has to leave the country; in *Up in the Air* (Clifford et al, 2009), a new hotshot from Cornell comes to George Clooney’s company and proposes a new way of firing people via video chat, thus making him obsolete; in *The Hangover* (Phillips & Goldberg, 2009), the guys go to Vegas; In *Zombieland* (Polone & Fleischer, 2009), Columbus meets Tallahassee (Woody Harrelson); or in *Frost/Nixon* (Grazer & Howard, 2008), Frost’s producer tells him that he is going to interview Nixon. All these events happen right after the set up at around the ten to twelve minute mark in those movies. This event gives the protagonist a goal to achieve, and brings out the central question of the movie.

The Central Question

The central question is basically what the movie is about. It is expressed somewhere in the first act, usually after the inciting event.

The central question in *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet et al, 2005) is, "can the penguins successfully reproduce?" And in *The Hangover* (Phillips & Goldberg, 2009), "can the guys find their friend and make it back to his wedding in time?" In *Zombieland* (Polone & Fleischer, 2009), Columbus wants to go back to Ohio to find out if he still has a family. It is usually a physical goal that the protagonist has to take action to achieve. Once the central question is established, the protagonist has to take action to answer that question, which brings us to the plot point just before act II.

Plot Point I

The purpose of the plot points is to change the direction of the movie, to help the transitions from act to act. In *The Proposal* (Hoberman et al, 2009), the first plot point is the couple leaving their urban setting and arriving in Alaska to meet Ryan Reynolds' family. This is a transition from the ordinary world (Sandra Bullock's professional, urban setting) to the extraordinary world of Alaska. The plot point of *The Hangover* (Phillips & Goldberg, 2009) happens when the guys get drunk. They get so drunk that they cannot remember anything that happened the previous night. This plot point propels the story from act I to act II, where they realize that their friend is missing. The plot point also forces the protagonist to take action to achieve the goal. In *Zombieland* (Polone & Fleischer, 2009), Columbus and Tallahassee encounter Wichita and Little Rock, and completely change their original direction – now the group decides to go to "Pacific Playland", an amusement park rumored to be zombie-free.

The Middle (Act II) - Confrontation

Act II is typically the longest act of a movie where the protagonist takes action to confront the problems that were set in act I. This is where our protagonist faces all kinds of obstacles that prevent him/her from achieving his/her goals. The obstacles get more difficult and the stakes are raised higher.

In *The Proposal* (Hoberman et al, 2009), when the couple is in Alaska, not only is Sandra Bullock now a fish out of water, the couple has to convince Ryan Reynolds' family

that their relationship is authentic. In *Frost/Nixon* (Grazer & Howard, 2008), Frost faces a formidable obstacle in Nixon. In *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet et al, 2005), the penguins battle the devastating weather, starvation, and predators in order to breed. And in *The Hangover* (Phillips & Goldberg, 2009), the guys have to retrace their steps and must deal with a tiger in their bathroom, a baby in their closet, Asian gangsters, and Mike Tyson.

Plot Point II

Similar to plot point I, the purpose of this plot point is to move the story forward from act II to act III. It has to change the direction of the story again. Just as the first plot point changes from the normal world of the protagonist to the journey, the second plot point moves the story towards the resolution. For example, in *The Hangover* (Phillips & Goldberg, 2009), after all the mishaps and adventures, plot point II occurs when they guys finally find their friend. Now they have to race back to the wedding, and thus completely changes the direction of the story again. The plot point in *Up in the Air* (Clifford et al, 2009) occurs when the lone wolf George Clooney realizes that he finally wants to have a meaningful relationship, rushes to Chicago to see the woman he loves, and finds out that she is married. He is all alone again. In *The Proposal* (Hoberman et al, 2009), Sandra Bullock cannot bear lying to Ryan Reynolds' family and confesses that the wedding is a fraud in front of everyone. She is going to be deported, which brings us to act III – the resolution.

The End (Act III) - Resolution

The resolution is the answer to the central question. This is where we tie up all the loose ends, and bring closure to the story. The protagonist has learned the lessons in act II, and is going to apply the new knowledge in act III. In *Zombieland* (Polone & Fleischer, 2009), Columbus and the gang defeat the zombies in the amusement park, and decide to stick together. This also answers the central question posed in act I: Columbus wanted to go back home to find his family, now he has found a new family. In *The Proposal* (Hoberman et al, 2009), Ryan Reynolds realizes he has fallen in love with Sandra

Bullock and proposes to her for real, which saves her from deportation, and answers the central question of the movie. In *The Hangover* (Phillips & Goldberg, 2009), the gang gets their friend back in time for the wedding in act III. Each of the character's subplot also gets resolved in this part, and we finally get to see what really happened that night.

An analysis of an award winning web video

The Sparky Awards (SPARC, 2008) is an annual award that recognizes the best short video presentations on the value of sharing information. The award has active involvement from libraries and librarians. This section will analyze the winning video of the 2009 People's Choice Award of the Sparky Awards using the aforementioned screenwriting principles. The title of the video is "Clueless Discovery" (Ludwig, 2009) and it is forty-five seconds long.

Opening Image: The video opens with a funny image of a caveman using a stick to draw a self portrait on the ground. This sets the comedic tone of the video. Running time: 0:00 - 0:05.

Set Up: It is prehistoric time. There is no civilization, and human knowledge is at its very beginning. Running time: 0:00 - 0:10.

Inciting Event: A volcano erupts and a fireball lands in front of the caveman, right on the stick. This event upsets the balance of the caveman's "normal" world. Running time: 0:11 - 0:14.

Central Question: The caveman has obviously never seen fire before. He stares at the burning flame on the tip of the stick. Can the caveman learn the value of fire? Running time: 0:14-0:17.

Plot Point I: The caveman is curious. He takes action. He picks up the burning stick. Running time: 0:17 - 0:25

Confrontation: What is he going to do with the fire? He puts it in his mouth. Running Time: 0:26 - 0:32.

Plot Point II: Uh-oh. His eyebrows shoot up. It burns! Running time: 0:32 - 0:33.

Resolution: Answer to the central question. "Learning is tough. Share what you learn. (Example: Fire tastes bad)". The end. Running time: 0:33 - 0:45.

Even though the running time of the video is just forty-five seconds, it follows the screenplay structure. There is a definite beginning, middle and end. It has the plot points to change the directions of the story, and it has a conflict. This award winning short video is a good demonstration of the benefits of adopting Hollywood cinematic narrative techniques.

Conclusion

Instructional designers recognize the benefits of using multimedia to deliver instruction. As web videos become more accessible, both in terms of production and viewership, it is important for instructional designers to acquire knowledge of using images and sounds to communicate. Elizabeth Van Ness (2005, March 6) suggests in her *New York Times* article that a Cinema Studies degree could be the new M.B.A., as many view "cinematic skills as a new form of literacy"; organizations recognize the power of influence that film and video could wield; and Elizabeth Daley, Dean of University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts, says, "The greatest digital divide is between those who can read and write with media, and those who can't." On the same token, libraries and librarians must keep up with this new media literacy in order to reach out to users who are used to this type of communication. By studying how professional screenwriters craft their screenplays is an important step towards learning how to use the power of stories to deliver information. It is an invaluable tool for instructional designers to create new and innovative videos for users.

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