



COMIC CON INTERNATIONAL FILM SCHOOL 2006 SYLLABUS

For the third year in a row, Comic-Con presents a 4-day, hands-on, nuts and bolts class on how to make a movie for very little money, using available video technology and desktop post-production software. Whether you're shooting your first comic

book fan film, or that story about the leather-clad girl who hunts vampires, this course will take you from script to DVD, so that you too can enter your own movie into the CCI-IFF.

DAY 1

PRE-PRODUCTION – WRITING AND PRODUCING & PRODUCTION Part: 1

PANELISTS

Tim Cunningham: Director: Xxtracurricular

Valerie Perez: Producer/Star: Tears of the Dragon (A Lara Croft Fan Film)

Sean Rourke: Director: Geek-Week (**Moderator**)

WRITING

- Write what you know you can shoot
- Begin short-form and work your way up to more complexity
- Don't let fear stop you.

PRODUCING & SCHEDULING

- Always get permission from your locations in advance.
- Borrow Equipment when you can.
- Schedule the shoot (how long does it take to shoot a page of dialogue? A fight scene?)
- Try to do formal agreements with crew & cast. Even simple ones are better than nothing. -Shot list & storyboards. Pre-plan everything.
- Pre production meetings – can't have enough of those.
- Script read-through with actors. Rehearsal time is important.
- Do a Budget...food is the biggest expense, but also the most important!
- Store all your information in one place! It doesn't matter if it is in a spiral notebook or on your computer, organizing the following will be key to managing budgeting, scheduling, locations, crew, and promotion:



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STORY

Genre, pitch, treatment, plot points, ideas

CONTACT INFO

Productions, equipment, hair, locations, wardrobe

CALENDAR

Shooting days, rehearsals, other meetings

SCHEDULING

Cast members, extras, stunts, set dressing, props, vehicles, fx

LOCATIONS

Contact info, directions, photos, maps, scenes for locations

BUDGETING

Pre-production (above-the-line): development & research

Production: camera, set constructions, props, gas for vehicles

Post Production: software, stock footage

Other: Publicity

ACCOUNTING

Where this money is coming from...

EDITING

Ideas

FILM FESTS

Festival, where, when

FIND A CREW

- Crewing up - make sure you can trust your crew. People WILL flake-out on you. That's why you shouldn't have a whole lot riding on your first movie. After doing a few, you will find out who is dependable and who isn't. You don't need a big budget to make a movie. However you do need a good support team.



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- Treat your cast & crew like Gods, especially if they work for free, because you may want to shoot another low budget film & you'll need a crew.
- Don't be afraid to handle more than one position.

For example: "I'm the director, and I'm not gonna move lights & sand bags" – don't be a pre-madonna.

PRODUCTION DESIGN, COSTUMING & PROPS

- Find the locations of the nearest Thrift Stores, Halloween stores, Army Surplus stores, Garment District, Hardware Stores, 99 Cent Store. You can find great deals at any one of these places.
- Learn to sew (or find someone who can), or else get a hot-glue gun.
- Take lots of pictures for continuity.
- Organize costumes and props with "paper bag" filing system.
- Make friends with spray paint.

EQUIPMENT TESTS

- Test your equipment before you shoot– very important!

PREP

- *Shot List*: Always write down every angle you plan to shoot during the day. It is easy to forget things when you're in the thick of it.
- *Storyboards*: Not necessary, but there is no better way to communicate to your crew what each shot is supposed to look like.
- *Pre-Vis*: Computer generated pre-visualization is almost unnecessary in the world of no-budget filmmaking, but if you want to do one, it can only help.
- *Video Pre-Vis*: Shoot the scene in the location using no lights, no crew, and one or two friends as actors, just so that you can get your angles and shot composition down before you get everybody to the location for real. Refer to Robert Rodriguez's behind-the-scenes on "Desperado."



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GENERAL NOTES

- Make new mistakes from project to project.
- DO NOT shoot anything too aggressive your first time out---AKA: Animals, Kids, huge SPFX, lots of characters/extras, giant fight scenes
- Spend money wisely - work within your means - DO NOT spend a lot of money on your first project
- Don't be afraid to experiment on your first movie, this is how you learn.
- Shoot - long for short form. Get this experience.
- Watch movies. Listen to the audio commentaries on DVD. In particular, the DVDs of directors like Robert Rodriguez, Kevin Smith, Steven Soderberg, John Carpenter, etc. who talk about the film-making process and not just about their vision.
- Keep it fun! If people have fun working on your movie, then they will come back and do it again. A movie set, if not planned-out and managed properly can quickly turn into a hellish experience for everyone.



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DAY 2

PRODUCTION Part: 2 & POST PRODUCTION

PANELISTS

Tim Cunningham: Director: Xxtracurricular

Kyle DeVriendt: Director of Photography: 1st Person Shooter

Valerie Perez: Producer/Star: Tears of the Dragon (A Lara Croft Fan Film)

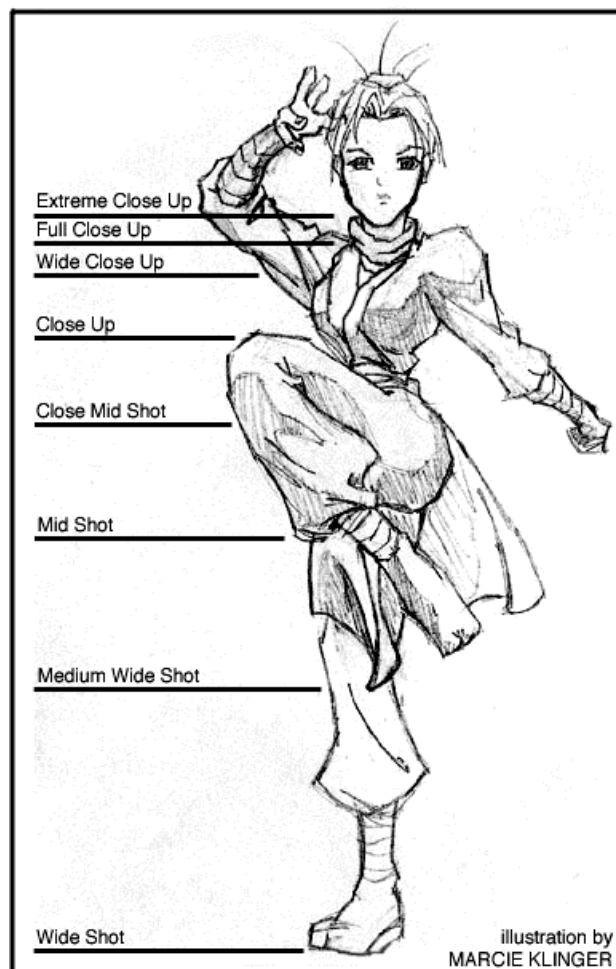
Nick Murphy: Director: Tears of the Dragon (A Lara Croft Fan Film)

Sean Rourke: Director: Geek-Week (**Moderator**)

PRODUCTION

CINEMATOGRAPHY

- *Shot composition* - what you want in your frame. If the audience can't see it, it doesn't exist. You do have to know some of the traditional film language to get good composition. i.e. low angle vs. high angle and what they both can mean. Watch movies with the audio off so that you can SEE what you are watching. For deep composition check out Citizen Kane and Ikuru, both have much more going on in frame than just the actors
- *Max Headroom* - the moving image has a language. The eyes of actors should line up at about where the top third of the screen cuts thru - this is the same for TV size or wide screen
- *Doing it with one camera* - shoot a master or wide shot, then shoot a two shot, then Close-ups,





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and extras that you know you will need, (a hand picking-up a phone, gun cocking, etc.)

- Try to light the master shot with the intent to only have to tweak the lights as you go in for the closer shots. Every time you re-light, you lose valuable time.
- *Don't do a 180* - the 180 rule - the camera never moves beyond 180 degrees during any one scene. If you do this, you will disorient your audience.
- *Don't give into the Jedi mind trick of wide screen* - most new cameras have the option to shoot in the TV safe frame or in the wide screen size - DON'T BE FOOLED - the cameras do not give you real wide screen. Shoot in the TV size screen and mask the top and bottom of the frame on your monitor as you shoot. This way, you can compose your shot for wide screen and then when you're done editing, you can mask your final image in your editing software. The other benefit is that shooting in TV size allows you to do some tricks in advanced editing.
- Know what you are doing before you show up. Again, use your set-ups wisely.

LIGHTING & SOUND

- White balancing; What is it & why is it important?
- Lighting for no money – simple lights can work out great.
- What camera to use - 3 CCD (3 chip camera) for maximum image quality.
- When do you shoot 24p, 30p, or 30i, and what's the difference?
- Mini-DV format vs. DVD cameras and HD
- Sound, what do you really need?
- Try to have someone dedicated only to sound. They should be in charge of the microphones, (shotgun, lavalier, or other,) should wear headphones on every take and listen for microphone bumps, cars going by, and make sure that everyone can be heard and understood. If you have a camera with VU (Volume Unit) meters on it, the sound person should watch them during recording to make sure that the levels are in a safe audio range. (i.e., not too soft and not too hot.)
- Good sound is very important in post, and bad sound will kill a movie very quickly.



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ON SET PRODUCTION

- Always have someone taking stills – digital is best. You never know when you may need them later.
- Have someone try & do makeup; Most actors don't mind doing their own.
- Slate your shots, even with a notebook.
- If you can have a script supervisor to take notes during filming try to do so. It will help you in post.

GENERAL NOTES

- Don't waste money on shooting your first movie on film. Make your mistakes and discover your style on video first.
- Learn your lessons on a lower budget.
- Good movie making takes trial and error! Your movies will get better the more times you do it.
- The most important rule of all is to keep the set FUN! A set that is not fun is a set people won't come back to the following day.

POST PRODUCTION

PRINCIPLES OF EDITING

- For each scene, start with an establishing shot to show the audience where they are.
- Move in for close-ups. If you can, overlap your cuts over people's dialogue. In other words, mix it up. Try cutting to a person AFTER they've started their line. Cut to a person while they're just listening to the other one talk. Seeing facial reactions are just as important as seeing line delivery.
- Edit dialogue so that it's snappy without long pauses between lines. At the same time, don't be afraid to let the audience linger on a quiet moment from time to time.
- Watch movies that are similar to yours to see how they're edited. There is a science to it, but it's really more about feel. Watch how the



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pros have cut your favorite movies, and you'll start to pick-up on how their rhythm "feels."

- The main concern is that you don't bore your audience. If your scene is 3 minutes long, try cutting it down to 1:30. You'll be surprised at how much footage you DON'T need in there.
- Transitions:
 - ♦ The simple cut should never be underestimated.
 - ♦ The dissolve is used to show the passage of time.
 - ♦ Stay away from the pre-packaged wipes in your editing software. Nothing says "amateur" like the goofy wipes you see in wedding videos.

**Sean's Note: There's nothing amateur about editing wedding videos. It is a respectable avenue of video post-production, and I did it for several months before moving to Hollywood. Still, the cheesy wipes belong in people's weddings, not in narrative movie making.*

EDITING LOGISTICS

- Plugging-in a camera/deck
- Digitizing a clip
- Cutting the clips into a sequence
- Doing a transition
- Doing a title
- Exporting a final movie

DVD AUTHORIZING

- Add your chapter markers while still in your editing software. They will be more accurate when you import your movie into the DVD software.
- Make the menus graphically interesting, but easy to navigate as well.

**Valerie's Note: When pressed for time or if you just don't have any other content but your film to put on a DVD, there's nothing wrong with setting your film to play immediately instead of first going to a menu.*



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- Don't use text that is too small. Sometimes text is readable on your computer monitor but will be blurry on a TV, (because the letters are falling between the pixels.)
- If you design your menus in Photoshop, use the preset document size for 720 x 540 NTSC Standard 601. This is the exact size of the television screen.
- What is Title Safe? When making DVD menus, always place your pictures, buttons, text, etc. with a sizeable margin on all four sides. The average television cuts-off the edges of a video signal, so you don't want your titles to be lost off screen.
- TEST every aspect of your DVD before handing it to anyone
 - ◆ Make sure all the movies play
 - ◆ Make sure all the menu buttons work
 - ◆ Make sure people can easily get back to the main menu
 - ◆ Play your DVD on a computer and a stand-alone DVD player. You may notice that one looks fine but the other doesn't.

SELF PROMOTION

- Make a website, and post a Trailer.

**Valerie's Note: There are enough resources online to help anyone create a website but creating beautiful graphics is harder to improvise. Try hosting 'Movie Poster Design Contest'. Advertise it on a PhotoShop or other creative forum. You'll be surprised how much awesome custom art will be submitted. Ex: <http://www.steeldolphin-forums.com/showthread.php?t=3130>*

- Print up flyers.
- Show your movie to as many people as you can, (both people you know and don't know) and LISTEN to what they think works and doesn't work. A lot of their opinions will be useless, but when you start hearing the same thing multiple times, then you need to pay attention.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

- What computer to use/get (buy/borrow)
- PC vs. MAC



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Suggestions for software:

- EDITING SOFTWARE:
 - ◆ FINAL CUT PRO!!!
 - ◆ AVID Express
 - ◆ iMovie for very simple cutting
- DVD MASTERING SOFTWARE
 - ◆ iDVD: for simple DVD Mastering
 - ◆ DVD Studio Pro: for Serious DVD design (i.e., Commentary Tracks, Web Links, Optimized compression, etc.)

**Sean's Note: Final Cut Pro and other desktop editing software have legitimate tools for making Titles, doing VisualFX, Compositing, and Sound Editing. However, those who want to do something more flashy or advanced may want to dive into more specialized software.*

- Photoshop for stills and graphics
- COMPOSITING SOFTWARE:
 - ◆ AfterEffects
 - ◆ Combustion
 - ◆ Shake
- TITLING SOFTWARE:
 - ◆ Motion
- SOUND MIXING SOFTWARE:
 - ◆ Pro Tools
 - ◆ Soundtrack Pro (Comes with Final Cut Pro)
- MUSIC SOFTWARE:
 - ◆ Soundtrack Pro (Comes with Final Cut Pro)
 - ◆ Garage Band (Comes with iLife)



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DAY 3

WORKING WITH ACTORS and A CREW & The TEARS OF THE DRAGON EXPERIENCE

PANELISTS

Tim Cunningham: Director: Xxtracurricular

Nick Murphy: Director: Tears of the Dragon (A Lara Croft Fan Film)

Valerie Perez: Producer/Star: Tears of the Dragon (A Lara Croft Fan Film)

Sean Rourke: Director: Geek-Week (**Moderator**)

ACTORS

Jack Conway

Kristen Meinhold

Susan Smythe

Brian Stevenson

Brad Upton

WORKING WITH ACTORS

- Acting is IMPORTANT, not an afterthought.
- Bad actors can ruin a good script

HOW TO FIND ACTORS

- How to post a casting call (LA vs. Anywhere else)
 - ◆ Backstage and Backstage West for NY and LA
 - ◆ Backstage.com
 - ◆ Breakdownexpress.com
 - ◆ Local Newspaper anywhere else in the country
 - ◆ Post notices at school drama departments or local theaters
- The 3 things you CAN'T do at a casting Session:
 - ◆ Never hold a Casting Session at a private residence
 - ◆ Never charge people to audition
 - ◆ Never require nudity at an audition
- How to hold a casting session
 - ◆ Schedule times for people to show up
 - ◆ Get them the Sides (Script Pages) before they come to the audition. Everybody has email these days.



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- ◆ Have a waiting room separate from the audition room. Actors will be nervous enough auditioning in front of you without having all the other hopefuls watching them at the same time.
- ◆ Always ask an actor to perform the scene for you in a different way to see if they can absorb direction.
- ◆ Full disclosure at casting session: what the part will entail (working in the cold, wearing very little clothing, etc...)
- Being hot DOES NOT equal good actor
- Never cast someone because you want to sleep with them.
- Never date your actors during a project.
- Additionally, finding a Casting Director is both a good idea and not that difficult. Many Casting Assistants or Associates want a Director credit and are willing to work on low/no budget films. Besides, many times it's the Assistants and Associates who do the actual interviews, pull sides, set up auditions etc., so they will be well versed. This can free up time for the director to focus on the other million things they have to do.

LOOKING OUT FOR THE ACTORS and THE CREW

- Feed them
- Schedule them, and get them a script well in advance
- Shoot them within the schedule
- Pre-plan the day with them
- Be prepared for flaking. Someone always will.
- Safety first in all things.
- Don't forget about them when the shoot is over, keep them informed of the progress of the movie
- Get them a copy of the movie afterwards

Remember: Do not freak out on anybody while under pressure, stay professional at all times.

THE ACTOR'S PERSPECTIVE.

- What do actors want to know when they work on a low budget film?
- What do they look for on set?



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- Why would they come back to work with the same crew?

TEARS OF THE DRAGON: A PORTRAIT OF A FAN FILM

- The Lara Croft Fan Film...how did it wind up?
- How did the premiere go?
- How was it covered?

Media coverage of TOTD has been on television as well as in newspapers, magazines, and websites around the globe because of *networking*.

- ♦ Find an angle – if your film features a classic car, find the vintage vehicle forums or news sites and offer them media on your project. If your film is on a popular genre or character, email the fan clubs.
 - ♦ If your subject matter has a real international following, offer a free copy to the film to online enthusiasts in exchange for web site or subtitle translations.
- What was the whole experience like?
 - What's next?

ADVICE FOR PEOPLE WANTING TO DO THEIR OWN FAN FILMS

- If you don't have the perfect costume :
If you need superheroes you can find many walking around at conventions – they are already in costume and would love to show it off. Enlist the help of your grandma or sister who is proficient in sewing. There are many costume making how-to's online (including ones to make specific hero costumes) and so on (see COSTUMING on page 3). And remember, it doesn't have to look as good for film as it should in person. A black trash bag could make a great ninja costume if cut properly.
- If there are not enough actors to play henchmen:
Put your less used actors in different costumes (Goon #2 that gets killed in scene 4 can be resurrected as Goon #3 in scene 6 if you give him a different gun and sunglasses). And if you still can't find more bodies try to bribe your dad if he looks the part.



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- If you need to find shooting locations:

The key is to write your script around the locations you are likely to get access to... BUT this is particular hard for certain genres. If you need a wide open space or natural location try a national park and the nearby hiking trails. Keep your eyes peeled for various types of architecture around town – the alleyway behind your neighborhood grocery store may look like it came straight out of Gotham City. Researching near by areas online can lead to that little bit of location scouting that finds you the perfect place.

** Valerie's Note: When shooting in a strange city or rather isolated area, be sure to check the weather forecasts and find where the hardware stores, markets and hospitals are near there so you know where to go if you need to patch up your set or your crew.*

- If you need to make things go 'BOOM' :

For those who want a little gunfire in a scene, during July a common and relatively harmless firework called 'Crackling Balls' are sold every where (or all year around depending on what state you live in). These give off little sparking pops that are perfect for bullet ricochet effects (for daytime shoots, best to set them up in the shade of a building and out of direct sun light so the camera can fully pick-up the action). Get as many bags of these as you can – you'll be surprised how fast you go through them after a couple of takes.

- If your ideas exceed your resources :

If you want to make your own super-hero epic and don't have the budget there are two ways: parody – if you make a funny movie people will forgive your lack of funds.

The second option is to plan heavily. Ask for donated materials in lieu of buying them. Shoot when you have the time and the money. Take as long as it needs to make it good. Never rush your film, this is easy when you are poor.



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DAY 4

PODCASTING

PANELISTS

Kent Nichols: Writer/Director: Ask A Ninja

Douglas Sarine: Writer/Director: Ask A Ninja

David Peck: Producer: Ask A Ninja

Tim Street: Director/Producer: French Maid TV

Jack Conway: Writer/Star: Geek-Week

Brian Stevenson: Star: Geek-Week

Valerie Perez: Producer/Star: Tears of the Dragon (A Lara Croft Fan Film)

Sean Rourke: Director: Geek-Week (**Moderator**)

Screening clips from: ASK A NINJA, FRENCH MAID TV, and GEEK-WEEK

THE PODCASTING PHENOMENON

- What is Podcasting?
- Why is it so popular?
- What are the benefits/drawbacks to Podcasting?

PODCASTING TECH

- What do you need to Podcast?
- What is RSS?
- What is an XML script?
- Tips and Tricks for making a Podcast PC/MAC/iPOD friendly?
- How long should a Podcast be?

PROMOTION

- Where do you promote your Podcast?
- How do you get your Podcast noticed?
- How often should you release content?
- What do people look for in a Podcast?

THE FUTURE

- Where is Podcasting headed?



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APPENDIX

Panelists Websites:

3rdfloorprod.com
spacemonkeylabs.com
tearsofthedragon.org
askaninja.com
geek-week.net

Websites we Recommend:

filmmaking.net
adamwilt.com/24p/index.html#TOC - Info on the 24fps Panasonic camera
dependentfilms.net
dependentfilms.net/files.html
dvshop.ca/dvcafe.html
filmmaker.com

Books we Recommend:

Film Directing Shot by Shot: Visualizing from Concept to Screen
by Steven Katz

Film Directing, Cinematic Motion: A Workshop for Staging Scenes
by Steven Katz

Rebel Without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker With \$7,000
Became a Hollywood Player
by Robert Rodriguez

Story: Substance, Structure, Style and The Principles of Screenwriting
by Robert McKee

Contracts for the Film & Television Industry
by Mark Litwak