The “Cinema” in Machinima
Avatar

• As of Jan 20, 2010:
  • Estimated budget: $200 - $500 million
  • Domestic box office gross: $512,852,205
  • Foreign box office gross: $1,172,833,529

• WorldWide: $1,685,685,734

http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=avatar.htm
Avatar

Did you like the movie?

Why or why not?
Why do we watch movies?
But why do we really watch movies? (Hint: There are 3 reasons)

- Story
- Story
- Story!!!

Filmmaking is the 20th Century story art form.
Is interactive gaming the 21st? (NPR, MIT professor)
Key Elements of a Good Film

1. Create a meaningful story
2. Communicate that story effectively using visual language
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What makes a meaningful story?

- A good beginning, a good middle, and a good end, i.e. **structure**
  - Cause and effect
- A **premise/theme** that drives the action
- Believable and rich **characters**
- Increasing **conflict/tension**
- Sense of **completeness**
Story Structure

Beginning, Middle, and End

Typical Hollywood Story Structure

Inciting incident → Rising Action → Crisis → Climax → Dénouement
The Hero's Journey
by Joseph Campbell

The Hero's Journey Model

Act I - Separation
- Call to Adventure
- Refusal of the Call
- Meeting the Mentor
- Crossing the Threshold
- Tests, Allies, and Enemies

Act II - Descent
- Approach the Inner Cave
- The Temptation

Act II - Initiation
- Reward
- The Ultimate Challenge

Act III - Return
- The Hero returns with the Elixir
- Return with the Elixir
- The Hero meets the Hero in the Ordinary World
- The Hero receives the Call to Adventure, a challenge, a quest, or a problem that must be faced
- A Meeting with the Mentor provides encouragement, wisdom, or magical gifts to push the Hero past fear and doubt
- The Hero learns about the Special World through Tests, encountering Allies and Enemies
- The Hero makes the final preparations and Approaches the Immortals Cave
- The Hero endures the Ordeal, the central crisis in which the Hero confronts his greatest fear and tastes death
- The Hero enjoys the Reward of having confronted fear and death
- The Hero crosses the Borderland and resumes to completing the Journey
- The Hero faces the climactic ordeal that purifies, redeems, and transforms the Hero on the Threshold home

ORDINARY WORLD

SPECIAL WORLD
Act Structure

• **Act 1:** introduces characters and sets the scene for ensuing conflict

• **Inciting incident:** catapults character into next act and onto journey

• **Act 2:** builds conflict to a climax

• **Act 3:** resolution of presented conflict

• **Tips:**
  • Start late, end early--Mamet
Story Structure

Beginning, Middle, and End

Typical Hollywood Story Structure

Inciting incident

Rising Action

Crisis

Climax

Dénouement
Short vs. Feature

- **Short** is more metaphor, haiku, or joke; doesn’t allow for as much plot and character development
- **Feature** is many shorts--like paragraphs or chapters that make up a novel--allows for more plot and character development
  - ex.-Situation, problem/conflict, and punch line
Like a paragraph
Has it’s own completeness
“The ordering of unrelated events or ideas or images in favor of an overriding preconception.”

David Mamet (On Directing Film, citing Jung)

**TRANSLATION:** We take events that happen and attach causality to those events in support of an end result or conclusion.
Cause and Effect

Wilber
Cause and Effect
Cause and Effect
Cause and Effect
It is the nature of human perception to connect unrelated images into a story, because we need to make the world make sense.

David Mamet (On Directing Film)
Subject vs. Theme

- **Subject** is what it’s about
  - Ex. Groundhog Day – What is it about?

- **Theme** is what you’re saying about what it’s about
  - Ex. Groundhog Day – “So what”?

- If an idea supports the theme, use it, but if it doesn’t, *murder your darlings*; tangents lead to detours
Character

• Actions and dialogue reveal character; setting and background further define

• Unique voice

• Fights for his/her beliefs; concerned for own well being

• Character is coded—show don’t tell

• Relatable—someone you could know; based on real people
Character Arc

Character presented

Character established by events/actions

Moment of Choice

Change

Result reveals Theme

Theme
Story Structure

Beginning, Middle, and End

Typical Hollywood Story Structure

Inciting incident → Rising Action → Crisis → Climax → Dénouement
Variety: As a reminder
Conflict/Tension

- Every **protagonist** (good guy) needs an **antagonist** (bad guy); bad guy can be one’s self

- About finding ways to give your characters a **hard time**
  - Put your characters up a tree, throw rocks at them, and get them back down

- **Escalate** the action
  - Start with a knife, move on to a shotgun, and if a shotgun doesn’t do it, launch a nuclear bomb

- Character should rise or fall; **change**
Key Elements of a Good Film

1. Create a meaningful story

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Communicating Story

1. Make sense for the Character
2. Make sense for the Audience
Accessing the Film
Meaningful Cinematic Story

visually
Example & Practice

Birds of a Feather
Birds of a Feather

Inciting incident

Rising Action

Crisis  Climax

Dénouement
Birds of a Feather

Inciting incident

Rising Action
Scenario: Gabriel and Shelly are both taking the same computer programming class. The teacher announces that whoever finishes the final programming assignment first will get a guaranteed A in the class. They both want to win and recognize in each other their main competition.
The Story

Gabriel loves nature and wild life and finds out one day that Shelly, the competition, also loves nature and wild life. He instantly falls in love.
However, because Shelly is the competition, Gabriel won’t admit his love or act on it, even as he can’t deny his feelings.

Too bad he always runs into Shelly when least expected.
Gabriel attempts to ignore his feelings in hopes that they will fade away. He buries himself in his work. But his feelings for Shelly only increase in intensity. Gabriel cannot go on in this way forever. He is reaching a point of crisis.
Moment of Choice

What should Gabriel do? How must he change?
Will he go for the girl?
Can he win the class competition and still get the girl?
Conclusion

How will events conclude for our love-torn protagonist? Are you a romantic or a realist?
Ideas

• Start with what *interests you*, if it interests you, it probably interests others too

• Notice what catches *other people’s* attention--makes them laugh, cry, do a double-take

• Dreams, journals, memories

• *News, literature, theater, movies, and games*--*recycle a good idea, adapt it*
Put it Down on Paper

• Act of writing produces more ideas
• **Brainstorm**; green-light yourself
• **Storyboard** with pictures for camera angles
• Make **notes** on dialogue and music
• **Sketch** scene flow
• Let it be messy, clean up later
Script format

- [www.celtx.com](http://www.celtx.com) for FREE screenwriting software
- iWork Pages template
- Macros in Word

***Formatting in a nutshell***

There are three parts of a screenplay: **headings**, **narrative description**, and **dialogue**.

1. **Headings** (slug lines)
   - There are three types of headings:
     - A. Master scene headings, which consists of three main parts:
       - 1. Camera location (EXT or INT)
       - 2. Scene location
       - 3. Time (DAY or NIGHT)
     - B. Secondary scene headings
     - C. Special headings for flashbacks, dreams, montages, series of shots, and

2. **Narrative description**
   - The word “narrative” loosely means *story*, and it consists of three elements:
     - A. Action
     - B. Setting and character (visual images)
     - C. Sounds

3. **Dialogue**
   - The dialogue block consists of three parts:
     - A. The *character cue*, or name of the person speaking, which always in CAPS.
     - B. The *parenthetical* or *actor’s direction* or *wryly*. This is optional.
     - C. The *speech*. 
How do you know when you’re done?

![Graph showing the relationship between time required to write and develop and quality of the script. The graph shows an increase in quality with time, reaching a peak before leveling off.](image-url)
Parting Words

• **Rule #1**: Keep it interesting

• **Litmus Test**: Is it something you would want to watch?

• **Passion**: Is it an idea you’re willing to log hours and hours on?

• **KISS Principle**: Keep It Simple Stupid