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Abstract

Jacks or Better is based on a true story of a young man who is a gambling addict. He is trying to overcome his gambling addiction, by doing so he isolates himself through moving away. Throughout the short film he triggers off flashbacks of his gambling problems, showing where it started.

In this report I will look at the research involved with the film-making process. I aim to cover every process in film making including research/development, Pre-production, Production and Post-production. Throughout the report I will show how the research I conducted links with my own project and film.

Introduction

“In the UK, it is estimated that around 350,000 people are suffering from a gambling addiction” (BBC, 2012)

Gambling has had a big effect on a close friend of mine. I clearly remember the change in character during his gambling problem and the extent he went to try and get rid of his addiction. For my project I'm making a short narrative film based around my friend and his addiction, the title of my film is Jacks or Better. This report will look at the research into film-making and how it will help me through the process of making my film. Throughout the report I will explore pre-planning techniques and show how I will apply them into my own project. Also researching the production and post-production processes to help me shoot and edit my own footage for my film. The report is broken down into four sections where I will research these areas and relate them to my own project:

- Research/ Development
- Pre-Production
- Production
- Post-Production

1: Research/ Development

For my project I spent a lot of time on research before starting the scripting. I wanted to build up knowledge of film-making and gambling. I used a blog to help me with my research, (VINCENT DOHERTY DES 509, 2012) every video or website that I came across that I found useful I would post up on my blog. First of all I sat down with my friend whom I'm basing the film on, I asked all sorts of questions about his addiction so I could get a good base for my film. I wrote out a rough storyline then resorted to the library; I was hungry for information on film-making. The first book I came across was Digital Film-making by Mike Figgis (2007). In this book Figgis (2007) gives advice and a step by step guide to digital film-making. Although reading through this book was giving me some valuable advice I wanted advice face to face from a working director so I can ask questions of my own first hand. After emailing many

directors in Northern Ireland, Marty Stalker (Scattered images, 2012) a director situated in Belfast who runs his own independent film production company called Scattered Images emailed me back inviting me up for advice and a look at his studio (see fig.1). Before I travelled up to him I prepared questions that I would put to Marty; advice on things that could go wrong? What to do on the day of the shoot? How I can be well prepared?. I interviewing him the following day and he answered all my questions. (See appendix 1) He also gave me more advice on how to start scripting and storyboarding. He kept stressing the importance of audio which I didn't really think about before then. I showed him the camera I would be using and he told me "a good camera is essential but what you put in front of it is more important". Then looking at his website he states "work with what you have, a better camera isn't going to get you the performances on screen, build everything around the quality that's in front of the lens" (Scattered Images, 2012).



Fig 1: Marty Stalkers Editing studio, Scattered Images

2: Pre-Production

"The discipline of pre-planning is underestimated to almost tragic proportions" Figgis (2007, pg 59) With that being said I wanted to pre-plan my film in great detail, I wanted to know exactly what shots I needed on the day of the shoot. Pre-production

consists of all the planning that takes place before the shoot begins says Curtis (2005,pg21); including writing a script, choosing a location, securing talent and crew, equipment and coming up with a shot plan.

When I first started to write my script I found myself staring at a blank page for hours. D.Katz (1991) goes on to talk about visualization whilst writing the script, about how many filmmakers write to music. That this helps them visualize the mood of a scene. To get the ideas flowing and into the mood of writing I tried listening to music when writing. I listened to some of Hans Zimmer's film score music on YouTube (Hans Zimmer Greatest hits, YouTube, 2012) although this music is quite dramatic it did get me into the zone of writing and helped me visualize scenes for my film.

In my script I wanted the story to tell itself, I didn't want any camera angles in my script as this complicates the reading of it. I wanted whoever the reader was to imagine each scene unfold in their mind. (Kris Cramer, 2009) feels that you should "skip the camera directions in the script and find better ways to convey the same imagery". After writing up and scraping many different drafts I finally came up with a rough draft that I was happy with. To help format the draft I went online where (How to format flashbacks in a screenplay, 2012) was able to give me guidelines on how to format my script correctly. I wanted to show flashbacks in my script and this website was able to guide me on how to do it. I got the idea of flashbacks for my film whilst watching the film 'The Butterfly Effect'. Eric Bress the director of the (The Butterfly Effect, 2004) uses a nice and effective transition to show when the flashbacks occur to travel back to a certain and important moment in the characters past. This could influence my flashbacks when I come to it in the edit/post-production.

Another film that influenced my script was David Fincher's 'Fight Club' (Fight Club, 1999), one of my personal favourites. Through-out the film there is a voice-over, in my film I want to use a voiceover. Like in (Fight Club, 1999) and (Rounder's, 1998) the main character is constantly voicing over the film, almost talking to the audience explaining the scenes. I want my voice-over to be a narration of what has happened to my character in the past and present, leading to and from the flashbacks. Therefore I wanted to know how to format voice-overs in my script so I researched Fight Clubs script (Fight Club Script IMSDb, 2012) where it showed how to write differently from when the character is actually talking in the film to talking on the

voiceover. Eventually after formatting it correctly I came up with the final draft for my script. (See appendix 2). It includes voice-overs of my main character, flashbacks and the locations of the action. (See Fig 2)

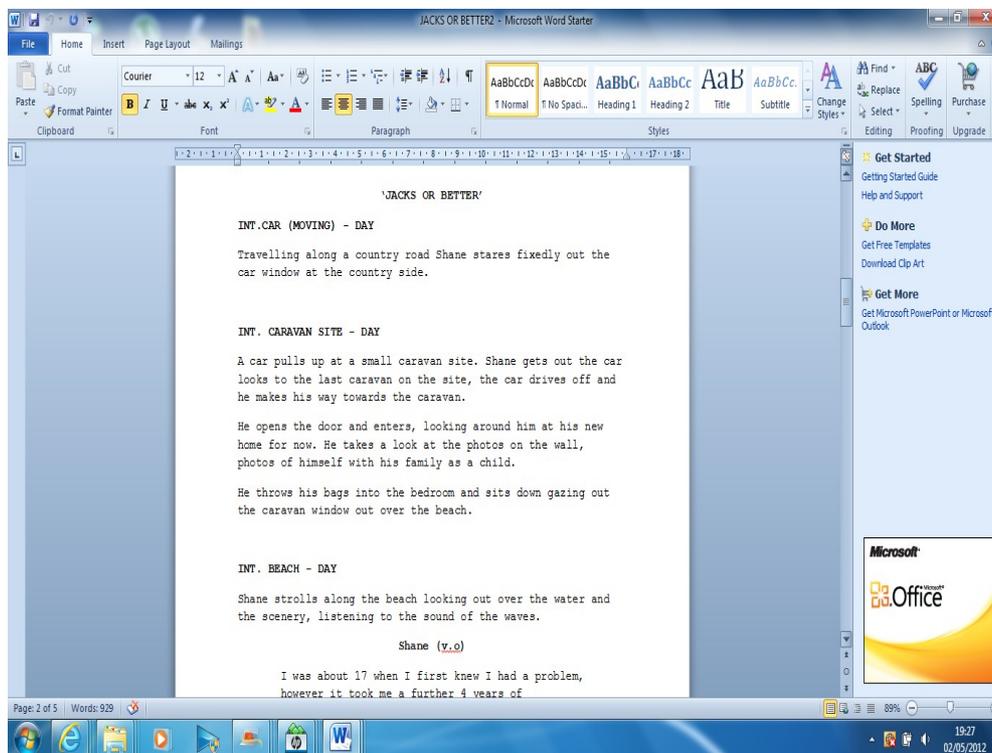


Fig 2: Script draft screenshot, Jacks or Better

Location scouting was the next step in the pre-production process; I needed two locations to begin with; a place to hold the gambling scene and a place of isolation, where my character has escaped to get away from gambling. Figgis (2007) claims that changing the locations in your film will make the story more interesting and stimulate the audience. I then took my car and camera and visited many locations that I felt was suitable for my film. I came across a beach in Stragill, Donegal which I thought was perfect for my isolation scene. It wasn't a busy beach and had a caravan site which was necessary for my film. After chatting to the landlord of the site he was willing to let me use one of the caravans on the day of the shoot to my

relief. I then took photos of where I plan to place the camera for certain shots, I found myself walking through the actions of the scenes on the location. I then realised I may have to improvise or change around some of the script due to the layout of the beach. D.Katz (1991, pg 104) goes on to say that the script may have to be changed or altered after you find your location because the imaginary settings of the script may be impractical at an actual location. This in my case was true as I had to alter some of my script.



Fig 3: Location scouting

With the location in place I decided to Google map the location of the beach. I did this to create overhead diagrams that I could use to plan out my scenes, I printed the maps out and sketched over them numbering where my shots would be (see appendix 3). Begleitier (2001, pg 68) refers to these overhead diagrams as plot plans or schematics, which are used to help plan out a sequence of shots. These diagrams could also be used to show the angle of the camera and if there is any movement with the camera, showing the starting and ending point.

When it came to storyboarding I practiced by sketching out scenes from original films. I took a poker scene from the film Rounder's (Rounders, 1998), I found the scene interesting so started to sketch it out in storyboard form (see appendix 4). Begleitier (2001) shows how some artists would use still photos for their storyboards, therefore I went and I printed out the pictures I had taken on location and started to sketch over them. I enjoyed this technique as I was getting a feel for the shot (see appendix 5). I wasn't putting much detail into the sketching as I wanted to show where the actor would be on the certain shot, and with the photo being the background it gave a nice depth to the image. With help from the overhead diagrams (see appendix 3) I was able to determine the angle of the photograph to use for my storyboards and this would later help me get my shots.



Fig 4: Storyboards

“Something I remembered reading in an interview with the great billy wilder, ‘use an actor, always use an actor, if you have a scene in a taxi cab get an actor to play the driver, even if you don’t see the driver, get an actor” (Curtis, 2005, pg 174)

My actor for the film was going to be very important; I wanted someone who resembled in a way my friend who the film is based on. I had first planned to hold auditions with drama students, however at a family get together I came across my cousin who studies drama. We starting talking and I thought he could be a possibility for the part, I arranged to meet him and I gave him the script. It was awkward at start as I didn’t know what to say, funny enough Curtis (2005, pg 174) had the same situation, he states “I really didn’t know what to do. At first I just sat back watching and listening as the actors read through the script”. Eventually after a rundown of the script the chemistry started to flow, I found myself acting out scenes from my script to communicate to him what kind of performance I was looking for. After getting my cousin to act out a few scenes with confidence I knew then he was my actor.

3: Production

With the pre-production in full swing, it was time to prepare for the production process, or the shoot. In the weeks leading up to the shoot I had to make sure everything was prepared. The camera that I would be using was my own DSLR camera, a Canon 1100d which records in High Definition. I was offered the use of a slightly better quality camera at the time but I choose not to, I knew my camera inside out so if something went wrong or I needed to change a setting I would know exactly what to do then and there with my own camera. Figgis (2007) states “The first thing a soldier is taught is how to dismantle his gun and put it back together- make sure it’s clean, make sure its functions- if something goes wrong with it, you want to know how to fix it or adapt it. That’s what I always say it’s important to own you camera, because in that way you have a different relationship to it.” I was uncertain on what settings to choose for my camera at certain scenes so I came across a website (Hurlbut Visuals, 2012) which shows advice and tips to what settings you should put or change your camera to in different scenes e.g. setting different exposures or white balance. I jotted these settings down on my notebook to be prepared in case I had to quickly apply the changes during the shoot.

When interviewing Marty Stalker (see appendix 1) I asked him for advice on the day of the shoot. He told me to be very well planned and equipped, to make sure to get all your shots but also to try having fun on the day of the shoot; it lightens the mood for the actors and yourself. Audio equipment was also necessary, according to (LightsFilm School, 2012) and Figgis (2007) audio is just as important as the video itself. I went out and bought a portable microphone which the actor could have along with him at all times during the shoot, and got access to a boom microphone (see fig 5). Figgis (2007) gives advice on how to go about recording the sound, to bring along a co-worker or assistant to help hold the boom and to always make sure they’re pointing the microphone towards the action.

When shooting a scene, although I didn’t have a clapper board so I would clap my hands in front of the camera and shout for example scene 1. This was important because I was recording the audio separate on the shoot, and when post-production comes; editing these scenes it is easier to sync up the audio to the video because you have a syncing point.



Fig 5: Shooting in progress, boom microphone

The day of the shoot was upon me, luckily enough the weather was good ;sunny and dry. Ideal conditions for the shoot that I had planned. Before I left to the location of the shoot I took advice from Figgis (2007, pg61) where I drew up a list of shots in my notebook that I had to take. I also wrote up on the back of the notebook a few things that could go wrong on the day and how I could go about fixing them. Borrowed a spare memory card and battery that would fit my camera, so I was all set to go. The first shoot would be the beach scene, the reason for the beach scene was to show my character getting away or isolating himself from everyone to try get over his addiction to gambling. Present at the shoot would be myself, the actor, my friend who will hold the boom mic and I brought along another friend just for extra help setting up. The extra friend came in handy as he was able to take pictures of the shoot in progress with his mobile phone. (see appendix 6). When I was on location with my camera and tripod, I started to improvise on shots. Take different shots were I didn't plan to, in between scenes I started to video the waves crashing in on rocks and birds sitting on trees. All this I could look at when I get back and upload to my laptop.



Fig 6: Beach Shoot

As I prepared for my 2nd day of shooting I met up with the actor again to brief him of what's going to happen, I told him to read through the script. I told him what to wear, or to wear something similar if he can to what I told him. Before the shoot the next day, I actually applied some make-up to my actor, to make him look more run down and depressed. On this shoot I tried to cover most aspects of the gambling addiction I'm trying to show in my film. First of all I had my actor in a dark room playing an online poker game 'Jacks or Better' hence the title of my film. This game was the catalyst to his addiction so I wanted it to be a scene during the day but still look dark in a way. Curtis (2005) would use natural lighting to his advantage when shooting a film or documentary, so I took the computer and chair and placed it near the window

of the room but kept the lights off in the room to keep the dark effect. This lighting arrangement worked well so I shot the scene. (see Fig 7) When filming the indoor scenes I found it easier to record the sound because I was in a controlled environment, when outside shooting I had to deal with the ambience of wind and people. After going through all my shots and scenes I was happy with the footage I gathered and called a wrap on the filming. I wouldn't have been able to gather such good shots if it weren't for my pre-planning.



Fig 7: Screen grab from my film, showing how I used the natural light from the window.

4: Post-Production

First of all, I needed a quiet location or room where I could sit and no one would distract me to begin the editing. Figgis (2007, pg 109) suggests that a disciplined environment when editing is crucial. With all my footage gathered and audio ready to be imported, not having a great experience of editing film I thought I had a daunting task ahead of me. But with most of the clips shot in sequence it wasn't too bad to begin with. This is called 'logging' which means labelling your clips, Figgis(2007, pg 112) stresses that "logging your clips is one of the most important things in post-

production". The software that I was using for the edit was Adobe Premiere CS5 Pro. When interviewing Director Marty Stalker (see appendix 1) he showed me his editing suite where he used Premiere also, he found it was the best editing software he used to work with DSLR camera footage which I shot my film on.

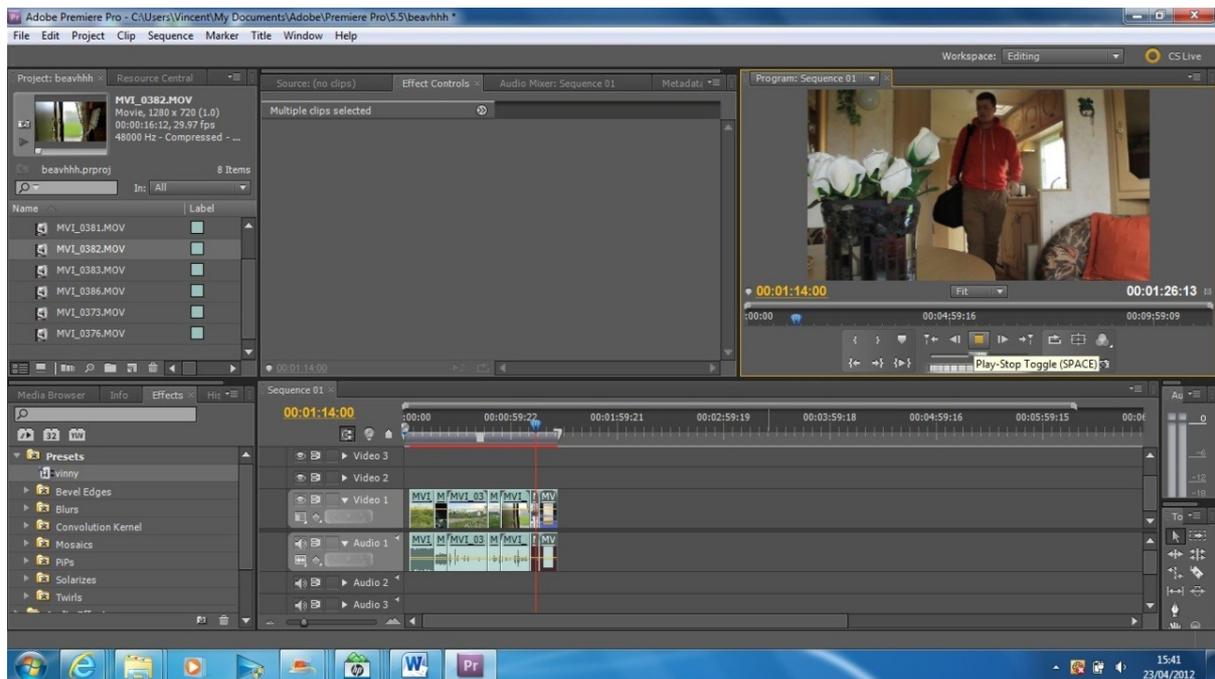


Fig 8: Screenshot of Adobe Premiere CS5 Pro: starting the edit of my film

When edited on Premiere it was straight forward to import the footage into the software and put into a sequence. When editing clips I found myself cutting a lot of footage from a clip, either because I filmed the scene for too long or else there was no need for the clip to run on after the character had left the frame. I broke my script down along with the footage so I could create separate sequences then bring them into one main edit, which made it a lot more simple to go back and change effects or transitions on certain sequences. Curtis (2005, pg 185) claims the main challenge of the edit is to keep the piece moving. This I found quite difficult because some of the clips that I had shot were not as how I visualised them.

After I got a rough edit of sequences put together I started to edit the transitions of the clips, in some I used a cross fade to let a nice scene cross over to another. In the flashback scenes I used a fade to white transition and sped the time up, which gave

a flash type effect which I found really interesting. I spent most of the day going through different transitions as Premiere has a lot to offer.

I wanted my film to have the sharp 'film look' or the 'cinematic look', to do so I would have had to apply a colour-corrector. So after messing around with a three way colour corrector I was finally happy with the results with the colours looking richer and vibrant, therefore I saved that effect as a pre-set in premiere and applied it to all my clips. (See Fig 9)

Before

After



Fig 9: Colour Correction in Premiere; Before and After

After all the editing of the footage I turned my attention to the audio. As previously stressed by Figgis (2007) and Curtis (2005) sound is very important. When interviewing director Marty Stalker (see appendix 1) he also stated how important sound is, as important as the film itself. He told me to go and watch a scary film and mute the sound, and guaranteed I wouldn't find the film as scary. True enough he

was correct although some scenes are still scary in a way, you don't get the fright or jump with no sound.

For some sound effects for my film I went to my local bookmakers and stood in the middle of the place with a portable microphone, no one knew what I was doing or even knew I was recording which was to my advantage as I wanted the sound of a bookmakers; the sound of dogs and horses racing in the background, jingles of poker machines and the hustle and bustle of the people in there, I thought I could use this audio at some point in my film. To clean up any unwanted noise or ambience in the background of my audio I took the clips into Adobe Audition which worked along with Premiere, therefore I could easily import and export the files to each bit of software. This software got rid of any unwanted noise in or as Figgis (2007) calls it "white noise".

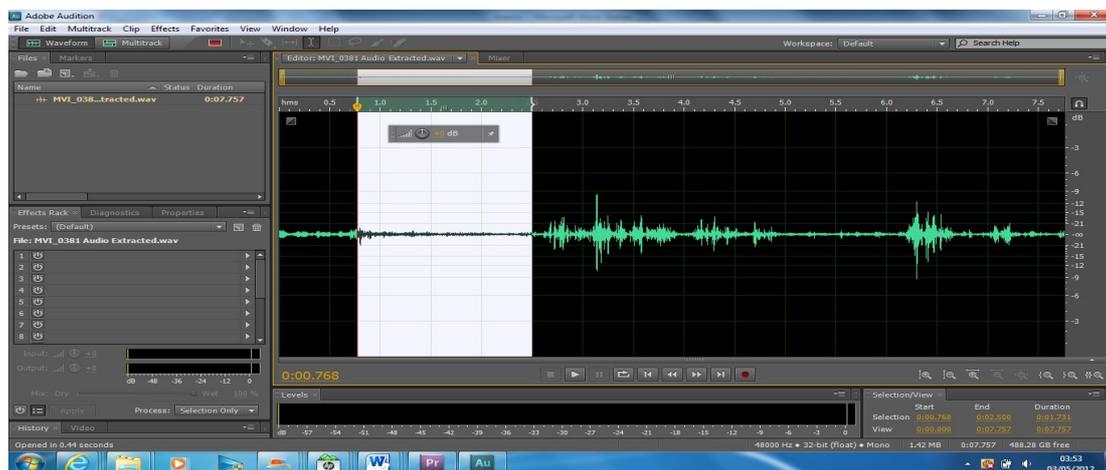


Fig 10: Adobe Audition: cleaning up audio

When it came to music for my film I had in mind what type of track or melody I wanted for my film. For the gambling scenes I wanted high tempo, heart like pumping music, then for the beach scene I wanted a relaxing, country/folk type music. Figgis (2007) states that music "functions as a psychological backbone for film". Music is also very important as it sets a tone for a scene. In (Rounder's, 1998) for most of the film there is music playing in the background but some people will not notice it. Originally I planned to collaborate with a music student or composer and compose my own music for the film to create a unique sound. However it didn't work out with me having very little knowledge in the music and scoring industry I didn't

know exactly what to ask off the composer or musician. With time at the essence I had to act fast so I went online to search for readymade music that could possibly fit my film. But Figgis (2007) states that you ask yourself “Does this piece of music happen to exactly fit a scene that I've already cut? Or am I cutting or extending this scene to make it fit to a piece of pop music”. The advice I took from Figgis' statement was that I want the music to fit my film, not my film to fit the music. I came across the website (Audio Network, 2012) which sold music that can be used on films. After searching through hundreds of tracks I finally came across two tracks that I felt would fit into my footage. I synced these tracks with the footage and audio using Premiere. The danger of introducing audio to a film is that it's very difficult to keep your ears fresh argues Figgis (2007), that you have seen the film so many times it doesn't have the emotional impact that you expected it to have and the dangers of this is that directors will add too much music. What I done with my film to test the music was that I added the music, then took it off, then listened to it without it, then slowly started bringing the music back in. This advice I took from Figgis (2007, pg142) who worked within a musical background before he started film-making, therefore has a wide knowledge on music and scoring music to a film.

With the film almost complete I wanted to test the film, I invited a few friends over to watch it. After I asked them honestly what they thought, with friends you would expect them to tell you that it was fantastic or well done, however with some of my friends being from a design background some were quite critical of some parts of the film. Figgis (2007, pg 143) states that “you have to be prepared to listen to their honest reactions”. Which I was, the film is currently in the last stages of post-production.

Conclusion

As you can see the film making process isn't as straight forward as first thought. The findings from my research have proved that a lot of pre-planning is involved in film-making. The research that I conducted in this written report has proved successful as I was able to take the information and use it to help me create my own film. For the Pre-production process I looked at how scripts and storyboards were created and formatted, using the information I explored I was able to come up with an interesting script and well planned storyboards. When the day of the shoot came I was well

prepared, also with help from director Marty Stalker I was able to take on board his advice and use it to the best of my ability to achieve the shots and scenes needed. My research into the post-production process of film-making became very important at the time of the edit. With the software skills I have and advice I researched into the editing of audio and music I was able to sync them with the video to produce my short film.

With these methods of research I was able to achieve and create a short narrative film based on my friend of how he battled a gambling addiction. I know Filmmaking is a never ending learning curve however after the research I conducted in this report I will go into my next project with more knowledge and understanding of the whole film-making process.

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