

***The Film is the Story:
Story-Extension in Digital Marketing of Independent Films***

Nico Meissner, Multimedia University, Malaysia

The European Conference on Film & Documentary 2014
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This article tells the story of the making of Spanish independent feature film *The Cosmonaut*. It highlights that this story was shared with the film's audience while the film was made. Therefore, so the argument, the story of *The Cosmonaut* was extended and served as the basis for the film's audience building.

The concept of story-extension acknowledges the multimedia, interactive and archiving aspects of the Internet. Independent films no longer have to be standalone products. They can be one, though often central, part of an extended filmmaking story. Related events or products allow a story to transcend the film's temporal boundaries and even the limitations of its medium.

The paper concludes that story-extension (a) helps to create communities and audiences, who (b) individually experience the making of a film and (c) view a film merely as an end product while 'watching' takes place over an extended period of time. Such ongoing storytelling allows continuous audience growth that helps the filmmaker to self-distribute.

Keywords: *The Cosmonaut*, Independent Filmmaking, Story Extension, Audience Building

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Independent films have always found themselves at the margins, most even completely outside of popular film culture. Traditionally, only a small number of filmmaking centers controlled film production, distribution and exhibition. Expensive production and exhibition equipment limited filmmaking to a select few.

Digital media and the Internet are often celebrated for popularizing independent filmmaking. Making and sharing films has become almost as normal as reading and writing. This has created what some have termed 'truly' independent filmmaking, with individual filmmakers not only making films but also independently distributing them to mass audiences via the Internet. Such mass publishing, however, has led to an abundant amount of available small-scale culture on the Internet (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Findability becomes a critical problem that threatens the promises of popular independent films.

This article uses the case study of Spanish feature-length independent film *The Cosmonaut* in an attempt to make the argument that applying storytelling principles to the communication around a film and its making in today's digital age may allow formerly niche independent films to access and nurture mass audiences - therefore crossing into popular culture.

The Story of The Cosmonaut

The Cosmonaut is the brainchild of Nicolas Alcalá, Carla Rodríguez and Bruno Teixidor of Riot Cinema Collective in Spain. The three met at university when they studied marketing. After graduating, they worked together in advertising, doing small video projects. They had no filmmaking experience prior to making *The Cosmonaut*.

In 2008 Nicolas and Bruno discussed conspiracy theories of lost cosmonauts. These are popular fictions about the Soviets only reporting successful space flights like the one of Gagarin, but not the unsuccessful ones. These unreported unsuccessful space flights, so the conspiracy theories, would leave some Soviet cosmonauts alive but lost in space. In the same year, Alcalá read the book *Poetics for Cosmonauts* by Henry Pierrot. Inspired by both events, he started to work on a script for a short film about a lost cosmonaut. A short while later, he ultimately decided to make it into his first feature length movie: *The Cosmonaut*.

What do you need to make a film? You need money. And Riot Cinema Collective got almost obsessed with the theoretical opportunities the Internet offers independent content creators. Their blog starts to discuss the experiences of Radiohead and John Freese, the drummer of Nine Inch Nails, who gave their music albums away for free online and asked people for donations. They celebrated this new freedom as a revolution that empowers independent producers and ends the reign of big media conglomerates. *The Cosmonaut* was meant to follow these and similar examples and prove that films can be successfully financed and distributed in today's digital age without the help of established media companies.

Enthused by those opportunities, the team devised a document they called *The Plan*, laying out a financing and distribution approach for *The Cosmonaut* that centered

around a day-and-date release, crowdfunding and making the film and all its source materials freely available to the public. When the first Plan was published online, The Cosmonaut's budget was 450.000 Euros. This quickly grew to 860.000 Euros. The goal was to use crowdfunding, sponsorship, investors and deferred payments to raise the money. The Cosmonaut was supposed to be different from traditional film productions. The Internet was not seen as the enemy but as an ally:

Until now it was the exhibitor or distributor who decided when and how you had access to the film. The Internet has changed that paradigm and it is now the users who decide how to enjoy the contents. But above all, they decide when. With this in mind we planned on designing a distribution system adapted to this new reality. A system that had the spectator and his needs in mind above all else (N. Alcalá, personal communication, 2010).

Of the total budget of 860.000

AMOUNT NEEDED FOR	ACHIEVED	TO BE ACHIEVED
Salaries	82.016,89 €	220.365,46 €
Preproduction	46.491,25 €	18.810,51 €
Filming	257.802,85 €	0 €
Postproduction	69.654,79 €	110.330,00 €
Distribution	25.828,25 €	28.700,00 €
TOTAL	481.794,03 €	378.205,97 €

Achieved so far

PROVENANCE	AMOUNT
Merchandising	138.061,52 € ¹
Private investors	260.880,38 €
Awards and others	22.906,57 €
ICAA grant for the use of new technologies in Transmedia	99.595,00 €
Team members who have swapped their salary for an investment percentage	123.640,27 € ¹

Total amount obtained via crowdfunding: **398.941,90 €**

Figure 1: The Cosmonaut's budget (Riot Cinema Collective, 2012a).

One of the central elements of Riot Cinema's marketing and financing strategy for The Cosmonaut were individual producers and investors. Investors paid a minimum of 1,000 Euros for a portion of the final film's profits. For as little as 2 Euros, everyone could become a producer of the film. Producers would receive a batch, online access to behind the scenes information and a credit in the final film. To recruit producers, Riot Cinema organized Campus Parties, concerts with indie bands and other space-themed promotional events such as Yuri's Nights.

On 28 July 2009, The Cosmonaut got its first 'producer' at a Campus Party in Madrid - Rodrigo Pineda paid 13 Euros. Three days later, the number of producers grew to 100. After another two months, The Cosmonaut welcomed its 1000th producers. On 25 April 2011, the 3000th producers joined the project. In the end, The Cosmonaut had over 4,500 producers.

With marketing and pre-production successfully underway, the first teaser trailer went online in January 2010. The soundtrack for the trailer was provided by Edward Artemyev, who also created the soundtrack for Tarkovsky's Solaris. Following their

approach of openness and inclusiveness, Riot Cinema asked their fans to remix the teaser trailer. The team received over 100 remixes. This number as well as the fact that Edward Artemyev could be convinced to support a project of novice filmmakers, indicate how successful the marketing campaign for *The Cosmonaut* was at this point and how Riot Cinema was able to convince other people about their dreams and enthruse them for the project.

Riot Cinema continued to make use of the opportunities digital media provides independent content creators. They crowdsourced tasks like location scouting, prop acquisition, extras casting as well as identifying support services and companies through the platform *Wreckamovie*. *Wreckamovie* was developed by the people behind fan film project *Star Wreck: In the Pirkinning*. The platform allows fans to participate in the production of a film, enabling collaborative filmmaking.

On the financing side, Riot Cinema celebrated a huge success in the summer of 2010. After being turned down a year earlier, Riot Cinema received a grant of almost 100,000 Euros from The National Film Board of Spain (ICAA) in August 2010 for the transmedia portion of *The Cosmonaut*. In addition, in May 2011, Riot Cinema published on their blog that they came to an agreement with the Russian-Latvian co-producer *Phenomena Films*, supporting them with money and production services.

Three years after the idea for *The Cosmonaut* was born, Riot Cinema Collective concluded its pre-production. In May 2011, the team went to Latvia to shoot its film. Everything was ready: the production budget was raised, the actors were casted and present, all crew and extras were in Latvia, the team got space suits, props and all the necessary equipment. Everything was set for principle shooting to start on 4 June 2011. But, on 26 May 2011, three weeks after the co-production agreement was announced and one week before the scheduled start of principle shooting, Riot Cinema announced that the co-producer pulled out, leaving a 40,000 Euro financing gap. The crowdfunding campaign *Save The Cosmonaut* was born. Riot Cinema Collective turned to its supporters - by now a big group of people who either helped to fund the film or just followed it out of interest. Only five days later, on 31 May 2011, the campaign had raised 60,000 Euros. After another ten days, the *Save The Cosmonaut* campaign had raised 130,000 Euros - 300% of the amount needed; in only two weeks.

Due to the successful campaign, principle shooting could start as scheduled on 4 June 2011. Again the team used the Internet to involve their fans. It live broadcast a number of shooting days through *Livestream.com*. Seven weeks later, on 22 July 2011, the end of principle photography was announced.

What followed were 20 months of post-production and increased marketing activities. The first official trailer was published in November 2011. On 29 May 2012, Riot Cinema announced: "We have finished the editing!" (Riot Cinema Collective, 2012b). A number of magazine articles, festival announcements, conference presentations, interviews and promotional parties were celebrated on the project's blog and through social media.

The preparation for the world premiere was underway. The team planned a live screening with actors, acting out certain parts of the narrative, and a big party in

Madrid. One day later, the same event was to be held in Barcelona. Canal+ bought the television rights and showed the film in a parallel premiere on its day-and-date release. Four years in the making, the film culminated in this day-and-date release. The crew had achieved what it set out to achieve.

On 14 May 2013, five year after the idea for *The Cosmonaut* was born, the film had its world premiere in Madrid in front of 1,000 people. One day later, another 1,000 fans saw the Barcelona premiere. During the week that followed, the film could be seen all over Spain, in London, Moscow, France, Canada, Kiev, Los Angeles, Ecuador. Three different VOD platforms showed *The Cosmonaut* (Filmin, Yomvi, Nubeox), in addition to the film's website.

But *The Cosmonaut's* story did not end here. The film had to recoup its costs. Most crew deferred their payments. Riot Cinema had planned for donations, VOD income, sales of DVDs, cinema screenings and international sales to gain the income they needed to not only pay everyone but also make a healthy profit and proof their vision of a new business model for independent films in the digital age.

But this was not about to happen. The film reviews were almost devastating. *The Cosmonaut* received an average rating of 4.2 over 10 on IMDb (n.d.) - a disaster for a film that is the child of the Internet and the crowd. Its crowd now abandoned it and rated it poorly. Viewing figures and, subsequently, income were disappointingly low.

On 6 July 2013, Riot Cinema Collective turned to their fans, somewhat apologizing for disappointing their artistic expectations. But they still celebrated their achievement - possibly rightly so. They had built a huge audience online, raised almost half a million Euros in funding, made a feature film that did not disappoint on a technical level - but failed to tell a story that the masses appreciated. Somewhat disappointed, the team went on in their attempt to sell the film, set up screenings, getting it into festivals, finding distribution partners, and so forth - to little success.

Overall, Riot Cinema Collective had created not only a feature film, but also 34 short films (for their K-Pass), a Facebook Fiction, one book, lots of behind the scenes videos, plenty of parties and marketing events. In the end, *The Cosmonaut* had 80 theatrical and semi-theatrical screenings in 14 countries during its premiere week (most of them requested by fans). 8,000 people have seen it in cinemas. 10,000 people watched it on Canal+. The film collected almost 27,000 VOD views (through Amazon, iTunes and smaller Spanish VOD platforms), amounting to VOD revenue of 1,800 Euros (the same amount the aggregator charged to put the film on VOD platforms). 17,580 people watched the film on its website. Of these, 2.5% decided to pay for it an average of 3.55 Euros. *The Cosmonaut* had 47,000 official P2P downloads and 38,000 views for its most popular, illegally uploaded, YouTube version. 505 DVD-books and 81 USBs of the film have been sold. The transmedia episodes garnered 80,000 views. Despite being represented by Imagina International Sales, one of the biggest sales agents in Spain, the film did not get any international sales. It was officially selected for 28 film festivals.¹

¹ All numbers taken from a blog entry on 18 May 2014 (Riot Cinema Collective, 2014).

The story of *The Cosmonaut* had one final episode. In early 2014, Riot Cinema Collective received a letter from The National Film Board of Spain (ICAA), the agency that gave them a grant of almost 100,000 Euros. In the letter, the ICAA asked back 73,000 of the 99,500 Euros grant money. The agency argued that their funding rules state that a producer has to cover 30% of a project's costs herself. Riot Cinema had stated that the deferred payments for the creators of the transmedia material would account for these 30%. This was acceptable when the funding agency made the decision to award the project. But since the payments were never made, the ICAA did no longer accept this argument and asked the money back.

As of this writing, Riot Cinema Collective is in a legal battle with the ICAA. They used their last money to pay the lawyers. The company is bankrupt and currently being dissolved. Their only asset, *The Cosmonaut*, is still with them - and therefore the crowd who had funded it. But should they lose the lawsuit, they will lose their film and therefore everything they have worked for during the past five years.

The Cosmonaut & Story Elements and Structure

The story of *The Cosmonaut* is one of ambition, success and failure. More importantly, it is, in fact, a story. The making of *The Cosmonaut* has traditional story elements and follows established storytelling structures.

The story of *The Cosmonaut* features a hero, Riot Cinema Collective, with the desire to make a feature length film and to revolutionize independent filmmaking. Like most heroes, Riot Cinema Collective also has a weakness the team is unaware of: the need for modesty. Nobody on the team had any prior filmmaking experience before making *The Cosmonaut*. Yet, they attempted to revolutionize independent filmmaking – a goal that was probably too big for any hero in a similar situation. The hero's opponent in the story of *The Cosmonaut* is the traditional film industry. The hero creates a plan (Riot Cinema Collective even calls it 'The Plan') of how to get her desire. Once set on its path, Riot Cinema Collective is confronted with plenty of obstacles concerning funding, marketing and distribution of the film. The premiere of *The Cosmonaut* solves the main dramatic tension. The current lawsuit against the ICAA is the hero's final battle against the opponent. The story ends with a heartbreaking self-revelation that, despite the film being made, Riot Cinema Collective failed in the attempt to make back its financial investments. The story ends in a new equilibrium with a hero that has learned new things about the world and herself and therefore ultimately changed.

This film is witness to one of the hardest things we have done in our lives. Shooting "The Cosmonaut" became a point of no return. Trapped. We couldn't come back. We couldn't not shoot. Had we done so, our careers would have ended. We would have let everyone down, our prestige down the drain. Our first and last movie... and it was almost so. (Blurb about the behind-the-scenes documentary 'Fighting of'; Riot Cinema Collective, 2012a).

According to John Truby (2008), desire, weakness, opponent, plan, battle, self-revelation and new equilibrium are the seven key elements to any story. All of them can be located in the story of the making of *The Cosmonaut*.

The making of *The Cosmonaut* does not only contain the key elements of a story but also follows an established story structure. The 8-sequence structure is an extension of the traditional 3-act structure in storytelling. It was proposed by Paul Gulino (2004) and builds on the teachings of Frank Daniel.

Following the model of the 8-sequence structure, any story starts with an undisturbed status quo that is disturbed by the 'point of attack' (sequence one). For *The Cosmonaut*, this inciting incident is the finding of Poetics for *Cosmonaut* and the inspiration it provided. The story was set on its way.

Sequence two elaborates the main dramatic tension of a story and a commitment by the protagonist to push for the set goal. In *The Cosmonaut*, it is the decision to make a feature film and with it the dramatic tension whether the film will be completed or not.

The third sequence starts the second act of a story. First obstacles arise and the audience learns why things may be more difficult than they initially seemed. In the case of Riot Cinema, the audience learns about a budget of over 800.000 Euros, a crowdfunding campaign and a planned day-and-date release. This was a tremendously ambitious project, trying to reinvent independent filmmaking. The stakes were high, the obstacles plenty.

The fourth sequence builds up to the midpoint and the first culmination of the story. *The Cosmonaut* had a successful funding campaign. Riot Cinema's plan seemed to work. The team was in Latvia, ready for principle shooting to start. But then the co-producer pulled out, creating the first real crisis and culminating in the Save The *Cosmonaut* campaign.

After the intensity of the first culmination, the fifth sequence is often more romantic. It usually explores sub-plot and characters. After the successful Save The *Cosmonaut* campaign, the attention shifted away from funding to behind the scenes coverage. Riot Cinema and *The Cosmonaut* team were on an emotional high. They were making the film they wanted to make. The audience learned more about the work on set. Life broadcasts and diaries from set allowed for a deeper exploration of the protagonists.

Sequence six ends the second act. It contains the story's main culmination, resolving the main dramatic tension. The main goal is either reached, not reached or has changed. In *The Cosmonaut*, completing the film was always the main dramatic tension. Sequence six therefore builds up to the film's world premiere. After countless little obstacles, different cuts and an intensifying marketing campaign, *The Cosmonaut* had not only built a huge following but also had its premieres in sold-out theaters in Madrid and Barcelona.

At this point, the story could be over. But the main culmination of sequence six creates new tension for sequence seven. This new tension is the result of the main tension. *The Cosmonaut* was a product now. It was made and now had to be seen, sold and make back its production money. But, like most seventh sequences, the story of *The Cosmonaut* features a twist. *The Cosmonaut* was not a good film. It received negative reviews, low to none income and one of its funders, the ICAA, demanded its money back.

The final sequence eight includes the final battle and a resolution. Again, both can be found in the story of *The Cosmonaut*. At the time of writing this article, Riot Cinema Collective was still in a legal battle with the ICAA – the final battle that would decide whether the team and their investors could hold onto the rights to *The Cosmonaut* or whether they would be transferred to the ICAA. And the hero changed, as the following excerpt from a very long reflexive blog post indicates:

Because in the end, we feel happily frustrated. We look back and we can see how we put everything we got out there. How we were the best we could be but maybe that wasn't enough. We haven't managed to pay our team yet. Or give back our investors their money. And that's hard. And makes hesitate about many many things: was it really enough? did we do enough? maybe it wasn't the time or the project to expect a return? were we too ambitious? naïve maybe? did we dreamed too high? [sic] (Riot Cinema Collective, 2014).

Conclusion

Digital media and the Internet have changed many facets of film industries around the globe. Film production, marketing, distribution, story structures and copyright issues have been impacted, experimented with and debated in academia as well as by practitioners.

Habitual movie going, pre-existing audiences and mass exhibition and appreciation characterized traditional popular film. Independent film could rarely afford such practices. The mass cultural aspect of popular film made communal conversation and appropriation difficult at best.

The Cosmonaut seems to be an example of a changing landscape in film marketing. The point is not just that the film's making follows storytelling rules. It is much more that the story of its making is made public. And the story of the making of *The Cosmonaut* is not only told - it is told while it unfolds:

[Our fans] can live a two-year experience instead of a two-hour experience. That's because we are telling them what we are doing every day. And they can live it with us (N. Alcalá, personal communication, 2010).

The making of *The Cosmonaut* is a story. It is not an uncommon story in independent filmmaking. But this story has been told 'live', not retrospectively. For five years, the team has blogged and used social media to update their audience on the progress of their filmmaking journey. From day one, the team was transparent. They told a story about a story. This story allowed Riot Cinema Collective to slowly grow an audience that helped them raise 400,000 Euros.

Sharing the story of a film's making, attracts audiences. *The Cosmonaut* received a score of 4.2 on IMDb. It had countless bad reviews and did not break even financially. As a one-off product, *The Cosmonaut* looks like a failure. But it was seen over 200,000 times and raised 400,000 Euros through crowdfunding. People were interested in the story of the film, not the film itself. Following traditional ways of

rating a film (reviews and income), *The Cosmonaut* is a disappointing film. The story of its making, however, may prove useful for other independent filmmakers.

We love stories. That is why we love films. But this is also the reason why we love stories about the making of films. Any film contains a point of attack (idea), a lock in (the decision to make the film), a main tension (will it be completed?), a plan, obstacles, ups and downs, a resolution (the film got finished or not) with further implications, a new goal (distribution/reviews/income) and a hero (filmmaker) that changes throughout this journey. Independent filmmakers can now tell these stories while making the film, sharing it with audiences and therefore building audiences over time. Their stories are no longer just their films but the processes of their making. By doing so, everything seems to become one big story (no longer just one film). This also allows filmmakers to extend the story of the actual feature film and include transmedia elements, publish books, Facebook fiction, a music album or Gagarin-themed parties (all done by *The Cosmonaut*) to create one big story universe. The story is everywhere - in the feature film, its making and ancillary products.

Treating the filmmaking process as the story to tell changes the audience building from a one-off campaign for a finished product to an ongoing process. In this scenario, time and commitment can replace money as the main driver of an audience building campaign. As such, a slightly more level playing field between the commercial mainstream - with its huge marketing budgets - and the independent filmmakers might be created.

Extending the story of a film by telling the story of its making is one way to overcome to problem of findability among the abundance of competing small scale cultural products in today's digital age. It (a) helps to create communities and audiences, who (b) individually experience the making of a film and (c) view a film merely as an end product while 'watching' takes place over an extended period of time.

References

Gulino, P. J. (2004). *The sequence approach. The hidden structure of successful screenplays*. London: Bloomsbury.

Hesmondhalgh, D. (2007). *The cultural industries*. Los Angeles; London: Sage.

IMDb (n.d.). *The Cosmonaut*. Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1629747/>.

Riot Cinema Collective (2012a). *The Plan*. Retrieved from http://en.cosmonautexperience.com/web/contents/theplan3_eng.pdf.

Riot Cinema Collective (2012b). *We have finished the editing!* Retrieved from <http://www.thecosmonaut.org/blog/?p=433>.

Riot Cinema Collective (2014). *Interview*. Retrieved from <http://www.thecosmonaut.org/blog/?p=547>.

Truby, J. (2008). *The anatomy of story: 22 steps to becoming a master storyteller*. London: Faber & Faber.