

[Print Now](#)

MovieMaker

THE ART AND BUSINESS OF MAKING MOVIES

THE ABCS OF DV MOVIE MAKING: A DIGITAL PRIMER

By John Gaspard & Dale Newton



We've seen a lot of movie formats come and go over the years and we've found ways to get the most out of each format with the least amount of expense. When we started making movies as teenagers in the 1960s, you'd find us animating GI Joes and clay with hand-wound, 8mm cameras. Super8 and sound arrived in the 1970s and we made some of the first features in that format. We moved to 3/4" U-matic videocassettes for feature moviemaking in the 1980s, and by the 1990s we'd graduated to 16mm for two critically praised features, *Resident Alien* and *Beyond Bob*. For our most recent feature, *Grown Men*, we joined the digital revolution. Our experience on this production—and on six features in other formats—taught us that with any new format, you can always combine lessons from the past with technological improvements to use the new format to the fullest, while still keeping your costs down. How do you turn an idea and a

screenplay into a digital movie? While we recommend that you thoroughly research movie production before you start, here, in our view, are the key steps to getting it done right.

The Script

Think you have a screenplay ready to go? Think again. The availability of low-cost equipment has inspired too many digital moviemakers to start rolling tape with mediocre scripts. And poor scripts rarely make good movies. For an independent digital feature to make its mark, the script needs to be pushed to the highest level of quality.

Spend time making sure you have a strong story with interesting characters, surprising twists and some memorable scenes. It's the story—not the format—that will keep the audience in their seats. Four writers spent over a year crafting the five stories in *Grown Men*. Each draft got us closer to a compelling and emotionally satisfying script.

Also, keep in mind that your script needs to fit your budget. Trying to produce a big-buck screenplay on a tiny digital budget is like squeezing into your swimsuit from junior high school. You may be able to do it, but it's not going to be pretty.

And, speaking of budget: you don't have to spend money on any fancy scriptwriting/formatting/doctor program. Any decent word processing program will do the job and save you some cash for later on.

The Cast

You'll want the best possible actors, because they'll make your script and your movie even better. Attend local stage plays and contact talent agents to find the best performers in your area.

You can also put an ad in the newspaper and hold open auditions. Be sure to give the performers time to read the script before auditioning, so you'll see their best work.

It's a good idea to videotape the auditions, then make your decisions based on your reactions to the tape and not to what you saw during the audition. Some performers are great in a live situation, but don't come to life on tape. And some performers who don't seem to be doing much during the audition may blow you away when you see them on tape.

Also, when you choose your cast, be sure to let them know up front about any sensitive scenes, such as nudity or extreme violence.

The Crew

To find a good crew, get recommendations from other producers—particularly to find out who the team players are out there. Because you may be paying little or nothing, look for crew members who are ready to move up a level, such as a boom operator who's ready to be a sound operator. These people will work hard when given the rare opportunity to work on a feature.

Business Issues

If you plan to show your movie beyond your living room, there are two business issues to consider: liability and ownership.



Peter Moore and Susan Vee in *Grown Men*.

If someone is injured or something is damaged during production, you may be liable to pay for it through insurance or out of your pocket. If you form a business or nonprofit corporation, then the corporation is liable, offering you some personal protection.

To sell your finished movie, you need to clearly establish ownership by yourself or your corporation from the start. Otherwise, when a distributor wants to buy the movie, you have to quickly negotiate the sale with 30 people who have a stake in it.

You'll also need rights to use the work and performances of all your cast, crew and extras. And you'll need permission to show any locations that aren't public property. Do this by having cast, crew and property owners sign release forms giving you those rights.

This is probably a good time to remind you not to use copyrighted music or issues/48/images unless you want to spend the time and considerable expense to obtain clearance for them should you land a distribution deal. This includes copyrighted issues/48/images that appear in the background, such as posters on walls and issues/48/images on televisions.

In *Grown Men*, we had a scene in a bar that sported multiple TV monitors throughout the space. We couldn't afford to pay for the copyrighted issues/48/images that broadcast and cable TV were providing, and we didn't want to leave the sets blank during the scenes, so we concocted a novel and legal solution: We popped in tapes from our past movies and ran those on the screens. They provided issues/48/images for the TVs in the background and didn't cost us a dime!



Publicity and Distribution

Those involved in independent productions usually plan publicity and distribution as an afterthought. Take time to shoot some publicity stills on your most photogenic shoot day. You can stage shots that will be hard to recreate later.

Before you start production, think about what the selling points are for a distributor: a unique location, a celebrity, a first of its kind fill-in-the-blank. If you can't think of any selling points, create some.

Production Format and Editing

Picking a tape format and editing system can lead to lengthy technical debates. We've had them ourselves. Let us cut to the chase for you: the three most economical and widely used digital tape formats are DV, DV Cam and DVCPro.

The only real differences are tape speed and how sound is managed. Otherwise, all three record issues/48/images using the same technical specifications, and there is good equipment to shoot each format. We've used all three, and where the rubber meets the road, the only important difference is price.



You also need to honestly assess your production and budget to decide if your finished movie should be transferred to film. Be brutally honest, because this is expensive and few independent movies go beyond video distribution. If film is a must, consider shooting in the European PAL television format, which is 25 frames per second (fps), or the 24p format, which is 24 fps with progressive scan. These formats allow for a cleaner transfer to 24fps film, but sound sync, equipment availability and transfer to NTSC video can be problematic. Consult with experienced moviemakers and labs before going this route.

Non-linear editing systems, like tape formats, have advocates and sales publicity. Three popular full-feature systems at the low end of the pocketbook are: Adobe Premiere (\$600), Apple Final Cut Pro (\$1,000) and Avid Xpress DV (\$1,700). All have similar capabilities but slightly different styles, and they offer image correction and sound controls. Considering that great films like *Lawrence of Arabia* were edited with only cuts and dissolves, any of these systems can do the job.



If even these systems are beyond your budget, cuts-and-dissolves editing can be done with Apple iMovie (\$50), AIST Movie DV Suite (\$70), MGI VideoWave (\$100) and many other simple non-linear editors. These systems typically don't have advanced sound controls, but you can get free ProTools audio editing software at <http://www.digidesign.com/ptfree> to fill the gap.

And, if you have no desire to edit your movie yourself, keep in mind that you can save the cost of an editing system by getting someone else to do it for you. The low cost and availability of non-linear systems means that there are lots of folks out there; you just need to find someone with the right skills and sensibility to do the job.

This kitchen location was part of a building that yielded over a dozen locations on *Grown Men*; Hollywood make-up artist Crist Ballas went low-budget for *Grown Men*; Peter Moore, Matthew Anderson, Tom Poole and David Fields in *Grown Men*.

So, how do you choose an editor? On one of our earlier features, we gave the same scene to three different editors and asked them to take a crack at it. The editor we ultimately worked with was the one who gave us the

scene we expected, but with a little something unexpected.

Rehearsals

Before you shoot, thoroughly rehearse all the key scenes with the primary cast members. This will save a lot of time on the set and provide the cast an opportunity to create stronger, deeper performances.

We shot *Grown Men* on weekends, and found that rehearsals on weeknights really sped up the shooting process, sometimes allowing us to burn through 20 pages of script per weekend. The rehearsals provided the time to really discuss character issues, answer questions and refine blocking for each of the scenes—things that are hard to do in the midst of a full day of shooting.

If your schedule allows for it, bring your DV camera to the rehearsals and shoot each scene from a couple angles. Then, on your non-linear editing system, you can make yourself a rough edit of each scene before it's shot. Sure, the lighting and the sound won't be any good, but it will give you a better idea of what you'll need to shoot when you get on set.

Locations

Try to combine your locations for each day's shooting into one tight area. The less you pack and move, the more time you have to shoot scenes. One office complex we used in *Grown Men* yielded over a dozen locations that appear throughout the movie: the building gave us a restaurant exterior and kitchen, high-rise apartment building locations, a parking ramp, a jail, a loading dock, two offices and a conference room—all within a stone's throw of each other.

When you and your DP inspect locations, find all the power outlets and the circuit breakers or fuse box. When the power goes out in the middle of a shot, you'll know how to get it back on quickly.

If you're shooting an outdoor location at night and you find that the sun is coming up, get all the shots that face east done first.

Then, if the sun starts to come up during other shots, you can use flags to block the sun and keep shooting... at least for a while.

Finally, it's common courtesy to leave a location the way you found it. Or, to paraphrase an old camping expression, "Take only digital photos, and leave nothing but footprints (and hardly any of those)."

Sound (and Camera)

It's easier than ever to create great looking shots for your movie: the cameras are smarter, the lights are lighter and a good monitor shows you exactly what you're getting without waiting for dailies. But while you're lavishing your attention on getting the shot, don't forget you also need to get clean, usable sound.

Start thinking about sound when you scout locations. How noisy is the space? Does it sound like it's next door to the Jackhammer-of-the-Year competition? Can you control the sound? (That is, can you shut off that noisy refrigerator while you shoot?)

Most digital cameras have built-in microphones, but for high-quality sound, upgrade to a small mixer and a good boom microphone and pole. Give your sound person some practice time before the shoot.

The digital format is unforgiving of loud sounds that peak the camcorder's meter. They turn into unusable crackles. If your mixer has a 1 kilohertz tone set at 0 decibels (db), then the camcorder audio should be set at -12db or even -20db. If you don't have tone for audio setup, just make sure sound levels never hit the top of the meter.

Tip: Remember that noisy refrigerator that you turned off (and forgot to turn on again)? Next time, put your car keys in it. You may leave without turning it back on, but you won't get far!

Coverage

While some established moviemakers have done amazing things with extended takes, when you're starting out it's best to give yourself options for the editing room. Shoot reaction shots, close-ups and over-the-shoulder shots so you have some choices for later. They may not seem necessary when you're shooting, but you'll thank yourself during editing when you have something to cut to.

Catering

It seems like a small detail, but don't think that you can do without food on your set. An army marches on its stomach, and you'll be amazed at what a well-fed crew can accomplish.

To save money, plan your shooting schedule so that the least number of people are around for meals. Avoid hosting a group of extras over a meal break, and be sure to approach local restaurants about providing free or ultra-cheap food for your shoots in exchange for screen credit. Making a few phone calls can save you a bundle. Sure, many establishments will say 'no,' but you only need one 'yes.' Which leads us to...

Asking

This is no time to be shy. No matter if this is your first or fiftieth movie, there are people out there who know more than you do or have services that can help your movie. It's always wise to ask their advice or call in a favor. Keep this attitude throughout the process, from sending your script out for feedback to asking if a composer has a student who wants experience scoring your movie.

On *Grown Men*, we asked Hollywood make-up artist Crist Ballas if he had any apprentices who would like to work on a fantasy sequence. He looked at the script, liked what he saw and said he'd do it himself.

We asked for free hotel rooms, airline tickets, valuable props, rental cars, locations, food and advice. Some people said no, but many said yes. And they wouldn't have said yes if we didn't ask.

Is that all? Hardly. But those are the key issues. Add them to a great idea, mix in a lot of moxie and countless hours of pre-production, production and post-production, and before you know it you'll have your first digital feature in the can. And then you'll be ready to start your second. **MM**

MovieMaker Magazine © 2006