Graduation Day

Isaac Holze

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Graduation Day

by
Isaac Holze
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MFA
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of Film and Animation
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York

Thesis Chair: Howard Lester

Thesis Advisor: Malcolm Spaull

Thesis Advisor: Skip Battaglia
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Abstract

This paper covers the making of the film *Graduation Day* and the aesthetic choices made along the way. Its focus is on the steps of the process and the obstacles each step created. *Graduation Day* is the story of a student who has rapped his way through his final oral exam and is in danger of not graduating. He meets with his academic advisor and, through a rhythmic beat and speech pattern, convinces the advisor to see the fun in rapping. He eventually “steals” the cap and gown and goes on to graduation.
The story and process of making my thesis film *Graduation Day* involved a long period of writing followed by a rewarding shoot and then months of post-production work. Taking one major step at a time motivated my decisions along the way. Keeping my ultimate goals in mind prevented me from worrying about the potentially difficult steps ahead.

I intended for this work to have broad comedic appeal for viewers ranging from teens to the Baby Boomer generation. Like any filmmaker, my main goal was to create entertainment, but I also intended to apply and utilize my aesthetic skills and techniques developed at RIT to create visuals that captivate the attention of the viewers. Hopefully, the visuals and story also gain acceptance in the Hip Hop community. Though any viewer will resonate with the playfulness of the humor and appreciate the contemporary style of this film. I plan to submit my work to film festivals, perhaps gain notoriety on the Internet, and possibly distribute on niche Hip Hop DVDs.

I wanted a film that would be my entrance into the rap world. I immersed myself in the musical and aesthetic culture of Hip Hop; studying everything from the mainstream music labels and shows like BET’s *106 & Park* to lesser known artists recommended by friends or readings on websites like memphisrap.com. I realized that I wanted this to be more than a simple music video. I believed story structure, character arcs and complex visuals would set it apart from the standard.

**The Story**

The genesis for the story began in October of 2008. I spoke on the phone to my friend’s son, Jordan Whitfield and asked if he had any ideas for a story. He told me that
he was always being called a “dork” for being smart at school and thought that if he could be called to the principal’s office for being smart, the teasing would stop. Since his brother Julien is a young rapper, I pitched the idea to my advisor Howard Lester that Julien be sent to the principal’s office for rapping in class. From there, I gathered inspiration from the film *Anchors Aweigh* and from discussions about the interplay of power between administrators and students.

**Actors**

I first chose to have Julien play the part of the student because I knew he had the ability to perform at a high level. Not only does he possess youth and charisma, but he also has legitimate rapping abilities. This combination of traits would attract the attention of any audience.

I always had Howard in mind for the role of the Principal, but further solidified this conviction when I watched his performance in the film *A Boy Named Sue*. The way his eyes read on camera amazed me. Howard had impressed me before while I was a student in his acting/directing classes, both as an instructor and as an actor. I imagined that the way he would be interact with Julien, not just a child but as an actor as well, would be unmatched with any other actor I might hope to find. I asked Howard if he would join the project and once we had established a shooting date in January, he agreed to play the role.

**Writing - Part I**
In the November of 2008, I asked my friend, Ryan Lupo, if he would be interested in helping to write the script for this film. Both Ryan’s ability as a writer and first-hand experience as a rapper in his own right would aid in carrying the film to a level I could not achieve on my own. After a few meetings with Howard, I had a basic story structure and we began to write during the week before the originally scheduled shoot. The first draft delved into philosophical debate about academia, teaching methods, and the flexibility of the mind. I knew Ryan was interested in these topics and I my own held-over angst toward my days spent as a high school teacher and my relationships with administrators. After meeting with Howard again, much was cut. We both agreed that the length of the debates detracted from the more fluid duet we intended. We took great care to make it more playful and ease the transition of the administrator’s reaction to rap (Figure 1). The next version of the script played down the angst and was built more on goofy word play and situational comedy. Of course, more would have to be done in rehearsals because the story still lacked a complete structure. We scheduled the rehearsals for Saturday and Sunday, and the shoot on the following Monday.

**Original Shoot Scheduling**

At the last minute, Julien could not make the trip from Mississippi to Rochester. I made a number of calls to locate other young rappers but had no luck. We cancelled the shoot and rehearsals. Although I was disappointed, some relief set in now that we had more time to prepare. Ultimately, the uncertainty of what would come next outweighed the benefits of extra time.
Writing - Part II

Convincing Ryan to help re-write the script, given that he had worked four full nights already on a project that was not his, proved a little difficult. Fortunately, I asked him to now act in the movie. Because he was more personally involved at this point, he knew the script needed some adjustment to be appropriate for him instead of an eleven-year-old boy. Luckily, we now had two months to work on a re-write instead of a week. I chose Ryan as an actor based on his authentic New York rapping ability, my established relationship with him and his reputation from earlier acting experience (Figure 2).

Rehearsals - Part 1

We began rehearsals in Howard’s office. Without the full script we realized the rehearsals would be limited because the actors would need to improvise to the beat. However, I was always able to get a few ideas down and add them to the script later. The first example of this came when Ryan was to deliver his first lines but without any beat playing. He struggled and claimed that, “it’s hard to rhyme without a beat.” This line defined our opening struggle. Also, as Howard was always throwing out new lines to react to Ryan at the moment, I’d write down these improvised phrases, eventually fleshing them out into full lines.

Finding a Beat

Finding a beat presented its own difficulties. In January, when there was limited time, I contacted a friend by the name of Dawud Gaston. He, in turn, put me in touch with the musician, Kardiak. After some discussion, Kardiak sent me five to six beats he
had made and were available for use. We picked one, but because of overproduction and the uninspired simplicity, it was a less than ideal match for the film. Ryan had written the rhymes to this beat, however, for the January script. With a delayed shoot, we had a chance to search for a more suitable beat. Eventually, I reached out to Eric Zabriskie, someone I knew had been composing a lot of music for other students at RIT. He told me that his drummer, Evan Wormwood, had some available. We liked one enough, but asked if they had just the beat, which they did. I produced different tempo versions to see which the actors liked best, and we decided on the original 120 beats per minute version. This tempo provided a delicate contrast to Ryan’s faster rhyming style.

The beat dictated the rewrites and ultimately the pace of the performances. The different beats provided us with different lines when writing and affected the tempo of the performers’ delivery. Each actor absorbed the tempo and rhythm of the beat, fit it to his own internal rhythm, and adjusted it to how the beat was affecting the other actor. So, if we had different beats, we obviously got different performances. But if we kept the same beat and chose different actors, I believe the rhythm and performances would be completely different again because the actors’ internal beat would be different.

The Proposal

By the day of the proposal, we had rehearsed enough, found our beat and had a story ready. During the proposal, the committee members primarily criticized the script, noting that it still had remnants of the ten-year-old boy character and not enough of a college-aged student. The original setting, located in a principal’s office had simply
changed to an advisor’s office. Clearly we would need to update the relationship between the two characters.

Rehearsals - Part 2

We had our most fruitful rehearsal on April 20th. We had to tackle all the objections made during the proposal, with the main adjustment being made to the setting of Graduation Day. The student had failed an oral exam by rapping. This decision was made when discussing wardrobe. Howard mentioned he could wear the cap and gown to signify the academics, and I said I only associated them with graduation day (Figure 3).

We had a final rehearsal in Howard’s office and asked the Director of Photography, Jeremiah Franco, to join us. I wanted him to see how the acting played out so he could visualize the action on camera.

Andrew Curran agreed to play the role of “Dust Cover,” the rapper’s sidekick. I chose him because, as he was already a close friend of Ryan’s, establishing their relationship would be easy. Although his general appearance resembles more of a “punk” look than Hip Hop, we adapted what he normally wears (a hooded sweatshirt) and modified it with bright pants and a dress shirt and tie combo (Figure 4). The boom box prop would also give him something tangible to work with while acting and identify him in the Hip Hop world.

The $100 Fish Shot

At about the halfway point of the film, the story transitions by way of a baseball bat turning into a fish. During the last rehearsal, the actors asked what I was going to do
about the fish. I explained that I planned to create a CG fish and composite it into the footage but Howard suggested that we use a real fish. An actual prop would release the actor from having to use creative energy to produce the reality of the fish. I agreed I would investigate the possibility and, over the weekend, found a large fish at a farmer’s market, a cooler, and some ice. The total bill was $100, so we dubbed our now favorite shot in the film the “Hundred Dollar Fish Shot” (Figure 5).

The Shot Planning

Jeremiah and I met to plan out shots for the film. Being able to move the camera established a baseline for further decisions. The world should have a flexible feel and we wanted to create a number of camera transitions between shots. The movement between these shots should maintain a rhythm of their own and reflect the pace and tone of the dialogue. For example, once the characters have overcome their differences, the transitions become increasingly more fluid and agreeable (Figure 6). While earlier in the film, the shots illustrate a stark contrast between Howard and Ryan’ characters. This difference is reflected in the choice to shoot Howard at a slightly tilted up angle as to make him appear more powerful. Naturally, we shot to Ryan in a slightly tilted down angle so he appears to be in a weaker position. We had other creative ideas like compositing the actors on to a CG roller coaster (Figure 7) and a spinning record. Within two meetings we had everything planned for the shoot on April 27th. We also decided to experiment with character scale throughout; an idea originally suggested at the proposal by Skip Battaglia. By the end of the film, Howard has literally shrunk in stature,
reflecting his relatively infant understanding of Hip Hop relative to Ryan’s knowledge (Figure 8).

The Shoot

We enlisted Ralph Mastromonaco as an assistant director to keep us on schedule. An additional issue that occurred prior to the big shoot was simply getting the necessary equipment in time. I arrived at the SOFA cage early and waited for our equipment to return from the weekend shoots. By nine o’clock we had most of our equipment and the crew was due to arrive at ten, with the actors coming to the studio at eleven. The crew was ready early and most remarked how relaxed the set was. When the actors arrived, we soon started shooting. The art director Regina Huynh chose Dust Cover’s clothes to compliment Ryan’s costume and Howard’s under clothes to contrast his black robe. Jeremiah chose lighting setups to realistically create the different settings we were going to be “moving” through. The rest of the aesthetic choices could wait until the backgrounds were chosen. Everything during the shoot went well, although near the end we needed to hurry a little because we had borrowed a camera that was needed for a later shoot. By the end the actors were exhausted, as they had worked from eleven to six with few chances to rest. I too, was exhausted and felt by the last hour of the shoot, my attention to my actors was not what I would have liked it to be. Luckily, our regular rehearsals and extra time spent in pre-production aided us in meeting our deadline and while capturing excellent performances from the actors.

A Break
After shooting I knew that I needed to step away from work and take the opportunity to contemplate the direction of the film. After first checking the quality of the footage, I began to reflect on the past eight months. At the time, my directing/acting interests were my primary focus, but I knew that I would have to mentally prepare for the long process of editing. I let the DP and actors know that I liked what I had seen, backed up the files and set them aside for a while.

**Edit**

The first edit lasted roughly seven and a half minutes, while the final edit was cut by nearly two minutes. Because the first edit of footage featured only the actors in front of a green screen, there was some difficulty in imagining the final aesthetic of the film. With unnecessary shots cut and many sequences already composited, the flow and pace of the final work began to slowly emerge over the course of two months. The initial idea of editing according to lines of dialogue proved to choppy, so I adjusted the rhythm of the edit by overlapping dialogue with the reaction of another character, eventually settling into the final iteration.

The beat also dictated how I made editorial decisions. The length of each shot would be completely different either with no beat or a different beat. The visuals that eventually replaced the green screen also affected how the viewer perceived the beat. The more movement in the background, the faster the beat and performances appeared to move.

**Green Screen**
My next step was to eliminate all of the green that permeated each shot, something that prevented me from editing some of the transitions that Jeremiah and I had originally planned. I used Adobe After Effects to process each shot. After a week of tests, it was obvious that the plug-in “Keylight” was going to work well for eliminating the green. “Keylight” works by picking a single onscreen color to remove. Then an alpha matte is created which attempts to remove the green spill as well. You select a white ceiling range (from 100 and under) to remove the highlight spill, and a black floor (from zero up) to remove the darker greens. Generally, I had values of 20 and 80, which left enough of a gap that I had very small numbers for screen shrink, a phenomena when the edges of actors or props still have some green present, and screen softness or the relative “hardness” of edges. The most difficult cases were instances when the green tablecloth was darker than the back wall and needed a higher floor range, nearing the white ceiling range at times. The other cases were where a green reflection was high on reflective surfaces like the boom box and fish. The white ceiling would have to go as low as the black floor. Not to mention the obstacle to remove all the black tracking tape we had used for the next step of camera tracking, requiring me to key masks around the actors. This work went quickly at first because of my enthusiasm over seeing a clean plate. On average, I worked on four seconds of screen time per hour. Overall, removing the green from the plate took a total of three weeks.

The disadvantage to using “Keylight” presented itself when I attempted to replace the green spill. Typically, it was able to remove all the green noticeable in bad keying. However, because it uses a gray to replace, you have the option of using original color to replace, it would sometimes flattens the highlights, especially on a yellow; the color of
Ryan’s main shirt and Howard’s graduate draping. Fortunately for me, the flatter look matched the cartoon quality of the backgrounds (Figure 9).

**Maya Live Camera matching**

The next thing I needed to learn was how to match our live action camera work with a 3D world camera. I had heard about Maya Live, but was unsure of how it worked exactly. After about a week of reading the documentation and experimenting, I was sure that I would be able to use this technique for the film. I first tested the Maya Live function on a scene wherein “Dust Cover” enters the room. The shot would require a tilt up with the camera as he enters a computer-generated door. Because the other scenes would be simpler than this, I realized that if I was able to tackle this shot specifically, I could be confident in my ability to finish the rest. While, I had cursed the black tracking tape when I was still trying to mask out the green screen, it paid dividends for the camera matching. I needed about five to ten locations to get a good camera match. Luckily, a number of factors contributed to my success. It had helped to know the focal length of the camera, the tripod height and that there were no camera movements, except for the rotation. Once matched, I was happy to have asked Jeremiah to move the camera instead of being locked down, as the 3D appears more realistic in comparison.

The most difficult shot was the crossover dolly shot when Ryan starts rapping. Maya has a more difficulty when approximately the placement of the camera if it’s moving. So, I stepped the solver through each progressive pass and manually corrected it when the camera appeared off-kilter. Matching the camerawork in this shot alone took about a week to complete.
Placing the desk in most shots turned out to be easier than expected. However, I would have to key it into three to four different places for some of the camera shots.

In addition, whenever Howard’s feet are visible, I used Photoshop to digitally paint over the protective blue booties worn to keep the green screen clean on the day of the shoot.

**Backgrounds & Improvements**

Inspired by the more simple animated style like that of *The Simpsons*, I created backgrounds that had a “cartoony,” rather than photorealistic, appearance. I created all the office shots first since they would have all the same structure. I also knew I wanted to undertake the roller coaster scene before returning to Rochester as it would involve the most work but wouldn’t require creative input from others.

I first chose an office color based on the shot where Dust Cover enters. Ryan’s shirt is yellow and I based my decisions off a tie-died t-shirt that was yellow, orange and red. So I made the wall orange and the door red. This looked pleasing for most shots but there were a few wherein the orange was too similar to the yellow or to Howard’s brown shirt in the final shot. To solve this problem, I transitioned the wall color from orange to purple when necessary.

Each week, near the end of the quarter I’d meet with Howard, and we’d discuss shots that needed to be corrected. The first major change was made to the editing style. Notably, we began to have more dialogue occur off-camera and explored ways to cut in less obvious places. The next task was to include a window behind Howard’s desk.

This eventually evolved into a decent looking window, but what exactly would be visible
through that window proved to be a harder decision. We played with the idea of a riot going on in the background so that the characters would appear to be ignoring something extreme. Eventually, we decided to not draw too much attention and I placed standard graduation footage initially. As the footage was of low, Youtube-like compression quality, I intended to replace it at a later date.

**Sound**

Throughout the film, there are specific scenes where the audio track is less than perfect. This occurs mostly in a few shots where the actor is in profile. Because the boom microphone was not properly placed the recording is too low in volume, not to mention the ambient noise of a compressor in the background. Also, the beat was being played in the background for the actors because we did not have a thump track. Donald O’Brien had helped me with some noise reduction, but for the most difficult piece I reached out to Dave Sluberski to what advice he might have to offer. While I wasn’t able to fix everything, the voices were much clearer and natural in our final version.

**Screening**

I screened the project on Sunday November 15, 2009. Concern over the use of Youtube-quality background footage proved to be unfounded. The reaction for the backgrounds garnered praise from both my respondent and the audience. They did notice the problems with the sound, but overall, it did not seem to take away from their enjoyment of the piece. Everyone enjoyed seeing Howard perform, and he received praise from those outside of the SOFA in early web screenings.
In the year and half of producing this film, I have overcome many obstacles that seemed initially seemed insurmountable. The long writing process, replacing actors, readying for a shoot, green screen removal and camera matching provided new challenges I had not met before. The final piece became something I am proud to have made. The most rewarding experience was working with the actors and I intend to continue in this direction in the future.
Graduation Day – Appendix A

Figures 1-9
Figure 1

Figure 2
Figure 5

Figure 6
Figure 7

Figure 8
(STUDENT and ADVISOR sit across from one another at a desk in the ADVISOR’s Office.

    ADVISOR
    …It’s Graduation Day
    …you failed the oral exam
    …your family (listing members) is here
    …they’re (we’re) not going to certify you

(Student can’t speak)

    ADVISOR
    What’s the matter?

    STUDENT
    Can I have a beat?

    ADVISOR
    What, a beat?

(Student snaps his finger. Beat begins.)

    STUDENT
    It’s not like I’m just fooling around,  
    In the silence I drown.
    I need the beat to swim in the sound.  
    Fitting the time, spitting rhymes  
    is how we live in my town.

    ADVISOR
    You can’t communicate without a beat?  That’s absurd.

    STUDENT
    Absurd is just another word  
    of labels and definition  
    (My main means of expression,  
    The way I learn my lessons)

    ADVISOR
    You can talk just like everyone else.  Where is that beat coming from?

    STUDENT
    What beat?
ADVISOR
The one messing with my feet.

STUDENT
Oh that’s my man, Dust Cover.

(Dust Cover enters with boombox playing beat).

ADVISOR
You have your own percussionist?

STUDENT
We’re just expressing ourselves
Putting books on the shelves
Our minds running free between your bells.

ADVISOR
Well it’s really annoying. Please turn that off.

STUDENT
Nah man, you’ve got to bang that beat
Keep’em tapping their feet
Run that thing on repeat!

ADVISOR
And I repeat, cut that beat. Get him out of here.
If my man DC’s got to leave
I’ve got to be hitting the breeze.
Music’s my main mechanism
For maintaining wisdom.
Yeah, I could live without it,
But is that life? Nah, I kind of doubt it.

ADVISOR
But this is not how the rest of world chooses to communicate.
Your position in life will be second rate.

STUDENT
You’ve got to forget all that jive,
Because I know I’m alive,
And always down to debate
But I’d rather communicate
In a more intuitive ways.

ADVISOR
You spend your days in a rhyming haze?

**STUDENT**
The pictures we paint make the scenery change.

(Cut out to show they are no longer in ADVISOR’s Office. The desk and seats are gone. They are on a dance floor.)

**ADVISOR**
Wait… My desk is gone.  
It just slipped away in the song.  
I want my desk back  
Because structure is something that your songs lack.

**STUDENT**
But you just solved mystery one.  
The beat will always take you someplace new,  
Somewhere fun.  
We can each speak our point of view,  
Just find a way to line it up in the groove.

**ADVISOR**
But this isn’t real  
And I don’t feel  
The connection between your world and mine.  
The return of my desk would be just fine.

**STUDENT**
But the beat can take you so much higher than that  
Just lock and load it, swing your bat.

(The advisor finds himself in a baseball field holding a bat)

**ADVISOR**
You think that this is fun and games  
But how many times do you say the names  
Of people who rap and talk like this  
Why the heck am I holding this fish?

**STUDENT**
You never really know what’s going on inside your mind  
You have to buy the ticket,  
Take the ride from time to time

**ADVISOR**
But in the business world,
you’ll feel like a fool
Look good in a tie,
That’s why you’re at our school.

STUDENT
But those business men could take a lesson
From our fresher form of expression.

ADVISOR
Professionals learn a lesson?

STUDENT
With this beat they could be messin’

ADVISOR
I think they’d think that this is just crazy.

STUDENT
Your feet used to be lazy!

ADVISOR
And now I’m moving like a baby.

STUDENT
And with you bouncing like that
I’ll take a crack
At working with my peers.

ADVISOR
Eliminating all of their fears.

STUDENT
Bring their eyes to tears.

ADVISOR
With this rhyme I find my mind
Moving in a new direction.

STUDENT
Even in a new inflection?

ADVISOR
Ready for your posse’s inspection.

STUDENT
And now they’re digging your vibe.
You could be our voice on the inside…
You could switch up the system.

**ADVISOR**
Slow boys gonna miss him.

**STUDENT**
Nobody’s goin’ dis him.

**ADVISOR**
They couldn’t even if they could.
They wouldn’t even if they should.

**STUDENT**
With a style so new
My mind you blew
Sending my jaw to the south.
Leave’em with an open mouth
So A-dog, I’m peacing out.

(student walks out wearing cap and gown)

**ADVISOR**
Take it easy Greasy.
That’s what I’m talking about.

(Beat)
(Advisor left in underwear)

**ADVISOR**
But what about my gown?
Graduation Day – Appendix C
Thesis Proposal

By Isaac Holze

Approved for submission: Howard Lester

Committee:
Skip Battaglia
Malcolm Spauld
General Description

A college student communicates only by rapping. His advisor addresses the distractions this causes in class. The office transforms based on the dialogue, the rhythm of the beat, and contrast of perspectives. A duet develops with the student’s worldview taking over. The piece is an essay on personal expression vs. arbitrary behavioral restrictions.

Overview

Inside a cg created office, a live student sits across from his advisor. The advisor asks why the student is disrupting classes by rapping. The student can’t communicate until he summons a musical beat to start. The advisor gets annoyed by the beat and demands to know how the music appears when he talks. The student reveals his dj waiting outside. They are asked to leave but the student argues that he is needed for him to communicate.

While the student raps, the office begins to disappear. In its place are a variety of backgrounds, all relating to the dialogue and the two conflicting points of view. Examples are a dance club, an industrial kitchen with swinging pots and pans, a board meeting with a presentation, and a ball park. The advisor fights hard to pull the space back to his office and the reality he is used to.

The advisor adapts his speech to communicate his point of view but eventually enjoys the method, gets lost in the fun, and a duet begins. The student realizes the distraction, states his closing argument and excuses himself. The regular office returns and the advisor yells out that nothing was resolved about his class actions.

Run Time: Approx 5-6 minutes

Treatment

See Attachment.

Method

The principal action of the characters will be three live actors shot on a green screen. The advisor’s office will be done in 3d Maya, and the backgrounds during the rhymes will be a combination of 2D/3D elements.

Timeline

August 2008-March 2009 – Story
April 2009 – Rehearsal
April 27 – Shoot on Stage A
May – Editing, keying out green screen
June-July – Model and animate backgrounds
August - Render and Compositing
September - Screening

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<td>$14,400</td>
<td>$14,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL: $32,816 $25,400