

Acting with a Pencil Storyboarding your Movie

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Sample storyboards from 'Troops' - an excellent short film set in the Star Wars universe by Kevin Rubio & Co.
Art Director - Eric Hilleary.

Storyboarding?

Storyboarding is the process of producing sketches of the shots of your script. The end result looks like comic book of your film (without the speech bubbles).

Why do it?



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It helps you think about how your film is going to look. You can work faster on set and as pictures communicate better than words it will allow your camera crew to move their camera and lights, for producers to foresee problems, for the art department to know which parts of the location are going to be in shot and so on. Even the actors will get a feel of what they are going to be shooting!

So I need to be an artist?

Well you can be, but looking at storyboards by Hitchcock or Spielberg you have to admit that they can't draw. There are professional storyboard artists that can give you results that look better than the final film. However its a good idea to bash them out yourself, it allows you to experiment quickly and cheaply, testing out different versions of how a scene may look and play on camera.

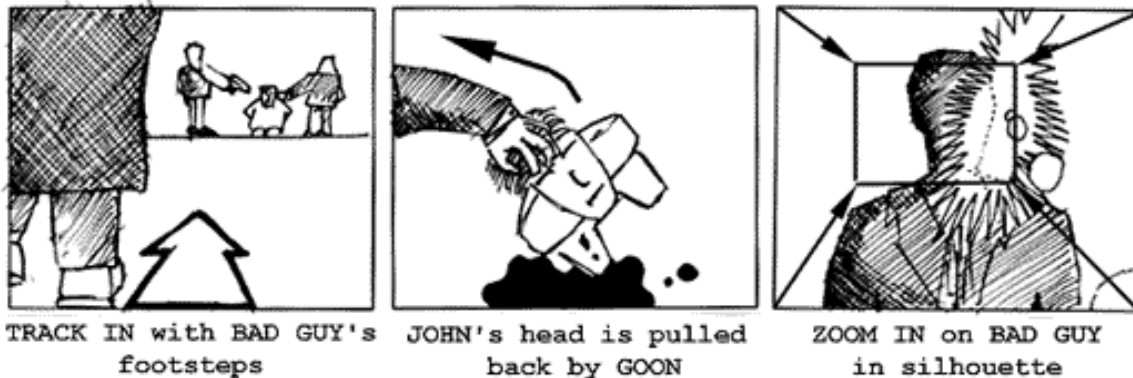
Storyboarding is especially useful for complex visual sequences e.g. elaborate shots or special effects sequences. Sometimes a film only uses storyboards for difficult sequences other times the entire film is storyboarded. The Coen Brothers (Fargo, The Big Lebowski) storyboard extensively, allowing them to shoot just the sequences they require for editing, saving both time and money.

Hang on though, pictures are still, movies move.

Ah! You got me there. There are a few tricks storyboard artists have up their sleeves to illustrate movement - whether its movement within the frame (actors walking) or the frame moving itself (camera panning etc.).

Arrows - Suppose the camera is tracking in, following a bad guy's footsteps. Draw in an arrow pointing into shot to show the camera's movement. Now the hero's head is pulled back by one of the bad guy's goons. Use an arrow to show the movement of the head being turned. What about a zoom in? From each corner draw in arrows pointing to the centre, draw in a new smaller frame to show the end of the zoom. Generally I try and use thick white arrows to show camera moves and thin black arrows to show objects moving.

Storyboard illustrating the use of arrows - nice 'n' gory



The floating frame - What if you want to show the camera panning to show a cityscape, or following a character as they walk through an airport? There's two options here: 1) Illustrate one shot using more than one storyboard frame showing the key stages of the shot's movement across a number of frames or 2) Draw out the entire scene (e.g.. the horizon of a city) and place a frame on it with an arrow indicating the direction of movement.

Transitions - The storyboard can also include transitions in your film. Write these in the gaps between the frames e.g.. DISSOLVE TO :

This is great but I can't draw!!

Neither can I, so I cheat.

Screen time is filled with people, and figures are painful to draw, getting the correct perspective of arms and legs is problematic. The people in my drawings tend to look like car crash victims with limbs all over the place.

I managed to pick up some really cheap wooden mannequins (they're 12 inch high artists models with joints so you can bend them into shape) that I use for more professional looking storyboards (oh! and did I mention they're fast too?). Over a couple of nights I rattled through the script, breaking the scenes down into shots, arranging the mannequins and shooting stills of them. I used a video camera and grabbed the shots, then arranged them as a storyboard. You could just as equally use a stills camera or draw from the figures (which is a much easier than trying to imagine where hands and legs go in your head).

Mannequin #1 beats the rush to the bar



Storyboard Shot



Final filmed shot

If you can't get hold of any mannequins try using an Action Man and Barbie and start playing

Now you can add to the images if you want, scribbling on rough faces and expressions or drawing in props and buildings. I left most blank, figuring that this was the actors' job.

You can quickly build up a store of images, and because many shots in films are similar (over-the-shoulder shots, wide shots etc.) you can use pictures again and again for different scenes and different movies.

Here's a few quick methods for producing fast and dirty storyboards.

1. Keep the area you have to draw small. It allows you to draw much faster. The pictures become more like doodles than works of art. Remember the point is to get an idea of how things will look on screen. Ridley Scott (Blade Runner, Thelma and Louise) is famous for his Ridleygrams - rough, almost indecipherable sketches that outline what he has in mind.

2. Copy up a set of storyboard sheets so you don't have to spend all night drawing screen boxes. Download a storyboard sheet.

- * Standard ratio (4:3) - 20 frames (7K gif)
- * Standard ratio with space for overhead plan - 8 frames (9K gif)
- * Widescreen (16:9) - 15 frames (5K gif)

3. Sketch in pencil so you can make changes easily, then ink in for photocopying. Feel free to use any medium you are happy with - professional storyboard artists use everything from magic markers to charcoal.

4. Scribble down short notes about what's happening in shot (e.g.. BOB enters) what characters are saying ("Is this it? Is this how...") or sound effects (Roll of THUNDER).

5. An overhead plan view of the location of the camera, actors and light can be helpful if you know the location you are going to be working on.

6. Number your shots so that they can be quickly referred to on the shot list and during editing.

Drawing storyboards is an excellent way to keep motivated, to show you're organised and to let everyone else know what's going on in your head.

Storyboards aren't there to constrain you. Just like the script they are there to back you up during shooting. If everything starts flowing on set let it happen. In the real situation you may see a new angle - go ahead, shoot it. Get the shots you need by checking your storyboard and give yourself the time and freedom to experiment.

Get your pencils acting!