

Cerebral: An Anthology Series

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Thesis Advisor

Rod Smith

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rod Smith', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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Abstract

Versa Studios Media's philosophy of filmmaking is to explore the age-old questions of "what if?" The company prides itself on making entertaining, thought-provoking films. After establishing an internship program in Muncie, Ind. During the 2013-2014 school year, VSM looked to find a distribution model for a new anthology series, called CEREBRAL.

This author's statement details the journey of the company to develop the CEREBRAL series through three installments. It also explores the lengthy journey that VSM took to find a perfect Video On Demand distribution model for its new TV anthology.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Rod Smith for serving as our advisor throughout this process. He was very insightful every step of the way during our journey.

I would also like to thank Kenneth Stevenson for all the hard work he has put into the company, and for serving as a mentor and friend for Andrew and myself.

Introduction

cer·e·bral (sə' rēbrəl) adj.

1. Appealing to or requiring the use of the intellect; intellectual rather than emotional

Since its beginning, the mission of Versa Studios Media, LLC has been to create high-quality, entertaining, thought-provoking content and deliver it to its audiences. Founded in 2010 by Kenneth Stevenson at Ball State University, Versa wanted to break away from the norm. Alongside Andrew Bennett, Kenny set up a film group that intended to make content separate from the university. Soon enough, the group was already making short films, business videos and music videos.

In 2012, the group and the company set out on an unlikely journey to create a feature film called *Cheery Point*. This film was the true test to see if the young crew had what it took to make it to the big time. After nine months of filming on the weekends, traveling between Kentucky, Illinois, and other locations, the crew finished principal photography of the film. The crowning moment for the group was the exclusive screening of *Cheery Point* in April of 2013. This was a homecoming for Versa, as the screening was held where the dream all began, in Muncie Ind.

While I personally was not with the group at the beginning, I was along for most of the ride with *Cheery Point*. Coming from a public relations background, I was brought onto the project as a publicist for the film. After the screening of

Cheery Point, I took on an even bigger task: Kenny knew that the Versa group needed reform, and I took charge of restructuring how the Muncie group operated. Its purpose was not specific or impactful enough; many things needed to be altered.

What was simply a film group took on a completely different identity starting in the summer of 2013. A decision was made to transform what was only a film group into what is now the Versa Internship Program. An advisory board with five members was put in place to run the group, consisting of: a President, VP of Operations, VP of Membership Development, VP of Marketing and VP of Technology. Andrew served as the 2013-2014 President, and myself as the VP of Marketing for the program. Attendance and project goals were put in place for all new interns, who were admitted to the program only after signing a legitimate internship contract. Everything was in place to start making more short films.

However, this wasn't enough. YouTube views can only establish so much credibility for a project and a company. As a distribution model, this also does not lend itself to any kind of ROI for the company, nor the people working on the film. A new decision was made: Versa Studios Media would create some kind of film series that would be sold in a video on demand (VOD) Model. There were many questions associated with this concept: what would the series be about? How would it be sold? At the time, there was only speculation and intuition to guide us.

Making our Versa work into an Honors Thesis

Andrew and I saw this new series as a perfectly good opportunity to combine schoolwork with our filmmaking aspirations. We decided to make this

task into our senior honors project. Some people had previously told us that selling a short film series would be next to impossible, even on VOD, but we were determined to make it happen.

The first challenge of this task was a large one: how could we possibly bundle some unrelated short films to sell? The answer to this was a lot of research. Anthology films such as *V/H/S* are actually a compilation of short films with unrelated stories, but similar themes. The only common element between all of them is that they are the same genre: horror. When looking at this type of model, we found a few pros and cons. The biggest pro we found was that this would be fairly manageable path to distribution. *V/H/S* was an independent production and still managed to not only get a VOD distribution deal as well as a theatrical release, but it also grossed over \$100,000 in the box office. In the past, a few anthology films besides *V/H/S* have had success, such as *Sin City* and *Twilight Zone: The Movie*.

Despite some pros, there were also some cons to this model. First of all, the only successful way to make an anthology film would be to make all of the shorts the same genre. We felt as though this would get repetitive for not only our writers, but for the interns making the films as well. Another con of this model was that we would essentially be confined to a 90 minute run time for the anthology, unless we wanted to make multiple sequels. This model was ruled out within a few weeks of thought.

After ruling out another few variations of this film anthology model, we decided to focus on the content first, thinking that once we decided what kind of content we wanted to make, the model would fall into place. Andrew, Kenny and

myself turned our attention toward the content and began brainstorming. Since Versa's brand is centered around cerebral, thought-provoking content, we needed to make our short films fit this brand. When it came down to it, we wanted to create a sort of cerebral anthology series. This is what became known as CEREBRAL.

CEREBRAL: An Anthology Series

Intro Dialogue:

Since the beginning, mankind has asked itself, "what if?" Immersing and culturing itself on an ever developing planed, it looked to the future as an era of no loss. Day by day, the empty spots on the map were filled. Little by little, complacency became key. One by one, uncertainties were put to rest. But there are some aspects of our civilized world that still creep in and continue to haunt us. We embrace them. We continue to ask questions. For they are timeless; they are life changing; they are CEREBRAL.

And so, CEREBRAL was born. With the distribution model still up in the air, the Versa Internship Program began its 2013-2014 school year preparing for a series installment titled RUST, written by Anton Barnett. Anton was contracted as a writer by VSM and instructed to tailor his script to meet our content.

Episode 1: RUST - October 26-27, 2013

Synopsis:

"Following an apocalyptic infection, a father must race against the clock to bring his infected son, Damien, back to humanity by feeding him memories of his

past. While his attempts seem to show signs of progress, he also becomes infected, narrowing the gap to complete the cognitive recharge for Damien.”

This primary installment of CEREBRAL was certainly the most challenging. The first way in which I helped with the series was as a location scout. It was challenging at first to find a house that met the description in the script: old, decrepit and looking as though a zombie apocalypse had taken its toll on the structure. Luckily, college housing is sometimes a goldmine for these types of houses. After location scouting for a few days, I was able to secure a somewhat run-down house that two of my fraternity brothers rent near Ball State's campus.

I served as the First Assistant Director on the set, which happened to be my first time in that particular role. Andrew wanted me fulfill this role because of my organization, time orientation and leadership skills. I was also in charge of the contracts for everything related to the film. I used my limited knowledge of contractual law to craft contracts related to actor agreements, location releases and more. The first step in the contractual process was to secure the location with the location release contract. I had Alex Selvey, one of the current residents of the house, sign the contract. This ensured that we not only had permission to use the facility, but would also be liable for any damages incurred to the premises while our team was on set. The next step once we got to set was to make sure each actor had signed his or her agreement as well. As a little-to-no budget production, we had to acquire actors that would not request compensation. We turned to Mark Esch and Holly Hathaway, two actors from *Cheery Point*, which we had already formed good relationships with. Andrew's

brother Sam Bennett had agreed to play the role of Damien, so his contract was signed as well. One thing we didn't originally anticipate was that we were required to have a separate contract for actors under the age of 18. A young boy named Hayden was set to play the young version of Damien, but we needed a contract for minors that included a parent/guardian's permission in order to allow them to act. I had to quickly modify and print our existing actor contract to include such edits before Hayden got to the set. Another important contract for this film was the standard release, a contract for any extras in the film. Since one scene required an entire zombie hoard, somewhere around 20 extras had to fill one of these out as well.

The two-day shoot for RUST was exhausting, but rewarding as well. I often had to speed up the grips and gaffer, who were taking an unusual amount of time to set up the lights on the set. The director, Greg, also needed some prodding from time to time, as he is always a perfectionist when it comes to his vision. One thing that was not taken into account for this film was the food situation. While drinks and snacks were purchased, no meals were provided for. A production assistant was sent out to purchase pizza for lunch, and then McDonald's for dinner. The scheduling for RUST that was done in pre-production was not laid out as well as it should have been, and the crew ended up filming until around midnight the first night. The second day ran much the same, with the crew behind for most of the day. The interns, however, were in very good spirits the entire time, as they were thrilled to be on such a film set. When it was all said and done, around midnight on that Sunday evening, everything had wrapped and

a very well made zombie film was in the books. The first installment of the CEREBRAL series had been made. Now it was on to the editing phase.

While the filming of RUST ran only slightly behind, the editing was something that immediately struggled. Not only was the transfer of footage and audio difficult to coordinate, but also the director, Greg, was stuck with the editing process at first and struggled to get everything into place. What we quickly realized as a team is that a post-production team needed to be in place to immediately start editing the film once principal photography ended. This would be set up for the next installment.

The VOD Model Changes Again

After RUST was complete, the model for VOD was once more discussed. The film anthology had been thrown out as a possibility, but the idea of a television anthology started to get thrown around. After some research, we discovered that shows like *The Twilight Zone* and *Goosebumps* were very successful television anthologies that followed a model we could potentially use. These films used the same sort of feel and intro montage in each episode. However, the story and actors changed from episode to episode and the show itself had different seasons. This model seemed very feasible, and we decided that this was exactly what we needed. We could essentially call the series CEREBRAL, use the same intro montage and make each episode its own separate story. The theme of the series would be cerebral, thought-provoking twists on different genres. RUST was a zombie film, so we had that genre taken care of. While the medium by which the anthology would be distributed was still

up in the air, the model was set in place. The next installment in the anthology series would be a clone story called REPLICA.

Episode 2: REPLICA - February 21-23, 2014

Synopsis:

“In a not so distant future, breakthrough technology will allow for the cloning of human beings for those that can afford them. After 13-year-old Corinne becomes terminally ill, her wealthy aunt decides to bring the girls clone into the home for harvesting. When Corinne discovers her clone alone in the basement, they forge an unlikely bond that will ultimately force Corinne to make a life-altering decision.”

This next installment in the anthology series was interesting for many different reasons. We had originally contracted a writer named Adam King to write the script, but two weeks before the shoot, the advisory board of the internship program received the “final” script and disliked the direction the writer had gone in. A member of the board, Sam Courter, offered to revise the script. It ended up that Andrew re-wrote the entire story in just two days in order to get it where we wanted the story to be. I took on the role of location scouting again, and ended up with the home of Mike Ashman, my fraternity advisor, on the outskirts of Muncie.

With this location also secured, the team moved forward with pre-production and entered the Ashman residence on Friday, February 21. The scheduling issues were adjusted for this installment of the CEREBRAL series, and it also served for a co-directing trial for Andrew and Kenny. I served as First

Assistant Director once more, and had the challenge of dealing with two directors, rather than just one. Even more challenging than keeping the crew on task was managing the expectations of the Ashman household throughout the filming weekend. Though I explained in as much detail as I could what was to come, non-film individuals always fail to grasp how involved the process really is.

After the Ashmans' expectations were managed, the filming process itself went very smoothly throughout the weekend. The extra evening of filming made the rest of the weekend very manageable. I was able to keep the directors on track and the cast did very well with their performances. The most challenging part of the weekend was getting the trick shots filmed, where the actress, Maggie, had to perform as herself and as her clone in separate takes.

The production design on this set was fantastic. The crew created a realistic "clean room" where the clones in the story are harvested, which worked out better than originally anticipated. The co-directing experience with Andrew and Kenny went very well, and this installment of the CEREBRAL series will go down as the best thing the company has filmed to date.

Reelhouse.org - A VOD Solution

After REPLICA was shot, the search for a VOD solution continued for Andrew, Kenny and myself. We found a site called Reelhouse.org that houses mainstream films and TV series, but also independent content that users can log on and pay to watch. We quickly set up a Reelhouse account and created our page, which had a nice space for films, trailers, behind the scenes videos and other media.

We enjoyed the customizable experience of the page, but what worried us about Reelhouse was that it was simply another middleman. We wanted to give users more of a direct access to all of our content. Another thing that worried us is that Reelhouse still is virtually unknown in the online community, so users would not only have to be directed there, but also sign up for an account and pay by the episode to watch. We knew there had to be a way to give users direct access to all of our content for one fee. The VOD search was again put on hold as we worked toward the next installment in the series, *Skookum*.

Episode 3: SKOOKUM - April 12-?

Synopsis:

A hunter, Neal, and his younger brother, Val, are contracted to do a job in the Deep South. When they arrive, they find the contractor has been killed, leaving his capable daughter, Ruby, to watch over the land. As Neal and Val spend more and more time out in these woods, they come to realize that Ruby and her family have been hiding a malevolent secret regarding what which lurks in the shadows.

The third installment for the CEREBRAL series was written by Aaron Beal, and was scheduled to shoot over the course of two weekends in April. However, due to location complications, the shoot was pushed back into the summer. On April 12, however, a skeleton crew in Muncie was able to shoot a makeup test teaser for the short film over the course of one afternoon.

Skookum will be shot over the summer on location in Lawrenceburg, Ky. The interns are very excited to travel to the Van Buren pioneer village to shoot the third installment of the series.

Roku: The Final Solution

With the end of the semester clearly in sight, a final decision had to be made about the VOD model for CEREBRAL. We wanted the series to be a TV anthology, and again searched around for potential methods to sell our product. What eventually caught our attention were streaming players such as Apple TV and Roku. These devices essentially turn a home television into an endless store of movies and TV channels. A user can access their Netflix, Hulu Plus, HBOGO accounts and more on one device. They can watch other channels such as Disney and A&E as well. After much research, we discovered that Roku was offering a chance for new users to develop their own channel that would sit among all the other big name channels for a small fee.

This was the light bulb moment for Kenny, Andrew and myself. We realized we could essentially make our own Versa Studios Media channel. Users could pay a small subscription fee, just as they do for Netflix, to access all of the content on our channel. Finally, we had found a model that made sense. We quickly developed the channel, housing our actual content on a Vimeo Pro account, streamed right to the Roku channel.

The crowning moment for this project came on April 30, 2014, as Andrew and I presented our honors thesis in Letterman building, 121. Our Roku channel was set up in a private mode, and we were able to rent a Roku device from a

friend and display our actual Versa Studios Media channel. The search had finally come to an end. When the other installments are filmed/edited and added to the channel, Roku users will be able to subscribe to the Versa Studios Media channel and watch our CEREBRAL anthology series.

Conclusion

While extremely challenging, this entire experience has been enlightening for myself. I have been completely immersed in all aspects of the film industry, from the on-set experience, to the off-set business aspects such as contracts and distribution. Along the way, I was able to add to my existing public relations skills by blogging, running social media and compiling marketing materials for the Versa Internship Program. What my major really helped me with during this process was the ability to get what I needed from certain people, manage their expectations and help run an organization in an efficient manner. It was an incredible experience to create this TV anthology series and I am ecstatic to see how far we can take it into the future.

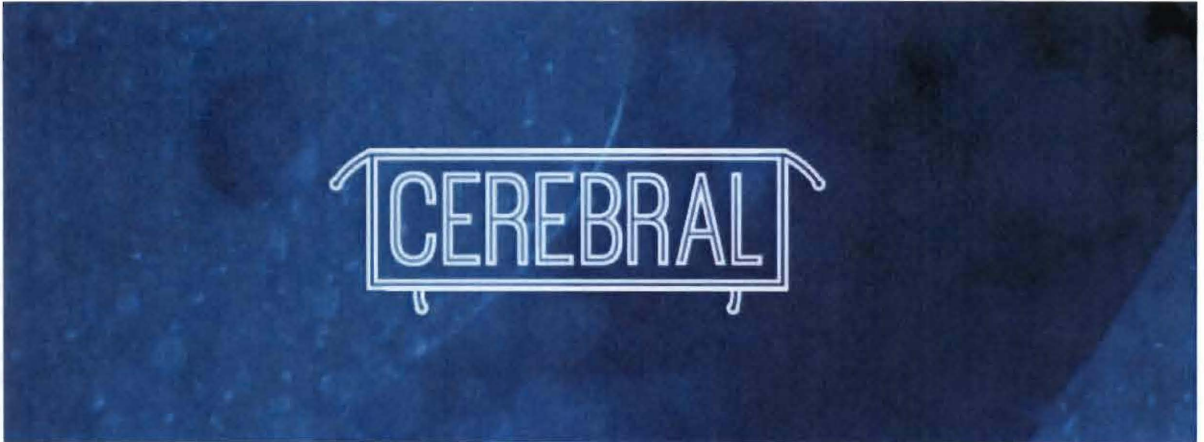
-Dylan A. Pieri

Appendix

Thesis Presentation Prezi:

<http://prezi.com/0eqsjpfxcqzh/cerebral-an-anthology-series/>

CEREBRAL Logo



RUST Location Scouting



Images from RUST



Mike Ashman's house – REPLICA location



Images from REPLICA



Honors Thesis Screening – Versa Roku Channel

