

A Story in the Making: Storytelling in the Digital Marketing of Independent Films

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Abstract

This article examines how the story of the making of the independent Spanish feature film *The Cosmonaut* resembles traditional narrative structures and story elements. It relates the ongoing sharing of the film's production process, and argues that this sharing provided the basis for the film's audience-building. Independent films no longer have to be standalone products that are marketed only after their creation. Related events or products allow the story of the making of a film to transcend the film's temporal boundaries and even the limitations of its medium. The paper concludes that telling the story of a film's making while it happens (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, storytelling, audience building

Independent films have always found themselves on the margins, most even completely outside of popular film culture. Traditionally, only a small number of filmmaking centres 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 enabling independent filmmaking on a larger scale. 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 small-scale films available on the internet (Hesmondhalgh 2007). Findability therefore becomes a critical problem that threatens the promises of popular independent films.

This article presents the case study of Spanish feature-length independent film *The Cosmonaut*. It argues 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, thereby crossing into popular culture and overcoming the problems of findability. The argument is presented in two parts. The first focusses on the story of the making of *The Cosmonaut* while the second considers how this meta-story is narrated using traditional narrative conventions. Given that the story of *The Cosmonaut* was told while the film was being produced and made publicly available through the film's social media channels, the article comes to the conclusion that the film's story was, in fact, extended. Through this ongoing storytelling, *The Cosmonaut* was able to slowly grow a mass audience for which the actual film was merely an end-product, while “watching” took place over time. The typical one-off campaign for a finished film was replaced by a longitudinal story of the process of its making.

The Story of *The Cosmonaut*

The Cosmonaut is the brainchild of Nicolás Alcalá, Carola Rodriguez and Bruno Teixidor of Riot Cinema Collective in Spain.¹ The three met at university, while studying marketing. After graduating, they worked together in advertising, making small video projects. They had no filmmaking experience prior to making *The Cosmonaut*. In 2008 Alcalá and Teixidor discussed conspiracy theories about lost cosmonauts; 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 go, left Soviet cosmonauts alive but lost in space. In the same year, Alcalá read the book *Poetics for Cosmonauts* by Henry Pierrat. 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 turn the idea into his first feature-length movie: *The Cosmonaut*.

What do you need to make a film? You need money. And Riot Cinema Collective became almost obsessed with the theoretical opportunities the internet offers independent content creators. On their blog, the team discussed 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

¹ The information in this section originated from an interview with Nicolás Alcalá (2011) as well as social media output of Riot Cinema Collective.

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 on 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. (Alcalá 2011)

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 space-themed promotional events such as “Yuri’s Nights” (named after Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space). 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 1,000th producer. By 25 April 2011, 3,000 producers had 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*. In the spirit of openness and inclusiveness, Riot Cinema asked their fans to remix the teaser trailer. The team received over a hundred 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 the extent to which Riot Cinema was able to enthuse the public for their project.

Riot Cinema continued to make use of the opportunities digital media provides to 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, all crew and cast were in Latvia, the team had obtained 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 their Russian-Latvian co-producer had pulled out, leaving a 40,000 Euros financing gap. The crowdfunding campaign *Save The Cosmonaut* was born. Riot Cinema Collective turned to its supporters again – by now a big group of people who had either helped to fund the film or just followed it out of interest. It only took the campaign three days to raise 60,000 Euros. In another eleven days, *Save The Cosmonaut* had raised 130,000 Euros: 300% of the amount needed.

Due to the successful campaign, principle shooting began as scheduled on 4 June 2011. Once again, the team used the internet to involve their fans. It live broadcast the film shoot on a number of days through Livestream.com. Seven weeks later, on 22 July 2011, the end of principle photography was announced through a blog entry. Twenty months of post-production and increased marketing activities followed. 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 screenings, conference presentations, interviews and promotional parties were announced 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 the same day. Four years in the making, the film culminated in a

day-and-date release. On 14 May 2013, five years after the idea for *The Cosmonaut* was conceived, 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. The production team had accomplished what it set out to achieve.

The Cosmonaut's story, nevertheless, did not end here. The film had to recoup its costs. Most crew had deferred their payments. Riot Cinema had planned for donations, VOD income, sales of DVDs, cinema screenings and international sales to earn the income required, not only to pay everyone but also to make a healthy profit and prove the validity of their vision of a new business model for independent films in the digital age. However, this was not about to happen. The film reviews were almost all devastating. *The Cosmonaut* received an average rating of 4.0 over 10 on IMDb (n.d.) – a disastrous result for a film that is the child of the internet and the public. Viewing figures and, subsequently, income were disappointingly low.

On 6 July 2013, Riot Cinema Collective (2013) turned to their fans through yet another blog post, somewhat apologizing for disappointing artistic expectations:

We've received savage reviews. Most of them, we understand. We've done a non-narrative film, which not everyone likes. It's also a kind of poetic movie, far from the commercial conventions. Far from it for us to want to be pretentious, as some people has said. It's a movie that comes from a personal view, which you connect with or you don't, and lot of people hasn't connected to it. We understand it and we're sorry some of you haven't liked it. [sic]

The team still celebrated their achievement, perhaps 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; it had merely failed to tell a story that the masses appreciated. The team went on in their attempt to sell the film, set up screenings, entering it into festivals, finding distribution partners, and so forth, albeit with little success.

Overall, Riot Cinema Collective had created, in addition to a feature film, 34 short films, a Facebook Fiction, one book, multiple behind-the-scenes videos, plenty of parties and marketing events. In the end, *The Cosmonaut* had eighty theatrical and semi-theatrical screenings in fourteen 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 received 80,000 views. Despite being represented by Imagina International Sales, one of the biggest agents in Spain, the film did not get any international sales. It was officially selected for twenty-eight film festivals.²

² 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 to be reimbursed 73,000 Euros of the grant money. The agency argued that their funding rules state that a producer has to cover 30% of a project's costs himself. Riot Cinema had stated that the deferred payments for the creators of the transmedia material would account for this 30%. This was acceptable when the funding agency made the decision to award the project, but since the payments were never made, the ICAA no longer accepted this argument and asked for the money back. Riot Cinema Collective entered into a legal battle with the ICAA, using their last money to pay the lawyers. The company itself is bankrupt and had to be dissolved. To make matters worse, Riot Cinema Collective lost their court case against the ICAA, losing, as a result, their only remaining asset, *The Cosmonaut* – everything the three novice filmmakers had worked on for more than six years of their lives.

The Cosmonaut: Story Elements and Structure

The making of *The Cosmonaut* is a tale of ambition, success and failure. Moreover, on a meta-level, the production is itself a story that has traditional narrative elements and follows established storytelling structures. It features a hero, Riot Cinema Collective, who desired to make a feature-length film and to revolutionize independent filmmaking. Like most heroes, Riot Cinema Collective also has a weakness. Nobody on the team had any filmmaking experience prior to *The Cosmonaut*. Yet, they attempted to revolutionize independent filmmaking – an ambition that was 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") to achieve her desire. Once set on its path, Riot Cinema Collective is confronted with obstacles concerning funding, marketing and the distribution of the film. The premiere of *The Cosmonaut* resolves the main dramatic tension – the film is made. The ensuing lawsuit against the ICAA presents 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 its attempt to make back its financial investments. In the end, the hero has learned new things about the world and herself and has therefore ultimately changed (reached a new equilibrium):

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).

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

Indeed, the production of *The Cosmonaut* not only contains the key elements of a story but also follows established narrative structures. 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 discovering the *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. Live broadcasts and diaries from the set allowed for viewers to develop a deeper connection with the protagonists.

Sequence six ends the second act. It is the story’s culmination, resolving the main dramatic tension. The 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. *The Cosmonaut* was now a product. It was made, had been released, but now had to make back its production money. Like most seventh sequences, the story of *The Cosmonaut* features a twist. *The Cosmonaut* was not a film audiences appreciated. It received negative reviews, low to no income and one of its funders, the ICAA, demanded its money back.

The final sequence features the final battle and a resolution. Again, both can be found in the story of *The Cosmonaut*. Riot Cinema Collective went into 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. The hero had undergone a transformation, 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. In traditional popular filmmaking, producers could rely on pre-existing audiences and mass exhibition. Independent film could rarely afford such practices.

The Cosmonaut might be an example of a changing landscape in film marketing. The point is not just that the making of the film follows a conventional narrative structure; the production of the film itself became a story, one that was told in “real-time,” while it unfolded:

[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. (Alcalá 2011)

The parallel between the production of *The Cosmonaut*, of course, and narrative techniques was unintended by the filmmakers, although the above quote seems to suggest that Riot Cinema had at least a vague idea this was the case. It is probably also safe to assume that they would have preferred the traditional happy ending over the tragedy that concluded their journey. Nevertheless, while life itself is never as clear-cut as the plot points in a screenplay, the audience-building success of *The Cosmonaut* (including its successful funding) makes its story relevant to other independent filmmakers.

The Cosmonaut demonstrates that the making of a film can be a compelling narrative. All films begin with a point of attack (idea) followed by a lock-in (the decision to make the film). All films have a main tension (will it be completed?), a plan, obstacles, ups and downs, a resolution (will the film get finished or not?) with further implications, a new goal (distribution/reviews/income) and a hero (filmmaker) that transforms throughout this journey. Independent filmmakers can tell these stories while making films, and they can actively highlight traditional storytelling elements and narrative techniques around their film’s production for a more compelling audience experience.³

The story of a film’s production is usually told retrospectively, not “live.” Riot Cinema Collective, on the other hand, blogged and used social media to update their audience on the progress of their filmmaking journey. For six years, the team was transparent. They told a story about a story, and by doing so, acquired a sizable audience over time and raised 400,000 Euros.

Sharing the story of a film's making attracts audiences, yet *The Cosmonaut* received a score of only 4.0 on IMDb, got countless bad reviews and did not break even financially. As a one-off product, *The Cosmonaut* looks like a failure. On the other hand, it was watched over 200,000 times and raised 400,000 Euros through crowdfunding. People were interested in the story of the making of the film, not the film itself. They were interested in process rather than the product. By all conventional indexes, *The Cosmonaut* is a disappointing film. The story of its making, however, was popular.

³ Not dissimilar to documentary filmmaking structuring real-life stories around traditional storytelling principles (see for instance Curran Bernard 2007).

Treating the filmmaking process as a “story to tell” changes the audience-building process 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. Extending the story of a film by telling the story of its making is one way to overcome the problem of findability among the abundance of competing small-scale film 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.

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