



MOVIE MAKING
AND
SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT

CHAPTER 4



Movie Making & Software Development

This chapter draws on the similarities and parallels between movie making and software development. I will be stretching the limits of artistic license, since I am certainly more familiar with one than I am with the other. In fact, I know very little about the intricacies of the movie making process, and the research that I have done is a poor substitute for experience. However, that said, there are broad themes that seem to apply to both. In particular, I believe that the *art of software development* is just that, an art.

Software development is art with technological underpinnings, just as movie making is art with technological underpinnings. Both are complex, creative, expensive and risky storytelling vehicles. Despite the similarities that exist between the two, due to the nature of the creative processes required for both, it is the parallels between the economics and the organizational dynamics of these two industries that I find fascinating and relevant.

The Players

Consider the players in the movie making process. Not only do you have the big name players (the producer, the director and the actors) you also have a small army of little name players that all make significant contributions (writers, costume designers, cinematographers, sound engineers, editors, musicians, animators, stunt men and women, hair dressers, and so on).

Now, consider the players involved in the software development process. Not only do you need developers and visionary leaders, you also need the services of an entire supporting cast (architects, database specialists, network specialists, technical writers, domain experts, content creators, copy editors, web designers, usability experts, graphics and multi-media experts, sales and marketing, and so on). All of these players are required to tell a story in software.

No producer or director in their right mind would consider working with anyone who is not at the top of their game in any one of these disciplines. Movie making is risky business, and you cannot afford to work with amateurs when even the best of the best often get it wrong. In order to recruit this small army of top talent, you have to deal with the numerous agencies that represent them. Pulling together the talent required to make a major movie is a monumental project management task. The same holds true for software development.

What are the chances that you will find all the top talent you need at XYZ Corporation, which is not in the software business per se, to tell the story in-house? If the story you are currently creating is mission critical and will cost in the millions, can you afford to work with amateurs in any one of these disciplines?

Within XYZ's current software state of affairs, the probabilities are high that your supporting cast will not be ready for prime time. For many supporting cast members, this may be the first time they tell a story in software. The supporting cast is likely to be both talented and full of potential, but these characteristics are no substitute for experience. Chances are that both quality and time-to-market will suffer.

The Process

Movie making and software development are process-driven and project-driven endeavors. They both have a well-defined beginning, middle and end. They require the collaboration of a wide array of talented individuals, all of whom are motivated and focused on producing a unified and coherent deliverable. Project risks run high, and catastrophic results are legend.

The successful completion of a movie is a miracle of sorts. The process demands that a large number of independently artistic people come together with a single goal—the successful rendition of an idea to film, finished within a restricted time frame and budget.²⁸

Replace the quote above with *the successful rendition of an idea to silicon* and it works equally as well for software development. Although there certainly are a large number of bad movies produced each year, I would argue that Hollywood, on the whole, does a much better job of managing large, complex projects than we do in the technology business.

Assuming that this premise is valid, the question that begs asking is, why? Perhaps one answer is that, for the most part, only top talent gets to play in Hollywood. You could probably build a strong case for this argument; however, I believe that there is a more subtle idea at work. Movie making is, by definition, a creative and chaotic process—something that no one disputes. On the other hand, we have tended to treat software development as an engineering process—a potentially fatally flawed premise.

Certainly no one would argue that a pervasive and influential engineering component within the software development discipline does not exist, just as no one would argue that a movie's technological underpinnings are trivial. However, storytelling is central to the movie making process, whereas the idea of software as a storytelling vehicle has only recently surfaced as a meme that is being bandied about.

If you start with the premise that software is primarily story based, then the *entire* dynamic of the process shifts. More emphasis is placed on the creative relationships and conversations taking place among cast members than on the technology required to render the idea to silicon. The human factor becomes front and center. Everything else becomes a secondary, yet still important consideration.

The Story

In the movie business, a great screenplay is everything. A great director and great performances will do little to improve a poor script. The result of a poor script is almost certainly a bad movie. Even though writers often feel that they do not get the credit they deserve, everyone in Hollywood recognizes their importance.

It starts with the written word—it's a familiar dictum, but somehow it keeps getting forgotten along the way. No filmmaker, irrespective of his bag of tricks, can ever forget his commitment to the written word.²⁹

—Steven Spielberg

You must create the story that your software will render in silicon before you ever write a line of code, before you gather requirements, and before you create a project plan. It must be written in quality prose that is enjoyable to read. It must then be vetted with all the stakeholders who will help deliver it: management, product marketing, product development, trusted customers and peers, etc.

If you cannot sell the story to these stakeholders, then *real* customers will never buy it because it will never ship. Or, if it does, you might well wish that it hadn't. The story is the *shared vision* that the cast must believe in, and that the cast is signing up to commit their creative energies toward. To be sure, it will evolve over time, but as it does, the entire cast must be brought along with it.

Rarely have I seen the marketing story and the silicon story aligned in a manner required for successful execution. Organizations that believe these two stories are separate will continue to produce less than desirable results (B-movies), and they

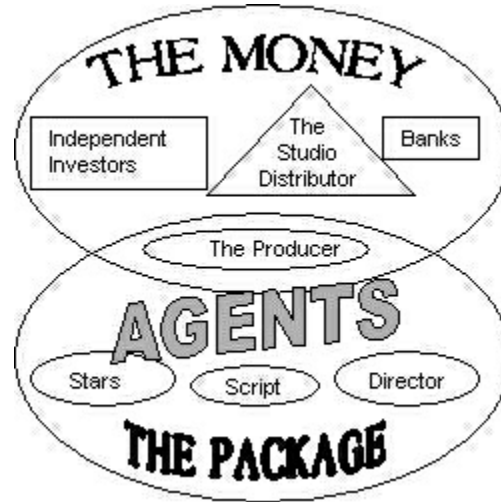


The Story

will, more often than not, bring to market products that are complete disasters at the box office. The marketing story and the silicon story are one and the same, and they must be treated as such from the project's onset.

The Studio

Let's explore the movie studio and production house as a metaphor for a business entity that organizes the production and distribution of stories-in-silicon a bit further. The creation of blockbuster stories-in-silicon is increasingly becoming a game of high stakes poker. The following graphic depicts how Hollywood has dealt with the disintegration of what was once a completely vertically integrated industry:³⁰



Hollywood's Vertical Disintegration

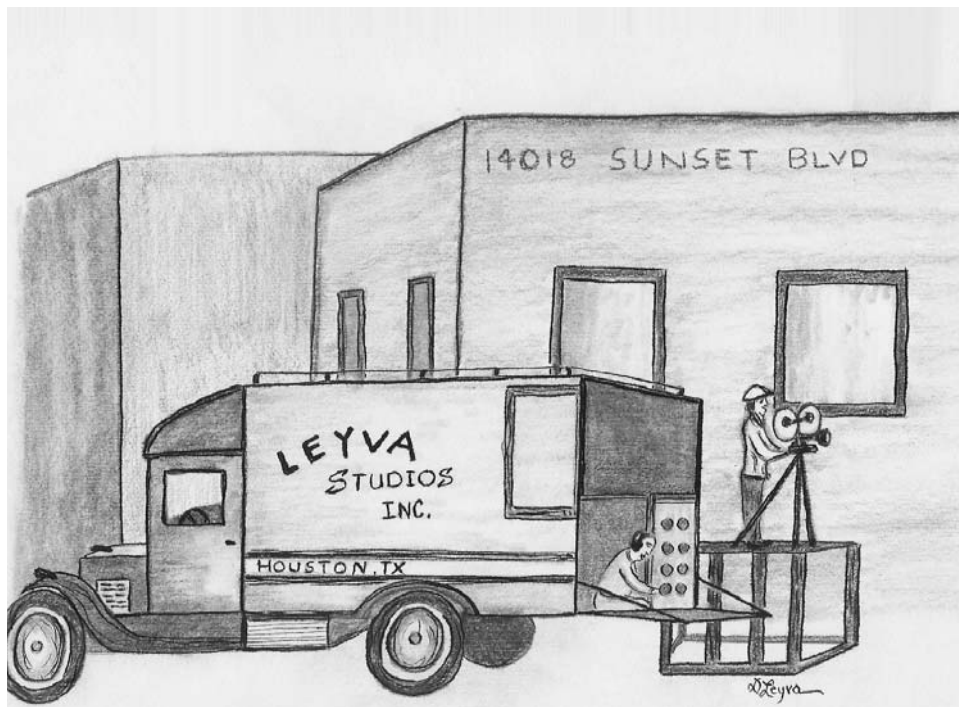
I believe that in the very near future, the software industry will begin to migrate toward a similar model. Why is that? On the surface, there are many similarities that are already apparent. Increasingly, many of the players who participate in the software market are freelancers. On any non-trivial project, you are likely to find freelance developers, technical writers, graphics artists, and a host of other supporting cast members.

The major difference is that Hollywood has taken this model much further up the business and creative food chain. In Hollywood, the producers and directors are highly influential hired guns who often make or break the financial success of any given project. However, the studios and their investment partners own the properties, and because they ultimately supply the money and take the lion's share of risk, they get the last word as to what gets produced.

Corporations that are in the business of producing stories-in-silicon would probably benefit enormously from adapting a somewhat analogous model. They do not necessarily need to be in the creation business, but they need to manage the packaging, branding and the distribution of the resulting properties. Although this model leaves them in control of the business, they will only be successful to

the degree that they can build effective working relationships with the best available creative talent.

The major difference between this model and today's predominant software model is that most organizations continue to be vertically integrated, with respect to software creation and production. The economic forces that have created the *Free Agent Nation* are likely to become even more powerful in the future. The result will be that the best available creative talent will often be more available outside of your organization than within it.



The Studio

The New Model

The new model requires the emergence of the Producer role within organizations that want to tell stories-in-silicon. The Producer is a line executive whose job it is to package and sell (to executive management and any other investors) the value proposition of a particular story. The package includes the specific creative (outsourced) talent that will be expected to deliver a blockbuster story.

Of course, the Producer's credibility will be judged based on his previous track record in successful collaborations with top talent. Once the story is created, the Producer's organization owns the branding and distribution functions. The creative partners may be brought in to do sequels, but all other operational considerations belong under the Producer's purview. As such, the Producer has at his or her disposal a group of operations staff members who are responsible for the care and feeding (support) of the resulting properties.

One of the Producer's primary responsibilities will be to maintain relationships with the agencies and the boutique firms that supply top talent. In addition, the Producer's organization, now freed from the responsibility of creating, can begin to focus on higher order thinking, which will bring their respective organizations a competitive advantage. The Producer's organization will be rewarded for deriving revenue from the story, but not necessarily for creating it.

Why work with talent agencies and boutique firms? Because superstar directors, actors and supporting cast members are likely to gravitate toward firms where they perceive they can maximize both their creative and economic potential. Jesse James, when asked why he robbed banks, had the following response: "Because that's where the money is." As a Producer, you will be motivated to work with these entities "because that's where the talent is."

As radical as this new model may appear, I am quite confident that many leading software organizations have already started experiments along these lines. Therefore, if you want to compete, start thinking like a movie producer.