Stories of Culture and Place

Blending oral, written and digital storytelling in a unique approach to art, literacy and content exploration

Technical notes for green screen storytelling

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DVD of student performances available on request

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Technical Guidelines for a successful green screen storytelling project

Artwork
Observing the following guidelines for creating background artwork will help the final DVD production greatly:

1. Students should use regular paper. 8 ½ X 11 works just fine.

2. Turn the paper on its side. This better resembles the actual shape of a TV or computer monitor, allowing the artwork to completely fill the background.

3. Try to make sure that artwork contains larger objects created in vibrant colors, rather than smaller objects done in light colors. These show up much better. The more contrast in the artwork the better.

4. Place the main object in the artwork off center. This is because performers tend to stand in the middle of the stage when they perform, blocking whatever is behind them. Placing an important character or object off to the side a bit will keep this from happening.

5. Have students move as they tell their stories. This allows the entire piece of artwork to be seen.

6. Make sure storytellers don't wear anything that is close to the color of the chroma green used in the background. Otherwise the artwork they create will show up on their clothes!

Chroma backgrounds
Some of more important considerations are as follows:

1. The background does not need to be green or blue, it just needs to be one solid color. Green or blue have become industry standards because they are distinct and easy to avoid and therefore tend not to interfere with actors' clothing.

2. I use a particular shade of "yuck" green that I found on a sticky pad (as in Post-It-Notes). I then use the stickies to

cover up plug plates, cracks and other imperfections of the wall. Very handy.

3. The best background is a painted wall. It is cheap and easy to do and has fewer wrinkles than a sheet. Wrinkles create shadows and we don't like shadows because it creates an uneven color. The more even the color, the better the chroma effect.

4. You can use a monochromatic sheet as a chroma background. Some bed sheets come in distinct colors that work. You can also dye a sheet. One sheet typically doesn't do it. You will need 2 or 3.

5. Companies make "chroma sheets" that work well in a pinch; that is why I usually travel with one. But you need to steam it or iron it for best results. Bottom line: try to paint a wall first, use a chroma sheet second. They are in the $150 range.

Lighting

Here are some important points about lighting the performance area:

1. Good lighting is key, but bad lighting is not fatal. I have used everything from professional lighting kits to uneven ambient lighting on a day during which the clouds came and went, providing lighting that faded in and out during the performances! It all works, it is just a question of how well.

   The main difference between good and not so good lighting is one of vibrancy – the better and more evenly lit the performance area, the fewer the shadows. The fewer the shadows the more monochromatic the background. The more monochromatic the background, the crisper the chroma key editing, resulting in sharper contrast and more vibrant colors. Any lighting situation works, and the absence of good lighting shouldn't stop you. Just get the best lighting you can.

2. Consistent low lighting is better than brighter, uneven lighting. In a perfect world you would have bright, even lighting. But given the choice between bright and even, take even. Consistent light, even if it is low level, makes chroma

key replacement more effective because it produces a more consistent color. The more consistent the color, the more effective the chroma editing.

3. Use what you have to control light. I use the blinds on windows a lot. If there are no blinds, hanging some sheets to control lighting also works. There are lots of low budget options.

Miking

Miking performances is key. Here are a few rules:

1. Don't rely on the microphone built into the video camera. It produces bad audio. Use a wireless mike plugged into the external mike port of your camera. I use the Azden Wireless Pro. It cost about $150 and is a real trooper. FYI: make sure you are using a video camera that has an external mike port. A few years ago most video cameras did, but now they are harder to find. Consumers weren't using them (to record soccer games and birthday parties) so some manufacturers discontinued them. I find tape-based video recorders are more prone to have them.

2. Don't rely on the mike built into the video camera- did I already mention this? Then I will mention it again. It is that important. You will be disappointed with the final product if you don't. When you use the built-in mike, performances are barely audible and storytellers sound like they have marbles in their mouth.

3. Always check your mike level before recording. Just plug a set of standard iPod or CD player headphones into the phones input on your video camera to make sure everything is coming through. This assumes your camera has such an input. Like the external mike port, these used to be common and are now are harder to find. If you get to the end of your project and you find out you don't have audio, you will be sorely disappointed.

Video Recording
Here are some tips for successful video recording:

1. Don't move the camera. I learned this the hard way. The tendency when video recording a performer is "to lead with the talent," that is, try to anticipate where storytellers are going to move and move there just before they do. Not so with recording in this case. Because the background artwork remains static, some of the things on the stage appear to move in an out of view, creating a very strange and distracting effect. Bottom line: set up the camera so that it captures the basic performance area and leave it.

2. Define the performance area. Sometimes, especially with kids, I will set up physical barriers (like desks, chairs, or tape lines on the floor) to define the area they need to move within. Nothing worse than having a storyteller constantly off-camera (except a storyteller who isn't wearing a wireless mike- did I mention this?)

Clothing
Here are some tips about what storytellers should wear:

1. Storytellers should not wear clothes that are the same color as the chroma background! Otherwise their artwork will end up on their clothes. This is an interesting effect, if this is what you are after. But it is a devastating effect if unintended.

2. Send a note home with parents about clothing color. I take a "yuck" green stickie and fix it to a handout that goes home to parents with the note "make sure your kids don't wear anything this color!"

Involving students
With a little training students of most ages can do everything involved in the process. Have students fix the wireless mikes to each other and test sound, set up the camera, scan the artwork, and then sit with them to do the chroma editing. I tend to train a few people who then train their peers. Then I hang around in case I am needed.