Feature

Creating a Costuming Demo Reel

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Demo reels enable established costume designers to show off their work. A veteran costumer shows how new costume designers and hobbyist costumers can create demo reels without extensive video clips.

Demo reels are an essential tool for creative professionals to show off their best work, including actors, set designers, and costume designers. A demo reel is a carefully selected and edited video compilation that showcases their best work.

What do Experts Recommend?

Demo reels provide studios and theater management a way to quickly assess the creative work and make hiring decisions more efficiently than by conducting in-person auditions or reviewing physical portfolios. A demo reel should be as short as possible. Those making hiring decisions must review many of them in a short period of time, so the demo reel should give them the information they need to either hire you or to call you in for an in-person audition.

What do experts recommend for a demo reel?

- Start with basic information about you, such as name and contact info.
- The demo reel should run anywhere between 1-½ and 2 minutes long, and no more than 3 minutes at the outside.
- Include 3-5 scenes or segments showing different aspects of your work using images, video, and sound.
- Engage the emotions by using smart and snappy timing and variety to hold the viewer's interest.

Challenge for New Designers and Hobbyist Costumers

Established costume designers with a many productions under their belts are likely to have a library of video clips of their work, either from movie or TV productions, or from videos of stage productions taken for such purposes.

Title shot of costuming demo reel for author and his wife.

For example, Hollywood costume designer Shawna Trpcic brought her demo reel to a show-and-tell at a convention several years ago. It included clips from TV series like Torchwood, Firefly, and Dollhouse, and showed off Trpcic's amazing range as a costume designer in an emotionally engaging way.

New costume designers will likely have mostly still photos and design drawings as part of the portfolios that they developed during their course work, and possibly a few video clips from student runway shows.

Hobbyist costumers can also benefit by creating a demo reel as a convenient record of their work for the entertainment and enjoyment of family and friends. Some high-end masquerades that require entrants to "audition" may also accept a costuming demo reel.
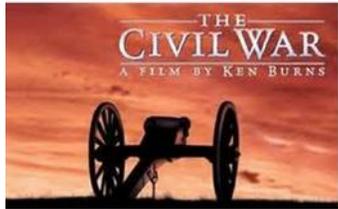
Hobbyist costumers are in a similar situation to new costume designers. They have mostly still photos from costume masquerades, those taken in the halls at conventions, or ones taken during custom photoshoots. They may also have a few video clips from masquerades at larger conventions.

Solution: Use Your Assets

If you have mostly still images and design drawings, and very little video, those are the assets you have to work with. How

can that compete with the what established designer has available?

The solution is to take a tip from film maker Ken Burns. Burns made a name for himself as a maker of documentaries on historical topics. One of his most famous was *The Civil War*, where he took still images from photographer Mathew Brady and others, added maps and illustrations, presented them in a way that was visually interesting, and added an effective sound track that engaged viewers' emotions.

You can do the same thing. Here is how.

• Organize your still photos and design drawings into a sequence of photos and images that tell a story.

• Choose a soundtrack that enhances the presentation and engages viewers' emotions in multiple ways.

• Sequence your content, making effective use of timing, intercuts and transitions to bring the presentation to life.

• If you have mostly still images use very short video clips only as a accent.

Here are some details about each of these ideas.

Organize Your Content

Organize the amount of content you have into three to five connected topics or scenes that, put together, tell the story you want to tell. Once you have gathered together all the photos, drawings, and any video clips, you should decide what story you can tell about your costuming work using this material at hand.

For example, if you are primarily an historical costumer, you might organize your material into periods or social classes. If you are primarily a sci-fi/fantasy costumer, you could organize your material by genre or mood. Build your story or narrative around the material you have available.

Select your best photos, drawings, and video clips from among all the ones you have gathered together, and put them into folders representing the individual scenes you have decided on. You can always add a few more from ones you did not choose if you run short.

Choose a Soundtrack

The next step is to create a sound track that fits your story. This is usually a piece of music that is about the right length, with the right tempo and mood. You are looking for something between 1-1/2 and 2 minutes long. It is best if the music has a definite beat that you can use to frame individual images, and changes of pace to keep the presentation from becoming monotonous. Always try for an uncompressed format like AVI. Compressed audio formats like MP3 are smaller, but have poor quality.

If you choose carefully, you could also select several different pieces of music for the different topics or scenes you have decided on, as long as there is a smooth transition from one to the next.

Sequence the Content

Once you have your material and a sound track, you are ready to start planning the sequence in which you will present the

material. Listen to the sound track a number of times, and mark out key beats and transitions in the music and use that to guide the order and duration of each photo or image in each topic or scene. Also, note the duration of each scene. This will dictate not only the number of photos and images you can include, but also the duration you will give to each one.

If you have a photo that shows important detail about a costume, have that come at a time where there is a longer time between beats in the audio track, or hold on it for several beats before moving to the next photo or image.

You can also begin thinking about intercuts and transitions between photos or images. For example, many of the transitions among ones in the same topic or scene will be the same, but the transition between scenes can be more dramatic.

Intercuts allow you to have a sequence of photos from the same costume that show its many details. And of course, there is the "Ken Burns" effect that enables you to zoom in or out, or to pan on a still image to give a sense of motion.

A useful tool for planning is a spreadsheet that is divided into topics or scenes, and lines for the photos and images in their order. In animation, this is known as a timing and spacing chart. Each line has the name of the file, the duration, and the amount of transition time between it and the next. For planning purposes, fill in 1 second transition times; you can adjust these later.

Use of Video Clips

Unless you have a enough video clips, consider not using them at all. If you do have a half a dozen, you can intercut very short (3-5 second) clips.

The problem is that the pacing of video clips is very difficult to control. They can totally throw off the pacing established by the music track and the timing of the still images. I also suggest removing the sound from the video and using the underlying audio track instead to avoid throwing off the timing and impact of the demo reel.
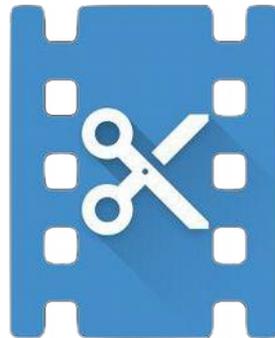
A Word About Copyright

Be sure to understand the copyright issues involved with photos, videos, and audio that you use. Unless you created them yourself, you have a copyright issue.

Try to get permission from the copyright holders of all the material that you include in your demo reel, including photos, sound track, and video clips. Photographers will generally give permission if you ask and give credit. Video and audio may require a license fee, depending on a source.

Practically speaking, what rights you need depends on the how and how widely you distribute your demo reel, and the rules of the distribution platform. If you distribute the demo reel to individual agents, studios, and theater management, you have less exposure than if you put it on a platform like YouTube. Even in a public hosting platform, your exposure is less if access to your demo reel requires a password.

For example, YouTube may blank-out your audio track if the artist or the recording company claims copyright infringement.

Software

A number of basic and high-end software products are available for assembling photos, images, and video clips into a demo reel presentation. Tools may be platform specific (e.g. MacOS or Widows only) while others are multi-platform. Some are very easy to use but have limited capabilities, while others require more training but can produce more sophisticated results.

Here is a brief summary of some products that you can consider using.

Apple MacOS/iOS Only

Several MacOS and iOS specific products are available for creating demo reel video presentations.

iMovie. (MacOS, iOS) This product is bundled with MacOS and iOS, as part iLife software that also includes GarageBand for audio editing and iPhoto for managing and editing photos. While the primary focus of iMovie is video editing, it allows organizing both video and photos assets into presentations and adding a sound track.

The product provides a timing track that enables you to place video and photo assets, assign durations, and add transitions between images and video clips. It also provides a selection of titles and subtitles. There are a modest number of transitions in the transition library, and there are third-party packages that can add new ones. The product also provides effects like the "Ken Burns" effect that pans or zooms on a still image, that Ken Burns employed on documentaries like *The Civil War*.

Final Cut Pro. (MacOS) This product is a professional level video editing suite created and sold by Apple. Its interface and controls are very similar to iMovie, and it can even read in an iMovie project if you want to further enhance it with features that are only available in Final Cut Pro.

Like iMovie, Final Cut Pro is designed primarily for editing movies, but it can also manage and and organize image assets, assign durations, and add transitions between images and video clips,. The product comes with an extensive set of transitions, effects, and titles, and it supports multiple tracks, which is handy for cutting between multiple views of an asset.

Microsoft Windows 10 Only

Microsoft Photos. This product is bundled with recent Windows 10 releases. It replaces Microsoft Movie Maker that was available on earlier versions of Windows. It is billed as a "direct replacement" for Movie Maker, but many consider it to be a shadow of the earlier product.

Microsoft Photos provides a very modest selection of filters, effects, and titles, and image and video content can be organized into a simple single-track timeline.

Cross-Platform

There are several products available that run on multiple operating systems

Adobe Premiere. (Windows, MacOS) This is a professional video editing product with features similar to those of Apple's Final Cut Pro, and aimed at a similar audience. Like FCP, it is aimed at existing users of other products in their respective eco-systems.

Adobe Premiere has an extensive library of transitions and effects that can be applied to both images and videos, and supports titles and multiple tracks.

Shotcut. (Windows, MacOS, Linux) This is an open source, cross-platform video editor that can also incorporate images into video presentations. Shotcut provides similar functionality to iMovie, and other features found on professional programs.

Shotcut supports fully-customizable filters and effects. It has a respectable library of transitions and effects, and new ones can be added. The only downside is that the program does not support platform-specific export file formats, but this should not be a problem for a demo reel video.

Presentation Packages

Presentation packages provide many of the same capabilities for creating a sequence of images and adding timing and transitions between them. They also support an audio track that plays during a presentation. Some of these packages can also export a "slideshow" as a video file, making them candidates for producing a demo reel.

Here are two to consider.

Microsoft PowerPoint: Office 365 (Windows, MacOS). Only the subscription-based Office 365 version of PowerPoint can export video files of a presentation. The program provides the same filters and effects as other versions of PowerPoint, including a modest selection of transitions.

The advantage of using PowerPoint is that it is already familiar to many people, so there is no learning curve. The disadvantage is that it is not as full-featured as even basic programs like iMovie on MacOS. Still, it is worth considering if it meets your needs.

Apple Keynote. (MacOS, iPad) This product is bundled with MacOS and iOS, as part of the iWork software that also includes Pages and Numbers. The program has most of the features found in other presentation products like Microsoft PowerPoint. It provides a modest but adequate selection of transitions and effects, and supports exporting the presentation as a video file.

The advantage of using Keynote is that it is already familiar to many people who use Apple's iWork products, so there is no learning curve. The disadvantage is the same as for PowerPoint: it is not as full-featured as even basic programs like iMovie, but it is worth considering if it meets your needs.

Other Software

In addition to video or presentation software, you may also need several other programs for preparing your images, audio, and video content. Here are a few of the types of programs you may need.

Photo editing. If you need to crop, resize, or color-correct images for your demo reel, you will need to use photo editing software such as:

- Preview (MacOS and iOS)
- Microsoft Photo Editor (Windows 10)
- Adobe Photoshop (MacOS, Windows 10)
- Gimp (MacOS, Windows, Linux)

Audio ripping and editing. If you need to rip an audio track, or cut and edit a track for your demo reel, you will need to use audio editing software such as:

- Garage Band (MacOS, iOS)
- Adobe Captivate (MacOS, Windows 10)
- Audacity (MacOS, Windows, Linux)

Video ripping. If you plan to include video from a masquerade DVD, you will also need video ripping software.

Sample Demo Reel

As an example of how to apply the advice on planning and creating a costuming demo reel, I will show how I created the demo reel to show off some of my wife Kathe's and my costumes.

I had originally created a version of our demo reel on Windows 7 several years ago using Microsoft Movie Maker. Since the program is no longer available and my primary computer is now a Macbook Pro, I

created a new version using iMovie. Some of the effects, transitions, and titles that I originally used in Microsoft Movie Maker are not available in iMovie, so I used the closest substitutes available.

I also have Final Cut Pro, which has considerably more transitions, effects, and titles than either Microsoft Movie Maker or iMovie, but I decided to stick with the free iMovie program to show what it can do. That also gives me the option of improving the demo reel in the future by importing the iMovie project into Final Cut Pro.

At the same time, I took the opportunity to include new costumes that we had made since the original demo reel that we are especially proud of. I plan to keep it up to date going forward as we continue to make new costumes.

Organizing the Content

Since we do a number of types and styles of costuming, I decided to organize the presentation into three scenes or segments, representing historical, sci-fi, and fantasy. Consequently, we selected what we consider to be our best costumes over the years and I organized them into three folders. I included more photos than I will probably need to give me a choice about which will appear in the final demo reel.

We do have videos of some of our costumes from larger masquerades that we have entered, but I elected not to use them for the reasons I described earlier, and also

because none appeared in the original demo reel. I may revisit this decision in the next version.

Selecting a Sound Track

I had several music options in mind from nearly the start of the original project, and elected to stick with the same music this time. My original goal was to find a single piece of around 2 minutes in length with sections that work for all three scenes.

One of the artists I had in mind was Wendy Carlos and something from "Switched On Bach." The music is vibrant and some of the pieces are in three movements. However there were no selections that came close to fitting the length requirement.

Then I thought of one of my favorite groups, The Nuclear Whales, a saxophone orchestra who recorded many classical and popular pieces. Reviewing several of their albums turned up a piece that was ideal: "All the Things You Are," by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II from their album "Whalin'." Their rendition is lively, naturally divides into three sections, and is around 2 minutes and 30 seconds in length. (Listen to a sample of it [here](#).)
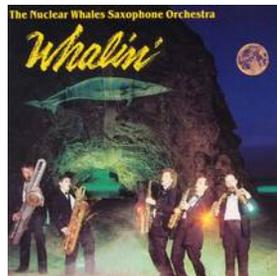
Sequencing the Content

Once I had the content organized into segments, and selected a sound track, the next step was to time out each segment based on the music, select and sequence the images in each segment, and plan the timing and transitions for each image based on the beats in the music. To do this, I used a spreadsheet to create a timing and spacing chart. It includes the opening title with our information, and titles for each of the three segments. These are dictated by the times of the lead-ins and the three segments in the music

	Description	Media	Time	Duration	Transition After
1	Description	Media	Time	Duration	Transition After
2	Opening title		0.00	3.0	1.0
3	Sci-fi book cover	Sci-Fi_Title.JPG	4.00	3.0	1.0
4	Airship captain and stewardess	Steampunk_Airship_Crew.jpg	8.00	1.5	1.0
5	Flash Gordon	Flash_Gordon.jpg	10.50	1.0	1.0
6	Flashy Gordon	Flashy_Gordon.jpg	12.50	2.0	1.0
7	Jocasta Nu and R2D2	Jocasta_Nu.jpg	15.50	1.5	1.0
8	Obiwan	phili_wan.jpg	18.00	1.5	1.0
9	Daniel Falconer light saber	P1070397.JPG	20.50	1.5	1.0
10	Boushh	Boushh.jpg	23.00	2.0	1.0
11	Thermal detonator	Class-A_thermal_detonator.jpg	26.00	1.0	1.0
12	Classic and ceremony Leahs	Leahs.jpg	28.00	2.0	1.0
13	Medal of Yavin	Ceremony_Metal.png	31.00	2.0	1.0
14	All 11 Leahs	L_11.JPG	34.00	2.0	1.0
15	Star Trek crew	TOS_crew.jpg	37.00	1.5	1.0
16	Kang and Mara	Klingons.jpg	39.50	1.5	1.0
17	Kang and Mara on Enterprise bridge	Klingons_On_Bridge.jpg	42.00	1.5	1.0
18	Klinon Disruptor	Klingon_Disruptor.jpg	44.50	1.5	1.0
19	Venusion expeditionary crew	Spaceman.jpg	47.00	1.5	1.0
20	Pixidust Title: "Fantasy", Unseely Faries	Faries.jpg	49.50	2.0	1.0
21	Head shot of Unseely farie	Farie_close.jpg	52.50	1.5	1.0

Timing and spacing chart for demo reel.

The time column has a formula that sums the time, duration, and transition after of the previous image to get the start time of the current image. I initialized the transition after durations to 1 second. I can modify this for individual images later.

At that point, I selected and ordered the content within each segment. The music suggested ordering the segments as Sci-Fi, then Fantasy, and finally Historical. The Sci-Fi segment was arranged by genre, for

example: classic sci-fi, Star Wars, Star Trek, etc. The Fantasy segment was also organized roughly by genre: faeries, classic fantasy, horror, Doctor Who, and Lord of the Rings. The Historical segment organized most naturally in chronological order.

Putting it Together

Now that I had an organization, a sound track, and a timing sheet, it was time to use iMovie to create the demo reel. The first thing to do was drag and drop the music track file to the iMovie timeline. Next, I created a title card from the library that provided both a title and subtitle. The title was "Costuming Demo Reel" and the sub-title was just our names. I could also have included a date or contact info if this were one for a professional costume designer.

For the Sci-Fi segment, I found an image of a book cover that already had the title "Science Fiction" For the Fantasy segment, I chose an effects title called "Pixie
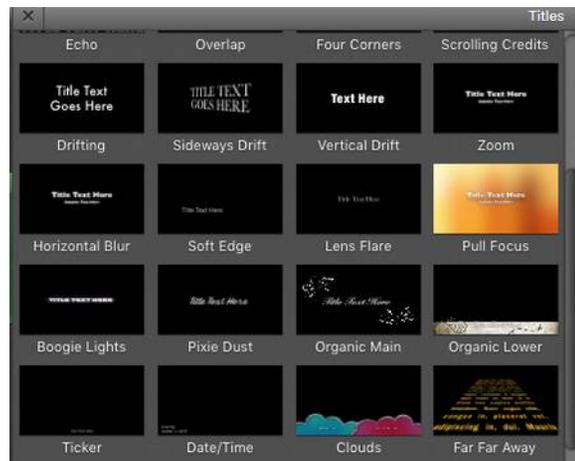
iMovie title pallett.

Dust" that played over an image of us as unseely fairies. The Historical segment title used a effects title called "Organic Main" that had vine leaves, shown over us in Elizabethan period costumes. I dragged and dropped these images to the timeline and added the title effects to play over them from the title palette.

Next, I created the Sci-Fi segment by dragging and dropping the image files specified in my timing and spacing spreadsheet to the timeline. I set an option in the project to automatically add a cross-dissolve transition between each image. I chose this as my default transition because it is gives some motion to the sequence without being intrusive. I can override the transition when I want a different effect.

I set the duration of each photo by selecting it in the timeline, and dragging its right handle until the photo is of the correct duration, as shown by the duration label.

I changed the transitions where I wanted a particular effect. For example, I used the most dramatic transitions between segments of the demo reel, and less dramatic


ones for changes in genre within a given segment. I selected specialty transitions between images to produce a particular effect. For example, I used a cross-blur transition to "morph" one image into the next. Such as between "Flash Gordon" and "Flashy Gordon."

To change the transition, I selected the transition, then "Transition Adjustments" from its popup menu to access the transition inspector.
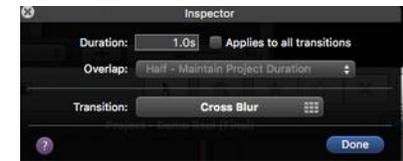
Then I selected the Transition button to bring up the transition palette and choose the new transition.

iMovie timeline with title, sequence title, images, and transitions.
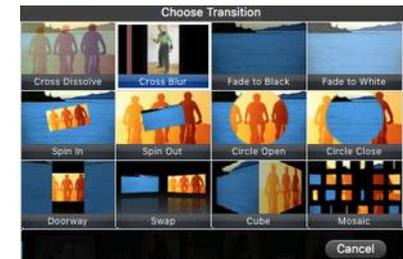
Most of the image durations were between 1 second and 3 seconds. While that does not seem very long, it was more than enough to leave a good impression of the costume. In the Fantasy segment, I had a sequence of photos of my recreation of Lon Chaney's "Red Death" costume from the 1925 movie, *The Phantom of the Opera* that could be put together into a sequence. To do this, I chose a shorter duration of 0.6 seconds for each sequence and also made the cross-dissolve time between them 0.6 seconds. This was very effective, and gave the impression of a motion sequence.
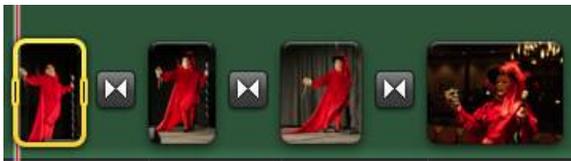
Quick-cut sequence suggests motion.

Since I also make props for some of our costumes, I also set up sequences that showed the costume, and then a closeup photo of the prop. For example, I used an "circle open" transition between a photo of my "Bounty Hunter Boushh" costume and the "thermal detonator" prop that he carries.

Sequence showing costume and detail of prop.

Once I had the Sci-Fi segment set up and timed based on the timing and spacing spreadsheet, I went on to complete the Fantasy and the Historical segments of the demo reel.

The final image in the Historical section was one of costumes from the movie *Singing in the Rain*, showing "Olga Mara" and "The Count" from the opening scene. One of the effects that I used from Microsoft Movie Maker in the original version of the demo reel was one that made the image look like an old-time black and white image. I wanted to use the same effect in the new version, and found video effects called "Aged Film" and "Film Grain that looked promising.

Unfortunately, neither of these two video effects worked in iMovie due to a bug in the software. I reported the bug to Apple, and chose the "Black and White" effect instead. I can always go back and try out the other transitions if they ever fix the bug.

Original photo and with "Black & White" video effect.

Music credit at the end of the demo reel.

The final image was the credits for the music used in the demo reel. Unfortunately, "The Nuclear Whales" has since broken up and I could find no way to contact the group to ask for permission to use the track, but we wanted to credit the orchestra and also the composer and lyricist, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II for the arrangement and the original composition.

You can view the finished demo reel video on the SiWCostumers YouTube channel.

I hope this article has inspired you to create your own costuming demo reel. Whether you are a new costume designer or a hobbyist costumer, having a costuming demo reel will provide is an entertaining way to show off your costuming skills.

Philip Gust enjoys sci-fi and fantasy costuming, and has particular interests in props, special effects, and prosthetic makeup. He also costumes in historical periods, including Regency, Victorian, and early 20th C.