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Anthony Jr.

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Allan Duso
Candidate for B.S. in Television/Radio/Film
and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in Television/Radio/Film

Capstone Project Advisor: _____
Keith Giglio, Assistant Professor

Capstone Project Reader: _____
Neal Coffey, VPU Manager

Honors Director: _____
Stephen Kuusisto, Director

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Abstract

Video Editors are the unsung heroes that take every piece of media, shot in production, and spin it into a story that is entertaining from beginning to end. It is hard to spot a marvelous editor because the better they are, the less the audience notices. It is only the bad cuts or the mismatched shots that the audience points out. There is no way to show the amount of work and puzzle-solving editors put in to make a movie sparkle.

For my capstone project, I edited *The Sopranos* television series down into a feature length movie. The story focuses on the son, Anthony Jr., or AJ for short, as he grapples with his teenage years under the shadow of his Mob boss father. The goal of the movie is to entertain viewers who are avid fans of the show, as well as people who have never watched an episode.

Everyone who has been through the angst filled teenage years can relate to Anthony Jr.'s struggles. His happiness, confusion, and sorrow are compounded in a world surrounded by his father's organized crime lifestyle.

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Executive Summary

This capstone project is a feature-length movie created from the multi-year television series, *The Sopranos*. It was a long and time-consuming project that taught me about every aspect of movie making. The project started with research and note taking. It then went into capturing and transcoding. After that, shots needed to be sequenced. A full assembly of the story could then be created. The project went through five drafts, each with extensive notes. During revisions, music was added and shots were changed to make the scenes work. The end result is a movie that focuses on AJ Soprano's story through the series.

The research stage entailed determining the best television series to turn into a movie. The show needed to be relatively current. Additionally, it should be a show with a familiar title and premise, whether or not people had seen it. It needed to be a show that people had passion for. Lastly, the show needed to be completed or at least in its final season during Fall 2013.

Several shows were in contention: *The Sopranos*; *Community*; *How I Met Your Mother*; *Breaking Bad*; *Dexter*; *Lost*; and a few others. *How I Met Your Mother* was quickly cut from the list because a television drama was better suited to the project than a comedy. The comedic value of the show would be lost in the formation of a movie. *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos* were the top two choices because they fit all the above criteria and were also suggested multiple times when people were asked for suggestions. The downfall of having *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos* as the top two choices

was that I had seen neither series before starting the project. A season's worth of episodes for each show had to be watched before making an educated decision. Initially *Breaking Bad* was chosen because I enjoyed the selected episodes more than I enjoyed *The Sopranos*. However, *The Sopranos* fit my criteria better.

Once the decision was made, the entire series had to be watched and notes taken on each episode. The show lasted six and a half seasons and the entire story covers around seven years of the characters' lives. Each season is a new year. The show focused on Tony Soprano, a mob boss in New Jersey. He had the mob, his wife and his two kids to manage. A typical American can relate to the struggles of dealing with work and family. However, there is an engaging layer of shocking violence in Tony's mob life.

The next step was to determine a focus for the movie. Selecting a single character would provide continuity. The character should evolve through the series and have a different outlook on the world by the end. AJ Soprano, Tony's thirteen-year-old son was chosen because it was unknown how he would cope with growing up in the shadow of his mob boss father. The series surprised me with the direction it went with AJ's character. However, an entertaining and rewarding story still existed.

With the show watched, the media on commercial DVDs had to be ripped onto a computer hard drive. Ripping means to digitize the DVD content into a media file that is playable on the computer separate from the DVD. For the six and half seasons there were four DVDs per season. Each

DVD took about an hour to rip onto the computer. To do the ripping I used a free software, *Handbrake*. Three computers were used simultaneously to streamline the process.

After the DVDs were completely ripped into watchable media files, it was time to import them into the editing system. *Avid Media Composer* was used for this process. This program is the industry standard and will be the program that I will use at my first job after graduation. Fortunately, I learned the program over the summer by watching over thirty hours of tutorials. During my fall semester, senior year, I took the Avid class in Newhouse and got my User Certification.

There are two ways to import a file into *Avid Media Composer*. The first way is called Avid Media Access (AMA). This way is the preferred way by many editors because it is fast. With AMA I would be able to view all the media instantly and make selections from the hour-long episodes. After doing AMA, all the clips are visible in bins within the editor. The AMA clips do not play very seamlessly in Avid because their file format is not a format that *Avid Media Composer* likes to edit with. When using the AMA method, the files have to be converted into a format that the editing program likes to use. This step is called transcoding because the original files are transferring to a different format.

For reasons that are unknown to me, *Avid Media Composer* would not let me transcode the clips. The solution to this problem was to use the second form of importing. In *Avid Media Composer*, this method is simply

called Import. The reason why this method is not preferred is because it is harder to increase the resolution later on. With the AMA and transcode option, the editor is able to easily recognize the original files and use those to raise the quality. When editing a large movie project, the media files need to be a low resolution so they are easier to scrub through. Scrubbing is the action of quickly skimming through the video content. After editing is completed, the resolution is increased. I determined that the super high resolution was not necessary. This video will be watched online, so the video quality must be able to quickly stream. The importation of clips would thus be acceptable.

All eighty-seven hours of footage were imported into the program. The import process took over thirty-six continuous hours. After the import, it was crucial to isolate every instance that AJ Soprano was ever shown in the series. String outs, or sequences that contain a single idea from the entire show, were created for each season. For this project, string outs were made for each season and contained every instance that AJ was shown on screen. This was a crucial step in piecing the story together because it allowed me to become extremely familiar with his story and not be distracted by everything else that went on in the show. The scenes were watched over and over again, during which several options for structure were considered.

The movie went through many revisions and was watched by a total of ten people before the final draft. After my fourth draft, I set up a focus group screening. Five people showed up to the screening, which was a

perfect number to give me that extra bit of feedback on the movie. The advice and suggestions further developed my creative idea.

The one hour and twenty-six minute movie is structured around Anthony Jr.'s attempted suicide in the last season. The opening scene is AJ sitting at the edge of a pool, holding a cinder block. At that point, the audience does not know if AJ jumps in the pool or gets up and walks away. From there, the story goes back in time and follows the circumstances that brought him to the edge. AJ deals with many obstacles through his adolescent years at home. He has problems at school, problems with girls and problems with his family. The movie, *Anthony Jr.*, is a focused look of one character's journey during the series, *The Sopranos*.

Reflective Essay

Working on the capstone project and seeing it come to fruition was one of the most rewarding experiences of my college career. Knowing that I took something and shaped it into a feature length movie that is watchable and deemed “enjoyable”, is an amazing feeling.

One of the most difficult parts of the entire capstone process was coming up with an idea. The only requirement that is given for someone majoring in television/radio/film is that the project needs to be “substantial”. Substantial could mean many things!

During Fall of my Junior year, I was in the *Feature Film Screenwriting* with Professor Giglio. He was my professor for Introduction to Screenwriting the previous year as well. His classes taught me much about the industry and how to piece a story together. After taking his classes, I thought that I wanted to become a writer/director after college. Throughout my college career, I have directed many videos and I have had many leadership positions. All of this, I thought, would lead to a promising career as a writer/director. I knew that I did not want to exclusively write because I also get enjoyment out of physically creating something. Putting words on the page is only half of the process for me. How the words are later portrayed is where I get the most enjoyment.

In the feature film writing class, we had to write an entire full-length movie. Again, the hardest part of the project was coming up with that first idea. Once I had a satisfying idea, I ran with it. The entire semester I worked

on finishing 120 pages of a script that made me extremely proud. It was not because I thought what I had written was gold, but because I had accomplished a huge task. This feeling and the knowledge that I learned through the duration and completion of my script transferred over to my capstone project.

At the same time that I was working on the feature length script, I took the *Capstone Preparedness Seminar*. With the notion that I wanted to become a writer/director after college, I thought that the perfect capstone project would be for me to create a short film based off of the feature length script I had written. The goal was to take a scene or collection of scenes from the feature movie and turn it into a fifteen to twenty minute short video. After the project was completed, I would send it to festivals and if the film did well, I could use it to sell my feature length screenplay.

With this project, I would have swallowed almost every production and post-production role. I would have been the writer, the director, the camera operator and the editor. This would have been a rewarding project, but I later realized that some of the roles that would be undertaken during this process were no longer of interest to me.

Second semester junior year, I participated in the Syracuse University Los Angeles Program. The program lasted from January to May, at which point I decided to stay in Los Angeles for the summer. The program consists of attending an internship during the day, and classes in the evening. The school helps students obtain internships, but encourages students to find

their own. I found an internship at a small production company. The company, Psychic Bunny, contracts with different local organizations to create videos. All the work, from pre-production to post-production, is done in house. The internship was an excellent learning experience for me. I was able to be involved in every part of their creative process. I read scripts, helped with shoots, edited videos, and helped with visual FX work. The visual FX work consisted of compositing and matte painting. This is the process of adding or removing items in a shot. Since the company was so small, they relied on interns to help with many of the projects.

Even though I believe that I wanted to be a writer/director, I have always been obsessed with computers, technology, and post-production. Before starting my college career, I thought that I wanted to become an editor. It was not until I got into my other classes that I thought I wanted to branch out to different production fields. At Psychic Bunny, I was able to refine my interests by getting professional, hands-on experience for all the jobs that interested me.

Post-production was what I helped with the most at Psychic Bunny, and I quickly learned that editing in a professional setting is different than I expected. Before going to Los Angeles, I was under the assumption that editors live like hermits and never have the chance to socialize with coworkers. This is true for some editors, but from my experience, if I choose to work around people, then I do not have to have a loner lifestyle.

During my Junior year spring semester, I did not actively spend time working on my capstone project. I was so busy with my internship and classes that it was not on my mind. However, by spending time in the film industry, I was subconsciously refining my goal for the project.

The Syracuse University Los Angeles program sets every student up with a mentor. This mentor is someone who graduated from Syracuse and is now working successfully in the industry. I was fortunate enough to get set up with a fantastic documentary editor. He is awesome! Not only is he a great friend, but also I respect his work ethic and professional insight. During one of our meetings, I told my mentor that I wanted to stay out in Los Angeles for the summer, but I really needed a paid job. He said he would ask around for me. After several weeks, he set me up with an interview to be a paid post-production assistant on a documentary. I was the only one applying and because of my mentor, I got the job.

There was one catch with me getting the position. I had to learn a new editing program, *Avid Media Composer*. Up until that point, I had never even looked at the program. At Psychic Bunny, I had to learn *Adobe Premier* but that program is so similar to *Apple Final Cut*, that it did not take me very long to figure out. *Avid Media Composer* was a whole new beast that I had to get up to speed with very quickly. I assured my bosses that I was a quick learner and that I would be able to pick up the program fast. I told them about my obsession with watching video tutorials. Right after getting the job, I downloaded the free trial of *Avid Media Composer* to have on my laptop.

Then, using Lynda.com, I watched over thirty hours of tutorials. By my first day of work, I already was aware of the basics. I was by no means fluent yet, but I knew enough to give me a foundation, enabling the assistant editors to teach me the rest.

The documentary had a great learning environment because there were so many people working on the project. It had to be done by the end of summer. This meant that the busiest times, there were three editors, one associate editor, two assistant editors, and one post-production assistant (me). There were also producers, and their assistants. The experience gave me a firsthand look at all the different tiers of becoming an editor.

Through one of my professors in Los Angeles, I found out about a director who needed an editor to work for free on his short film. He had made a career as a children's television writer and now wanted to try his hand at directing. Unfortunately, he only had a shoestring budget to make the short film he envisioned. He did not have enough money to pay an editor. I professed my interest, while meeting with him, and he agreed to have me work with him. During the day I would work ten hours at the documentary as a post-production assistant, and when everyone had left the office, I would stay another four hours and edit the short film. I put a lot of time into editing the short film and had the valuable opportunity of working for a director.

After working for the documentary company for over a month, I truly fell in love with post-production. There were a lot of great editors on the project that gave me wisdom on a daily basis. I started to reflect on what I

wanted to do after graduation and how I wanted to start my career as a professional. I began to realize that with every class I had for television/radio/film, the magic of movies diminished. Several entertainment business classes with lessons about money and the time constraints also took away from the pleasure of storytelling. Post-production and editing was where I felt the movie magic was put back into the project. Bad takes and problems on set were all forgotten. The same energy and passion that went into writing the story also is expressed during post-production. I am not belittling the other steps that are taken to make a movie; I just believe there is a beauty in carefully putting the pieces together.

By the middle of summer, it was time for me to start working on my capstone project again. I pulled out my feature length screenplay and tried to pick out a section to turn into a short film. I tried and I tried but nothing jumped out at me that seemed rewarding. Opening up old screenwriting folders, I started going through old short scripts I had written. There were some that I really liked, but would not be feasible to create as a low budget short film. For several days I thought about what story I would tell and how I would tell it. Frustration and fear were starting to work their way into my brain. I was losing passion for my project and was not looking forward to having it consume my entire senior year of college.

I was still trucking along on the short film I was editing for the director, and I had already put in a lot of hours. As I was desperately trying to figure out a solution for my capstone project, I thought, "Why can't I count

the short film I had been editing as my project?" In my mind, I had put in a lot of work and it seemed like it should count. I emailed the advisors at Honor's Program to see what they thought about my solution. Unfortunately and realistically, they thought that the project was not substantial enough, and I was instructed to ask my advisor's thoughts on the project. Through several emails, I explained what I wanted to do and how I was not thrilled to continue with my current capstone idea. My advisor wisely agreed with the opinion of those in the Honor's Program. He suggested that we brainstorm a different editing project that could work.

Finding the right project was hard. I had decided that I really wanted my project to focus on editing as much as possible. That meant that I would have to pick something big that contained enough creative control. I also wanted to produce something that was original. The cliché editing projects are to create a trailer for a movie that already exists, or take a scene and edit it into a different genre (i.e. comedy into a horror). None of these ideas really excited me because they have been done so many times. My advisor came up with the first suggestion that got the juices flowing. He told me about Topher Grace's Star Wars edit. Topher Grace took the original Star Wars trilogy and edited the three movies down into one movie. I thought that this was a brilliant idea that presented a lot of options to be creative.

Taking a trilogy and editing it into one movie would undoubtedly be a difficult and rewarding project but it had already been done. I wanted to make something that was more original. Also, with a trilogy, the story is

already out of the editor's control. The only thing Topher Grace could do was to shorten it down and manipulate it slightly. I came up with the idea of taking a television series and editing that down into a two-hour movie. This got both my advisor and me very excited and we began thinking of which show I could do.

As mentioned in the Executive Summary, the television show had to fit several criteria that I laid out. First, the show needed to be already completed or about to be done. I wanted to create a movie representative of an entire series, instead of just a portion of one.

Second, the show needed to be relatively current. I did not want a show that had been completed years ago because even if what I created was a masterpiece, there would not be enough people familiar with the original. If people were not acquainted with the original piece of work, then the new rendition would not be as remarkable and would therefore, not produce the same reaction. The same concept is true for parodies. If the parody is referencing something that no one recognizes, people will not find the parody as creatively funny.

From these criteria, I started to look at different shows. At first, I was looking at all genres. I did not care if it was a drama or a comedy. I quickly realized that there were other conditions that I wanted to consider. To make my life easier, I was hoping I could pick a show that I had already seen so I did not have to spend my time watching a completely new show.

My first choice was to make *Community* into a two-hour movie. I thought that this would be an incredible project for a couple reasons. First, I was already very familiar with the show. I had been watching it from the beginning and knew each character's storyline. The second reason was the show always talked about having six seasons and a movie. *Community* was struggling to reach that goal and may never have a movie. The saying "six seasons and movie," is still the mantra of the show and I thought that if I took all the seasons and turned it into a movie, there would be a wide fan base.

The reason I did not choose *Community* was it is not very feasible to edit down an episodic show. This reason is similar to why I did not choose another comedy show like *How I Met Your Mother*. Even though *Community* and *How I Met Your Mother* have an overarching serial storyline, each episode has its own theme that does not necessarily relate to the surrounding episodes. It would be very difficult to pick and choose scenes from either of these shows without the heart of the show disappearing. The way these episodic comedies are designed, most of the comedic value comes from the seemingly random journeys the characters go on in each episode. In order to shorten all the seasons into a two-hour movie, the comedic value would be lost and the story arc would not be very strong.

A serialized drama was the path I would have to go down in order to create an entertaining and concise movie. Similarly to the comedies, I first went through the list of dramas that I had already seen. I was still hoping to use a show that I was familiar with, so I would have more time to play around

with different story structures. The only really famous drama that I watched every week was *Lost*. The finale was in 2010, which fit the condition of being recent, and it was a very popular show. I quickly decided that *Lost* would not work because it had too many tangents from the original storyline. The show tended to jump around with different ideas, making it difficult to create a cohesive storyline.

Up to this point, every show that I looked at as a possible option was a standard cable show. As a kid, I did not watch very many premium channel shows because my family did not pay for those channels. With none of the shows I looked at working out, I decided to test popular HBO shows. The two on my list were *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos*.

Breaking Bad was a good choice because it fit all the criteria and its final season was during my senior year. If I created a movie from the show, the movie would have been extremely relevant. *The Sopranos* was on the list because many critics label it one of the best-written shows of all time. Because of this label, I was able to consider the show even though it had its series finale in 2007.

I had seen neither of these shows prior to my capstone project. Having limited time to pick a show meant I had to watch *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos* at the same time and choose from there. I watched both first seasons before I made up my mind. They are both fantastic shows and it was tough to choose a favorite. *Breaking Bad* was more entertaining, and after the first season, set the stakes high. *The Sopranos*, however, had better

character development and had more potential for individual character growth. *The Sopranos* would be the show that I continued watching.

Choosing the show was the first step in the process, but I then had to watch all six and a half seasons before I even put the show into the editing program. There are 87 hours of *Sopranos* total. For each episode, I took down key points in my notes. I was still feeling the time crunch and knew that I had to pick an emphasis earlier rather than later. This way I would be better able to focus my notes. I chose to focus on Anthony Jr.'s (AJ) storyline. He is Tony Soprano's only son and at the beginning of the series, AJ is 13 years old. In the first couple of episodes, AJ learns that his father is in the Mafia. I was curious to see how he would grow up under the shadow of a Mob boss father. Anthony Jr.'s storyline did not unfold exactly how I imagined and at times, I thought about choosing a different character to focus on. I ultimately still liked the story and decided to commit to it.

After watching the entire series on HBOGo, HBO's online streaming site for its movies and television shows, I had to acquire the DVD box set. Lucky for me, one of my friends has a massive DVD collection and owns *The Sopranos* box set. He graciously mailed it to me. Over winter break I began ripping the DVDs onto the computer through the use of the program *Handbrake*. Ripping means to digitize the DVD content into a media file that is playable on the computer separate from the DVD. Each season contained four DVDs. Each DVD took about an hour to rip. If I used just one computer, it would have taken over thirty hours to finish the series. To combat this, I

installed the program on two other computers in my family's home. I cut the process down to a third of the time.

After all the DVDs had been ripped, the next stage was to import the media into *Avid Media Composer*. As mentioned in the Executive Summary, there are two ways of going about the importing. I decided to do the standard import method because there was no reason to up the resolution after the project was completed. The movie will primarily be watched on a user's computer while streaming it from a video site. Even if I raised the resolution, the video site would compress the file back down into a lower, more easily played version.

One question that gets asked in this situation is, "Why not edit the media files at full resolution?" The problem with editing high quality media files is the same problem with watching high definition movies online. The higher the quality and the bigger the file, the more processing power the computer needs to complete the edit. When editing, I do not want to have to sit at the computer, doing nothing, while the computer processes each action I do. I want to be able to edit as fast as I am able to move and think. For this reason, I chose to import the files at a lower resolution that mirrors the quality of online streaming.

I needed a way to organize and interpret 87 hours of footage. Again, my experiences working in Los Angeles as a Post-Production Assistant were invaluable. I had learned several techniques for managing large amounts of media. Creating sequences, or timelines, was a method suitable for this

project. Since my movie would focus primarily on Anthony Jr.'s story, I skimmed through every episode and would precisely pull out his scenes.

Anthony Jr.'s scenes took up around an hour per season. After I had pulled each of AJ's scenes, I had seven sequences of only AJ's storyline. Even though I had taken notes over every episode, I had forgotten some of AJ's early story. I watched the seven hours of footage multiple times while taking notes to try and put the puzzle pieces together.

Before deciding how to structure the story, I wanted to know which scenes were my favorites and which scenes played well off one another. There absolutely needed to be a flow, but there could not be an overwhelming number of characters involved. Also, early scenes needed to set up and explain later scenes in order for the movie to be successful and entertaining. Even though this was a unique editing experience, it taught me lessons that will carry over to all editing projects I ever have to do. I learned, while editing, that sacrifices have to be made for the benefit of the story. Even though the piecing together is my choice, I am really trying to anticipate the audience's reaction and understanding. As well, I learned I am limited to working with what I am given. Several times, I wished the show had unfolded in a different way because it would better fit with my ideal structure. As an editor, it is rare to be consulted about what is needed for the story to work. The editor is given the shots and then has to form the story from there. No matter what the project is, there is always a puzzle to put together.

My project took several drafts to get to a level that viewers and I found satisfactory. The biggest problem was the inclusion of my favorite scenes from the series even though they did not help the story. I had to keep on reminding myself that the significance of the movie is to tell Anthony Jr.'s story. The more characters and tangential scenes I included, the cloudier the story became.

As the story started forming into a cohesive unit, I started to receive notes back from people about the lack of music. During my spring semester senior year, I took *History of Film Music* with Professor Meyer. Up until this course, no teacher had ever emphasized music in films; it was mentioned, but not in detail. This class taught me about character themes and how repeating a theme can change the mood or interpretation. *The Sopranos* series did not have a lot of music, which was ideal for editing, but became a disadvantage for this stage in the process. The music that it did include was all famous classic rock songs. I wanted to keep my movie as close to the style of the television show as possible. However, in order to set the mood for certain scenes, I had to use music scores. The amount of music is still limited throughout the entire movie, but I use somber and sustained notes in every instance that relates back to the opening scene. The music has a reflective nature to it. Anthony Jr. contemplates whether or not he should live, and the music is representative of his inner dialogue.

With a project this size, it was easy for me to get stuck in one mindset. Others opinions became a necessary part of the process. At the beginning, I

had the same people review the movie and give me notes. Later, I needed to have more people view the project and look at it with fresh eyes. I set up a focus group in Newhouse where five people showed up. Two people had seen the entire series and three had not. We watched the movie from start to finish. Before talking about their reactions, I had each of them fill out a sheet with general suggestions for improvement. I wanted to get their individual opinions before they were influenced by what everyone else had to say. The discussion during the focus group was really helpful because the more thoughts I got back, the better I was able to form my own creative opinion. Even the conflicting thoughts about different scenes were helpful. I was able to use these different opinions to better decide how I wanted the scene to be interpreted.

This capstone project was a great learning experience for me as a future film industry professional. Each step in the process taught me something new. It is also my hope to use the project as a calling card and a powerful resume builder. Unfortunately, I cannot submit the movie to festivals because of copyright, but I can show it to people. Unlike short films where the viewer cannot fully appreciate all the time and effort the editor puts in, people know the scope of *The Sopranos* and can hopefully have a better feeling for the dedication to the craft.