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Software Review by Carl Hose

Movie Outline has me positively glowing with excitement...

Let me start by saying that I have used just about every screenwriting program on the market, including the two that are considered Kings of the Castle -- Movie Magic Screenwriter and Final Draft. I am, in fact, a registered user of MM Screenwriter. Until recently, my screenwriting software of choice was Sophocles. I don't know where it went. The program simply disappeared from the market. I loved Sophocles and I was sad to see it go, but now I look at the disappearance of Sophocles as a positive thing. If Sophocles hadn't vanished, I would not have had to return to MM Screenwriter, which in turn drove me nuts and forced me to take another look at Movie Outline.

The reason I say "take another look" is because I've reviewed two versions of Movie Outline. When the software was first released, it was simply an outlining tool. Very cool, yes, but only a tool for outlining your story, not actually writing it. The second time I reviewed Movie Outline, the software included the ability to write your scripts as well as outline them. I saw the value of Movie Outline and wrote a short little review about it, but I didn't understand the depth of the program until I became so sick of using MM Screenwriter that I desperately went in search of a screenwriting program that would fill the shoes of Sophocles. I didn't have to look far. The perfect software was on my computer, looking beautiful and waiting to be discovered.

As I said earlier, Movie Outline has me positively glowing with excitement. Let's talk about it, folks, because that's what I came here to do.

Movie Outline is designed for writers. If you write and direct, go right ahead and use MM Screenwriter. It does have some very good features for producing movies. Those features, however, serve no purpose to the writer in the trenches, and features for writers in MM Screenwriter are minimal at best. Even their attempt at an outlining feature seems clunky to me. Movie Outline is a different story. This is my software. If you're a serious screenwriter, it should be your software too.

Movie Outline has a beautiful, modern interface. Across the top are ten panels labelled Outline, Script, Notes, Characters, FeelFactor, Reference, Library, PowerView, Step Cards, and Story Tasks. Each of these panels corresponds to a specific view of the story and presents users with an array of tools with which to develop, analyze, and write. These tools are the beauty of Movie Outline.

The Outline panel, in conjunction with the Script panel, is the heart of Movie Outline. This is where all the heavy lifting gets done. The best part for you, the writer, is that Movie Outline helps you do the lifting in a way that no other screenwriting software on the market does.

In Movie Outline, rather than writing your script straight through, one scene after another, you write your script scene by scene. Each scene (or however many scenes you include in a given step) is written and viewed independent of the other scenes in the script, allowing you to concentrate on one story step at a time. In the Outline panel you title the step you're working on and write a synopsis of what occurs in the story within that step, then you switch to the Script panel and write the scene, or vice versa, it's up to you. The point is, not only does this allow you to write a more cohesive story, what you end up with in the end, with your Outline panel information, is a well written treatment you can use to pitch your script.

The other panels, for the most part, are self explanatory. You can make scene-specific notes in the Notes panel, keep a list of things that need to be accomplished in the Story Tasks panel, or view your outline with the Step Cards panel. The cool thing about the step cards is that you can drag and drop them to rearrange the order in which story events occur, and Movie Outline automatically rearranges your script for you. Then there's the PowerView panel, which allows you to switch between a color-coded outline view of your script and a reference script (which I'll talk about later) by simply right clicking the outline.

The FeelFactor panel gives you a color-coded graph that allows you to set and monitor various "feel factors" in your story. You can use this graph to analyze the levels of action, comedy, romance, gore, conflict, tension, twist, and many other important elements step by step, scene by scene. This feature comes in most handy when all the writing is done. You can go back and get an overall sense of what emotions each scene of your movie will invoke. It's a bonus feature, as far as I'm concerned, and one that adds to the writer-friendly nature of Movie Outline.

Another bonus feature (totally unique to Movie Outline) is the ability to compare your script to several top-of-the-line scripts to see how you measure up. This is where the Reference and Library panels come in. Movie Outline comes with outlines to Dead Poets Society, Die Hard, Ghost, Good Will Hunting, Pretty Woman, Scream, Seven, Spiderman, The Terminator, There's Something About Mary, True Romance, and When Harry Met Sally. How's that for a hit list? There's something in every main genre so you have a comparable script to compare yours to.

Movie Outline includes a spell check, a great thesaurus, and in addition to the traditional search function, SmartSearch, which lets you search the outline (user or reference), script, or notes individually.

I've saved two of the best (arguably, of course) features of Movie Outline for last. I'll start with the character development function. This is a feature Movie Magic Screenwriter users have been requesting for years and have always been denied. The character development function in Movie Outline is a full-service feature that could have been stand-alone software. In fact, character development software with these features does indeed exist, but it's expensive, and all you can do with it is create great characters. Having this feature in Movie Outline is more than just a bonus. It's a gift that should be cherished.

I could probably do a full review on the Character Wizard included with Movie Outline, but I'll keep it simple. The Character Wizard lets you to define the physical and emotional elements of your characters, it lets you develop their history, their relationships to other characters in your story, and their story arc. An intensive list of interview questions allows you to flesh your characters out until they are well rounded, three-dimensional beings with a purpose -- characters you care about. No matter how good the story, if your characters aren't real and believable, the story will eventually fall flat. The Character Wizard lets you create solid characters that will give a breath of life to your script.

Another feature associated with the Character Wizard and unique to Movie Outline is the Dialogue Spotlight feature. With Dialogue Spotlight you can isolate the dialogue of individual characters and review it to ensure that each character's voice remains true and consistent throughout the script.

Yet another awesome feature of Movie Outline is the array of preview and print options available. Sure, you can print your script as you would in any other program, complete and ready to go, but with Movie Outline you can preview or print not only the script, but the outline, notes, character profiles, character arcs, Dialogue Spotlight info, FeelFactor info, and Story Tasks as well, and any of these elements can be printed with or without act information, headers/footers, etc.

I have always dreaded, as most screenwriters do, having to write a treatment that is good enough to entice someone to look at, and possibly purchase, my script. This is no longer an issue now that I use Movie Outline. The treatment is written as I go, and by the time I finish the script, I have a beautifully crafted treatment that can be used to market the finished screenplay.

Here's the deal, baby. If you're a writer looking for screenwriting software that is both affordable and writer friendly, you will not do better than Movie Outline. It's well-developed, stable software that's easy to use and extremely satisfying. As I said at the beginning of this piece, I've used just about every screenwriting program on the market, and I can tell you now, without reservation, that my screenwriting software of choice is Movie Outline. Visit the Movie Outline web site (www.movieoutline.com) to download a trial version of this software to see what I'm talking about. You won't be disappointed.