friendly software

by david sharpe

Production managers, take heart! A new computer is coming to your rescue. Not only will it allow for last-minute changes, it will soon revolutionize the industry.

Listen to production manager (PM) Bert Gold of Warners, faced with what he calls "the greatest jig-saw puzzle in the world, always with pieces missing." PMs hire the people, find equipment, plot locations, cater, schedule, get the pieces — and go to pieces. "Why doesn't it work?" Gold cries out. "Why? Why? Why? I rack my brains, toss all night."

Two Toronto men paid dues on production teams and decided there had to be a better way. "The film industry has cameras that could shoot in caves," says Tim Hurson, thirty-three, "but with all the super-sophistication, the industry still uses caveman tactics. Production management with its strip-boards and breakdown sheets — that is a stunning example of something old." When Hurson met Rob Lockwood, thirty-eight, they formed Screen Data Systems (SDS) and in the last thirty months, have begun to beat a path for PMs into the twentieth century. With the help of a computer on Lombard Street, they offer a service unique to North America, and to their knowledge, unique to the world.

"Even the most extensive computer in the studios of Hollywood is oriented to administration, not production. A fellow there tried five years ago to set up something like this, and got nowhere," says Hurson in their windowless office on Yonge Street.

In seventy-two hours, SDS can enter a screenplay into a word-processor, provide a complete resource analysis including a scene-by-scene list of cast, locations, props, ambience, wardrobe, vehicles, animals, and special effects, then provide a location-by-location list of the same; and compile a cross-plot for display on a wall. This is the script breakdown that a PM needs up to two weeks to complete. Then SDS can schedule the shooting by locations, time of day, availability of actors, weather conditions, holidays, or by whatever circumstances may affect production. Before filming starts, producers can play with variables in their plans and print out (one every ten minutes) any number of alternatives.

But that's not all. During filming, SDS can revise shooting schedules in the midst of emergencies with Spock-like calm, inform when to call the actors in the morning, and give daily reports. Those reports solve Bert Gold's complaint that "the only person who really knows if you're on schedule is a little clerk in a little office somewhere." For the accountant, an "interactive system" using a portable terminal can compare expected with actual daily costs, per-item; warn of end conditions based on current trends; keep a general ledger; and record cash flow and payroll down to the last "focus no. 2, trainee." "There is an exquisite audit trail," says Hurson with pride, "which is more important as films become publicly financed." Post-production clean-up of things like T-4 slips, usually a matter of several man-months, is ready the day the production ends.

Dino de Laurentiis used the system for several pilots in Hollywood and Rob Lockwood, while assistant director for *Silence of the North*, did its script breakdown by computer. But the first major on-site test for SDS has been the film, **Death Hunt**, with producer Murray Shostak and production manager Bob Baylis. "They were absolutely wonderful," says Hurson. "They rode with us the whole way even though they were going to a remote location, far away from support in case of problems. Just now they're shooting in Banff (May '80), and in a little hotel there, they've got a computer terminal in their bathroom!" The crew of **Death Hunt** has since returned from Banff, and Shostak endorses the result: "We still kept back-up accounting, but next time we'll be more confident.

"Rob and I," says Hurson, "are not computer-men. When we began, the experts wanted to do programs that were logical to them, and that was fine for the computer, but not for us humans. We needed software that was 'friendly' — from a humanized computer. We even try to print the breakdown in a form as traditional as possible."

The two self-confessed gadget-freaks learned quickly how fast, accurate, and *dumb* a computer can be. Though it could shuffle data for them faster than any cardshark, it thought "Keep a watch on him" referred to a prop. The computer had to be "taught" the difference between noun and verb. Using more than one name for a prop completely flummoxed the machine; in **Conan**, one of the de Laurentiis productions, a jewel was both "The Eye of the Serpent" and "The Green

David Sharpe is a Toronto free-lancer, and short story author, who wrote his M.A. thesis on Joyce and Film: Use of Montage in Ulysses at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

Stone," and in one scene, spilled onto a table in the midst of ordinary jewels. By a process called Resource Rationalization, all the alternate names of the same thing were combined in one. On the other hand, a character through time had to be distinguished, young from old.

If a character reported that "Harry was hit by a baseball bat," the early breakdowns would include Harry as an actor, and a baseball bat as a prop — that is, *after* the problem of two-word labels had been solved: earlier, the prop list would have included a baseball and a bat separately, and at the worst, the bat would have joined the list of animals required. Now, the software divides mention-within-dialogue from actual appearances, and multiple-word labels such as "broken cognac bottle" are used with ease. Also, the computer had to be informed that camera directions such as 'Point-of-view' did not create a character named POV, and that 'TV' was not an instruction.

All of these language skills were developed by Lockwood and Hurson, but still, the processing does not replace creative judgment. "The script must be precise," says Hurson. "If a script calls for a crowded restaurant, the extras must be mentioned" or the PM must notice the omission. "The computer is not replacing any talent; it's simply doing the busywork that leaves the production manager free for a whole series of evaluations."

Producers in Hollywood have predicted that computer breakdowns will improve scripts simply by providing a format that can become standard for the industry. Writers and producers, says Abby Singer (PM for MTM Enterprises), "create catastrophes by approving scripts that are wonderfully written, but horrendously *overwritten*... We plead with producers to simplify scripts before shooting." With a computer breakdown in a standard format, the creative team can see trouble spots before it's too late. The breakdown becomes "script illumination," and shows the relative importance of settings and characters. Later, Hurson thinks thematic work by computer may be possible, where a writer can create a "shell" of constraints to write within — say 75% screentime for a major character, a balance of light and dark, and a pattern of climaxes.

SDS has a competitive lead of two years, and intends to "run with it" through strong research and development. Until now, Lockwood and Hurson have invested their own funds and found some CFDC support in the early stages. "It saddens me," Hurson reflects, "that the response to us in Hollywood is ten times as strong as it is here — and it's a Canadian thing! There are some 300 producers in Hollywood — and they're wowed! They take risks; they tell you 'That's good' or 'That's crap.'"

Hurson expects SDS will open a branch in Hollywood, and when that happens, the system will become, to some extent, 'certified.' "If we are recognized elsewhere, then Canadians will notice us; even the large bureaucracies like the CBC. At present, it's much easier to approach the entrepreneurial producers rather than the bureaucracies, where there's a problem in even *finding* the decision-makers.

"But please, don't think I'm bad-mouthing Canadians. The underpinnings of an industry are here; there are producers willing to risk some set-backs and offer perspective. I just wish there were more."

Working on a script breakdown, Jim Hurson scans read-outs from his "friendly software"