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40 Meters Down: A Diver's Journey

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40 Meters Down:

A Diver's Journey

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Film and Theatre Arts

of the University of New Orleans

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Bachelor of Arts, with Departmental Honors

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By

Milan Holman

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Abstract

In this paper, I will reflect on the challenges I faced from the first idea to the final export of *40 Meters Down*, and how I overcame these.

Keywords: Diving, Scuba, PADI, Egypt, Documentary, Ocean

40 Meters Down: *A Divers Journey*

By Milan Holman

I first became inspired to create this project in September 2018 when I earned my PADI Rescue Diver certification. At that point, I was only 20 dives away from reaching the coveted Master Scuba Diver rating—a rank that only 2% of all divers achieve worldwide. It was at that point that the idea of a diving documentary started to take shape in my mind, but I did not have the resources to make this a reality, as unfortunately diving is an expensive hobby, and the New Orleans area does not boast any noteworthy diving locations. Florida, however, has many great diving opportunities, but taking several trips to complete my required 20 dives seemed impossible.

I had, however, made plans to visit home in the Netherlands for Christmas break, and shortly before I left my dad revealed his surprise plans to spend a week of said break diving in Egypt. Immediately, I realized that my documentary seemed significantly more doable. Diving in Egypt cost me about a quarter of the price that it would have in Florida, which allowed me to make more dives in an environment that is much more beautiful than the Gulf of Mexico.

This trip gave me 5 days of diving to make the 20 dives I needed to achieve my goal. It was an ambitious plan, but I was confident I could do it—and on the off chance I wasn't able to complete all my dives, I would still be able to take the audience along with me on a journey far below the surface to a magical place. More than anything, I wanted to showcase this wonderful undersea world that few have a chance to explore.

As the project began to take more shape, I realized that I would have to overcome many challenges to complete it—I had found a solution to the largest obstacle, the cost of diving, but there were many more problems that I would have to tackle.

My biggest concern was my inability to predict what I would see on each dive. While there are certain dive sites where you are far more likely to see sharks, you are dealing with wild animals and it is simply luck that determines whether they will be there that particular day. This made it hard to do any kind of preproduction. I was bound by the trips the dive center offered for each day, and luck would decide if I saw anything worthwhile or not. I could not make any real plans or go in with any specific expectations, so I decided to make it more of a personal story. Initially I wanted to just take the audience on these 20 dives with me and focus on the present, but I ended up telling the story of my whole journey as a diver, from my very first dive until my most recent.

The next obstacle was the actual camera. Cameras are not waterproof, unfortunately, and the few cameras that are designed for divers are very expensive. Personally, all I had access to was a Go Pro Hero 5. While this is a great 4K camera, the waterproof housing makes it impossible to adjust any settings. Essentially, I was left with a 4K wide-angle point-and-shoot camera. I had no ability to see what I was actually shooting until I was back topside, which made the whole luck aspect even worse. Through my job at Property Control at UNO, I found out about the possibility of businesses donating to the University and getting tax credits for the value of the item, so I reached out to the three local dive shops —Harry's Dive Shop in New Orleans, Seal Sports in Mandeville, and Coral Reef Dive Shop in Slidell. Unfortunately, I never got a

response from Seal Sports or Coral Reef, and Harry's was unable to get a video camera through their suppliers that did anything the Go Pro was unable to do. So Go Pro it was!

Ultimately, I decided to just shoot a lot and hope for the best. Unfortunately I got sick, preventing me from diving for the majority of the week and I was only able to do a total of 6 dives. Still, at the end of the week I had shot almost 5 hours of raw footage, both underwater and in and around the dive center.

After shooting, I found myself facing an unexpected problem—this was the first documentary that I had edited, and not having a script while editing was more difficult than I anticipated. With absolutely no script or preproduction guidelines and that much footage to sift through, there were many choices ahead of me. This was definitely a challenge since I was very proud of this material, and I really just wanted to share everything with the audience. In the end, it took me almost a week just to throw out anything that was unusable and then organize the remaining footage into different sections of the documentary. After this, it took me another two weeks of editing to complete my first cut. I definitely experienced how challenging it was to have complete creative freedom with all of my footage and no predetermined script.

The final major challenge I ran into was the sound design. I love editing—I can sit down and simply get lost in a project for hours, and out of all the roles I had on movies at UNO, I think it's the one I am best at. While I am not always able to communicate my vision from my mind to paper or from paper to a camera, I feel like I am able to transform provided material into a great edit, communicating my own ideas and creativity as well as that of a director. I know Avid rather well, I'm not nearly as proficient with Protools and audio mixing, and shortly into editing this project it became clear that most of the underwater sequence would hinge on good audio design. I needed audio of consistent

breathing to really emulate the feeling of being underwater, and I needed to record my voiceover to explain what was happening. I recruited fellow UNO Student Catalina Contreras to help me record my voiceover while live mixing this, so all that was left for me to do was choose the takes I liked the best and insert them under the video and mix the sound effects down to a reasonable level.

Finally, there was music to consider. Initially, I was hesitant to use music at all; I really wanted to give the true underwater sensation where you don't hear anything but the breathing of you and the people around you, but after reaching picture lock and having a final version of VO and SFX tracks laid out it was clear that music was needed. It was especially necessary under the pre-underwater shots to fill up gaps in the narration, but I realized that the underwater shots would also be enhanced by some very soft music.

The music I wanted would have to be so soft and calm that it would almost not be noticeable, and ideally it would flow and 'feel' like the ocean. Immediately the *Blue Planet II* soundtrack by Hans Zimmer sprang to mind, but as the rights to the music had to be obtained, this was impossible. As an avid soundtrack listener, I could immediately name several other songs that I would want underneath my project, and this made it even harder to select anything non-copyrighted as I just kept comparing it to the music that I really wanted.

Usually at this point I would ask fellow UNO student Ryan Rieth to compose a piece for me as he did for several previous projects I have worked on, but unfortunately, he is currently in the Disney Internship Program and does not have access to any of the programs he would use so this option fell through too. Finally, after hundreds of rejected tracks, I found "Aerial" on Moby's website, which is free to use for independent

filmmakers. I immediately fell in love with it, as it was just what I had been looking for. The other track I used was found on *Purple-Planet*, which provides non-copyrighted tracks to non-profit filmmakers. It wasn't exactly what I was looking for, but it worked well under the surface material and I had to make do with what I could get.

While there have been many challenges in the making of *40 Meters Down*, I am extremely satisfied with the final results. The footage came out so much more beautiful than I ever expected it to, and I sincerely believe that this movie not only gives the audience a look into my life as a diver, but also truly succeeds in taking them on a journey through one of the most magical experiences on the planet.