

# MuVChat

► CARIS O'MALLEY

**F**ilm presentations have become a staple program in many libraries all across the country. For the most part, they require librarians to press “play” and wander off to perform other duties. While that certainly makes for an easy programming option, it doesn't make for a very memorable one.

As the teen services manager in a large library district, I am always looking for new takes on old ideas. A variation on the typical movie night seemed like a good avenue for investigation, as it is already one of the most prevalent and popular library programs. Typically, my research requires me to surf the Internet for a while, make a few phone calls, and consult some professional publications. On this occasion, however, I found myself in a much more unlikely scenario.

It was way past bedtime on a dark night in the middle of nowhere. I was seated on an uncomfortable folding chair in a strip mall retail space that had been converted into a makeshift movie theater. The rest of the dozen or so movie goers seemed normal enough, so long as I ignored the guy in the back row sporting a wolf costume. When the film finally started, via a laptop projected onto a bare wall, my suspicions were confirmed: This was the future of teen movie nights.

When I'd first heard about the public screening of the 1996 gem *Werewolf*, I was excited. As a longtime fan of really bad B-movies, I knew this was sure to make for a memorable evening. It's hard to forget the iconic *Mystery Science Theater 3000* episode where Crow, Gypsy, and Mike lambasted this particularly cringe-worthy supernatural misstep. What made the presentation impossible to miss, though, was the inclusion of **MuVChat** technology.

**MuVChat** allows viewers to bring the *MST3K* spirit to any movie they want. Basically, it is a software program that makes cell phone text messages show up on screen in real time. So instead of having hecklers in the audience shouting things at the screen and spoiling everyone's experience, viewers quietly compose their messages and add them to a constantly updated feed of commentary. This takes the fun of the midnight movie subculture and makes it easily accessible to anyone with a cell phone and scathing wit.

In 2008, the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that 38 percent of teens were sending text messages daily. In September



hey - somebody get me some popcorn - I'm hungry and lazy.  
we're not worthy. give us muvchat and we'll be worthy.  
**MuVChat is rad**  
All I have to say about that is 'ashpinctersayswhat'

2009, that number jumped to 54 percent. They went on to report that text messaging has become the most common method of peer communication (Lenhart et al., 2010). It is time for libraries to finally take advantage of this tech trend.

The first step in getting this program off the ground is to find the perfect movie. It is very important to consider your audience when doing this—it's very easy to find bad horror and sci-fi movies to show, but those won't be appropriate for all audiences (*Werewolf*, for example, deserves its R rating). It's also important, especially when dealing with teens, that the film be relevant. Most of them will have no idea what *Mystery Science Theater 3000* is, so there's got to be an appeal factor. Try movies that teens love to hate, like *Twilight* or pretty much anything from the 1980s. For our initial program, we decided to show the 1992 classic *Cool As Ice*, starring Vanilla Ice. Teens knew who he was (which provided the appeal), but weren't necessarily aware that he has gone down in history as one of the worst actors of all time. One important thing to note is that you should be leery of comedies, since it's hard to inject the requisite amount of humor into something that's already trying to be funny. If you do decide to pick a comedy, make sure it has plenty of unintentionally funny aspects, such as dated dialogue or absurd costumes.

Once you've got your movie selected, you'll want to secure

the licensing to show it. Swank/Movie Licensing USA (<http://www.movlic.com/>) offers licensing options for individual films or blanket coverage to protect your library year-round. This is an important step, as it protects your organization from the legal complications that can arise from public screenings of copyrighted material. The fees are pretty reasonable and paying them will keep you in compliance with the law.

Once you've got the movie picked out and the licensing secured, you'll want to get the **MuVChat** software installed. You can download the software from their website (<http://muvchat.com/>) and install it on your computer. Your computer should be running Windows XP (or better) and have a fully functional DVD drive (and the resources necessary to make use of it). Keep in mind that this computer will need to be hooked up to the video projector you plan to use. The computer will also require Internet access, as that's how the text messages find their way on screen. As far as configuration and operation of the program is concerned, there is a handy user's guide on the **MuVChat** website that explains the whole process.

Advertising the event is kind of tricky. There's no real way to get around trying to explain exactly what **MuVChat** is without getting a little wordy. We tried to minimize the amount of words on our posters by utilizing "text talk," a language teens are already fluent in (and one that brings them no small amount of amusement when adults try to replicate it). It makes for a nice tie-in to the technology and we found that teens had no trouble understanding the concept. Our exact phrasing was: "TXT in YR jokes . . . and they'll appear on screen."

Once you've got your audience, it's good to set up some ground rules. If you're going to restrict what texts are going to be considered acceptable (concerning language, content, etc.), let the audience know up front. This isn't too much of an issue, as **MuVChat** has a pretty great message filter that can be programmed to catch just about anything teens will throw at it.

If you have the resources, it might also be good to have a local celebrity or comedian host the event. Our presentations, for example, are hosted by Andrea Beesley-Brown (affectionately known as the Midnite Movie Mamacita). Beesley-Brown is well-known in central Arizona for screening oddball movies. With a little searching, it is likely you'll be able to find someone with similar name recognition near you. It's an added bonus if the host is also willing to contribute to the commentary.

Lastly, we found it very useful to have some ringers in the audience to get the ball rolling. This can be very helpful when an audience isn't really sure what they should be doing. Nothing gets the process started like a couple of snarky library staffers (every library has a few) sitting in the back row text-messaging in their puns and quips. It's an added benefit for participants to see library staff participating, as it helps to build that sense of community for which we're always striving.

When putting on one of these programs, there are many thematic variations you can try. You can, for example, do holiday screenings (we're planning an anti-Valentine's Day presentation this month), or you can let the teens comment on movies they love—the text message commentary becomes a vehicle for appreciation rather than humor. The teens in your library are bound to have lots of suggestions after they experience the first program.

We did our first *Cool As Ice* **MuVChat** program at our rural

#### THE FOLLOWING FILMS WORK WELL FOR MUVCHAT PROGRAMS:

- Batman & Robin*. DVD. Color. 125 min. Produced and dist. by Warner Bros., 1997. \$12.98. PG-13.
- Battlefield Earth*. DVD. Color. 18 min. Produced and dist. by Warner Bros., 2000. PG-13.
- The Breakfast Club*. DVD. Color. 98 min. Produced and dist. by Universal, 2011. \$12.98. R.
- Ghostbusters*. DVD. Color. 105 min. Produced and dist. by Columbia, 2002. \$14.94. PG.
- Return to Frogtown*. DVD. Color. 90 min. Produced and dist. by York, 2001. \$19.71. PG-13.
- Suburban Commando*. DVD. Color. 90 min. Produced and dist. by New Line, 1991. PG
- Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. DVD. Color. 93 min. Produced and dist. by New Line, 1998. \$5.95. PG.
- Troll 2*. DVD. Color. 95 min. Produced and dist. by MGM, 2010. \$14.98. PG-13.
- Twilight*. DVD. Color. 122 min. Produced and dist. by Summit, 2008. \$22.99. PG-13.

Queen Creek Branch library last summer. With only minimal in-house advertising and no precedent for this type of program, we didn't know what to expect. By the time the movie started, we had a total of twenty-one people (mostly teens) in attendance.

This may seem like a modest number to larger libraries, but this crowd was roughly three times larger than what our teen programming typically brings in. As such, it was a smashing success.

When our ringers in the back of the room started in on the movie's excessively long introductory dance sequence, all bets were off. There was a near-constant stream of laughter and groans. Hundreds of messages appeared on the screen during the ninety-one minute feature. At the movie's close, it received a round of applause. The teens left with a truly memorable experience—one in which they had become the creators of content rather than consumers.

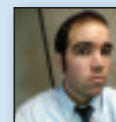
In the end, that's what this is really about: getting teens to contribute to programming rather than passively absorb. The **MuVChat** program incorporates technology with literacy and entertainment in a novel way that teens are not likely to forget. ■

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#### REFERENCES

- Lenhart, A., Ling, R., Campbell, S. and Purcell, K. (2010). "Teens and Mobile Phones." Pew Internet & American Life Project, Apr. 2010. <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Teens-and-Mobile-Phones.aspx> (accessed July, 28 2011).

Caris O'Malley is the teen services manager for the Maricopa County Library District in central Arizona. He was recently selected by the American Library Association as a 2012 Emerging Leader. He divides his spare time between writing, fatherhood, punk rock, and bad horror movies.



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