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### Cashing Out (Documentary)

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Cashing Out (Documentary)

By

Girard Tecson

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Integrated Media Arts, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

January 2023

1/13/2023  
Date

Andrew Lund  
Thesis Sponsor

1/13/2023  
Date

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## **ABSTRACT**

Every sneaker has its own story. Michael Jordan's third iteration shoe model from Nike, the Air Jordan 3 with the Black Cement colorway which debuted in the 1988 NBA All-Star Game when Jordan scored 40 points and took home the NBA All-Star MVP trophy, is one of the most popular shoe models in existence. That legendary origin was amplified not only by popular print and TV commercials, but also by celebrities of incredible caliber and equally legendary status, such as Spike Lee, Kanye West, and Jay-Z, who wore it in magazine photo shoots, television shows and movies. It quickly became one of the most sought-after sneakers, selling out when it was first released in 1988 and again in 1994, 2001, 2008, and 2011. In honor of Michael Jordan's 55<sup>th</sup> birthday on February 17th, 2018, Nike released a remastered version worldwide with the original Nike Air branding on the back of the shoe, matching what appeared on the 1988 version. It gave sneaker enthusiasts, fashionistas and sport fans, another chance to purchase this shoe model with all its original features, but it sold out just as quickly as the previous re-releases. The sneaker resellers knew it would make a big profit for them even though it retailed for a premium price of \$200; the current resale price of that shoe averages around \$500 on web sites like eBay and StockX.

There are several storytelling angles with just this one sneaker model: Michael Jordan's achievement during his time wearing the shoe, the influence of celebrities wearing this model, the challenge to obtain it, and the bittersweet experience of reselling several pairs.

My 30-minute documentary film, *Cashing Out*, explores all of these story aspects through my journey into the world of sneaker culture and the major impact it made in my

life. The film examines different categories in the sneaker community, such as sneaker enthusiasts (aka sneakerheads), social media obsessed hypebeasts, and business minded sneaker resellers, and how each part of the community contributes to the thriving culture. It includes the narratives of some of my favorite sneakers along with my personal connection to each of them and covers the important role of sneaker collecting played in my life during the covid-19 pandemic. It's a tale of self-realization, growing up and moving forward. To some, sneakers are a functional commodity to keep your feet comfortable and safe, but to me, they are a big part of my identity.

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Despite making several award-winning short films and documentaries, as well as viral internet content, my personal goal during my time in Hunter College's Integrated Media Arts MFA Program was to strengthen my storytelling skills in screenwriting for short narrative films, animation, documentaries, and other types of productions. Several of my films consist of a fantasy narrative that involves the old school trope of the protagonist saving their significant other and battling against the antagonist in the climax of the film. In my parody of the widely popular Nintendo video game series, The Legend of Zelda, I created a Hong-Kong style crime drama called *Chinese Legend of Zelda* (2016), which reimagines Link, the sword slashing video game protagonist, as a disgraced cop who, rather than using the master sword and the Hylian shield, uses his bare fists and kung-fu skills to save princess Zelda from a ruthless crime boss Ganon in the violent and gritty world of a Chinese police action movie. The movie trailer and short film received over 100,000 views each, along with several online write ups from video

game and pop culture websites like Complex, Crunchyroll and Digital Trends. Even though I'm a big fan of the Zelda video games and Hong-Kong action cinema, I felt that there was something further that I could implement in my own work to make it more personable.

The IMA Program's Advance Studio course with Prof. Zach Nader helped me further explore my own experiences and passions as the basis for my narrative projects. I accomplished this with my narrative short film *House Rules* (2019) with the help of the feedback and suggestions from the faculty and fellow IMA graduate students. The film is a comedy/drama about an Asian American filmmaker trying to finish his low budget film production in his parent's house without their permission. It drew upon my personal story of low budget filmmaking and how my parents see my filmmaking endeavor as a useless waste of time, since, like most Filipino parents I know, they want their kids to be in the medical or engineering fields. The film screened in several film festivals like the 2019 International Film Festival Manhattan and was featured in the New York Philippine Consulate's 2018 summer film showcase.

In the Interactive Installation course with Prof. Sha Sha Feng, I further explored my other passion: sneakers. The final project gave me the opportunity to create an informative interactive installation called *Hype Kicks* in the iART Showcase during the Fall 2018 semester. The installation consisted of several shoe models equipped with a software called Max that programmed to show videos and information about the sneaker on a monitor when an individual picked up a particular shoe display. One of the shoe models was Michael Jordan's first signature sneaker, the Nike Air Jordan 1 Breds. The

user can learn about the shoe's legacy within the sports and mainstream media, as well as watch local news clips of violence during the release of the sneaker.

To make the experience more immersive, I coordinated a staged conflict to provoke a genuine reaction from the attendees as they experienced real-time arguments that occur while queuing up to purchase sneakers. I did this by hosting a staged raffle giveaway of an Adidas Yeezy sneaker in the moonrock colorway that's worth over \$1,000; many hopeful attendees participated. I recruited some of my social media influencer contacts, like Prince Zee and Daniel Jean, who have over a million combined Instagram followers, to act as disgruntled raffle players who ultimately scuffled in the middle of the crowd. This was all preplanned with the Chief CLT and Production Coordinator Peter Jackson and the instructor Prof. Sha Sha Feng. Overall, it was convincing, and the attendees experienced some problems that occur when trying to obtain sought after sneakers.

I had so much fun incorporating sneakers as my focus and subject in the interactive installation project that I decided to do the same with my thesis project. After a consultation with my advisor, I wanted to produce a short narrative film and decided to write the script prior to entering thesis. The script focused on a street smart Asian American sneaker reseller who needed to decide whether to find another stable endeavor or stick to his reselling side hustle despite the hardships and dangers that come with it. The script focused on sneaker culture, family, race and social class. I wanted to cast my social media influencer contacts, in order to garner viral attention and notoriety in prestigious film festivals. But more importantly, I wanted to finish my time at the IMA program with a special project. Unfortunately, one month into the Spring 2020

semester, the COVID -19 pandemic started. All my video projects were either cancelled or went on hiatus indefinitely. I had to rethink what was doable to finish my thesis project, and to my disappointment, a low-budget short narrative film production was not possible under those extreme circumstances.

With the plans for the short narrative thesis film out of the picture, the only possible project that I could pursue during the pandemic was a documentary film focused on my life. The New York City lockdown in the Spring of 2020 meant that my spending was halted. Earnings from my full-time job at CUNY John Jay College no longer went to traveling, dining, film productions and shopping. In addition, the passive income I make from my YouTube channel was also accumulating. This encouraged me to shift my focus to financial literacy, like investing and real estate. Due to the pandemic, the real estate market was at its lowest from March to June 2020. The low market rates forced many banks to offer lower interest rates on loans and home mortgages.

Since our apartment wasn't a good fit for my wife and I, especially after the pandemic forced us to cook in our small kitchen and do all our remote work with minimal sunlight, we contemplated on purchasing our first home right away to take advantage of the low mortgage rates. We needed to have a certain amount of cash for a down payment. Even with savings and additional cash flow, we still needed more money quickly to start the purchase process. My sneaker collection is my greatest financial asset because I have been collecting since my undergraduate years in the early 2000s. It numbered over 500 pairs worth over \$40,000. We only needed half that for the down payment, so I decided to sell half my coveted collection to meet our quota.

The concept for my thesis project came together when I combined the life changing event of home buying with narratives of some of my favorite sneakers and an insider look at the world of the sneaker culture. I pitched this to my IMA advisors, Andrew Lund, Ricardo Miranda and Sha Sha Feng. With the approval of my advisors, I set out to create the short documentary *Cashing Out*.

## **RESEARCH ANALYSIS**

Several movies, television series and books influenced me throughout my production process. When I initially investigated producing a narrative short film, I wanted to implement a similar tone and theme as the movie *Kicks*, written and directed by Justin Tipping and released on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. The film is a coming-of-age story of a young boy named Brandon who, after being robbed, sets out on a mission to retrieve his stolen Jordan 1 sneaker. *Kicks* is the most realistic representation of what the sneaker community is all about. "They're not just shoes. They're fucking J's" is a Brandon quote in the movie that gave me chills. It showed how important the shoes were to him, to which all sneaker fanatics can relate. I have been collecting shoes since I was able to afford them in the early 2000s. Some of my peers who aren't into sneakers thought my growing collection was an unhealthy obsession. They are constantly commenting that "they are just shoes." I have learned to ignore them. But in certain situations, like in the movie, if most of the community are immersed in a particular culture, there is a need to feel accepted and be a part of it. Growing up in Corona, Queens, a location deeply rooted in sports, hip hop and sneaker culture, it was hard not to be influenced by the community. Stories connected to each shoe model and wearing



them evoke a sense of belonging within the community and a group of friends. They provide a sense of identity and pride.

In the movie, Brandon thinks that a pair of shoes can easily solve issues in his life like the harsh reality of being poor, being bullied, hoping to be admired by his peers and finding love. Unfortunately, a lot of people I know thought the same way too. It creates certain expectations. But in reality, everything depends on the individual and how they move forward with their issues. Will the shoe help? Maybe. But in the movie, the only way Brandon got over his fears and achieved personal growth was due to the initial conflict of getting his sneaker stolen.

I also studied the Netflix six episodes comedy series called *Sneakerheads* by Dave Meyers. The series is about middle age man, Devin, who after losing \$5,000, sets off to a mission to track down a rumored rare sneaker model. While the premise is promising and I can relate to the characters since I'm also a middle-aged man that gets in trouble with my spouse frequently, the overall execution falls flat due to unrealistic situations like going off to Hong Kong for the sake of adventure to find a shoe that might not exist or isn't even for sale. But what this series got right is the subject of grails. Grails, which comes from the concept of the Holy Grail, is the one sneaker that is difficult to obtain but is a must-have in the personal sneaker collection. Before the internet, an individual would have to connect with many people and would have to travel, trade, and go through great lengths to obtain their grails. But now it's easy to obtain almost anything, especially when you have the money.

In the reselling business, there is no single source that decides how much a particular sneaker is worth. It's a free market and the price is determined by the

consumer. With the online reselling services like StockX, eBay, and GOAT, the combined popularity and rarity of the sneaker drives the price. With all my sales, I always consult those three main websites to determine the average that people are willing to pay, and then I list the shoes at that price or at a discount depending if I want to sell immediately. For example, a general release sneaker, which means there are over 100,000 units made, would typically cost the same as the retail price. But if it's general release that's a sought-after sneaker like the Nike Air Jordan 11 Concord, the resale price will be more than double the retail price. Because popular sneakers generally sell out quickly, some people are willing to pay an extra \$200 if they couldn't obtain a \$200 sneaker during its initial release.

In the short documentary *The Sneaker Game*, Jacob makes good money reselling sneakers and has created a business doing it. His key to success is consistently watching the trends and getting sneakers that he knows will make him profit immediately or several years later. He is always on social media, researching information from the sneaker community on which shoe model is the most sought after. When possible, he buys those sneakers for the retail price, or if necessary, pays resale knowing he can subsequently resell them for more money. This is the strategy I embrace when I buy and sell sneakers. But I usually buy sneakers to wear them, while Jacob has no attachment to any particular sneaker.

Being an Asian American, I researched the popularity and origin of the sneaker culture in several Asian countries. Basketball was an American sport that had limited popularity in countries like Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Indonesia prior to 1990s. But a Japanese manga comic *Slam Dunk*, released during the 90s' changed all that and

paved way for basketball and sneaker culture to blossom in those countries. *Slam Dunk* is about a high school student Sakuragi who joined a basketball team to learn how to play the game and win high school basketball tournaments. The combination of great art and storytelling in the Japanese manga form made this series appealing to the younger crowd. This series proved to be so popular that the 31-volume comic was adapted into episodic animated series that drew more attention to it. It was translated and dubbed in several languages all over the world. The series had a lot of references to popular sneaker models and the NBA players that wear them. For example, Sakuragi was looking to purchase sneakers for his first tournament. He decided he wanted to buy the Nike Air Jordan 6 shoes that the shop owner was wearing, and the owner insisted on telling him that the particular shoe model was Michael Jordan's signature shoe in 1991 when Jordan won his first championship with the Chicago Bulls. Near the end of the series, Sakuragi goes to the same sneaker shop again. The shop owner gave him the Nike Air Jordan 1 Bred and proceeded to tell him about how that shoe model is popular and expensive because it's the first shoe model that Michael Jordan debuted with Nike, and it introduced the sneaker culture to a mainstream audience. Those two scenes with the shop owner resonated with me because of their informative nature. Likewise, I wanted to inform my film's viewers about some of my favorite sneaker models the same way the shop owner educated Sakuragi about the Nike Air Jordan 6 and the Nike Air Jordan 1 Breds.

## **THESIS PRODUCTION PROCESS**

My original plan for my thesis project was a narrative short film. The timeline was to finalize a shooting script, complete pre-production in the winter of 2019, and then shoot and edit it in time for the Spring 2020 IMA Thesis Show. This plan was scrapped because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It took a while to get a new concept going. The pandemic was affecting me mentally due to changes with my job and lifestyle. Transitioning to working remotely proved to be a challenge with the looming uncertainty of what was ahead. Many of the staff that I supervised quit or were not motivated to continue working remotely. I felt the same way as well. Cancelling my planned film production and travel took a big toll on me. Then came the news of my friend's death. His name was Raymond Long, and he played the main protagonist, Link, in the Chinese Legend of Zelda film that I made. I needed to pause and take my time to rethink my priorities. But in the back of my mind, I knew I needed to keep moving forward. I just had to postpone my thesis project to focus on buying a home and selling my sneakers throughout the Spring and Summer.

During the beginning of summer 2020, I pitched and created several proof-of-concept videos, like an experimental documentary about sneakers that tells a narrative from several combinations of video clips from YouTube, social media, television, and movies. My three advisors had nothing nice to say about it. But when we causally caught up about our personal lives, I briefly mentioned that I was selling my sneakers to add funds for a down payment for my first home purchase. An idea sparked a new concept of combining my home buying journey with my passion for sneakers. At that point, I was halfway through selling my sneakers, so I started to film several B-rolls to create a new proof of concept video. But I still needed to think of a style and execution. I

felt that having a traditional short portrait documentary of myself would make this project feel stale. Combine that with the fact that I don't really like being in front of the camera, and I knew it was a disaster in the making.

When considering a specific style and execution, I watch films to inspire and motivate me to produce innovative ideas. When I was watching the movie *Zombie Land*, I enjoyed Jesse Eisenberg's narration of his deep thoughts throughout the film. It connected me as a viewer to his character's situation in the zombie ridden world. His narration was clever, and it entertained me throughout the film. An idea came to me: what if I had someone narrating throughout my film? Then I wouldn't need to edit an awkward talking head of myself. I was convinced when watching the Netflix series *Never Have I Ever* created by Mindy Kaling. The main character is a 15-year-old South Asian high school girl named Devi Vishwakumar. Her thoughts are narrated by John McEnroe, a 62-year-old tennis player. This dynamic was funny and original. I just had to do something similar. The thought of having Morgan Freeman's soothing voiceover narration in *Shawshank Redemption* occurred to me. But his light-hearted narration in the *March of the Penguin* is more ideal for my film.

Unfortunately, I couldn't afford to pay Morgan Freeman to narrate my film since I was still trying to raise money for a down payment. Instead, I reached out to my good friend David Kim. He is one of my frequent collaborators and filmmaking partners. When he mentioned that he was training to do voice over work, I told him about my thesis project and asked if he would be interested in lending his voice for a proof-of-concept video. David agreed to it because he needed more training and work samples for his voice over endeavor.

I wrote narration to accompany the B-roll footage I filmed. David had a homemade DIY voiceover area in his bedroom where he recorded the narration. He then sent it to me so I could edit it with the footage. I picked out background music from the YouTube Music Library because it contains a massive collection of royalty free music. I chose one melodic background tune to lighten the mood and some hip-hop music to really showcase hip-hop influence on sneaker culture. The proof-of-concept video was about 3 minutes long, and I immediately sent it to my advisors. It was a hit. They approved my new thesis concept, and I was so relieved that I finally had something to work on.

With the film concept and narrator locked down, I had to construct a narrative. I wanted to do an introduction of myself and my passion for sneakers, and what's a better way for an introduction of both than to feature the Nike Air Jordan 11 Space Jams that I wore in my wedding? After the opening, I incorporated my early introduction to the sneaker culture, like going for my first ever sneaker camp-out to purchase the Jordan 4 Fire Red. I then recounted how I became a hypebeast with my social media accounts and how eventually I was transformed into a reseller by selling a portion of my shoe collection to add the funds to the down payment for my home purchase. Throughout the film, I featured several significant sneakers such as the Virgil Abloh collaborations and Jordan 12 Flu Games along with their legendary stories. All the shoe models I focused on have interesting narratives that engage the audience, whether they are viewing the film as sneaker fans or just being introduced to sneaker culture.

## **AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION**

The sneaker culture is a niche audience. But I made *Cashing Out* to appeal to a mainstream audience, regardless of their prior knowledge of the sneaker culture. The goal is to get the viewers excited about some of my favorite sneakers that I mentioned in the film, as well as to motivate the audience through my journey to always stay positive and move forward with their life.

All the copyrighted materials used in *Cashing Out*, which includes video clips from several movies, television series, commercials, music videos and YouTube videos, as well as pictures and print ads, arguably falls under the Fair Use exception due to its use in my film as social commentary. The background music is all used in accordance with a free license, while I was granted permission to use the track *Tell It True* from the band Up For Nothing.

I plan on doing a small festival run by submitting *Cashing Out* to film festivals that have featured my work before, like the Asian American International Film Festival and Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival. The main focus is not to compete with other films, but to just get eyes on the film and get feedback from a more film-centric audience who might not know about sneaker culture.

After a brief film festival run, I'm planning to release *Cashing Out* for online distribution on my YouTube channel, Dayside TV, which has over 37,000 subscribers, as well as on my Vimeo page and my production company's website DaysideNY.com. To garner more attention for the film and accumulate substantial view counts, I will also promote the film using my social media accounts on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Tik Tok, which have over 5,000 combined followers.

One of my goals is to make this film go viral online in order to reach a worldwide audience and earn ad revenue in the process. With the sneaker culture in the mainstream spotlight, there is a big audience for this subject matter. Here are the follower counts of several big sneaker websites on Instagram:

@Sneakernews at 10.2 Million Followers

@HypeBeast at 10.1 Million Followers

@Complex at 9.8 Million Followers

@Nicekicks at 4.4 Million Followers

@BrKicks at 2.2 Million Followers

Just having a write up from one of these sites with the film imbedded in the article will help *Cashing Out* go viral.



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