

Project 1 - ABC Story “The Matrix” by Payton Prince

The English alphabet, in order, is one of the first aspects of the English language that is taught to children. It is almost always taught by the use of the famous alphabet song - a song that probably every hearing individual has had memorized since infancy. The use of song in teaching the alphabet helps children to easily remember the letters of the alphabet and the order in which they present themselves. In turn, this mnemonic tactic of remembering the alphabet aids in the development of reading and writing English for the vast majority of the hearing population. However, the use of song in remembering the English alphabet does not aid much for those who are d/Deaf.

While d/Deaf individuals can very often feel the beat of music, songs with emphasis on the lyrics, such as the alphabet song, are frequently of little use. Even for Deaf individuals whose native language is American Sign Language, the acquisition of proficient English literacy is stressed greatly from childhood all the way into adulthood. Educational institutions for the d/Deaf emphasize the use of English far more than the use of signed language more often than not, and this audistic educational environment has been the reality for the American Deaf community since the beginning of deaf education in the United States. Deaf students needed to remember the letters of the English alphabet and their respective order in order to continue their education, but the alphabet song was not suitable for the majority of them. For this reason, the Deaf population had to create their own alphabetical mnemonic: ABC stories, or sometimes referred to as A-Z stories.

ABC stories display the English alphabet in order through the use of American Sign Language and signed letters. Much like the name suggests, ABC stories tell a story completely dictated by the order of the alphabet, with each letter representing a different aspect of the story.

They are a form of performance art unique to Deaf culture possessing a flexibility and a range that allows for hundreds of different versions, each telling its own distinct story. Because ABC stories are unique to Deaf culture, it is only appropriate for a Deaf person to create and share them. A hearing person creating and sharing an ABC story would be considered cultural appropriation, as they were created by Deaf people and for Deaf people. These stories, just like every other story in literature, possess an introduction, climax, resolution, and conclusion. Some ABC stories are more well-known and more widely used in schools than others, but each one has a similar purpose: to help remember the alphabet.

One of the most important aspects of ABC stories is the expression used by the signer. The signer must possess ample facial expression, and they must also be able to adequately portray multiple characters and/or events. While this is the case for all signed stories, it is especially important with ABC stories. Without the use of speech or written language to enhance a story, and with the requirements of using the alphabet in order, the storyteller then must rely on proper bodily and facial expression to make the ABC story engaging enough for the viewer to remember it. ABC stories often incorporate popular media, such as films or books, or major historical events to make the ABC story that much more interesting and memorable for the audience.

For this essay, I have chosen to analyze an ABC story modeled after the popular American movie franchise entitled *The Matrix*. *The Matrix* is a four part science fiction movie franchise revolving around the world of cyberspace and the altering of reality as we know it. The films star popular movie actor Keanu Reeves, and the first film won a total of four oscars. The cultural impact of these films are enormous; the concept of the matrix, defined as a surrounding structure, with the purpose of questioning the current perceived reality has become

extremely well known among the entire world population. The films include mind boggling visuals and concepts, as well as fight scenes that are determined to keep the audience on the edge of their seats.

Jeremy Lee Stone created an ABC story centering around this film due to his passion for the film itself and the movie's tendency to push the boundaries of the imagination, and this passion translated into his desire to create an ABC story with similar visual and cognitive effects to what he saw in the film. He wished to create a body of art that kept with the tradition of ABC storytelling, while also including digital visual and sound effects to properly engage both hearing and Deaf audiences. He greatly succeeded in this, as many of the comments under his video praise his expressive skills and claim his to be one of the best ABC stories they have witnessed in a while.

Before I begin analyzing Stone's ABC story step-by-step how it is produced, it is important to note that as a hearing person, my interpretation may be different from the interpretation of a Deaf person. There may be details or elements that I miss, because this work of art is of a different culture and language than my own. That being said, with my knowledge of ASL and with Stone's use of bodily and facial expression, I am able to comprehend and appreciate most of the story.

It appears that Stone's character has just ingested a substance into his brain that allows him to travel into the matrix, where he finds himself in the middle of a fight with several others. He begins with the letter A to sign, "HELP-YOU." For the letter B, he uses its handshape with both hands to create a table or flattened disk of sorts that he slides in front of him to suggest its appearance out of "nowhere." It opens up to show a substance that moves on its own to situate itself right in front of his face; for this he uses the letter C on both hands to emphasize the shape

of the substance. All the while, his facial expressions demonstrate the abnormality of this substance and the events taking place. He then shows the C substance making its way into his brain, after which he expands his C hands outward from the head giving the impression that the substance has now taken effect. The screen goes from grey to green to emphasize the notion that he is now inside the matrix.

As soon as he enters the matrix, the story becomes action packed. He uses the D handshape to point to his eye and then to point off to the side, emphasizing that he is seeing something. He then uses the E handshape to fashion his hand into a gun which he then shoots off into the direction he previously pointed. His whole body is used to express the illusion of shooting a gun, which the viewer can see by the way he kicks his shoulders back with every “bullet” and how he morphs his mouth to imitate the sound of them. Visually, he adds the effects of real bullets onto the screen in order to make the “gunshots” feel more real.

The story heightens itself when it appears that someone else has shot him. He uses the handshapes F and G to show the trajectory of the bullets heading his way, going from incredibly fast to slow-motion as he dodges them. This slow-motion aspect is recognizable from *The Matrix* films, and Stone is able to easily depict that with the use of his hands. The action continues when he uses the letters H and I for classifiers, showing that he is backed up against a wall, and others are shooting at him. H represents his body, and I on both hands represents the others kneeled down shooting. The story shifts back to first person when he uses L handshapes on both hands to represent guns that he pulls out of his pockets, to which he begins shooting using the thumbs as the triggers. M and N handshapes are then used to show the trajectory of bullets flying towards him and directly past his head. He then uses the O handshape to depict the landing of bullets both behind him and once on his chest, to which he pulls the bullet out.

Next, he uses P handshapes on both hands as classifiers to seemingly represent two people who have fallen down but then stand back up. This could be the introduction of another protagonistic character. They run towards each other and then squat, back-to-back, guns drawn. Stone depicts them squatted and back-to-back with the use of Q handshapes. The story shifts back to first person again, and he uses R handshapes to display more shooting. The computer generated visual effects continue throughout the story. Stone continues the use of R handshapes when pointing to his head and out in front him. He then looks around, eliciting the impression that he is searching for others. To show that they are all gone, he uses a flat-B handshape on the non-dominant hand and slides his dominant hand across it from an open S into a closed S handshape.

The next part of the story seems to be the resolution to the climax. He uses the T handshape as a classifier to depict himself shooting straight up against a wall and then the U handshape to depict himself falling straight down many feet. When he has landed, he uses the W handshape to depict massive amounts of wind all around him. He uses an X handshape shaking from side-to-side and sound effects to then depict a phone ringing next to him. He answers the phone with the Y handshape, and his facial expression changes to one of surprise. For the final letter of Z, he uses the Z motion as a classifier to depict himself shooting straight down below the surface, emphasizing that even though this particular story has come to the close, another one is just beginning.

Jeremy Lee Stone's ABC Story representing *The Matrix* is a perfect example of the beauty of Deaf art. Despite having only the alphabet to work with, he tells an incredibly detailed story with great expression and emotion, and he uses his entire body to help him. ABC stories marvelously utilize the mobility of ASL to create entire narratives and storylines out of the use of

merely twenty-six letters, and they utilize it in a way that everyone can understand it. They are an absolute testament to the fact that Deaf “oral” literature deserves the same regard and respect as written literature, as its effects on the viewer and on its culture are all the same.

References

Jeremy Lee Stone. (2020, March 17). *ABC Story: The Matrix* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mdQCTbd1dI>