

Behind the Silver Screen: The Movie Theater as an Activity System

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Activity systems are everywhere—even at the movie theater. Looking at AMC Theatres, Kelly Pierce looks at the ways genres intersect to create one giant activity system that allows us to watch the movies we love on the big screen.

Every Friday, a new week begins at the movie theater. New films come in and audience members pour into the auditoriums, popcorn and soda in hand, to watch the latest thing to come out of Hollywood. It's a tale as old as time—or at least as old as 1905 when the Nickelodeon, an indoor space designed to show motion pictures, was first opened in Pittsburgh (Mondello). Sure, there have been a lot of changes in the last one-hundred-plus years, but what has not changed is the fact that the movie theater is an **activity system** many people are familiar with. Activity systems are “cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal” and the Writing Program website describes them as historically developed, inherently social, dialogic, collective rather than individual, and always changing (ISU Writing Program). I want to discuss the activities that surround going to the movies not only because I am an avid moviegoer myself, but also because I worked for AMC Theatres for six years. This means that I belong to the **discourse community** of the movie theater industry. A discourse community is a group or organization one belongs to that has certain social and cultural norms. Because I specifically worked for AMC Theatres, I will focus on the activity systems surrounding their business practices.

CHATing About the Movies

Some of you may be a little confused about why I am spending time talking about the activity system of any movie theater in a journal about writing. There are really two reasons for this. One is that I like movies, and if I am going to write about anything for several pages, it will have to be something I'm passionate about. The other reason is that there is a lot we can learn about the activity systems of writing from looking at other activity systems we interact with on a regular basis. This is done by using **CHAT**, or the Cultural-historical activity theory that the ISU Writing Program uses to analyze **genres** and activities. Genre is a word that can be used to describe a text or artifact (or even an activity) that tends to solidify over time in different situations, but it's also important to remember that genres are always in action—always evolving and changing. For example, a book is a print artifact, and when we say the word “book” people might often imagine a physical object with a cover and pages. But many people now might also include digital books in their understanding of what a “book” is, and these texts are very different. And yet, a Kindle book usually does still have a cover and pages; this is because genres also tend to retain some characteristics, even as they adapt and change over time. In this article, I will be looking at different genres within the different activity sets (the groups of activities that make up an entire activity system) of going to the movies and applying the following CHAT terms:

These CHAT terms have been paraphrased in my own words based on the definitions on ISUwriting.com on the “Key Terms & Concepts” page.

- **Distribution:** The way a genre is sent out to an audience.
- **Reception:** The way the audience takes up (interprets or reacts to) a genre.
- **Socialization:** The way people communicate about or interact with other people because of or about a genre.
- **Production:** The technology, products, and other items that go into creating a genre.
- **Representation:** How the people involved in the genre plan and conceptualize it; or, how they think and talk about the genre.
- **Ecology:** the environmental conditions surrounding the creation of a genre.

The seventh CHAT term, activity, involves all of the practices people engage in when creating the genre. However, I will be focusing more on

the activity customers perform as movie-goers and their **uptake** of the genres mentioned in this article. Uptake is another ISU Writing Program term that means the way an audience member makes sense of a new—or even familiar—genre. Another term I will use throughout this article is **antecedent knowledge**, which can include everything a person knows about a genre (or similar genres), particularly knowledge that helps them interpret new genres. All of these terms can be found on the ISU Writing Program page at isuwriting.com.

Coming Soon

So, it's Friday night and you want to watch a movie. How do you decide which movie to see? Part of this decision rests on how often a person watches movies at the theater. For me, I often know which movies are coming out each week because I watch a lot of trailers on several platforms. The genre of trailers is important to my process because they are short clips—usually between one-and-a-half or two-and-a-half minutes—that give the audience an overview of what the movie will be about. However, there are many genres that can help people decide what to watch, many of which are based on the time the movie starts. Because the movie theater is an activity system that is always changing, the genres surrounding it are also changing.

Two genres that used to exist to help audiences make their decision based on time were newspapers and automated phone systems. While there are still a few newspapers that print showtimes for local movie theaters, most large companies, like AMC, no longer send their times to the newspapers or phone systems because of the cost and the fact that their customers are now more likely to use different technology to find showtimes. AMC changed the distribution of their showtimes to meet the demand from their customers; they now provide showtimes on their website as well as their AMC Theatres app, shown in Figure 1. By moving to these new genres, AMC has responded to their customers' growing needs to get their information quickly.

This is not to say, however, that all customers appreciated the move from print media to online access. While the reception was generally positive, many of the customers I interacted with did not receive the change in business practices well, complaining vehemently when they could no longer open the newspaper and find accurate showtimes for the movies they wanted

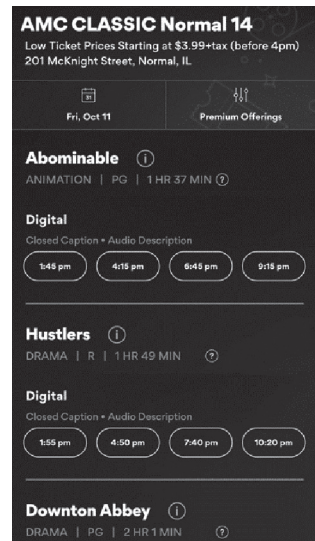


Figure 1: A screenshot of showtimes on my AMC Theatres app

to see. As with any change, there are always people whose uptake of a new genre will be different from others.

No matter how customers get their information, the showtimes are always separated by what the movie theater calls “sets.” Each set of showtimes is scheduled between one to two hours around 12, 4, 6, and 9 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. Weekday sets during school years generally lose the 9 p.m. set because Sundays through Thursdays see very low attendance after 8 p.m. This shows how theaters have responded to the demands and needs of their customers by changing the way the movie itself is distributed at times that are most convenient to the maximum number of customers.

Show Me the Movie Ticket!

Once the movie has been chosen—possibly after endless debates—it’s time to get the tickets. Based on many people’s antecedent knowledge of this activity, a lot of customers think about buying their tickets at the box office. This is still the primary method most movie patrons use, which is pretty clear on a weekend night when a new big movie is released and there’s a line out the door.

In recent years, AMC has introduced two new ways to buy tickets without going to the box office. Knowing that patrons do not like standing in those long, opening-night lines, AMC began opening sales on their website as well as through Fandango, a third-party website that sells movie tickets. Once they launched their app, AMC also allowed people to buy tickets through that platform. Customers who buy their tickets online or through the app are able to go to kiosks at the front of the lobby to print out their tickets. If they do not want to deal with the kiosk, they can still go to the box office to let the employee at the register print the tickets instead.

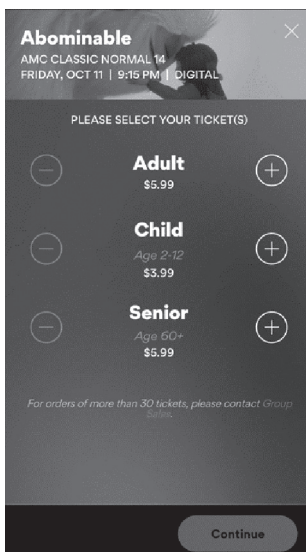


Figure 2: The ticket prices for a matinee showing of *Abominable*.

All these activities involve different genres. The app conforms to the standard conventions of most phone applications because it is easy to navigate with the touch of your thumb. Figure 2 shows the image that appears when a patron selects a movie from the showtimes listed as shown in Figure 1. Once the movie is selected, the customer chooses the appropriate number of tickets for the needed age group and moves on with their purchase, all from the comfort of their own phone. The website

genre allows customers to click through the page to find their movie and buy their ticket. AMC has transferred many of the style choices across their platforms to make buying tickets online or through the app easy. Even the physical box office has genres customers are used to seeing. For example, the main genre is the box office marquee, which displays the movies being shown and the times they will play throughout the day.

All these genres come with slightly different socializations that cause the customer to respond in certain ways. No matter how the customer purchases their ticket, every method results in the same genre: the physical ticket. This particular genre tells the customer when and where they bought the ticket, when their movie starts, where their auditorium is, and how much they spent. Though most people forget about their tickets almost immediately, this is one genre that accounts for some very important activities. If the movie stops unexpectedly, or if there is an emergency, the ticket is necessary to receive a refund or free passes to return.

Depending on the movie you have chosen, there is one more genre that might play a part in this activity set, and it is one you will have to show to the box office attendant. If you choose to see an **R**-rated movie, you may be asked to show your driver's license or **ID** card because **R**-rated movies require customers to be seventeen or older or to have an adult present. This is perhaps one of the most contentious moments of the activity for people on both sides of the counter. I cannot count the number of times I have had to turn customers away from a movie because they weren't old enough, did not have an **ID** that proved they were old enough, or did not bring an adult along. While I would have happily let anyone in to watch whatever movie they wanted, doing so may have resulted in a genre no customer gets to see: a write-up. In fact, failure to card young-looking people for an **R**-rated movie could even result in getting fired. So if you go to an **R**-rated movie, make sure you are ready to produce that important genre of your **ID** (and tell all your friends, too).

I'll Have What She's Having

With your ticket in hand, it is time to make a fateful decision: to snack or not to snack? That is the question. For many people, this is an easy question to answer because they do not believe anyone can truly enjoy the movie-going experience without a large bag of popcorn and soda in hand. When it comes time to buying concessions, there are two major genres: menu boards and the smells of the concession stand.



Figure 3: A fleet of large popcorn bags from AMC

I will start with the last genre because it seems like the most unlikely genre to impact someone's decision to buy anything. This is, however, the most basic selling concept of a movie theater. Think about the last time you went to a movie theater. Do you remember the smell of freshly popped popcorn when you entered the lobby? That is because concession employees pop a new batch of popcorn at the beginning of each set. This smell is of vital importance to the sale of popcorn and other concession items. During my years at the theater, I can attest to the fact that nothing lowers sales like the smell of burnt popcorn. Even the lack of that fresh popcorn scent can affect sales. And, even as more food has been added to the menu, popcorn remains the top seller. Part of this is because of the socialization and reception that surrounds popcorn. Most people receive the idea of popcorn as almost synonymous with going to the movies. In fact, it's so much a part of movie culture that if a movie has a scene where the characters watch a movie, they will have popcorn. Just see if I'm wrong. I'll wait. Eating popcorn is also included in socialization because customers take up the smell and decide to share their popcorn with the person they are watching the movie with. If they don't share their popcorn, you might want to rethink socializing with them.

The other genre I mentioned, menu boards, seems like a more standard genre. It displays images of the different products available as well as the cost of individual items and combos. Each theater has different menu boards based on what food and drinks are available, but they all have the same basic set up of pictures, words, and prices. However, the distribution of this information may change based on the type of menu displays the theater has. Some theaters still have the original stationary menu boards, while others have updated their displays to LED screens that give information along with short videos advertising different products on a continuous loop. Many times, these videos represent the food in ways that are meant to have the customer receive the items as delicious and necessary for watching the movie.

The products themselves could also be considered genres because their packaging is designed to both catch the eye or signal that the product is tasty. The distribution of food and drinks can depend upon the ecology of the theater. While the Normal AMC Theatre uses the traditional method of distributing their products over the counter, there are an increasing number of dine-in theaters, especially in bigger cities. At these theaters, the

audience members order food from menus handed to them by servers, and their meal can be delivered to their seat at any point in the movie. The dine-in experience also changes the socialization of getting concessions. Instead of standing in a line, customers can interact with their server more quickly. They also do not have to miss as much of the movie to get refills on drinks or to order more food. No matter how or what someone decides to buy, the important part is that they have something to munch on as they watch their movie.

Yippee-Ki-Yay, Cell Phone Talker

Now that you have your ticket and concession items, it's time to sit down and watch the movie. This is perhaps the most important activity in the system. Okay, it is absolutely the most important activity in the system. But this comes with its own activity set. Before you can start watching, you have to choose a seat. In most theaters, this is a choice you make when you walk through the doors of your movie's respective auditorium. In some places, this activity is changing as theaters add a pick-your-seat feature when the tickets are purchased. The new option allows customers to choose their seats before ever stepping foot in the auditorium. Not only does this cut down on the number of empty seats between people in the same group, but it has also changed the ticket genre; theaters with this feature have added the seat location to their tickets, so—much like a seat on an airplane—no one else can sit in that chair. Once the seat is chosen (and sat in), it is time for the main event.

Watching a movie has also changed somewhat over the years, with the most noticeable change being the addition of the pre-movie announcement. This relatively new genre can be analyzed through several aspects of CHAT as it informs audience behavior so that everyone can enjoy the movie. The AMC announcement provides emergency information and hypes the products and services offered by AMC. In order to ensure maximum viewership, this announcement is distributed as a short clip before the trailers. Socialization is an important factor because the announcement relies on the audience's awareness of theater etiquette and presumes an agreement about what that behavior should be. The announcement does this by asking patrons to silence their cell phones, stop talking, and refrain from posting on social media. All of these rules are ended with the directive, "Don't ruin the movie." While planning this announcement (representation), AMC likely considered how they could best display the cultural norms they are asking their audience to perform while also using the announcement as a space to advertise.

For me, the most important aspect of CHAT in this scenario is the audience's reception of the announcement. Not every audience member takes up this announcement the same way. Many people do silence or put away their cell phones. Most even refrain from talking while watching the movie. Unfortunately, some people receive the announcement as an easily ignored suggestion. These people seem to be unaware that when they look at their cell phone, even briefly, it can be seen by everyone else in the auditorium. The etiquette around talking in movies is also impacted by socialization and reception. There are appropriate and inappropriate kinds of talking or noise-making depending on the type of movie someone is watching. There will of course be laughing during a comedy and gasps and screams during horror movies—at least there should be if the filmmakers did their jobs right. The amount of appropriate noise may vary depending on different movies and discourse communities, but at no point is it appropriate to hold full conversations during a movie. This goes against the whole activity of watching a movie at a theater.

When certain movie goers use their cell phones or talk loudly, the activity that follows is not always a public shaming of the person or people behaving against the social norms. However, as the movie theater is an ever-changing activity system, perhaps this will be socialized differently in the future. For now, the hope is that everyone learns to take up the announcement AMC produced and cease annoying their fellow movie goers.

You're Still Here? It's Over. Go Home.

Not many people know this, but we watch movies in reverse these days. Up until the early 1960s, credits were always displayed at the beginning of the movie. All of the actors, producers, sound stage workers, and everyone else who worked to create the movie had their names displayed before the audience's eyes for the first minute or two of the film. When the movie was over, the previews for new movies coming out in the coming months would begin to play. In fact, that is why movie previews are called trailers, because they *trailed* the feature film. Today, the trailers run first, followed by the feature film. Then, finally, the credits roll, signaling to the audience that the movie is over. However, in recent years, filmmakers have begun to add end-credit scenes, which have changed how audiences take up credits and have also sparked a new genre: end credit notifications.

Long before Marvel became known for this practice, one of the first end credit scenes was featured in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Figure 4). Matthew Broderick, as Ferris, tells his audience to go home because there is no more



Figure 4: The final end credit scene from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.



Figure 5: The final end credit scene from *Deadpool*.

to see. This tongue-in-cheek end credit scene was the beginning of a slow change in how Hollywood produces their films and how audiences receive them.

Today, many Marvel fans often know not to leave the movie theater when the credits start rolling, as there are generally two end credit scenes. One occurs somewhere in the middle of the credits while the second appears after the music and studio credits roll away. This fact is so ingrained in the socialization of the Marvel discourse community that fans often laugh when they see people leave when the credits start rolling and are mad if there are no end credit scenes or if the final scene doesn't meet their expectations. One of my favorite Marvel end credit scenes is the one where *Deadpool* pays homage to the original end credit phenomenon (Figure 5). *Deadpool* uses the same set, costume, and lines from *Ferris Bueller*. Moreover, a website called RunPee has been incorporated into the AMC app for most new films. Beyond showing audience members moments in the movie when they could possibly go to the bathroom without missing something important to the plot, the app

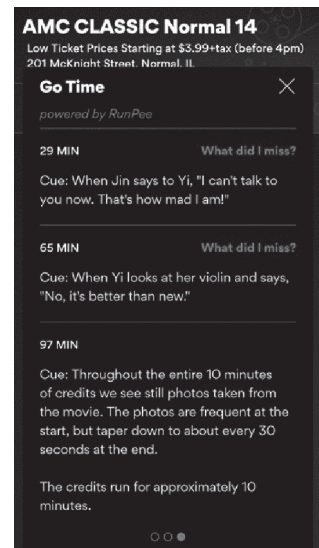


Figure 6: A screenshot of The RunPee times and end credit information for *Abominable*.

provides information on whether there is an end credit scene (or two) the audience should wait for.

Credits have also changed over the years in that they are longer than they once were. As technology has advanced and more movies are adding digital effects such as CGI, more people have become involved in the production of each movie. These longer credits and end credit scenes have changed the way theaters have scheduled their sets so their employees have time to clean the auditoriums between showings. This time must include the fact that more people are staying for the full length of the credits—unless they check apps like RunPee that let them know if there is nothing to wait for. Before the advent of end credit scenes, employees could feel fairly confident that people would leave during the credits, giving the ushers—employees in charge of cleaning the auditorium—more than enough time to clean the theater in time for the next showing. This brings the activity system full circle: the consideration of long credits with possible end scenes affects the times at which movies are scheduled, which can also affect how the next customer chooses a movie.

I'm Ready for My Close-Up(take)

As technology advances and movie theaters compete more and more with in-home entertainment, it will be interesting to see how the activity system of going to the movies changes over time. For now, many of the activities I have mentioned are the activities that have been around for almost 100 years.

However, after all of this you may still be wondering: what does any of this have to do with writing? The fact is that writing is an activity system that is every bit as complicated as you never knew watching a movie could be. Much like the activity system I just described, writing involves all aspects of CHAT to produce the genre you are trying to create. Whether you are writing an essay for a class, posting to social media, or doing any other kind of writing, you are engaged in every facet of CHAT. The conditions of where you write—the ecology—impacts how you write. The way you plan your text—the representation—impacts how you write. Just know that every time you engage in an activity, there are so many factors that go into it, and CHAT can help you figure out how your audience may take up any genre you produce.

Well, that's all folks. Happy writing and movie-watching!

Works Cited

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