

The Dummies Guide to making movies in LOTRO

Aegthil's Fool. March, 2013

Introduction

This is a guide about how to make movies in the online computer game [Lord of the Rings Online](#) (LOTRO). Should you care? Probably not. But if you're interested, read on.

Who am I? Well, I play a character called [Aegthil of Gondor](#) on the Landroval server. And I've taught myself how to make movies in LOTRO. You can look at the videos I've made on YouTube, at <http://www.youtube.com/user/BardsBeersLongbeards>.

Somebody asked me to write a Dummies Guide about how I made these movies. This is it. There are many ways to make movies, of course, so what I'll describe is only the way I made them. It might not be the best way - it probably isn't the best way - but it's the way that works for me.

As the saying goes, your mileage may vary.

In real life I know nothing about making movies. I am a musician. I know about music. Neither am I a video geek. However, I have learned enough to get by, and you may (or may not) find my comments useful.

Setting up

What you need

- A decent computer. The bigger the better. I currently use Bootcamp (running Windows 7 Pro) on an iMac (3.4 GHz Intel Core i7, 16 GB). I've not tried making movies on a low-end machine, but I don't think I'd want to try it.

You'll need a bit of free disk space. Typically, the raw video files for a 5 minute movie will require about 50GB, and then you need all the extra stuff (audio files, additional pictures, scratch disk space for editing, etc.) I wouldn't want to try it with less than 70 GB free space.

- A program that grabs video from your computer. The program I use is called [FRAPS](#), and is the best I've found. There is a free version of FRAPS which you can use for testing, but this leaves a watermark on the frames. To make a serious movie you will need to pay for FRAPS. It's not expensive. FRAPS is not available for a Mac, which is a sad, sad thing.

A word of warning here: you really need a video grabber that grabs raw (i.e., uncompressed) files. These are not so common. For example, I haven't yet found a program that runs on the Mac that will do this. (If you know of one, please tell me!) Most programs grab the video and then compress it, either on the fly or after you stop the recording. This is useless. Firstly, it is WAY too slow for doing practical movie recording. You've got 20 people standing around waiting to be told what to do, and the last thing you want is to have to wait 5 minutes for your latest recording to compress

and save. Secondly, the video editing is much slower when using compressed files (well, it is in Premiere. I don't know about other programs.) Thirdly, you lose quality in a way that is not under your control. Not good. FRAPS records directly to avi format. This takes a lot of disk space, but is fast and high quality.

- A video editing program. These come in a huge variety of shapes and sizes. I use [Adobe Premiere Pro](#) (on a Mac), which is powerful and easy to use. I've also used [iMovie](#) (on a Mac) which is free, but not nearly as powerful. There are many other programs.
- A video compressor. No competition here. Use [Handbrake](#). End of story.

Lotro and FRAPS settings

You need to set the window size and resolution in Lotro (as well as the graphic quality), and then set up FRAPS. When doing this you need to keep in mind the ultimate place for publication of your video. I knew that I wanted to put them on YouTube, so I chose my settings accordingly.

Lotro settings:

- Window size: 1920 x 1080. Windowed mode (so you can control all the other stuff you have to do while filming).
- Graphics quality: put this to whatever your computer will bear. On my computer I run at ultra settings, but with all shadows turned off. I turn off the shadows because Lotro tends to record very dark video, and shadows just make it worse. Also, I use sharp filtering instead of anisotropic, because I prefer the look.
- Turn all audio off (less strain on the computer). You mostly won't be using the audio you grab during a recording session anyway, so don't bother grabbing it. All audio should be put in later, unless there's a really compelling reason why not.
- Set up an easily accessible button to turn the interface off. I always used F13.

FRAPS settings:

- Record at half window size. This gives output at 960 x 540, which is a good size for a YouTube video. Remember, if you want to make a movie with more pixels, you need a LOT more computer power.
- 25 fps (PAL). Go NTSC if you want, but that's a slightly higher load on the computer. For most recording you won't get 25 fps anyway.
- Set up an easily accessible button to start recording. I always used F15.
- Don't grab audio, so uncheck that box.
- Loop buffer: 30 s.
- Hide mouse while recording.
- Lock framerate.

Recording your movie

Now that you're all set up it's time to record your movie. Set up the shot, hit F13 (or whatever you set up) to hide the interface, hit F15 (or whatever) to record, and away you go.

I can't really help much with this part of the process, as this is the creative bit. You're the one who has to think up a storyline, scenes, choose or write music, etc. Here are just some random thoughts.

Get a bunch of people to help

You can't do it alone, and I couldn't have made any videos without the help of the greatest kinship in Lotro, [The Lonely Mountain Band](#). (Not that I'm biased or anything.) They turned out, 20 or more at a time, to donate their time to help me.

In return (if you'll allow me to state the obvious) be organised. Start on time. Finish on time. Give directions clearly using voice communication. Etc, etc. Like any activity that needs a lot of people coordinated.

Music and Storyline

Again, up to you. Lotro has its own music system, and it's criminal not to use it for a Lotro movie. It's best to write your own music, of course, as then you can change the music to suit the movie. Even more, you can ensure the music changes in precisely the correct place, is exactly the right length, etc.

By the way, if you think you've got a nice poem, or a nice story, or a nice piece of music, whatever, the chances are that it will have to be significantly changed in order to make it into a movie. It might work as a poem, but that doesn't mean it'll work as a movie. Each time I used a pre-existing poem to make a movie ([Ride of Eorl](#) and [Song](#)) the original poem had to be chopped and changed quite a few times (and shortened considerably), and the music had to be adjusted each time to match.

How to record BIG crowds

If you want to record a scene with 50 people in it, but you only have 5 extras, you can cheat.

- Pick the camera angle. Make sure it's the angle you want, as you can't change it later.
- Get your five friends to do their thing (walking along, riding horses, whatever).
- Stop recording. DON'T move the camera.
- Get your five friends to go back to the beginning and do it all again (preferably in a different order).
- Rinse and repeat.
- During editing, use animated masks to patch those takes together to make it look as if 50 people were all there at once.
- Do this all quickly, before the light changes. Which it does fast in Lotro. If the light changes too much between the takes you can't patch them together.

Lighting

If you possibly can, record during the day. The lighting at night is complete rubbish in Lotro. Very dark, very nasty, very irritating.

If you must record at night you'll have to change the colour balance and saturation in your editing program, but I could never get the results as good as a daytime record.

Audio

- Record audio separately if you possibly can. I keep a stock set of cheers (all races, both sexes), yells, sighs, etc, as well as generic battle sounds. They can all be put in later.
- Never record music live in-game.
 - Lag will kill the rhythm, no matter how good your connection is. Trust me. It might sound OK to you, but it won't sound OK to nitpickers like me. I know, I know, that sounds really condescending, but rhythm that is not QUITE right is something I really really hate. Like being almost in tune. Ugh.
 - The person standing next to you will be slurping a drink, cheering, and farting. All these sounds will come out on the video, and will be unbelievably irritating to anybody (i.e., to me) who is watching the video for the sake of the music.
 - So, record the video, get a copy of the music, and put them together in the editing process. You'll be happy you did. You can thank me later.

Using emotes while filming

- Get your extras using lots of emotes. Try never to have them standing still like stuffed dummies.
- You also can use emotes on your own character while filming, even when your interface is off. Just set each emote up as a shortcut (tied to number 1-9, say). Then, when your interface is off and you're filming, you can just hit that number and your character will do the emote. Very handy. I guess you probably knew this already.
- You can use the above method to get your character talking or singing when your interface is off.

Dual boxing to get your character out of the centre

If you record your own character a lot, you'll quickly get irritated by the fact that your character - when filmed from your character - is always right in the middle of the screen. Often, that's not where you want them to be.

The solution is easy. Dual box. Set up a free account, level your favourite race up to level 6, and film the video from them. Hobbits are good to get low angles on your character, while a man on a horse will get a nice high angle.

You can dual box on a single computer very easily. Windows has this neat feature whereby you right-click on the application and choose "Run as different user". Log in to a different user and power up your second Lotro account. Hey presto, two Lotro windows on your screen. Very cool indeed. I wish the Mac could do this.

Once you start a FRAPS recording in Lotro screen 1, the recording will continue from screen 1, even if you switch to screen 2 to make your character do something.

Tracking and panning

Moving your character with the keyboard gives nice smooth motion. It's easy to move backwards, forwards, or track left and right. But swiveling the view with the mouse is always jerky. At least when I do it, it is. Too jerky to be used in movies.

You can get around this partially by setting the mouse speed to be VERY slow, and then moving the mouse like crazy. But this isn't a good solution. What you need is a mouse movement programming application, but I was never able to find a good free one. If you know one, do please tell me.

Editing

This will depend on what program you're using. If you use Premiere Pro I could help, but if you don't, I can't.

However, just in case you use Premiere Pro, here are the settings:

- Timebase: 25.00fps
- Frame size: 960h 540v (1.0000)
- Frame rate: 25.00 frames/second
- Pixel Aspect Ratio: Square Pixels (1.0)
- Fields: No Fields (Progressive Scan. This last setting is very important. FRAPS outputs Progressive Scan video and this has to match in your editing program.

Output settings:

- Format: Quicktime
- Video codec: MPEG-4 Video. (This gives a big file as output. Premiere has an option to compress with H.264, but the Handbrake compressor seems to be a lot better. No idea why.)
- Quality: 100
- Use maximum render quality, and render at max depth
- Square pixels, 25 fps, 960 x 540 pixels.
- Field type: Progressive

Some additional random thoughts, which are probably totally trivial to anybody who had made movies.

- Animated masks are your friend. Learn how to use them, learn how to love them. It's amazing what you can do with masking.
- Nested sequences are also your friend. Build the movie in pieces, then put all the pieces together. Don't try to do everything in a single sequence. Put sequences within sequences within sequences. (This is Premiere terminology. Your own editing program might use different words but the concept will remain the same.)

- Rotoscoping is also your friend. It's very time-consuming, but you can do cool stuff with rotoscoping that you just can't do any other way. For example, suppose I wanted to film a band playing on a cloud that is zooming around.
 - Film the band playing, in front of a plain background.
 - Open the band video in Photoshop.
 - On every frame, trace out the outline of the band playing, and delete everything else. For two seconds of video you will have to do 50 frames, so it takes a long time. There are fancy tools to do this, but I don't know of any free ones.
 - This process gives you a band playing, with no background at all.
 - Now just superimpose this band video on top of any background you like. You can make the band play anywhere you like. Even on a cloud. With halos.
- Do all your editing on uncompressed video. In Premiere at least this is much faster.
- When it's all done, output to an uncompressed format. I used MPEG-4, as I said above.

Final compression and upload

Once you've got the uncompressed movie saved (typically it's about 3-4 GB for a four minute movie), you just need to compress it for upload.

Handbrake is a great tool to do this. And it's free.

- Use H.264 compression
- Set the quality to be such that the final movie is about 100 MB (probably about RF20, using the constant quality setting). This is decent quality, but doesn't take too long to upload.
- Framerate should be set to "Same as source". Usually. However, you might need to set this to 25 fps manually. For example, if you try to compress FRAPS output directly, Handbrake sometimes seems to be unable to detect the correct framerate, in which case the video file gets messed up and Premiere can't import it. I have no idea why.
- There are lots of other settings in Handbrake, but I rarely use most of them. The default settings seem pretty good.

Finally, put it up on YouTube. You know how to do that better than me, I imagine.

Here endeth the lesson.

***Any questions? Want any additions? Things I got wrong or forgot to say?
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