



INDEPENDENT ANIMATION

DEVELOPING, PRODUCING AND
DISTRIBUTING YOUR ANIMATED FILMS



BEN
MITCHELL



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1

Introduction



Wackadoodoo (Dir. Benjamin Arcand). (Courtesy of Benjamin Arcand, ©2014.)

We're living in a particularly exciting time for all forms of independent creativity, perhaps especially animation. Throughout the world, we have seen a rapid acclimation to some very sudden shifts and advances in technology. Entertainment media has evolved to a point where consumers from all walks of life can engage with it in almost any circumstance,

thanks largely to the portability of tablets, smartphones, and other such gadgetry. How we experience entertainment has also drastically changed; with content so readily available on demand, these demands are being raised, and with them, our expectations of quality. Matching this is an increasing prevalence of sophisticated, user-friendly, affordable software alongside a vast ocean of equally affordable, online educational resources to teach auteurs how to use them.

During this same period of recent technological advancement, the changing economy has hugely reconfigured the funding options that were once so key to getting any kind of animated film project off the ground. Depending on where you are in the world, some grants and schemes in support of the arts remain, while those not so geographically fortunate have been forced to up their game. This coupling of new circumstances has turned out to be a tremendous positive, with true ingenuity manifesting itself out of the limited resources available to filmmakers.

As such, the cultural significance—and, indeed, effect—of independent animation is thriving, and the future is bright for small studios, collectives, and individuals, who are able to put strong ideas out in the world in ways they would not have been able to in the not-too-distant past.

My aim with this book, as an animation enthusiast, freelancer, and independent director myself, is to lay out some of the essential tenets, philosophies, and creative processes behind the independent animation community's most prominent, prolific, and respected artists, so that other creatives and artists such as yourself can be motivated to put these into practical effect when it comes to their own projects (Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1

The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle. (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2014.)

An important thing to clarify is that this is not another book that goes through the fundamentals of animation and storytelling itself, as there are plenty of those out there, a fair few of which will most likely be on your shelves already. This book is for when you have worked through the basics of animation—your bouncing balls, flour sacks, walk cycles, lip-sync exercises, and layouts—and are asking yourself how precisely you wish to apply this knowledge to a film. This includes those of you who have determined that the type of animated film you wish to make will throw these fundamentals out of the window, to develop an entirely personal process from scratch. Here you will read about how popular animated films have come from such unique approaches—whether animated on laptop trackpads, using ink sprayed from syringes, or on sticky notes attached to the backs of farmyard animals (seriously).

The most consistent observation I've witnessed at all points of my career as both an animator and an animation researcher is that whether you are a student, professional, or hobbyist, the call of directing, writing, and/or producing one's own projects is often a strong one. Of course, many of those who work in the animation industry are less creatively driven, more practically minded individuals with essential talents and specialist skills. Chances are that if you're reading this book, you don't consider yourself amongst that group, or perhaps you do but wish to branch out and try your hand at some new territory. Not that there's anything that puts creatives above specialists and other equally hard workers; specialist skill is invaluable and oftentimes the real key to a project's success, and as such, it's worth considering to what degree you wish to go it alone, so to speak (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2

The Planets (Dir. Andy Martin). (Courtesy of Andy Martin, ©2014.)

To whatever extent this may be, it's a safe assumption that the ultimate goal is the same: to create a standout film that makes your mark on the animation world, one of the few goals aspired to at all stages of one's career. These stages include but are not limited to

- Animation students who wish to have something to show for their hard work and studies, which will make a name for them and help grab the attention of hiring studios
- Animation hobbyists looking to channel their interests into something they can make a legitimate career out of
- Freelancers with work experience and a fundamental knowledge of the industry, eager to create a piece of work with their own stamp and creative identity
- Studio owners who might benefit tremendously from the visibility and industry credibility a standout film would generate for their business
- Industry specialists eager to expand their body of work through collaboration or simply trying something new
- Even those who have made a film—or several—before, searching for the motivation to create more or possibly pursue an exciting new artistic direction

Wherever you are in the industry, the ultimate goals will most likely be to entertain, be noticed, and have your work be seen and appreciated (Figure 1.3). My personal enthusiasm for the subject comes from having forged an animation career in part from the creation of my own independent film work, alongside the comanagement of the UK-based *Skwigly* online animation magazine. Beginning my involvement with the website as a contributing features writer in 2011, before long, I began to truly appreciate just how multifaceted, entertaining, and inspirational animation's independent sector could be. Since then, *Skwigly* has grown to include regular written features, industry exclusives, a long-running podcast series featuring an assortment of guests from all imaginable manner of animation backgrounds, microdocumentaries, not-so-micro-documentaries, specially curated



Figure 1.3
Phantom Limb (Dir. Alex Grigg). (Courtesy of Alex Grigg, ©2013.)



Figure 1.4

SplinterTime (Dir. Rosto). (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D./Autour de Minuit/S.O.I.L., ©2015.)

animation screenings, and a great deal more. Through our regular contact with some of the industry’s most inspiring figures and the opportunities we have had to spread awareness of rising animation talent, it has become resoundingly clear that independent animation is entering its most innovative era to date (Figure 1.4).

Throughout this book will be a number of case studies from the world of independent animation. Some are recent, others long-established industry game-changers, but all of these ultimately encapsulate the “spirit” of independent animation. Which begs the rather vital question:

What Exactly Is “Independent Animation”?

Our own individual take may be relatively cut and dry, but putting it to the artists themselves paints a wider picture altogether:

I never really used the word *independent* until a few years ago when I thought *I should use it more, because it means many things and it’s a good summary of all the things I aspire to do*. I still don’t have a business card because I don’t know what to put on it. Storyteller, producer, writer, what am I? I do like the word *auteur* because of the Frenchness and because it suggests that you had a hand in everything; it’s a complete artistic expression. It says to not just the audience but to people who want to get involved in your project that “this is mine, this is an expression of me, I’m in control and I want creative freedom.” So for me, independence means many things—it can mean poverty, it can mean creative control, it can mean that you’re choosing a path that’s probably a bit insane from an audience’s perspective but you’re being brave, taking a risk and delivering content people many have never seen before and will hopefully get something out of.

Adam Elliot

Oscar-Winning Director, Harvie Krumpet

It's a very tough question, because technically, George Lucas could be considered "independent" in that he finances his own films and can make whatever he wants, though we don't really think of him as such. To me, that's the definition, if the money is your own rather than government money, Hollywood money or from some big producer, because if it's your own money, then you can dictate the content. Whoever pays usually has a say in the content; it's very rare that someone will give you money and not care what you do with it. That's just the way it goes. So I believe that if you finance your own film and create it, then it's truly independent.

Bill Plympton

Oscar-Nominated Independent Director

I think it's just a matter of scale. I don't really know where the line is between an independent studio and a big studio, how many people you need and what the funding is. Just the fact that something's classified as *independent animation* might not make it all that interesting, but if it reflects the personal vision of a specific person who is taking a lot of risks to be vulnerable the way only a single human being can be, rather than a committee, that's going to be something that I'm interested in. It doesn't have to necessarily be all made by one person, but when it comes to *auteur* filmmaking, for me, the fewer people working on it, the more interested I'm probably going to be.

Nina Paley

Independent Director, Sita Sings the Blues

I think it's fantastically important to have animators making work that does not depend on pleasing an awful lot of people. I think we couldn't grow this art form if we were always under the compulsion to make megabucks and to avoid unsettling or upsetting our audiences. There are commercial companies doing really wonderful work, and I think in the UK especially, there is a wonderful crossover between commercial work and independent animation. Independent animators are, I think, more cognizant of their audience's time; it's a type of filmmaking that has real discipline and muscularity.

Ruth Lingford

Independent Director and Animation Professor

I pay a lot of attention to how and why films are made. A lot of big studio films are made because somebody wants to make money or somebody *has* to make money. A filmmaker says "I have an idea" but then needs a producer who won't come on board unless the film will make money. In the credits, when you see how many wrote the script, you realize these are films made by a committee. They'll strip it of the things that certain groups won't like, to make a film that appeals to a very broad audience, not one artist's vision. That is not what interests me, and it's not what drives me. I am an individualist, I guess. I want to survive; I want to live; I want to make films that are primarily one person's point of view ([Figure 1.5](#)).

Signe Baumann

Independent Director, Rocks in my Pockets



Figure 1.5

Rocks in my Pockets (Dir. Signe Baumane). (Courtesy of Signe Baumane, ©2014.)

I think it *could* be summarized as filmmaking without the commercial or financial constraints of longer-form work; it's art for art's sake, to use the old cliché. Short-form animation is an art form, and it should be respected as such; it's not just, as so many people consider it to be, a stepping-stone onto bigger and better things, especially not for animation. I think the word that kind of grates on me is *independent*. Even some of the bigger studios like Aardman still make short films; they still see them [to be] just as worthy as any other solo project by an animator in his bedroom. Films are being made for the love of it, and I think that's the great thing about short-form work. There's so much dedication and pure love for the art form. So that's what it is for me, it's unconstrained by finance, and it's done for the love of it.

Kieran Argo

Animation Programmer, Encounters Festival

I feel like the distinction between independent and commercial animation has become more blurred recently. There's so much good commercial work out there that it's less of a dirty word than it used to be. The level and prevalence of technical skill has definitely increased in line with the explosion of access to content and instructional material online. It's terrifying how good people are at such a young age now. I feel like the main difference is that people are making stuff for more varied audiences. It's not so much about getting into the rarefied world of festivals or awards, and more about producing things that will engage people with similar sensibilities across disciplines.

Sam Taylor

Independent Director, The Line

I think that I'm so independent that I'm really an *amateur* in the strictest sense of the word—making films for the love of making films. My musical metaphor for my students is as follows: if Disney is an orchestra and the Warner Brothers' cartoons of the 1950s were made by a jazz ensemble, then independent animators are the folks on a street corner with a guitar and a hat. It implies that you can't achieve the scale or ambition of the grander organizations, but you have complete control over the content and presentation of the work. I'm interested in the expressive relationship between style and content in how an animated film can communicate to an audience simultaneously as a graphic form and as a narrative form, which is one of the most compelling aspects of animation to me. If you're not controlling all aspects of the production, it's more difficult to pursue these goals.

Tom Schroeder

Independent Director and Documentarian

One possible meaning of independent animation is when it's simply not commissioned; it came out of the filmmaker's wish. I think about subsidies, where funding comes from, and is a film really still independent if a film gets funding? One core meaning of independence is that you don't do it with any money; you just do it in your free time. In a way, the animated short film is always kind of independent because there's not really an established financial model for it, so at the start, there's rarely any other reason to make it other than for yourself.

Tünde Vollenbroek

Head of Programming, KLIK! Animation Festival

It's a feeling of doing it for yourself, not waiting for anybody, and being liberated in every way, in terms of production but also in terms of the kinds of stories you want to tell. I think on every level, it's about doing it yourself, being yourself, and not bending to anyone else's preconceived idea of what you should be doing. To me, that's what it is; it's freedom, really (Figure 1.6).

Robert Morgan

Independent Director



Figure 1.6

Bobby Yeah (Dir. Robert Morgan). (Courtesy of Swartz Can Talk/blueLight, ©2011.)

I guess it's something that's been started without a financial safety net, so obviously, there are grey areas, but when someone says "independent animation," I see a small handful of people or a solo artist getting together off their own back with their own savings and trying to put something together without a large media network behind them. I would say that'd be my attempt at an empirical definition!

Robertino Zambrano

Creative Director, KAPWA Studioworks

To me, it signifies that I'm largely the one in charge of how the film turns out, that there isn't a client or studio head I'm answering to that has the last word. Because of this, one would generally have more personal responsibility for the film, but I enjoy that responsibility. I don't answer to anyone when I do my personal work. I get to control everything—it's a controlling animator's dream! The downside is that I don't get paid (Figure 1.7).

Kirsten Lepore

Independent Director

It's about having the freedom to make the rules, to be ambiguous. Freedom from "style," models, and submitting to other peoples' limitations. There aren't any limitations to animation, but people's minds deceive them into thinking there are. The potential of animation has barely been tapped. In my experience, people (in the entertainment industry) tend to see animation as just a less expensive version of live action, like in order for a form to morph and change, it has to be written into the script as a drug-trip scene or something. That is absurd—it's making the most basic qualities of animation (change and transformation) require some kind of extraneous explanation in order to be put into practice. Of course, the commercial approach is so deeply enmeshed in the baffling complexity of the web of commerce that it doesn't really have a choice, so it's best for artists not to worry about it and use that machine to their advantage if they can, and never lose the true creativity that should only ever be checked by the artist and not by any outside force.

Garrett Michael Davis

Animator and Designer



Figure 1.7

Move Mountain (Dir. Kirsten Lepore). (Courtesy of Kirsten Lepore, ©2013.)

I suppose it is animation that's out of the clutches of the big corporations. The thing is, the nature of animation has changed—as time's gone by, animation has become very democratized, where now, everybody can do it, whereas before, it would be a select few who had all the resources and equipment. After 2000, it sort of opened up with Flash and all those other programs. I like that somebody on a council estate in Leeds can make an animation and put it online, and their viewpoint is just as valid as anybody else's. I think that making it more democratic as a medium is a good thing, and it can also make it more powerful; it has more strands; it means more to more people.

Chris Shepherd
Director

It's animation that you don't have to ask anyone's permission to do; you don't need approval; you just crack on. One of the reasons I do it is, having had a perfectly nice career doing attractive-enough stuff and making money, with none of my projects could I stand back and say that all of the creative decisions were mine. The ego in me wanted that. Not just from the point of view of taking all the glory, but I was fed up of apologizing. Every project had that moment of "the client made me do it," so I wanted something where I could say, "This baby is mine." At which point, it moves into the world of art; it's a self-expression.

Robert Grieves
Animation Freelancer and Independent Director

It is within the parameters of this reasonably broad series of definitions that the book will operate, and ultimately, it's up to you to consider which definition best applies to your processes and how it may very well add to your perspective—or change it altogether. As you read on, you will glean invaluable insight from all of the artists and experts here, plus many more, with practical guidance along the way to help you determine exactly how you can develop, produce, and distribute your independent project and have audiences sit up and take notice.



Risehigh (Dir. Adam Wells). (Courtesy of Adam Wells, ©2013.)

2

Story Development

To some, story development can be broken down as a methodical process, predicated on heavy research of successful character dynamics, story structure, action beats et al. In all forms of independent filmmaking, be it animation or otherwise, there generally tends to be more inherent creative freedoms when it comes to how rigidly a story is developed and structured. On the surface, when considering the wide variety of time periods, settings, and characters represented in conventional animated films, animation has generally managed to sidestep convention.

Or has it? Here's something to consider from a structural perspective: Did you ever see that big-budget animated studio feature where the protagonist was (while ultimately likeable with struggles and ambitions akin to our own) something of an underdog, or at the very least an outsider amongst their kind? Then, shortly after getting a sense of their character, an inciting incident prompted an unlikely adventure in which they were paired or grouped with a (team of) charmingly idiosyncratic sidekick(s)? Did their journey then hit an initial hurdle that only served to strengthen their bond? As the final act loomed, did some misunderstanding or moment of weakness threaten the unity of their group/friendship/romance, briefly separating them, but did they soon after reunite for the final conflict, for which they both/all pull together and emerge victorious?

C'mon, I'm sure you've seen that one. I'm sure because I've just described the sequence of events of pretty much every major animated movie ever made.

I'm overstating a tad, and certainly, there's more to what makes a movie great than following a tried-and-tested formula, but the point remains. Truth be told, I'm always a little thrown when I see a mainstream feature that has the courage to at least tweak the aforementioned breakdown. Aardman's 2012 movie *The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists* took most of these components, albeit with an altogether different structure, taking the unusual step of introducing the main character's nadir right at the start, something we usually only tend to see in live-action films. Pixar's *Toy Story* had an inventive enough angle back in 1996 by having its protagonist Woody be instantly undone by his own insecurity, which, more than his eventual ally Buzz Lightyear or the sadistic toy-torturer Sid, is the true antagonist he needs to vanquish. That's a fairly bold story concept for a family film, one of many reasons why the film has held up beyond what may otherwise have been merely novelty value of being the first all-computer-generated (CG) feature. By and large, however, the major features tend to play it safe on the story front; ironically, it's their sequels that tend to be bolder in their approach, the filmmakers' confidence perhaps boosted by the knowledge that audiences will be more accommodating, having been familiarized with the ensemble cast in their first outing.

Immersing yourself in the culture of animated film across the board—from the sunniest, most character-driven box-office smash to the bleakest, most obscure Eastern European dirge—will obviously be valuable in determining where you lie on the spectrum, and I'm sure many of you reading this will have done as much already. Breaking down the gamut of story into its two most simplified categories, what we end up with are films driven by written scripts and films driven by visual concepts. It follows that if your film has a strong narrative at its core, where the conversational interplay between your characters is the driving force behind their characterization, then written story development is most likely the way to go. By extension, of course, if you're going for physical humor, with less reliance on dialog, the visual approach will be the best method.

It may seem that I'm stating the obvious: filmmakers rarely think in such black-and-white terms. More often than not, the process of crafting a story tends to combine both approaches in some measure, depending on artistic background, style, sense of narrative, sense of drama, sense of humor, and directorial intent. Sometimes the writing process can even be completely invented by the writers themselves. Filmmaker Adam Wells (whose work we'll look at in greater detail later in the book) has his own particularly organic way of developing original ideas:

"I listen to a lot of podcast storytelling, sometimes second-guessing how the stories are going to end. When they don't actually end how I imagined, I have an original story. It may sound really weird, but whenever stuff like that happens, I try to write it down."

This method is one I'm sure most of us can appreciate; how often do we wish we could change elements of a story to better suit our tastes? Of course, in Adam's case, more is being done than simply tacking on a presumed ending, as one can't effectively plagiarize and claim originality by altering one detail.* Working backward to craft a story completely independent of the one that inspired the original, alternate ending results in an end product that is, ipso facto, an original overall idea.

* Well actually, people do that all the time, as many a music industry lawsuit can attest, but obviously they shouldn't.

Generally speaking, this isn't an approach that most would adopt, but it warrants mention as an example of just how individual our creative process can be. Circumstances and scenarios that can prompt our own original ideas are multitudinous, so let's take a look at some recent examples of modern animated films taking an atypical approach to story development and examine the main virtues of each to help determine what best suits a project or the artist at the helm of it.

The Character-Driven Approach

As we'll explore in the subsequent chapters, the freedoms animation allows can accommodate virtually any approach to story crafting, be it adapted from preexisting source material, predicated on thumbnail doodles barely legible to anyone other than its artist, or even stream-of-consciousness fantasies animated chronologically. As overused—and, oftentimes, misused—as the saying “the possibilities are endless” can be, on the subject of story generation for an animated project, it genuinely applies.

Just because any and every approach *can* be taken, however, doesn't mean it will be the right choice for those who take more solace in a nice, detailed plan of action with an old-fashioned script at its center. Certainly, the independent scene is a playground for the avant-garde and the experimental, yet a more straight-laced method is easily as effective as long as the hook is strong. Oftentimes, a short film will be developed with a hope to generate more of the same, either as a pilot for a potential television show or formative outing for a series of shorts that share a central character or premise. The success of Bill Plympton's visually scripted Oscar-nominated *Guard Dog* (2004), for example, inspired the director to return to the character time and again between other projects, for the subsequent shorts *Guide Dog* (2006), *Hot Dog* (2008), and *Horn Dog* (2009), with more such outings in the works. Don Hertzfeldt similarly created a trilogy of shorts in 2006, 2008, and 2011 that all centered around an ailing man named Bill, each film effectively building on what had come before. These three shorts were ultimately edited together to create the acclaimed 2012 feature *It's Such A Beautiful Day*.

In the United Kingdom, another independent trilogy of films were produced over a span of 6 years, beginning with 2007's *Rocket Science* (Figure 2.1). The film, written by Andrew Endersby and Sam Morrison (also director), was scripted with the full intention of being used as a pilot that might branch off into a series. As is often the case, timing and circumstances—combined with what the TV network perceived as *niche* appeal—ruled out this option, although its functionality as a stand-alone short made it a successful venture in its own right. In lieu of episodic production, the film eventually spawned two “sequel” shorts—*Grime City P.D.* (2010) and *The Patsy* (2013), also directed and cowritten by Sam. With a focus on dialog-driven, movie-trope-heavy, scripted comedy and effective, minimal visuals, the combined length of the three comes to nearly an hour.

“As we like to think of ourselves as creative people, we thought we should maybe do something creative,” Sam says of the project's origins. “It started out as prose, actually, writing stories. It's quite possible that we just didn't discuss what it was going to be, but someone wrote a first line, and it just went off from there. What we did then was the same thing we do when we write: get in a room together, take it in turns to write a bit and read it back to one another, and basically just try and make each other laugh.”

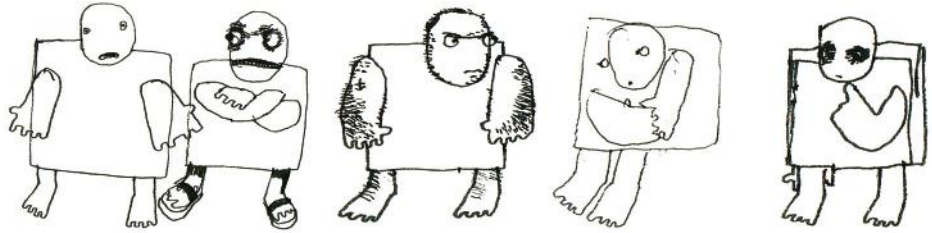


Figure 2.1

Early character sketches/concept for the *Rocket Science* universe. (Courtesy of Sam Morrison.)

When working with a cowriter, there are multiple variations on what precisely the working dynamic will be, though it's important that you both play to your strengths.

"It's quite a reductionist, sweeping statement, but I think I'm probably better at structure, and Andrew's definitely better at coming up with funny one-liners and crazy left turns in the story."

Character Development

The *Rocket Science* stories themselves draw upon some of the most familiar conventions of film noir (updated to the crime television genre in later films), as does the leading player of the trilogy, Jack Hersey: a concentrated syphoning of every cop character cliché—such as casual misogyny and arrogance paired with misguided determination (Figure 2.2). Jack is flanked by two supporting characters with similarly obvious characterization—level-headed



Figure 2.2

Early *Rocket Science* illustration. (Courtesy of Sam Morrison.)

Patricia and earnest, unintelligent deputy Billy. It is, in Sam's words, "satire with a very small s," though the films stand out as not coasting off personas that could very easily write themselves, a trap that many genre parody films can easily fall into. As far as the writing itself, Sam freely admits that these films are far more script exercises than animation showcases.

"While I'm writing, I do occasionally conjure up an idea. I might think, *This'll be a different film noir-type shot of looking down through the staircase*, think of the shadows, stuff like that, but most of the time, I'm guilty of just thinking up stupid things for Jack to say and not thinking massively visually about it."

The strength of this trio of characters comes from a dynamic that allows them to carry scenes individually, together, or in respective pairings (Figure 2.3). While a story headed up by a single lead is reliant on his/her ability to carry a story on his/her own, one headed up by a pair is reliant on their chemistry. It follows then that three characters must extend that chemistry, so one person's yin serves as another's yang; Jack Hersey's bullheadedness will be effectively counterbalanced by Patricia, who coddles Billy's naiveté and earnestness, which in turn will exacerbate Jack while moving the story forward.

"I think that Jack was really well defined from the outset and has remained pretty much the same. The stories evolved to a point where we were trying to pitch them as a series; they became more focused as a result of that, and maybe he became more satirical in his attitudes rather than his actions.

"Billy started out more stupid and I guess evolved to be more of an innocent while still a bit of a doofus; that was played up because it was the nice contrast to Jack. Patricia, being caught between them, I think probably evolved the most, in the sense that at the start, everyone in it was just sort of idiotic. With the first draft of *Rocket Science*, she turned up as a scientist, was revolted by Jack, but ended up falling in love with him just because that was the way those films were, kind of what you expected. Partly because that made her a less interesting character—and partly because we wanted to do more films—we realized that she couldn't fall in love with Jack, because that was a resolution, of sorts. Comparatively, Jack doesn't evolve; that's his key characteristic."



Figure 2.3

Rocket Science (Dir. Sam Morrison) lobby card design. (Courtesy of Evil Genius Ltd, ©2006.)

In substitution of a writer's bible, the universe of the films is largely predicated on amassed pitch materials from when they were trying to sell the series (Figure 2.4). Even outside of a formal style or content guide, when dealing with script-based film work that has the potential to expand to a series or, at the very least, further films, having your world mapped out in some form or other will prove beneficial. Breaking down character personalities, motivations, and even things the audience won't see such as secret yearnings and past history will give you a sense of acquaintance with your characters and, in turn, give your characters a sense of dimensionality.

At all points of production, feedback is also important. Though the world of Jack Hersey did not find footing as a television series, the pitching process yielded valuable insight into how to improve the next outing, two prime examples being the automatic limitations of making a film in black and white, as *Rocket Science* was, and jettisoning their original plan to enforce a timeline by having each outing for the characters be set 10 years apart.



Figure 2.4

Grime City P.D. (Dir. Sam Morrison) poster artwork. (Courtesy of Evil Genius Ltd, ©2010.)

“Our original idea for this was so we could visit a whole load of different genres and have Jack in a different decade, being exactly the same. But we realized that wasn’t going to work, partly because television commissioners don’t like serials—they like to be able to show programs in any order at all, with no chronology—and partly because Jack would be dead after about four episodes because he’d be too old” (Figure 2.5).



Figure 2.5

Still from *The Patsy* (Dir. Sam Morrison). (Courtesy of Evil Genius Ltd, ©2013.)

“The main sort of feedback is people who like it, or affect to like it, is saying they think it’s funny, because that’s all it’s trying to be. The main thing that evolved was that *Rocket Science* never made it clear what era it was in, but it was very easy for everyone to assume it’s the 1950s. In our own heads, we were probably thinking that, but commissioners made it clear they weren’t interested in stuff set in the past, so we brought Jack and his characters into the present day. That was a really brilliant bit of feedback, actually, because it made it even more satirical, more observed, and brought the whole relevance of questioning those old attitudes to the surface.”

Telling the Harder Truths

It is a hard truth in itself that animation is often regarded by the masses as little more than frivolous entertainment. We can certainly be amused, moved, and even angered by animation; we can be awed by its spectacle and its ability to communicate concepts that live action and other means of storytelling simply cannot. Ultimately though, like any form of artistic expression, it is ephemeral, its appeal bound by shifting cultural attitudes and political climates. As such, there is an inevitably smaller percentage of animators whose work has a lasting value, either through technical advancement or social messages.

Born in Australia and a long-time resident of Melbourne, Adam Elliot is an *important* animator, a term I don’t use loosely (Figure 2.6). His work, on an aesthetic level, is purposefully entrenched in a traditional and pleasingly nostalgic era of Plasticine animation, while as a storyteller, he is able to put across earnest social messages without being either preachy or maudlin. What has so far tied all his work together is an underlying theme of living with affliction. This work began with his Victoria College of the Arts student short *Uncle* in 1996, followed up in quick succession by the government-funded *Cousin* (1998) and *Brother* (1999), rounding out a quasi-autobiographical trilogy of shorts focusing on family members who have led troubled lives. Venturing further into outright fiction, Adam’s 2003 short film *Harvie Krumpet*, detailing the life of a Polish migrant with Tourette’s syndrome, went on to win the 2004 Academy Award for Best Animated Short. The accolade, referred to by Adam as “the golden crowbar,” ultimately facilitated the production of his first full-length feature, *Mary and Max*, in 2009, a critically acclaimed exploration of two pen-pals who lead tremendously disparate lives yet maintain a bond throughout.



Figure 2.6

Character sculptures for Adam Elliot’s *Uncle*, *Cousin*, and *Brother* trilogy. (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)



Figure 2.7

Adam Elliot with *Ernie Biscuit* character sculpt. (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)

Regarding the latter film, his former producer Melanie Coombs observed, “I see the pattern in all of Adam’s work is about accepting difference. That we all look for acceptance and love is probably a universal truth; that we are all different is another.”*

Adam’s films also have a shared sense of national identity, in a manner similar to the distinctly British politeness of *Wallace & Gromit* and the celebration of Americana and family values that was *The Simpsons* in its heyday. It’s a quality that, alongside the bold choices of topics covered in his work, has made Adam such an important figure in contemporary Australian film and culture. Alongside his affinity for Plasticine animation, a constant in Adam’s work has been the casual incorporation of subject matter that mainstream television and cinema (even, to a large extent, the world of independent film) feel compelled to handle with kid gloves. Though no doubt well intentioned, this hypersensitivity toward the depiction of important social impairments, physical disabilities, and mental illnesses has, in many respects, only served to fuel the sense of alienation that accompanies them. Adam Elliot’s storytelling, by contrast, indulges a far healthier and more socially aware impulse to bring these issues out into the open. Said issues span birth defects, Tourette’s syndrome, Asperger’s syndrome, cerebral palsy, alcoholism, depression, and all manner of limitations of social and cognitive development. The undeniably tragic inherence of these afflictions is married with the far more taboo notion of their comedic mileage. Rather than cheapening or trivializing the plight of each character, this gallows humor instead rounds out and humanizes all of them, making their stories all the more poignant (Figure 2.7).

“I always try to write funny films,” Adam maintains. “Unfortunately, I can’t help myself—they end up being quite tragic! No one has a perfectly happy life or a completely miserable one; I think it’s all shades of light and dark. Comedy–tragedies have been around for centuries, and to tell stories which are authentic, empathetic, and relatable to

* Source: *Mary and Max* press kit.

an audience, you can't just do gags; you have to dig deeper. I try to create very authentic characters, and while my aim is to make the audience laugh, I *really* feel like I've achieved something if I've caused them to cry. I know that's a strange ambition, to upset your audience, but I don't like them leaving the cinema indifferent or apathetic. I really want them to have experienced *something*—even if they've just laughed, at least I've pushed *some* buttons.”

When it comes to the actual process of getting these ideas together, Adam concedes that it can be a struggle. While much energy is expended on draft after draft of each screenplay, more often than not, stories only fully come together in the dying hours.

“That's annoying, to just spend so much time trying to construct a scene or a sequence, and then you throw it all out at the last minute and go with something intuitive and spontaneous! It's a necessary part of the process, of course, but I feel like a fraud so often when people say that my films have such strong writing! I think all writers try and aim for perfection, and we certainly don't feel like we ever really get there.”

As frustrating as it may be in the moment, it stands to reason that without the effort spent on story construction that will ultimately be jettisoned, the last-minute change-all might not indeed manifest itself at all. In that respect, the act of writing itself, even if it doesn't contribute directly to the final film, is never a waste of time. It is, truthfully, a far healthier impulse to feel a fraud, rather than feel we are owed. Entitlement and arrogance have rarely led to a creative product that rises above mediocrity, as there is no driving force behind it. As Adam insists, confidence is a curse.

“I think the moment you become confident, you tend to rest on your laurels. You don't want your self-esteem to get too low, and you don't want to wallow in self-pity, but feeling like you're only at the beginning of your career just forces you to keep writing harder and with more determination. I mean, determination is a silly word; I don't wake up in the morning with this 'determination' to write. I write when I'm angry; I write when I'm tired; I write in all sorts of modes. Feeling inadequate, I think, is an important ingredient; certainly it's a stimulus.”

What binds all of Adam's work to date is a staple of an earlier era of filmmaking: narration. Going back to his original trilogy of “clayographies,” the minimally animated visuals and sparse (effectively nil) use of dialog are undeniably bolstered by the humanity of the narration, performed by Australian actor William McInnes. *Uncle*, *Cousin*, and *Brother* are all recollections of an unnamed, ostensibly fictional protagonist regarding each titular family member. Through both writing and delivery, the films are infused with palpable regret, warmth, and humanity. Subsequent films modified the use of this device inasmuch as the narrator becomes an entirely faceless entity, overseeing the events of the films rather than remembering them. Such is the nature of narration-driven films. Adam is compelled to embrace the English language and, when appropriate, use it as a character almost in itself.

“I can't stop using my thesaurus all the time. I probably overuse it, but I think we're all striving for that perfect sentence, or something that's poetic and original.” There are also elements of fastidiousness and caution we should always be aware of regarding the originality of our work. “You go through these periods of self-doubt, thinking, *Oh hang on, maybe this has been done before? Have I subconsciously ripped somebody off?* I'll Google sentences I write now just to check that I haven't. For example, in *Ernie Biscuit*, the line ‘Some days you're the windscreen, some days you're the insect,’ I heard it years ago, and I still cannot find who came up with that. I certainly didn't write it, and I don't claim to have.”

The writing process itself is one Adam analogizes with baking a cake (“which is a cliché in itself”) and the selective approach one needs to take with whatever “ingredients” are appropriate. “An ingredient might be a piece of music; it might be a conversation I heard in an airport lounge; it might be something I found on the ground on one of my walks in the morning. I have notebooks, like a lot of writers do, and they are a mishmash of sights and smells; I try and use all my senses when I’m writing; I try and create imagery that you could almost smell or taste, so when I go to write the scripts, I go through my notebooks, and I pick out all the ingredients I want. In *Mary and Max*, for example, I knew that there had to be a scene in the film where three old men jump off a jetty into freezing-cold water and they get erect nipples—I just *had* to have that in the film somewhere! So I sort of do it the opposite way to how a lot of writers work: I start with the detail, and hopefully, by the third or fourth draft, a plot magically starts to appear, and by the very last draft, a very obvious three-act structure” (Figure 2.8).

One school of thought would insist that structure in filmmaking is a skill that needs to be learned methodically. Having gone the route of reading scriptwriting books himself, Adam maintains that for many, it is in fact a natural intuition. What qualifies as three-act structure, an inciting incident, and a climax is something we are exposed to our whole lives, virtually anywhere we look, throughout literature, television, cinema,

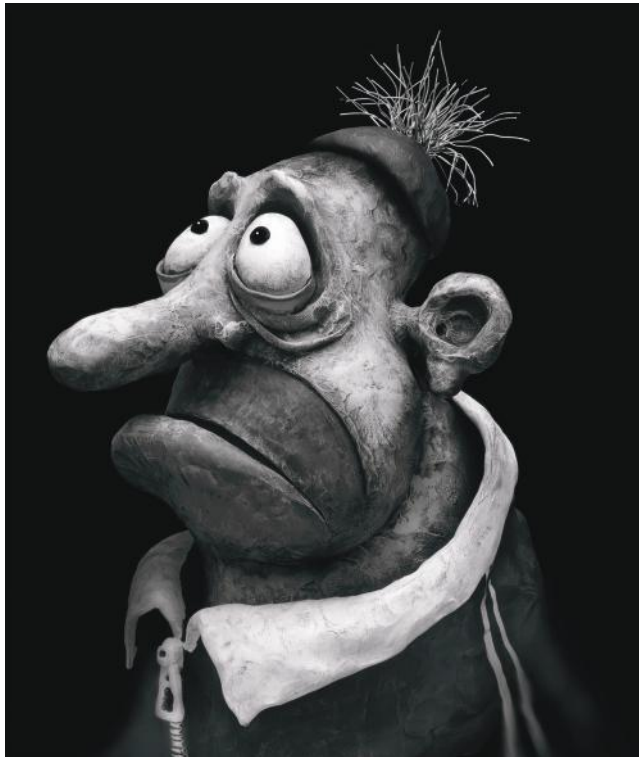


Figure 2.8

“Max” character sculpt for Adam Elliot’s *Mary and Max*. (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)

documentaries—even advertising and news reports are tailored to a fundamental narrative, primarily to ensure that audiences don't change the channel.

"I really believe that storytelling is a primeval act, that we're all storytellers, and some of us are better storytellers than others. In many ways, a good story, well told, is just like a very good joke, well told—it's all in the timing, and there's a punch line. For me, with all my ingredients, it's always getting a balance between the humor and the pathos, the comedy/tragedy; it's getting a rhythm to the piece; it's a holistic sort of patchwork. I always say, 'Without the dark, the light has no meaning.'"

Though Adam struggles to work out exactly how his scripts come together, when breaking it down systematically shows that they often begin with an assortment of small details that are then gradually woven together. Though his later films such as *Harvie Krumpet* and *Ernie Biscuit* are linear and straightforward, Adam does not obsess over the plot. The stories are uncomplicated, which allows for their respective twists to stand out all the more and keep the audience engaged.

"It's a cliché to say that I write for myself, but I do; I really make films that I want to laugh and cry at. I think *Mary and Max*, for me, was a great opportunity to really have an hour and a half to fully explore two characters' lives in extreme detail and have moments of poignancy and comedy. I certainly love making shorts, because for me, shorts are about what to leave out, not what to put in. With a feature, you can go off on tangents; you can have stuff purely for visual pleasure as long as you come back to a story eventually. The plot is always secondary—as long as the audience are laughing and engaged, then that's my golden rule. The other rule I have is that if a joke falls flat, that's okay; the audience will forgive you. If the next joke straight after *that* joke falls flat, okay, you might be in a little bit of trouble, but you could still be forgiven. If the *third* joke after that joke falls flat, then you're in really big trouble!"

As to whether or not he is more at ease with writing comedy or tragedy, Adam identifies that there is an element of trial and error. A danger when setting out to move an audience is that our purpose may become too obvious. A "sad" scene, when clearly manufactured to be so, has not nearly as much impact as a poignant moment that doesn't aim to draw attention to itself. Pathos is best delivered in small, understated doses, and as such, it is more likely to have an effect when incorporated organically, without contrivance.

"Luckily, with animation, we're forgiven so often; whereas a novel is such high art, aspiring for such poignant, palpable scenes, I just do a lot of toilet humor, whack in a bit of poignancy and a few deaths, and there you go! Some people would say comedy is harder, but I think with tragedy, getting someone to cry and squeeze tears out of their eye ducts, I mean, that's insane! Some films, I achieve that; others, I don't quite get there, but I know with *Mary and Max*, I've had so many people come up and say, 'Oh, it's the first animated film I've cried at! Apart from *Toy Story 3*.' And they have all said the same thing—that it's not what they expected from a Claymation film."

Midst its overriding humor the journey of *Mary and Max*'s story is one of extreme, feel-good highs and gut-wrenching lows, a journey that took an emotional toll not just on the audience but on Adam himself. Certainly, the labor of a major feature—produced under tremendously limited resources next to virtually any other stop-motion feature of comparable success at that time—was creatively incapacitating, but it was clear to Adam that another film that carried on the traditions of tragedy was not in the cards immediately. The eventual solution came in the form of paring down his next proposed feature

Ernie Biscuit into a short film of similar length and tone to *Harvie Krumpet*. Completed in 2015, and crafted and produced almost entirely on his own, the film could arguably be considered his first truly independent short (Figure 2.9).

“For my own sanity, I wanted to make something a little bit more lighthearted, my version of a romantic comedy of sorts. I wrote it as a feature, which I think is a good exercise in making a short, is to write it as a feature first and then pare it back significantly; you distil it, and you get to its essence.

“I’ve discovered the difference between *Ernie Biscuit* and my other films is all my other films are tragedies that have comedy in them, whereas *Ernie Biscuit* is a comedy that has a little bit of tragedy in it. My films certainly don’t stand out because of their technique—I’m dreadful at walk-cycles; I’m terrible at lip-syncing; my characters are pretty grotesque looking. I have very few camera moves, but I think that one of the reasons my films *do* stand out is because they do deal with difficult themes and subject matter that’s a bit more challenging.



Figure 2.9

Still from *Ernie Biscuit* (Dir. Adam Elliot). (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)

“Often, audiences feel by the end of the film that they’ve been wrung out, that I’ve pushed every button on their body and frightened them with scenes of suicide and alcoholism. They’re quite dense, and in some ways, the audience are exhausted by the end, but they feel somehow satisfied. I get a lot of e-mails from people who have just discovered *Mary and Max* in particular, and they say that the film has lingered with them. That, for me, is the biggest compliment.”

Films that linger with an audience tend to do so because they have had an impact in terms of characters they can empathize with and circumstances they can relate to. These are elements that apply to all areas of storytelling and make a case for looking outside of animation to fully develop your frame of reference as a storyteller.

“*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* works today as beautifully as it did back in the 1970s, because it deals with archetypes, characters that are classical in that they will always be ageless and deal with subject matter that is universal and timeless. That’s also why I read a lot of classic literature, for selfish reasons! I read classic literature because I want to find out *How did this become a classic, what is the definition of a classic novel?* It is a never-ending pursuit of trying to work out what is a story I want to tell, what is a story I want to hear and see. Ultimately, you get to the point where you think, *Alright, well I just want to be moved, I want to have a laugh, I want to smile, I want to understand most of the plot, but ultimately, I want to leave that cinema feeling something has happened to me.* Whether it lingers or not, I want to feel that I haven’t wasted that person’s time. The audience are giving up 20 minutes of their busy lives!”

Often, when we see perceivably taboo subject matter used for humorous purposes, it is for shock value, contrived to provoke. Certainly, there are filmmakers, comedians, and television show creators who have capitalized off this device, as that which will offend some will also have a built-in audience of those who enjoy seeing offense being taken. Adam Elliot’s films don’t take this approach; as easy (perhaps lazy) as it would be to take any of their more sensitive topics and rattle off a series of caustic one-liners, the effect of this would quickly diminish. Instead, his writing is more effective for being respectful and honest, incorporating small details that stand out in their truthfulness—recalling, for example, the cerebral palsy-afflicted cousin of *Cousin’s* ever-present smell of licorice, the color and size of his pills, and the (inexplicable, yet perfectly sensible to a child) envy of his being allowed to pee sitting down.

“I was jealous of my cousin, as a child. He got special treatment; he got to do everything first. I remembered going through this weird period where I wished I had no legs, because I’d get all this attention! It was ridiculous now in hindsight.”

Although ridiculous in hindsight, there is an authenticity to it that gives the writing far more weight than if the story were laced with condescension and positive affirmation; these are not always films about people who triumphed in the face of adversity. Animation functions superbly as a form of escapism, but it is equally capable of facing real-life issues—be they sociological, political, religious, and so forth—head on. To confront, rather than escape, can be equally nourishing to an audience.

“I remember going to Annecy back in 1996 with *Uncle* and realizing that my film was very different to everyone else’s. Back then, I had never been to a film festival and wasn’t really an animation buff or fanatic—I didn’t know who Jan Svankmajer was! But I quickly realized that I was a point of difference and that if I was going to have any longevity as a filmmaker, then I should just continue making more of the same. Luckily, I had plenty of friends, relatives, and people I knew who I perceived as interesting and a point of

difference themselves. Then as the years went on, I kept thinking, *Why aren't more people making films like mine? I want to see animated films about autism and Tourette's syndrome.* It wasn't so much that I wanted to see films about disability, but I wanted to see films about *real* people, which is why I prefer documentaries over animation."

Adam having always gravitated toward anything biographical or autobiographical, the ripple effect of his success has led to an increase of short, animated films that strive to deal with more challenging subject matter. That there is new work being created that is proving more challenging, if not abstract, to the audience is something to be encouraged by.

A Combined Approach

Though technically operating outside of the more commonly agreed-upon definitions of independent animation, UK-based animator Matthew Walker has directed several films whose funding circumstances have infused in them a degree of independent spirit. Following his 2005 University of Wales Newport student short *Astronauts* (a major success on the festival circuit depicting two hapless spacemen growing increasingly aggravated by their confined proximity aboard their ship), Matthew joined the Bristol-based studio ArthurCox as an in-house director for commercial work (some of which was produced in association with local powerhouse Aardman Animations) as well as short films when circumstances allowed (Figure 2.10). The first and most prominent of these has been



Figure 2.10

Still from *Astronauts* (Dir. Matthew Walker). (Courtesy of Matthew Walker/University of Wales, Newport, ©2005.)

John and Karen (2007), which shared the director's identifiable pacing and unostentatious wit seen in *Astronauts*, applied instead to a lighter, more domestic scenario in which a polar bear awkwardly attempts to repair his relationship with a penguin, a prior faux pas having driven a wedge between them.

As with Adam Elliot's work, one notable area where Matt's films succeed is making effective use of minimal resources. With student films often bogged down by the need to showcase the spectacle of CG software in lieu of an engaging story, I have often cited *Astronauts* as a master class in what corners to cut to both alleviate the demands of production and benefit the story. As written, the animation requirements are minimal, which allows what little there is to have more time spent on it, resulting in subtle yet highly considered character animation. Labor-intensive sequences that would otherwise require a lip sync and facial animation are alleviated by having the astronauts wear blacked-out helmets, a device that, rather than limiting their range of expression, adds a charming impassivity to their performance when paired with the often-deadpan dialog. Ultimately, all of Matt's animated films tend to share this trait of humor through minutiae, which requires an interplay between dialog and visuals that warrants a good deal of consideration at the writing stage.

"I feel like I'm always struggling with it, because I kind of work both ways. I usually start with a script and then further develop it in the animatic stage, or storyboarding, but sometimes, I'll start with a visual idea; it depends on the film. *Operator* never really had a script, because it was just a very simple idea that I had sketched in a notebook. It was just a few lines of dialog I wrote on a plane coming back from a festival, and then I just turned that into a little comic, and then that was it. I never sat down and wrote it as a script, really; it was just a kind of little series of thumbnails. So then I think when I recorded it, I added a few lines or tweaked some of the dialog, whereas all my other films have started with a script, but then a lot more has been added as I've gone through the animatic stage. I think the animatic stage is where I do most of the creative stuff. So the script is just a starting point, and then I'll refine it in an animatic."

Operator is perhaps the most minimal of Matthew's work in terms of story, being essentially a one-sided phone conversation between a man and God (Figure 2.11). The film, made while he was an artist in residence at Newport International Film School Wales, benefits from an assortment of visual embellishments in a manner similar to *John and Karen*, in particular, the use of cutaways to paint an incomplete yet intriguing portrait of a man compelled to call upon a deity to inquire as to why humans cannot lick their own elbow. In the single room that the film takes place in, we glimpse an assortment of sticky-notes with illegible inquiries, possibly of a similar nature; an empty watering can; a sleeping cat; and a book on dishwasher safety amongst other seemingly disconnected bric-a-brac. Small details also serve to flesh out the realism of these endearingly simple premises, such as being halfway through a bite of toffee apple when God picks up on the other end, or a brief moment of struggle in *John and Karen* when the titular polar bear realizes he has overdunked his biscuit to the point of flaccid saturation. For Matt, the point at which these elements are incorporated into the story tends to vary (Figure 2.12).

"Sometimes, when I write a scene in the script, I'll have a very clear idea of what's going on in the scene, or the reaction of another character, or anything that's happening in the background, and I might write that in the script. But sometimes, stuff like that just comes



Figure 2.11

Mockup and final layout for the sparsely detailed *Operator* (Dir. Matthew Walker). (Courtesy of Matthew Walker, ©2007.)

from doing the animatic, working out the layout of the scene and then thinking of another joke that can be added, or another layer of interaction with the characters. There's no rule with it; it just happens as it happens."

Matt Walker's films also represent how some stories are best delivered with restraint and understated humor. Although the characters may have an identifiable arc, or the story a satisfying resolution, the films maintain a consistent low-key tone throughout. This accentuates how a grand denouement that resorts to visual gimmickry can be unnecessary and arbitrary, as seen so prominently in mainstream films or effects-driven, design-oriented studio projects. Similarly, the pacing of the films benefits from being allowed to breathe, not succumbing to the impulse to pepper quiet moments with sight gags or constant activity. While "plussing" (a term coined at Pixar to describe how critiques of in-progress work are used to constructively embellish and enhance their films) is a vital process for some films, in others, a more moderate approach that allows the story to speak for itself is far more appropriate.

"I always like to be very minimalist and restrained with the dialog and the humor, but sometimes, that has come about from my own limitations, whether it's time or skills. It's interesting, when I think of making *Astronauts*, that kind of ended up defining my style,

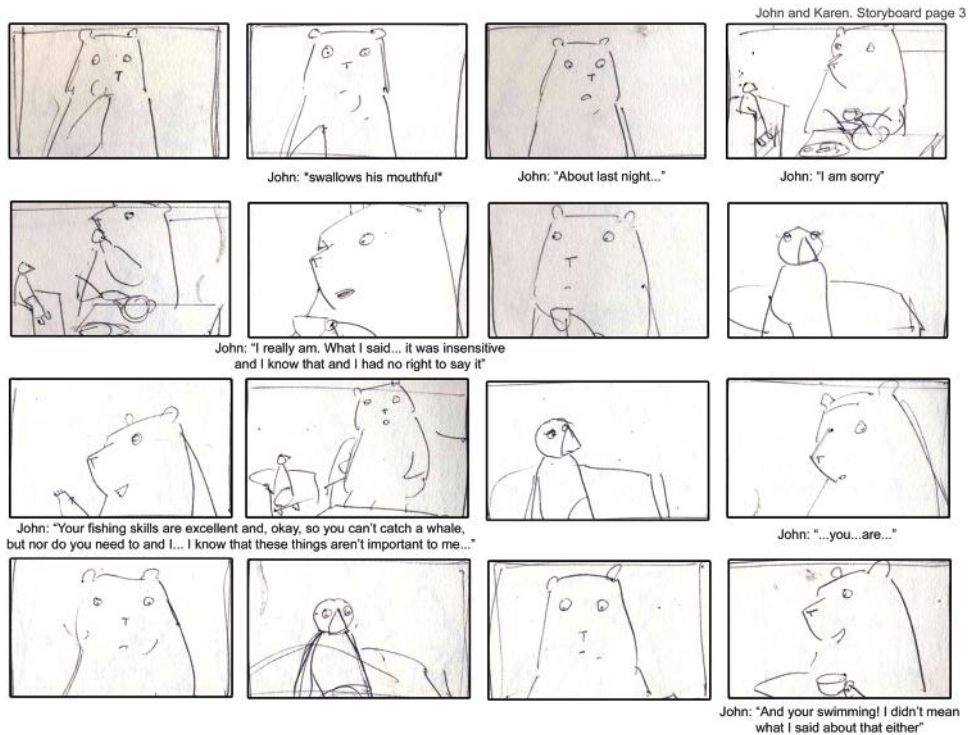


Figure 2.12

John and Karen (Dir. Matthew Walker) thumbnail board excerpts. (Courtesy of Matthew Walker.)

but it wasn't deliberate at the time. The nature of *Astronauts*, the way it ended up, a lot of it was down to just circumstances and limitations" (Figure 2.13).

Of all his films, Matt regards *Astronauts* as perhaps the most organic, given the inherent freedoms of student film production. One limitation that ultimately benefited the film was having nonprofessional voice actors take on the two main roles. Matt not being satisfied with how some of the written dialog translated, these instances helped determine how best to pare down a script originally 20 pages long to something more concise. To compensate for the removed dialog, the story was able to be carried visually through animatic revisions.

"Even though I wasn't deliberately making it minimalist, it ended up being that way, and I liked it like that. That's kind of what I've continued doing, but more deliberately since then, when there have been times I've tried to do stuff that isn't as minimalist."

In terms of feedback that Matt has picked up over the years, there is one particularly identifiable strength that audiences have engaged with, one again shared with the work of Adam Elliot and Sam Morrison and an integral mainstay of scripted films—the characters themselves (Figure 2.14).



Figure 2.13

Astronauts storyboard to final film comparison. (Courtesy of Matthew Walker/University of Wales, Newport, ©2005.)

“I think that people seem to really respond to the characters, particularly in the case of *John and Karen*. A lot of the feedback on that was couples saying it was just like them, or really identifying with that situation. Also, I guess in terms of the characters, there’s an underlying sadness and loneliness that the films seem to have. I think people like that. With *Astronauts*, it was the nastiness as well. I guess just the subtlety of the humor gets a good response; I like to think it’s different to a lot of the stuff that’s out there. Some people probably don’t get it, but I think others respond to it.”

Taking the above case studies into consideration should help paint a clear enough picture of how a script-based approach to a short film will determine its outcome. Indeed, the hope with all of the examples shown in the book is for you, the reader and prospective (if not already active) animation filmmaker, to pick up each artist’s variety of perspectives and approaches and determine whose you have the strongest creative kinship with. This will be the key to developing your own personal production pipeline, one that may not necessarily be consistent with major studios and mainstream projects but will guarantee your own follow-through on whatever animated undertaking you set for yourself.

If scriptwriting is not your forte, however, then don’t be dissuaded. There are many other approaches to story from which a strong animated film can emerge. As you will see in the coming chapters, we’ve only just begun to scratch the surface.

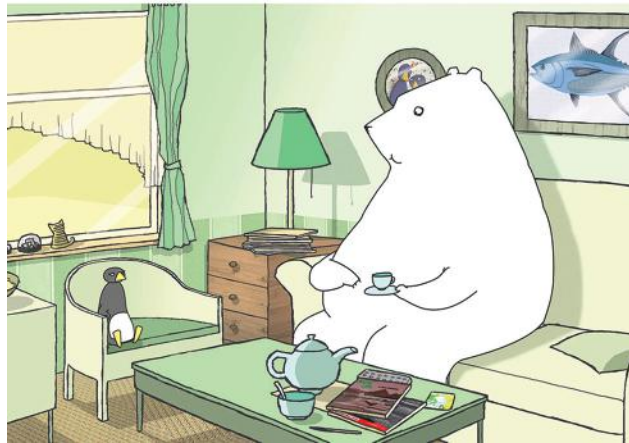


Figure 2.14

John and Karen (Dir. Matthew Walker) early concept art, storyboard excerpt, and final still demonstrating the film's visual development. (Courtesy of Matthew Walker. Still ©2007 ArthurCox Ltd.)

3

The Visual Storyteller



Still from *The Dam Keeper* (Dir. Robert Kondo/Dice Tsutsumi). (Courtesy of Tonko House LLC, ©2014.)

Having established in the preceding chapter that the line between strictly written and strictly visual storytelling can be a blurry one at best, one key factor that remains is that animation is, first and foremost, a visual medium. So while a scripted approach is often integral to the successful animated short, by animation's very definition, it is never quite

as essential as the visual component. More to the point, writing a script, like every other type of creative process, is not necessarily an easy thing for everyone. Beyond having the solid germ of an idea, the actual act of describing environments or writing dialog can be something that is more organically achieved through a visual process. Fortunately, independent animation is an accommodating medium for those whose films need not be dependent on conversational interactions between characters (or the presence of “characters” in a literal sense at all) and conventional approaches to film structure. In this chapter, we will look at several instances where the “script” of a film is a far more visually driven affair.

Branching Out

Our first major case study for this chapter may not at first seem especially relatable, being in many respects the product of a creative union forged at Pixar Animation Studios, a powerhouse of big-budget, mainstream animation production and, as such, one of the least “indie” operations out there. Following a stint as visual developer at Blue Sky Studios, Dice Tsutsumi’s talent eventually brought him to Pixar, where he worked as an art director on such films as *Toy Story 3* (2010). Over the course of 7 years, Dice worked closely with Robert Kondo, himself an art director on *Ratatouille* (2007), the two of them contributing significantly to *Monsters University* (2013). Having neighboring offices, the two would oftentimes find themselves looking over one another’s shoulders and finding excuses to collaborate, Dice in particular harboring a desire to work on his own independent project one day.

“When I met Dice,” Robert recalls, “he always made a really clear distinction that I had never really heard anybody else put the same way. He would say, ‘I’m an artist who works for a studio, not a studio artist.’ I think that spirit was really kind of the impetus, very much making the clear distinction that these feature films are a collaboration between artists and a studio rather than a studio having artists that are ‘theirs’; it’s really more of a collaboration. That also means that it’s really important to have your own ideas, to have your own identity as an artist” (Figure 3.1).

This sense of artistic identity was nurtured over time with extracurricular projects such as a promotional film for *Sketchtravel*, a collaborative charity project in which a sketchbook traveled across 12 countries, picking up artistic contributions along the way. The animated promo made use of a very striking visual concept, in which the elaborate, painterly aesthetic of an animation film’s production art is applied to a series of quickly intercut images that tell a story.

“*Sketchtravel* wasn’t really made as a short film,” affirms Dice. “Any film artist, when creating concept artwork for films, thinks about story, about how our paintings will turn into actual, moving images. Of course, we don’t have the skill set to make it into an actual animation, but we do think about it. So when I made *Sketchtravel* as a kind of PR film, it was as an animatic, albeit totally painted.”

Surprised by how effectively this approach was still able to convey a story in spite of not being fully animated with smooth motion or in-betweening, Dice equated the end result with a moving picture book. Applying a similar approach to a short film, one that maintained the same artistic depth while incorporating a somewhat heightened aspect of the character animation, seemed very achievable.



Figure 3.1

"Pig" from *The Dam Keeper*—early development drawing by Dice Tsutsumi. (Courtesy of Tonko House LLC, ©2014.)

"I told Robert, 'Why don't we make it together? Since I made a 7-minute PR short by myself at two frames per second, if there's *two* of us, that means we'll have *four* frames per second.' It came with the naive idea that we could maybe smooth out the animation if there were two of us. We always dreamed of having a painting animated, but when we decided to do *The Dam Keeper*, we realized there is so much more to animation. It's not just about a series of paintings; you have to know how to animate, which we didn't." Embracing their own limitations as well as the opportunity for collaboration, Dice and Robert approached a studio friend, Erick Oh, to become their animation supervisor, heading up a crew of contributing animators.

A complicating factor, though one that, in many senses, reduced the risk element had it been an entirely new venture, was that Dice had initially approached Robert about the prospect of their own film deep in production of *Monsters University*. Getting it off the ground with such a demanding day job was not the only hurdle, and as we'll explore further in [Chapter 9](#), funding was an important reality to face. Rather than go down the now well-trodden route of crowdfunding, realizing the extra demands that campaign management would have on time, energy, and resources better spent making the film itself inspired the duo to self-fund as a more viable alternative. *The Dam Keeper* ultimately took the form of many truly independent works, as a passion project and group effort ([Figure 3.2](#)).

"In the beginning," Dice recalls, "we had some savings and talked about paying everybody, but there are certain kinds of restrictions that didn't allow us to do that, so



Figure 3.2

The Dam Keeper early development by Robert Kondo. (Courtesy of Tonko House LLC, ©2014.)

everybody on the project was a volunteer. So, by default we saved a lot of money there.” In lieu of crowdfunding, a more traditional fundraising approach was used, accruing enough of a budget to get started from selling original artwork they had created for the preproduction of the film through avenues such as eBay. In spite of this, what the film’s production hinged on more than anything was dedicated time, effort, and commitment, with a total production period of 9 months (3 of these full-time and the other 6 alongside their day-job on *Monsters University*).

When it came to story itself, the two certainly benefited from being in a nurturing creative environment, as Robert remembers.

“Being inside Pixar was great for seeing all the parts that it takes to make these multimillion-dollar feature films, but at the core of it was this idea of storytelling. I wouldn’t even say that we were good at that; we just had a real interest in it and didn’t expect a studio on the scale of Pixar to just hand us the opportunity to play in that world, because we really hadn’t done anything within the walls of the studio to warrant that.”

The film’s visually rich look is bolstered by the story, one that uses simplicity as a strength and acts as an effective platform for the duo to flex their artistic muscles. At its heart, it subscribes to the convention of an underdog lead in the form of a porcine narrator recalling his youth as a village dam keeper, ostracized by his schoolmates. Effective visual scenarios are driven by the story elements: the operation of the dam’s windmill that keeps a perpetually threatening dust storm at bay; the idyllic visualization of the village itself; and the dark turn of the film when the dam keeper, despondent, forgoes his duty and allows the storm to take over. Robert attributes the visual success of the piece to the same reason that the two gravitated toward one another in the first place (Figure 3.3).

“The absolute, most important thing was us working together, so the visual style really came from the fact that we both paint very similarly, and so it felt like the easiest solution for us. It made the most sense, given that we knew story was going to be the most challenging thing for us. We didn’t want to create a really challenging visual style that would push us in a different direction where there was potentially another area to have disagreements about. As for the story itself, I think a lot of creative relationships come out of somebody having an idea first and really wanting to make it—we did not have that at all. We really wanted to work with each other, to see what we were capable of.”

Embarking on a film with a vague story idea is an uphill journey at the best of times, so embarking on one with no story at all, without a traditional storytelling background or experience, would make the prospect especially daunting. That they would do just that speaks volumes of the duo’s certainty that something good would come of the endeavor, though ultimately, going into the project completely green when it came to a rather vital area turned out to be to its benefit. “We went through almost five or six versions, completely different stories, before we got to this final story. So I’d say the core of everything was the relationship, wanting to work together. Then after that, the look kind of fell into place, and the story itself was something we struggled with; knowing that it was going to be our first film, we told ourselves that while we weren’t going to just rush this thing out, let’s just make sure we finished. It’s our first story; we can’t be precious with it; if it’s not perfect, we’ll do another film that’s better! So that was our plan” (Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.3

Still from *The Dam Keeper* (Dir. Robert Kondo/Dice Tsutsumi). (Courtesy of Tonko House LLC, ©2014.)



Figure 3.4

Still from *The Dam Keeper* (Dir. Robert Kondo/Dice Tsutsumi). (Courtesy of Tonko House LLC, ©2014.)

Nightmare Worlds

Let's take a cross-country trip to the complete opposite and far less sunny end of the independent animation spectrum. While matching *The Dam Keeper's* ambition in terms of length and impulse to eschew a formal studio hierarchy, in most other respects, you could not envisage a more different film than British nightmare-weaver Robert Morgan's British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA)-nominated *Bobby Yeah*.

Robert's name was established in the late 1990s with his stop-motion student short *The Man in the Lower Left-Hand Corner of the Photograph*. While the original meaning of the film's title* is somewhat arbitrary and open to interpretation, in the case of the film, it serves as a cue for the setup in which a lonely, corpse-like man who spends his days spying on his suicidal neighbor keeps a photo of himself amongst his minimal possessions. Despite—or, arguably, because of—the relatively meager resources available for the film's production, it perfectly captures the same uneasy, claustrophobic tone conveyed in such nightmare-visions as David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) or Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965).

With a clear precedent set, Robert moved on to professional film production shortly thereafter, with 2001's equally horrific (albeit faster-paced) *The Cat With Hands*, in which a terrifying apocryphal story of a supernatural cat who absorbs the body parts of its victims is told through a mix of live action and unreal stop-motion. The film, partly inspired by a recurring nightmare of Morgan's sister's, began life as an Animator In Residence scheme once run by UK television network Channel 4. The successful end result led to a bigger budget for his harrowing, slickly produced third animated short *The Separation* (2003), a horrifyingly violent and tragic tale of twin co-dependence.

* The title is named after a track from the equally unconventional *Adult Themes for Voice*, a semiobscure 1996 album of voice-only soundscapes by alternative musician Mike Patton.

In another era and under other circumstances, the idea of returning to independent film would most likely not have been the most logical next step. In truth, Morgan was motivated by the realization that, in a country whose arts funding had been decimated, going solo was the only way forward (Figure 3.5).

“After *The Separation*, I did *Monsters*, a live-action film in 2004, then basically, there was about 5 years of *What shall I do now? Oh, there’s no funding. I’m never going to make a film ever again! Oh well, that was fun.* I remember literally lying on the bed awake at night wondering what was next, because it felt like there were no more opportunities to make stuff, especially as animation is so time-consuming, and you need the right gear to make it work. Around the same time, it became much more possible to do that stuff; the dropping out of the funding coincided with the arrival of things like Final Cut, DragonFrame, and iStop Motion, which I was using for *Bobby Yeah*. So with the arrival of home stop-motion software and kits that could capture HD with a stills camera, I realized I could actually do

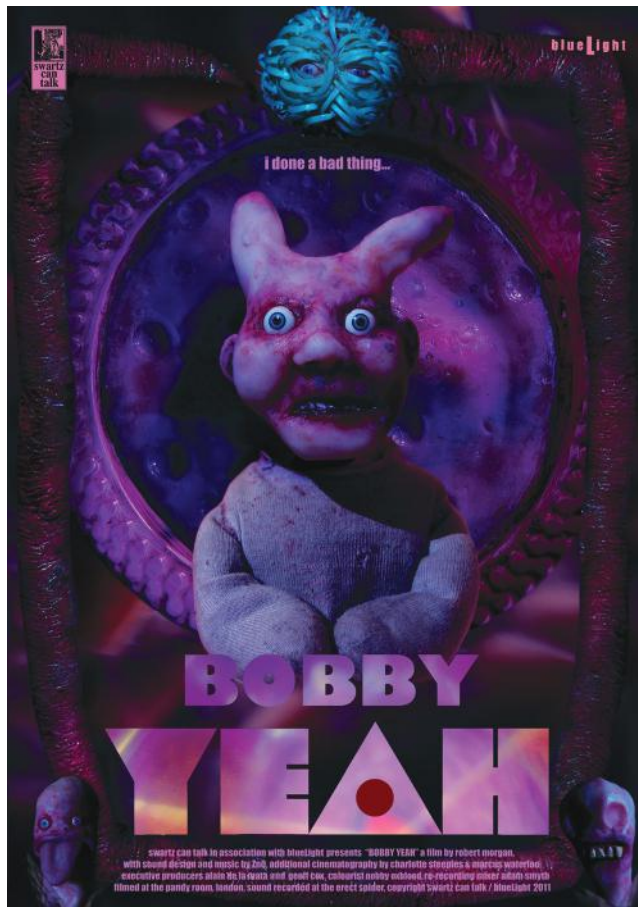


Figure 3.5

Bobby Yeah (Dir. Robert Morgan) poster. (Courtesy of Swartz Can Talk/blueLight, ©2011.)

something. The original idea was just to make a little placeholder, a 2-minute short just to remind people I was still here while I worked out how to get funding.” Once the film was in motion, however, Robert quickly developed a renewed enthusiasm for the process, mainly for the freedoms that automatically come with being independent. It soon became clear that, him being liberated by not requiring permission from funders or clients to make a film, something far more substantial than a 2-minute placeholder was on the cards. “The biggest, most exciting thing was to not have to ‘okay’ everything with a higher authority, which is what you normally have to do when you’re making a film. That’s why I think the film is so unhinged, because there was no one telling me ‘You can’t do that!’ Three years later, I was still making it” (Figure 3.6).

“Unhinged” is certainly apropos. While Robert’s prior work never shied away from troubling premises and visuals, *Bobby Yeah* is a masterpiece of unrelenting, hallucinogenic excess, one that earned him a BAFTA nomination in 2011.

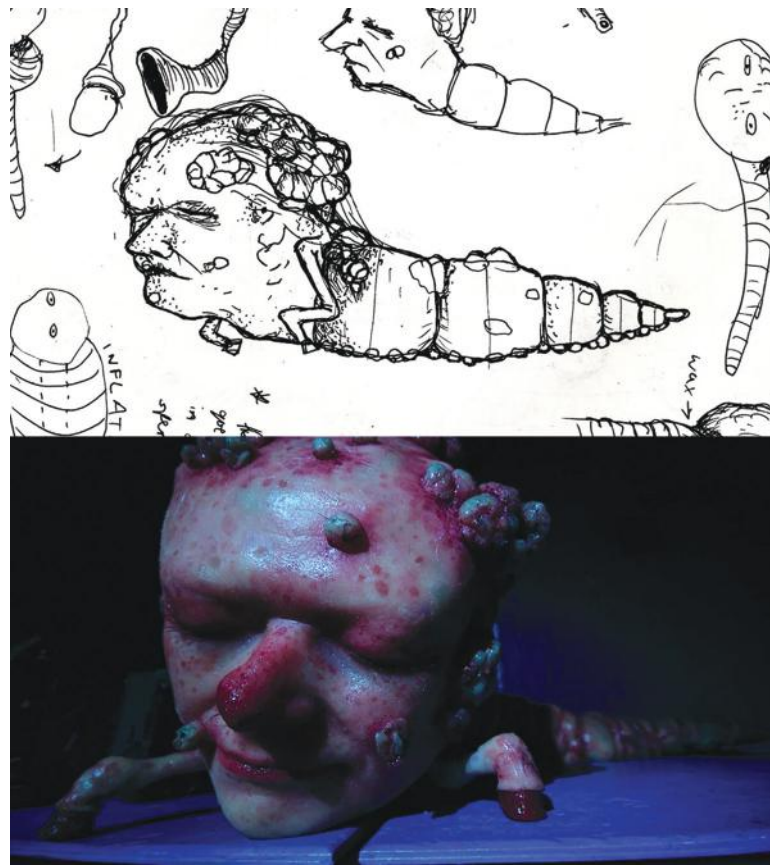


Figure 3.6

Bobby Yeah (Dir. Robert Morgan) character sketch and film still. (Courtesy of Swartz Can Talk/blueLight, ©2011.)

“This film was a stream of consciousness. Previously, I have written scripts when I have a story to tell, and the visuals come second to the story, but this time around, there was no story. I just started filming, and the first shot of the film is the first shot I filmed, the last shot is the last, and everything in between was chronological. All I had at the start was just a visual sense. I just had a puppet and a set and just started animating that; I had this character run into the room; watched it back; thought, *Okay, now what can happen?* and went from there. So it was only visual to begin with, and then you start noticing you’re subconsciously telling a story.”

To fully appreciate just how unconventional said story is, here is a beat-by-beat breakdown of the first 5 minutes of the film:

- We open on a sparse, minimally furnished room bathed in blue light, into which scurries Bobby Yeah, a creature of indeterminate species (though resembling a squat man with rabbitlike ears and a mammalian tail).
- Seemingly anxious, Bobby retreats from the room and, shortly afterward, reenters carrying another inexplicable creature in his arms. It resembles an earthworm with a cluster of fingernail-clippings for a head, out of which a pair of squinting eyes peer. Both Bobby’s and the creature’s body language suggests that it has been either stolen or rescued.
- Placing his find on a bed, one of the room’s few furnishings, Bobby examines it as it writhes around the mattress.
- Bobby gently strokes the creature’s wormlike torso, calming its frantic movements, and then spies a stark red, metallic button protruding from it.
- Clearly tempted by what may occur if he presses it, Bobby visibly attempts to resist doing so until the suspense is too much to take.
- Once the button is pressed, we briefly cut to a shot of a dramatic sunrise and then return to the room, where the creature and Bobby find themselves joined by two new monstrous entities. One is faceless save for a toothy mouth, the other all tongue and beady eyes, both fleshy, amorphous, and protruding from tanklike machines.
- Bobby approaches as the two creatures gyrate disconcertingly, acknowledging the anticipatory twitching of one creature’s tank barrel.
- The barrel eventually secretes two tasseled globules. The two creatures briefly pause, inspect what they’ve produced, and then resume their gyrations with fervor.
- As more and more globules pile in front of him, Bobby takes action and muzzles the barrel with his fingerless hand.
- Pressure builds until the mechanism clogs and breaks, the backed-up secretions instead coming out of the creatures’ faces.
- Pressure continues to build until the tank explodes, sending Bobby hurtling across the room followed by a rapid-fire succession of globules from the splayed barrel.
- Globules continue to fly, ricocheting off of every surface and item in the room.
- Bobby races over to the creature whose tank is (one assumes) malfunctioning and, in desperation, punches it, which has little effect.
- Bobby’s plan B is to grab the creature’s protuberant tongue and pull with all his might, eventually removing it along with what looks like a spinal column, attached.

- The creature is seemingly felled, one final globule leaking out of its destroyed mechanism. The second malformed creature remains alive.
- Bobby surveys the bizarre detritus around him, his attention soon taken by the cry of his wormlike, fingernail-headed kidnappee.
- The wormlike creature's shimmering tail opens and expands like a trunk, growing and spilling onto the floor, where it proceeds to vacuum up (or consume) the spilled globules.
- Once all the globules have been absorbed, the wormlike creature lays a blood-smearred egg on the floor and returns to its original shape (Figure 3.7).

At this point, we're less than a quarter of the way through the film, with nearly 20-minutes to go. Though obviously, Morgan's machinations are not for the weak of stomach, this is excellent news to an audience who delights in the animation's weirdest, darkest, and most surreal potential—an audience I'm staunchly amongst. As Robert freely admits, a pitch meeting or funding application for *Bobby Yeah* could only boil down to “a list of disgusting events that wouldn't work as a document”—so what *does* make it work? In the midst of the hypnagogic nightmare-fare, the success of the film ultimately comes down to an unexpectedly traditional trope: the sympathetic lead.

“What links it all is the character of Bobby,” Robert offers. “I think he's a very relatable character in that he becomes the audience's eyes. In a slightly perverse way, he wants to see it all, but at the same time, he's squeamish about it. Once the game is revealed, that every time he presses these buttons that appear, something really weird happens, the audience

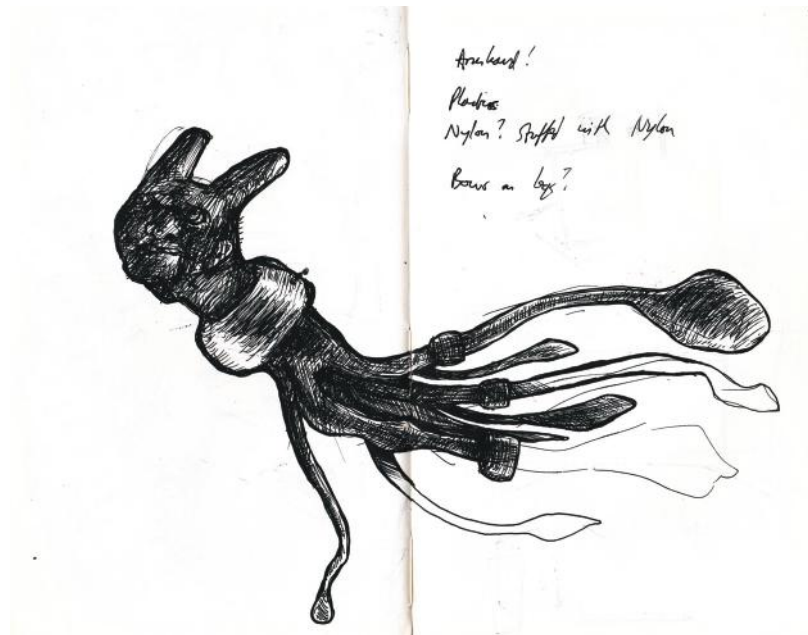


Figure 3.7

Bobby Yeah concept sketch. (Courtesy of Robert Morgan.)

becomes him: they want to see what happens, yet at the same time, they're afraid. So there is that push and pull of being tempted that I think satisfies a certain perverse feeling within the audience. I never expected anyone would like this film, but the fact that so many people did, I think that's why, because they relate to the character; he becomes the thread through which the audience can relate to events."

The events themselves continue in a vein similar to the opening as outlined above, and accompanying the thread of Bobby himself, a story slowly starts to emerge (Figure 3.8). Bounding from scenario to scenario at the push of a succession of mysterious, enticing, red buttons, we come to learn that Bobby is indeed a thief, and it soon transpires that those he has stolen from are not to be trifled with. When Bobby is called to be accountable for his behavior, the turns the action takes are wholly unpredictable, utterly surreal, and yet very easy to make sense of. As with the practice of free-association writing, a method of idea generation in which a writer will put pen to paper without thinking of what he/she will write until the moment it's being written, oftentimes with surprisingly creative results, the improvisational approach to *Bobby Yeah's* story does build up a comprehensible narrative around itself.

"It was completely ad-libbed. I would shoot in chunks until I would get to a point where I felt like I'd boxed myself into a corner because I didn't know what he was going to do next; then I had the idea of the red button that kind of got me out of it. If this button appears and he presses it, then literally anything can happen. So my process was animating a little bit, watching it, and then fantasizing about what could happen next. I set myself a little rule that whatever occurred to me, I wouldn't analyze its meaning. If I liked it, it would go in. If I *had* analyzed anything, it would've killed it, so I forced myself not to."

This process extended to the creation of the ensemble cast, a silicone mishmash of intricately detailed, hyperreal features set against a mess of detritus and viscera, evocative of



Figure 3.8

Still from *Bobby Yeah* (Dir. Robert Morgan). (Courtesy of Swartz Can Talk/blueLight, ©2011.)



Figure 3.9

Bobby Yeah (Dir. Robert Morgan) storyboarded characters to final film comparison. (Courtesy of Swartz Can Talk/blueLight, ©2011.)

Francis Bacon's furies, Clive Barker's cenobites, and the mixed-media sculptures of David Lynch. When it came to the point at which Robert felt a new character should be introduced, the animation itself would be halted so that a new puppet could be built from scratch. One example of character development in particular perfectly exemplifies just how circumstantial the progress of the story could be:

"I had gotten to the point where this bird-headed creature and Bobby are fighting (Figure 3.9). Bobby kicks him, and his head goes into the wall. When I reached that bit, I stopped for Christmas for a 2-week break. I'd left the set as it was, with this bird-headed man's head in the wall, and I was going to continue after; he was going to pull his head out, and the two would continue fighting. Then for Christmas, a friend, for some bizarre reason, bought me this weird little ragdoll key ring. As soon as I opened that present, the image popped in my head that when the bird-headed man pulls his head from the wall and turned around, he'd now have this ragdoll's head. It made me laugh because it was so, so weird. I just thought, *That's going in the film, no analyzing, that happens now!* I went back, and then that's how I carried on; the creature pulls his head, and he's got this new head. That type of opening yourself up to anything that occurs to you is what really frees you up to do some really surprising things on this journey that you go on."

Idea Generation

While Robert's spontaneous method of idea generation is incredibly freeing, it carries with it a high risk factor if applied to most other types of film than the surreal or horrific.

Even the ever-present humor of *Bobby Yeah* owes its success to the director's intuitive sense of comedic timing, something that is especially tricky to pull off when dealing with such unconventional characters and events. As seen in the accompanying illustrations, some of the most outlandish visuals of the film are rooted in sketched-out character concepts and basic thumbnail boards, which can be a huge contributor to a film's cohesion in the absence of a script.

Returning to a comparatively lighter side of stop-motion production, acclaimed LA-based animator Kirsten Lepore, perhaps best known for such auteur short films as the multi-award-winning *Bottle* (2010) and *Move Mountain* (2013), has her own personal process that assists with idea generation (Figure 3.10).

"I have no way of just coming up with ideas out of the blue; however, there are certain things I can do to help get inspired. I keep a sketchbook/notebook of ideas I get and always write them down, so I can go back and reference those once I need to generate ideas for a project. I also get inspired by browsing the aisles of craft stores, driving, and being out in nature.

"I've never written a script, as my ideas are almost always visually driven. My sketchbooks, however, mostly contain writing (such as a quick note I will have jotted down) and the occasional thumbnail to help jog my memory further once I revisit it. When I first have an initial seed or spark of an idea that feels right, it usually includes a technique, color palette, or sense of movement that excites me. From that starting point, I branch outwards until I can narratively justify that element."

Striking visual concepts are a mainstay of Kirsten's work, going back to her first stop-motion project *Sweet Dreams*, an undergraduate thesis film produced in 2008 at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). From a production values standpoint, there are certain tells that the film is a formative outing, especially in contrast to her later



Figure 3.10

Still from *Move Mountain* (Dir. Kirsten Lepore). (Courtesy of Kirsten Lepore, ©2013.)

work, but the marriage of an inventive visual approach (the film is made almost entirely out of food, presenting a world where sugary snacks build structures out of sugar cubes) and a well-thought-out story (a bored cupcake sets sail to start a new life and finds itself stranded on an island occupied by healthier food, quickly adapting to their simpler yet more fulfilling—and ultimately pragmatic, as it learns on its return—way of life) would prove to be one of Kirsten’s major strengths.

This quality is further refined in *Bottle*, a stop-motion/pixilation film that sees two lone figures on opposite sides of the ocean—one made of sand, the other of snow—communicate with one another via a bottle sent back and forth between their respective shores. Using actual sand, snow, foliage, and miscellaneous detritus, a sense of growing friendship is conveyed to the audience to the extent that, when the film concludes, they are emotionally invested in the connection between these two and the poignancy of their geographical separation.

While *Bottle* would ultimately prove the more acclaimed and visually sophisticated project, both films are grand in scope when considering the circumstances of their production. Yet both also began life as relatively simple ideas.

“Both *Bottle* and *Sweet Dreams* were created as university projects—it’s doubtful that they would exist had I not had an assignment to fulfill. The idea for *Sweet Dreams* was sparked because I thought the idea of using kale and leafy greens as foliage in a film would be interesting. I built out that world and story from there. For *Bottle*, I had the initial spark for that idea while I was watching a snowfall at my parents’ house in New Jersey a year prior. I had the realization that packable snow behaved much like clay and was curious about animating with it.”

That such engaging work can be built upon these types of idle musings goes to show that even a passing thought might be worth expanding on. A great film has to begin somewhere, after all.

Returning to the Scene

The approaches explored previously both go to show the potential independent animation can have to still succeed even when throwing the rulebook out of the window (or in the case of *Bobby Yeah*, setting it aflame and stomping it into oblivion). Sometimes, this does not prove to be the case, and entering into a film’s production blindly may very well be reflected in the final result. To elaborate on this, we will take a look at *Sausage*, a playful, high-energy short by Robert Grieves about “two artisan stallholders whose idyllic world is invaded by a devious fast-food vendor.”* The film is considered successful in terms of both its execution and reception. This, as it happens, was very nearly not the case, as the largely unseen first attempt at the film demonstrates.

One of the major considerations when it comes to personal work is knowing precisely when to draw a line under a project. Without deadlines or a client, it can be very hard to tell impartially when a film is truly finished and deliverable. When it comes to student films, however, the lines can tend to be a little blurrier. Technically speaking, a student short *will* have a deadline in terms of its assessment, but in a great deal of instances, the door is open to return to it and tighten things up before sending it out into the world. Allowing yourself

* Vimeo synopsis, *Sausage* (Dir. Robert Grieves).

a week or so to take a second swipe at the edit of your film might increase its festival performance immeasurably. (I speak from firsthand experience here.) As the months go by, the urge to open up the project files and tinker around more and more eventually fades, to be replaced, hopefully, with the urge to create something new.

In the case of *Sausage*, however, Robert rightly identified the unrealized potential for a film that could make his name but would have no chance of doing so as made (Figure 3.11). Several months after completing it for his master's degree, he realized that despite the high marks it had earned, it simply wasn't a professional enough piece of work to appropriately convey his true vision of its story.

"After a couple of weeks of just being a bit depressed about it, I got that wave of *no, these things aren't meant to be easy*," Robert recalls. "So I ended up fixing it, which ended up being a process of complete deconstruction. I suppose it was mainly the story, but to be honest, every discipline needed rethinking—the editing, the storyboarding, the animation, the music, everything had to be reworked, because this style of narrative animation was very new to me."

"To me, just designing interesting characters doesn't work; I have to build the world first, the reason for it all to exist. I want to see the narrative take shape, and I want to see where it's going to end up. You hear novelists talk about how they developed some characters, set them on a journey, and they don't know how it's going to end. While I respect that, it's *nothing* like how I write. I tend to build it up in that layered way; I want to know that everything works and is in place, and then I'll start going into details."

This approach being contrary to that taken by those who would start with details and then develop outward does not make it either right or wrong. You will know as a creative what is right for you based on the obvious—which approach yields more by way of actual results? For Robert, the emotional place he wishes to take his audience to is the most important catalyst for character development (Figure 3.12).

"It's just not the kind of person I am, so I can't worry about it too much, but one of the issues I have about my work in general is that I wish I was more of a doodler. I never doodle. Everything I do is for a purpose; it's all functional, to go towards whatever it is that I am making. I think doodlers are similar to the novelists who start with a character and



Figure 3.11

Sausage (Dir. Robert Grievess) lobby card art. (Courtesy of Robert Grievess, ©2013.)

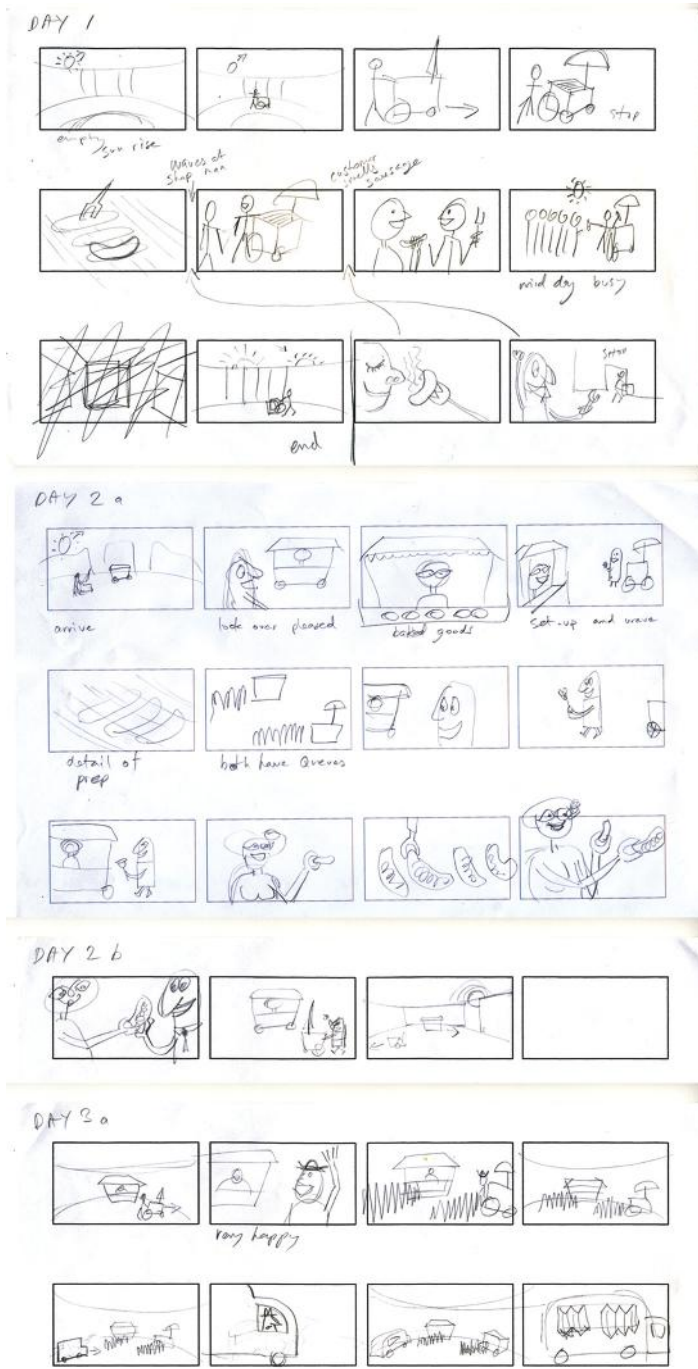


Figure 3.12
 Sausage original storyboard excerpts. (Courtesy of Robert Grieves.)

‘take the lion for a walk.’ I definitely start with the bigger picture and then narrow down; I did that on *Sausage*, and I would say I continue to do that.”

Robert having made a fair amount of short-form animation, both narrative and experimental, the duration of *Sausage* had presented him with challenges that had been entirely unfamiliar at the time. One particular area of weakness boiled down to not appreciating how best to approach the character animation itself, which, given how character- and performance-oriented the film’s premise was, proved a major pitfall. Conceding that the fundamental issues with the film were, in fact, issues with the fundamentals of animation production itself, Robert realized he needed outside assistance.

“My use of character animation didn’t really give much emotional depth. Fortunately, I had worked with someone on some random little commercial job in Sydney, this English guy, Simon Williams, who was storyboarding on the job, but his previous life had been in London, where he was an animation director on various animated series. I went to him and said, ‘I’ve got this film I really need to work out,’ which led to the classic moment of ‘What do you want to hear? Do you want me to just tell you enough to get it finished and out there, or do you *really* want to know the deal?’ ‘Yeah, c’mon, hit me with it!’ So he basically started that deconstruction process.”

During their evenings after work, Robert and Simon tried for several months to work out fixes for the film as made. Eventually, both admitted defeat, that time was only being wasted, and that the only realistic option was to put the existing animation to one side and return to the storyboard stage, where the story issues could be resolved, before embarking on new animation. Although such an undertaking is far from appealing, Robert acknowledged it as an exercise in correcting the missteps of his first attempt; by redoing the film in this way, it would become far easier to appreciate how best to create a dynamic flow and marry shots properly for better cohesion. In a direct sense, it was a matter of learning from one’s own mistakes (Figure 3.13).

“It wasn’t hitting the audience at the right time, all those things that you don’t have to deal with in 2 minutes. Two minutes is jazz-hands, it’s eye-candy, it’s punch lines, whereas anything over 5 minutes—and this was 8 minutes—you will need to have an arc, and things have to deliver; you have to let the audience know where you are in any given moment. All those things that keep the audience engaged. Although he was outraged at my lack of knowledge and my audacity to make a film, he was wonderful, and with his help, we built it and got it to a point where I could not only watch it again without retching,



Figure 3.13

Sausage early sketches. (Courtesy of Robert Grieves.)

but I was actually really excited! And now I watch it, and I am entertained by it; it carries an audience, and it carries me.”

One way to rationalize the failings of a short would be that there was not enough time, and that with more hours and more commitment, might come the fixes necessary. The truth of the matter is that, no matter how much time is available, knowledge of the craft itself is what is required more than anything, and there is no shame in reaching out to others with a more expansive skill set than us for help; in fact, what better way is there to learn?

“One of the big things that I have learned to appreciate is how sophisticated the audience is. It isn’t as though we’re in the 1920s inventing cinema and people are going to be impressed by anything; our audiences have grown up on what is not just random kids’ television; some of the *best* animators and filmmakers out there make kids’ television and then go on to make adult television. You could choose to ignore the three-act game, but you have to know what that game is because the audience certainly knows it. They might not know enough to teach a course on it, but they instinctively feel when things are working or not. So you have to respect the audience by understanding what it is they already come to any screening with. The reason we make these films is to get better; it’s an opportunity to get stuck in.”

Despite the massive reworking of the short, efforts were made to preserve some of the original character animation that had actually proved successful the first time around. As a result, the overall style of the film—modern digital animation processes applied to a retro approach to 2-D character construction—needed to remain the same, as did the general arc of the story (Figure 3.14).

“There were things that got dumped, like a minute at the beginning with a whole back-story of the two main characters as children—talk about killing your babies; it was a baby slaughter! But that’s all part of the process, and sometimes, you need someone to come along to make you realize which babies need to die.”

The major limitation regarding the character work for the original film was an absence of emotional range that could translate to visual performance. Without dialog or a narration, effective character acting would be needed to carry the entire film, so that an emotional journey could be communicated. Though the film has a largely whimsical story, every major character conveys a vital emotion at some point throughout—the hero and heroine running the gamut of contentment, elation, fear, horror, sadness, anger, confusion, joy, and despair; the villain, smugness, malice, revulsion, and fury. While the final film boasts all of these with no ambiguities, the performances of the original pass at the film were far more stilted (Figure 3.15).

“My characters weren’t good enough actors; it was like putting someone with a stroke on screen and expecting them to be Marlon Brando. So I was in that situation where stylistically, I had gone through that limited animation look, but I was telling a story that was more sophisticated and had more requirements. This is all stuff that you learn, isn’t it? If your story asks for this degree of emotional range, either you need a voiceover that tells you, ‘This character’s sad,’ or you need a character that can really *be* the particular type of sad that the script calls for. So I did keep the stylistic thing, but there was a big discussion about whether that should change.”

Most of us will have past projects that, were we to dust them off and take a second run at them, would doubtless be improved by the newly accrued and more finely honed skills we’ve developed in the interim. When, then, is doing so an advisable, practical idea?

Sausage

Scene	Duration	Panel	Scene	Duration	Panel	Scene	Duration	Panel	Scene	Duration
454	03:00	3	457	01:00	1	458	01:00	1	459	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Scene	Duration	Panel	Scene	Duration	Panel	Scene	Duration
460	01:00	1	460_A_0	05:00	1	460_A_1	05:00	1	460_A_1_A	05:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Scene	Duration	Panel	Scene	Duration	Panel	Scene	Duration
460_A_1_B	05:00	1	460_A_20:00	20:00	1	460_A_20:00	20:00	2	460_A_20:00	20:00

Figure 3.14
Sausage revised storyboard excerpt. (Courtesy of Robert Grievous.)

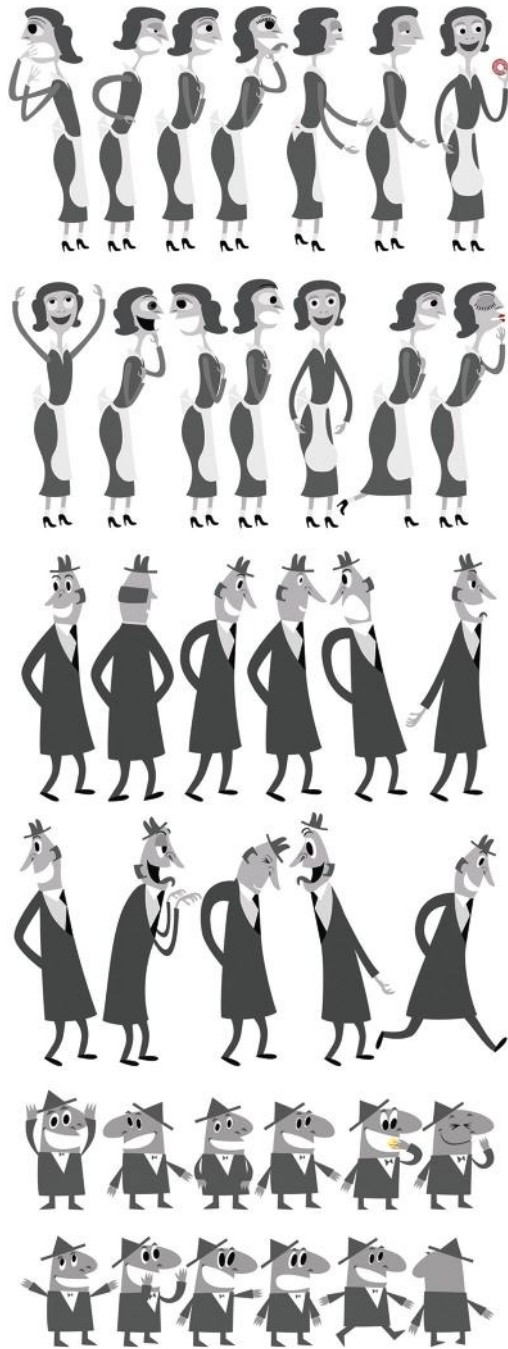


Figure 3.15

Sausage character design sheets demonstrating poses and actions. (Courtesy of Robert Grieves, ©2013.)



Figure 3.16

Still from *Sausage* (Dir. Robert Grievess). (Courtesy of Robert Grievess, ©2013.)

“You’ve got the two levels. One is where I’m at personally, having done the film, that definitely, it was worth it because I’m now a confident filmmaker—I wasn’t before. It also gave me a product—which these things are—that was able to go out and have life. I’m now getting the kind of jobs I *wanted* to do, that I wouldn’t have been able to without the film, and I’m able to *do* them, having done the film. So it’s a double bonus! (Figure 3.16).

“If I ever spoke to a bank manager, he’d think I was an idiot! The amount of time I was working and spending on my own, I would have been better off doing something more simple. Watching the younger graduates who are doing sensational stuff at the moment and really using the Internet as a way of connecting with the world, I don’t know if it’s instinctively or not, but people just seem to be doing these much shorter, sweeter things, and it makes a lot of sense, doesn’t it? You get it out there, throw something at the world. If it sticks, great; if it doesn’t, then move on to the next thing. The other approach, of putting all your effort and spending years working on one thing that’s 7 minutes long, it takes forever to do. So of course, you learn from doing it, but you might have learned just as much from doing some shorter, quicker things in a short amount of time.”

Pleasing Abstractions

One of *Sausage*’s other appealing attributes is how the liveliness of the visuals is bolstered by composer Dan Radclyffe’s playful musical score. Indeed, the interplay between music and visuals is obviously a huge consideration when it comes to animation. We’ll look at this further when considering animated music videos in [Chapter 5](#) and score composition in [Chapter 21](#). Music also has a part to play in the conceptual and visual development of a film, and it’s worth taking a look at work whose “stories” are far more open to interpretation, if not outright abstract. Canadian experimental film artist Steven Woloshen began

making films at around 17 years old in the 1970s, making use of the Super 8 cameras and projectors his parents had lying around their house in Laval. With the project beginning as a means to pass the time in lieu of much by way of quality TV entertainment, Steven joined forces with his friends, an assortment of artists, designers, and musicians, to dip his toes in the waters of experimental filmmaking (Figure 3.17).

These freeform efforts, primarily involving the destruction of Super 8 film cartridges and scratching over the negatives, paired with unplanned musical improvisations, would prove to be the first step of a long career. Indeed, Steven's formative years of playful experimentation would heavily foreshadow his eventual—and quite extensive—filmography. The first major turning point came during his studies at Vanier College in Montreal.

“My professors were experimental film teachers who were really interested in Stan Brackhage, Len Lye, and all these formalist experimental filmmakers. They kept on talking to me about the surface of the film, the surface of the screen, the materiality of the film. I told them I had been bashing up film cases and having a really good time, so they said, “That’s perfect, bring it in!””

Spurred on, Steven began making films with hole punchers and pins, beginning with an experimental use of the projector as a filmmaking tool in itself. The positive response and high marks this early student effort garnered cemented his affection toward this particular area of filmmaking, and he has not looked back since. During his studies, he was educated on the works of Len Lye, such as *Free Radicals*, a 4-minute short incrementally created over a 21-year period (from 1958 to 1979) by scratching 16 mm black film leader with needles. The stark simplicity of this process appealed to Steven, and no further encouragement was needed to actively fill the remaining gaps in his knowledge about the culture, the process, and its terminologies.



Figure 3.17

Steven Woloshen scratching on film. (Courtesy of the artist.)

“I didn’t know until later on that it had all these designations, terms like *absolute film* and *Cinéma Pur*, but all I did was what I wanted to do in my parents’ basement, like Letra-film on top of film, ink, paint, dipping it, rolling it over with bicycles, setting it on fire. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do or what I wasn’t supposed to do; I just did it anyway, and it was a lot of fun.”

“I used those films to get into university, but there, I made documentaries. The documentaries were not going my way, because they were 16 mm Bolex. I would waste a lot of film forgetting to take off the lens cap, so instead of throwing the film away, I would paint and scratch on it a little bit more. So how it started was basically the result of bad documentary filmmaking” (Figure 3.18)!

“I’ve always considered the films that I make to be a kind of document of the way I’m feeling about something, or the way my hand moves, the way my eye moves, the light that’s in a room, the tools that I have on hand, if I find a marker or a bottle of ink that I really like—it’s always just a reflection of what’s around me. If I can get the material to make the film, if I hear music I really like, it’s a reflection of that too. So it’s not really about a story *per se* except the story of me, as a document of what I’m going through at the time. This isn’t really a linear document, like a narrative, but it’s still what I perceive as being really important in my life. A lot of times, that’s music, color, movement, light—in the early 1980s, for example, I started getting into calligraphy. I wanted to exercise my skills, so instead of making letters on paper, I made them on very small squares of film. So it’s just a reflection of the things I thought were important.”

The projects that followed share certain fundamental approaches throughout—manipulation of existing film is a dominant theme, as is the role of carefully selected musical accompaniments and a tactile physicality to the variety of textures and images, however briefly glimpsed. To give some small sense of Steven’s variety of approaches, these films include *Bru Ha Ha!* (2002), a film timed to a found brass musical piece that had been previously transferred to 35 mm magnetic film, on which Letraset symbols are strategically

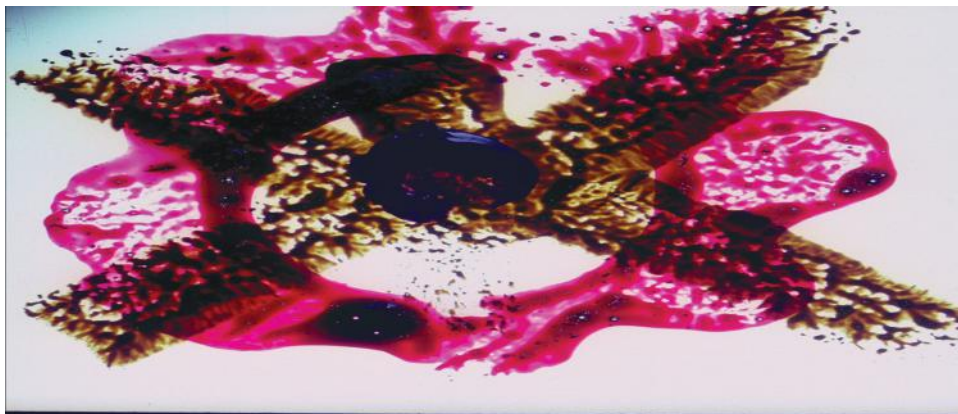


Figure 3.18

Still from *When the Sun Turns into Juice* (Dir. Steven Woloshen). (Courtesy of Steven Woloshen, ©2011.)

placed; *When the Sun Turns into Juice* (2011), making use of both sides of film leader using both ink and paint and lighting the results from both sides during the optical printing stage; and *Crossing Victoria* (2013), combining hand-painted rotoscoping with the projection of imagery onto raw stock using a self-constructed variation on an optical printer.

Noteworthy amongst his body of work is *1000 Plateaus* (2004–2014), so subtitled because of its decade-long production history (Figure 3.19).

“It started when I was a driver on film sets in Montreal. I drove actors, directors, technicians, directors of photography—and as a driver, you usually want to make your passengers comfortable. What I did was I tried to get their mind off my bad driving skills and just let them talk about something. (Of course, you’re not allowed to be the one who talks first.) So I placed a roll of film on a little wooden box with a glass surface and a flashlight in it between the passenger’s seat and the driver’s seat. What I wanted to do was just scratch on film while I was waiting for the actors to come out of their hotels, just so I could work on the film a little bit, here and there. They would ask, ‘What is that thing?’ ‘I’m glad you asked; I’m making an animated film in the car!’ And they’d respond, ‘Are you sure you’re allowed to do that?’ We started a process where I could tell them a little bit about what animation was, and slowly, they encouraged me. So over time, whenever I was free, I’d do a foot here, a foot there, and by the end of it, I’d done about 300 feet.”

Even when it comes to experimental film, discipline and forethought are important—one might argue, in fact, that experimental film, by its very nature, demands even further consideration in these areas. When dealing with a film that has no characters or linear narrative, it is more of an uphill battle to wind up with an end result audiences will consider watchable. As loose and freeform a visual medium as scratch-on-film is, the visuals have to make some kind of sense. An abstract film can, in the right hands, prove curiously entertaining; an assortment of arbitrary and thoughtless visual noise, however, cannot carry itself. When it comes to Steven’s work, great pains are made to ensure that his end result falls into the former category. In lieu of a script, his films are often structurally dependent on their soundtracks.



Figure 3.19

Still from *1000 Plateaus* (2004–2014) (Dir. Steven Woloshen). (Courtesy of Steven Woloshen, ©2014.)

“What I had to do was chart out what piece of music I was going to use, how long it would last, where the changes would happen, and stick to that ‘script’ from the beginning of the film to the end of the film. So it all landed in sync, I would have to count perforations just like an animator would do with a dope sheet, counting where events would occur. So there was no digital technology for me to use; it was just the box. It started in 2004 on a magnetic strip, an audiomagnetic tape with perforations, and that’s where it continued!”

Ten years later, the finished *1000 Plateaus (2004–2014)* was released to much festival success, picking up major awards at festivals such as the Melbourne International Film Festival (Figures 3.20 and 3.21). Steven has accompanied the film as it has traveled, bringing workshops to various international festivals and events to showcase the tactile joy this branch of experimental filmmaking can evoke.

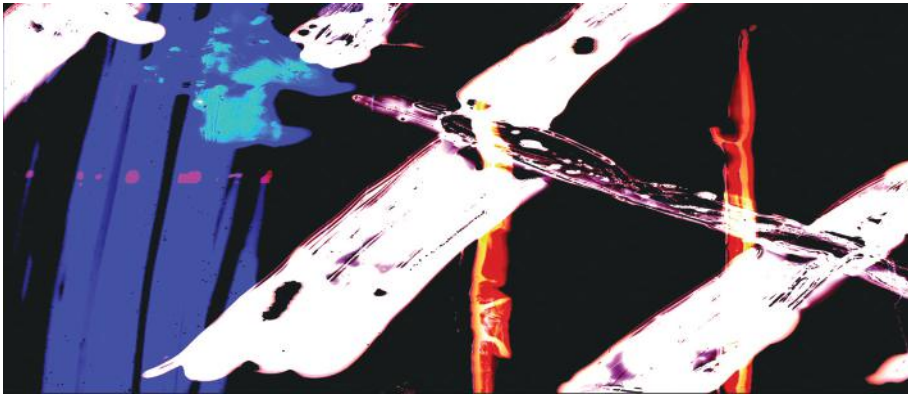


Figure 3.20

Still from *1000 Plateaus (2004–2014)* (Dir. Steven Woloshen). (Courtesy of Steven Woloshen, ©2014.)

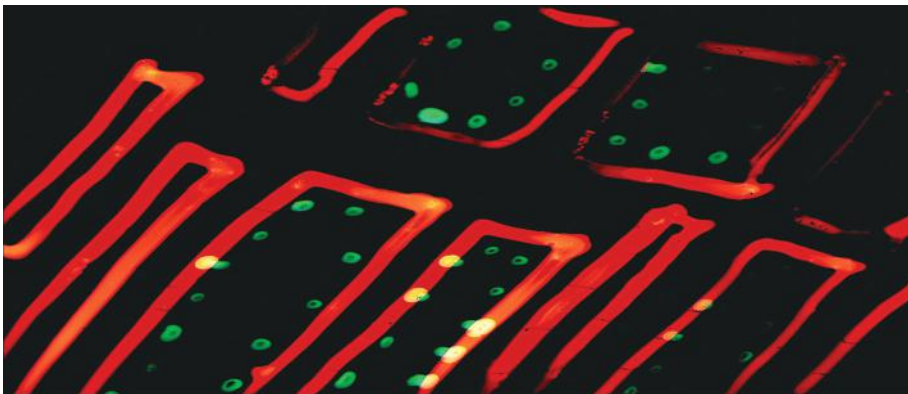


Figure 3.21

Still from *1000 Plateaus (2004–2014)* (Dir. Steven Woloshen). (Courtesy of Steven Woloshen, ©2014.)

“I really find that I’ve made it my goal to make an imaginary toolbox of all the things I can do with film, either by stapling it, burning it, gluing it, peeling stuff off from it, or combining it all together. I just want to make a very big compendium of what animated films could be. I do a lot of workshops, and everybody always moves towards scratching on it or painting on film, so I suggest, ‘Well, why don’t we try doing both?’ Or ‘Why don’t we try bleaching it, or putting paint underneath, or scratches underneath? Why don’t we try combining what we already know with something that we don’t know?’ To me, that has always been the most important thing, just to move forward with something that’s been around since the 1930s.”

Later in the book, we will look at other projects whose creative approaches have been similarly informed by music and experimentation, such as Thomas Stellmach and Maja Oschmann’s *Virtuos Virtuell* (2013) and Benjamin Arcand’s *Wackatdoo* (2014). If you’ve skimmed or skipped ahead in the book, you will have gleaned that in many instances, the films and artists we have discussed serve as prime case studies for a number of areas, and not just within production. Now that we have canvassed a range of script-based and visual-based storytellers, for the next few chapters, we will expand on other types of approaches and genres that can kick a film idea into gear.

4

Consider the Source

There's no shame or failure in conceding that we are not all of us storytellers. In truth, it's something of a rarity for directors, animators, and/or producers to be responsible for the story on top of everything else they have to deal with. So where to turn for a great film idea? In the upcoming chapters, we will hear from animators whose work spans musical interpretation, nonfiction, metafiction, skit-based vignettes, and interaction-driven, multimedia projects, amongst others, to assuage any potential concerns that there are limits to what form your independent project will eventually take. For this section, we will be presenting a cross-section of animated projects that used preexisting source material as their jumping-off point.

It is worth establishing the fundamental difference between a respectful adaptation of another artist's work and just outright stealing their ideas. It's sad to say, but on occasion, it's not been unheard of for some people, in lieu of their own original concepts, to go the lazy route of either stylistic or narrative plagiarism, sometimes even justifying the practice as simply taking inspiration. Have you ever seen a bold, ingenious approach to an independent film online or at a festival and then seen more or less the same idea replicated with a higher budget in a television commercial a few months later? In some instances, the original creative will have been hired to direct a variation of his/her idea or brought on as a creative consultant, but it isn't unheard of that some poor, meek, nonlitigious soul has just been ripped off.

In terms of being taken more seriously as a creative and artist, this is obviously not a route you want to take. It can be a thorny business, and one that further hammers home the need for audience feedback not just after but also during production. So if the process of idea generation does indeed turn out to be a constant battle wherein every idea or concept is second-guessed or falls flat—or, frankly, if you simply want to direct or animate a film but have no impulse to write it—then it’s advisable to look elsewhere for your story.

One of the most rewarding creative partnerships can thus be predicated on pairing a writer and a director, mutually beneficial especially if both are at a similar stage of their career. It may even be the case that the story you want to tell has already been written.

Based just outside of London, Slurpy Studios is an award-winning animation production company whose client base includes the BBC, ITV, and the British Council. Headed up by producer Aaron Wood and creative director Katie Steed, the studio quickly built up a strong body of work spanning entertainment, commercials, corporate videos, and educational content. With a desire to expand into animated series development and production, a crucial opportunity came about when the studio was approached by Giles Paley-Phillips in 2013 to potentially adapt his children’s book *The Fearsome Beastie*, which had been published by Maverick Arts 2 years previously (Figure 4.1). Thus began an ongoing, symbiotic creative partnership.

“To be honest, I think it was around the time that *The Gruffalo* and *The Gruffalo’s Child* were doing really well.” As Aaron recalls, “That was obviously a big reason; authors were trying to create an animation out of their idea, even if it wasn’t for money. So Giles got in touch with a book that he had written and wanted to make into something. He didn’t know whether it would be a series, a short film, or an app, but we were up for meeting up and talking about possibilities.”



Figure 4.1

The Fearsome Beastie concept visual. (Courtesy of Slurpy Studios, ©2015.)

Slurpy had, as it happened, been on the hunt for just such a project themselves, so the timing could not have been more fortuitous. A meeting with Giles at his publisher Maverick’s office in West Sussex showed that, the tone and illustration style of *The Fearsome Beastie* was a perfect fit for Slurpy’s own developing visual identity. Although the more ambitious avenues for adaptation such as apps or ongoing series did not have legs—the story in essence being a short-form poem—the short film option perfectly matched up to both the source material and the studio’s resources (Figure 4.2).

“Giles was completely cool with that; he just wanted to see it come alive as an animation. To be honest, it was the publishing company’s first foray into animation, so they were just happy to have somebody on board who would take it on as a project; it was win-win.”

In lieu of a formal development deal or starter funds, Slurpy and Maverick, being two relatively new companies in their respective industries, instead took on a mutually beneficial arrangement in which the film rights and potential profits were passed over to Slurpy for them to develop on their own time and fund through commercial projects taken on simultaneously. With Maverick maintaining the rights to the book itself and the potential to earn money from any future sales, the partnership proved ideal for both parties.

“Financially, from our point of view, after whatever we spend on production costs, we can make that back. If it makes money, then it’s an 80%–20% split in our favor, so we were happy with the deal.”

The project was more than just an opportunity to network and pad out the studio’s output; its very nature carried with it the potential to define their identity and bring them closer to the ideal scenario of regularly producing content for a younger audience.

“We felt, at the time, very much that we needed to prove that we could do something for children,” says Katie, “because our aim as a studio is to make content for that audience.



Figure 4.2

Katie Steed’s first *Fearsome Beastie* concept designs. (Courtesy of Slurpy Studios, ©2014.)

We were approaching people with our series ideas, and we always felt slightly as though we just didn't have any work that backed them up. Although it wasn't asked of us, for our own confidence, we wanted to spend time with that age group, with that kind of film."

"And we wanted a personal project," Aaron adds. "One hundred percent of our work is commercial, it's what we do all the time. At that point, we didn't have a single personal project in the studio, so to have something else that was fun and enjoyable was good."

For Katie, this comes with the acknowledgment that it's tricky to keep personal projects on the boil, especially alongside the demands of running of a commercial studio. "But if you 'owe' a debt of some kind to someone else, like the author or the publisher, which we did, it gives you that impetus to keep going, when, if it's a purely personal project, sometimes that enthusiasm can die quite quickly."

While some instances of children's book adaptations go through a process of heavy script revision and story changes—any Dr. Seuss feature adaptation, for example—keeping the runtime of Slurpy's *The Fearsome Beastie* down enabled the original source text to remain largely untouched. Although some experimentation with additional lines and story embellishments was entertained, ultimately, a word-for-word adaptation was deemed most appropriate. Instead, the fleshing out of the story is largely down to carefully considered visualization, expanding the universe of the story rather than convoluting it with needless detail (Figure 4.3). This approach had also been taken with Magic Light's successful mainstream adaptation of *The Gruffalo* (Dir. Jakob Schuh and Max Lang), albeit to a larger extent accommodated by their budget.

"*The Fearsome Beastie* is a roughly similar length of poem to *The Gruffalo*. Our adaptation is 5 minutes, and *The Gruffalo*'s is 20 minutes, so they expanded it a lot more than we were able to. I think our first cut was 8 minutes, so we've looked a lot at expanding it, and we've come up with a lot of other ideas and a lot of other characterizations; but both for time and

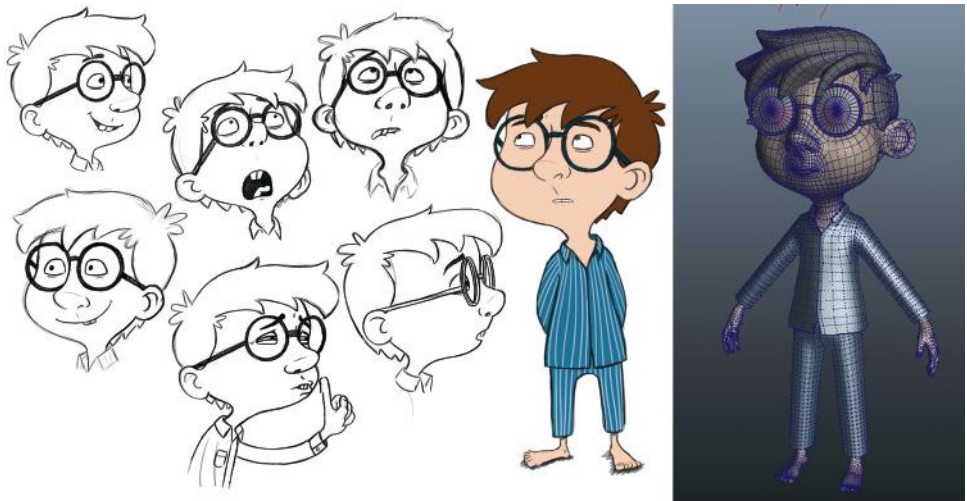


Figure 4.3

Visual development and early CG modeling on *The Fearsome Beastie*'s "Clive." (Courtesy of Slurpy Studios, ©2014.)

budgetary reasons—and just because of how concise and clever the poem is—we’ve actually ended up getting it right back to 5 minutes. Also, the timing and the pacing of the poem, we’ve often found it has a certain rhythm that carries you along. It’s an adventure story, so it does have a natural pace, but it’s hard to stick in extra scenes without breaking that pace up.”

Alongside *The Gruffalo*, other Magic Light adaptations such as *The Gruffalo’s Child* (Dir. Johannes Weiland and Uwe Heidschötter) and *Room on the Broom*, next to Studio AKA’s *Lost and Found* (Dir. Phil Hunt), were turned to when researching which ideas most effectively translate from one medium to another. Other elements of successful adaptation—including, for example, a well-executed framing device in which the story of *The Gruffalo* is set up in a manner better suited to film—were the ways in which embellishments could be made to the world of the story while again leaving the original text unchanged (Figure 4.4).

“We’ve also had to expand the world,” says Aaron. “In the book, it takes place inside one room really and maybe outside on the street, and we had to do it in a much more filmic way and set up a whole village.”

“I think *The Gruffalo* and those sorts of books have quite a lighthearted tone,” adds Katie. “For us, the big challenge was setting up this darker tone while keeping it kid-friendly and cartoony, so that it wasn’t too scary.”

Adaptation is far from a filmmaking cheat or hack—it can be a tricky process, and effectively translating one storytelling medium to another is a skill in itself. The process of finding a story that proves a fit as far as your artistic sensibilities are concerned may eliminate the initial ideas phase of the process, but rarely will a story as written translate immediately to film. Some concepts may need to be embellished; others significantly edited down; focuses may shift; and structurally, the narrative may require much by way of tweaking. To stay true and respectful to your source material while creating a film that stands up on its own is a gentle art that warrants a great deal of communication.

Depending on the circumstances of your initial arrangement, it may very well be that the story’s original author is perfectly content for you to adapt it in whatever way you

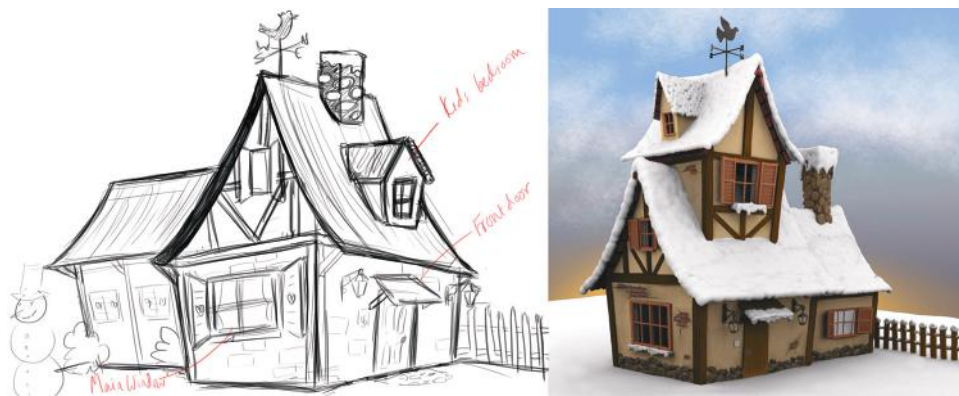


Figure 4.4

Visual development of the children’s house from *The Fearsome Beastie*—early sketch concept to CG render comparison. (Courtesy of Slurpy Studios, ©2014.)

please, in which case it makes sense to proceed as you would under any other circumstances. However, keeping lines of communication open with a story's originator gives you a direct line to the humanity of its characters and the intended narrative arcs and helps guide you toward defining the response you want from your audience.

Narrative children's fiction, ordinarily having been adapted from shorter stories, as the medium of picture books dictates, can very well stand on its own when adapted to animation, at least in terms of the narration and dialog. Where the animation can come into its own lies more with how the visual illustrations are interpreted and built upon.

By going the route of adaptation, we need not be limited to one story type or audience. Not that there's anything wrong with films aimed toward younger audiences (certainly, as one of the more indefatigable animation genres, they may very well be in with a better chance of generating revenue down the line), but just as not every writer can sit down and scribe a children's book, not every filmmaker will have the creative impetus or interest in producing a children's film. Along with preexisting scripts for unproduced projects, numerous other sources that can serve as a springboard can include short stories, essays, articles, and biographical nonfiction. The latter we shall explore more extensively in [Chapter 7](#), though it is worth examining here a successful instance of how all four can combine and be brought to life through animation.

Standing Tall

Love in the Time of March Madness (2014) is an animated memoir written by filmmaker and writer Melissa Johnson ([Figure 4.5](#)). With a background predominantly focused on live-action documentary films, her work has leaned toward rite-of-passage stories focusing on women athletes, such as *No Look Pass* (2011), a feature documentary project for Showtime, as well as *Brittney Griner: Lifesize* (2014) and *Queen Vee* (2015) for ESPN. Alongside her documentary work, she is also an acclaimed humorist, cocreating the Comedy Central web series *The Worst Speeches of All Time* along with writing a number of first-person essays published in the *New York Times*, *Boston Herald*, *GOOD Magazine*, and *Salon.com*. Posted on the latter in March 2011, Melissa's essay "The Tallest Woman in the Room Tells All" proved a huge hit for the website.

"I received a lot of positive feedback about the essay, which was hugely encouraging. It was based off a series of anecdotes drawn from a 20-year span of my life. The film is a pared down version of the *Salon* piece."

The essay, an endearingly candid series of her own recollections and personal conflicts as a 6'4" basketball player often prone to romantic misadventure, seemed to Melissa to be best suited to an animated film adaptation over any other approach. As she didn't have any direct experience in this arena, a mutual contact introduced her to Robertino Zambrano, then working at a New York ad agency, having hailed from Sydney.

With some early dabblings in animation and computer-generated (CG) images during high school, Robertino's enthusiasm for motion graphics kicked into gear when he embarked on a visual communications degree at the University of Technology Sydney. With a knowledge of design, illustration, and animation, he would eventually branch out into other areas such as advertising, though the call of more creative projects remained strong.

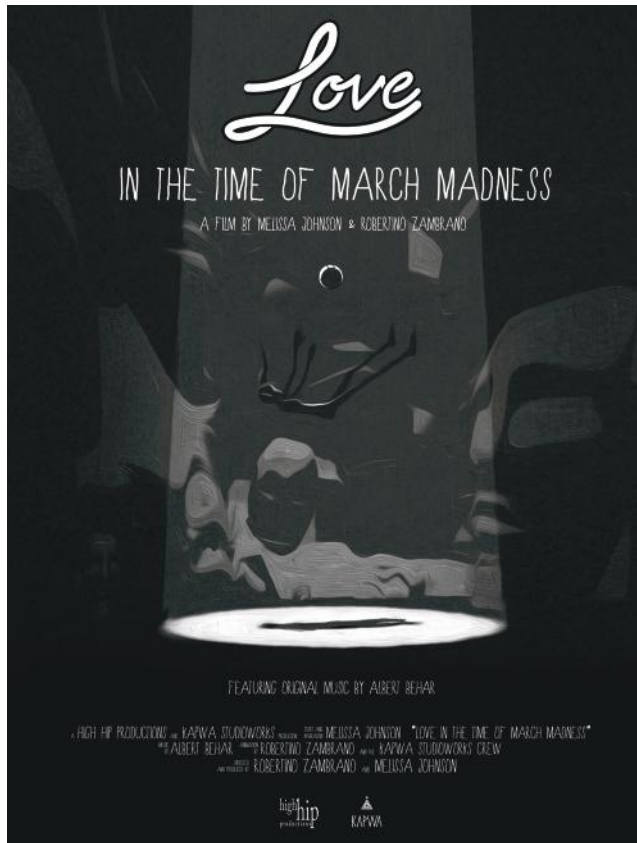


Figure 4.5

Love in the Time of March Madness (Dir. Melissa Johnson/Robertino Zambrano) poster. (Courtesy of High Hip Productions/KAPWA Studioworks, ©2014.)

“The piece immediately resonated with Robertino, and it felt like creative kismet,” Melissa recalls of their initial meetings. “I mean, he’s not a 6’4” white American woman, but that didn’t matter a bit. Robertino just *got it*. We started going back and forth, refining the script and creating the storyboard. I don’t think I’ve ever had such an experience of total alignment in a creative collaboration from the very start.”

For Robertino, collaborating on *Love in the Time of March Madness* with Melissa was an ideal incentive to make the shift back into the creative side of animation and motion graphics. “I think starting on that project was one of the big factors in what propelled me to leave my job there in New York. I moved back home to try and start up my own practice where I’d just try and focus solely on animation and motion and film.”

Similarly, Melissa was feeling the call to step out from under her agency life and establish herself in the world as an independent artist. With Robertino having moved back to Australia, setting up shop as KAPWA Studioworks, and Melissa leaving New York for Los Angeles, the two began the transcontinental process of adapting her resonant essay to an animated short, sharing the directorial reins (Figure 4.6).



Figure 4.6

Love in the Time of March Madness concept sketch by Robertino Zambrano. (Courtesy of KAPWA Studioworks.)

“It then took about 3 years to complete because of the complexity of the animation,” explains Melissa. “We wanted an *Alice in Wonderland*–meets–Alexander McQueen aesthetic—dark, ornate, irreverent—with exaggerated plays on perspective and a dry sensibility to the humor. I don’t normally talk deadpan like I do in the narration, but I wanted it to have this insider, intimate feeling, which I think animation complements so well. I want you to feel like I’m speaking only to you. Maybe we’re driving in my car and I’m telling you this story; or it’s just the two of us over candlelight, and I’m sharing something that I don’t share often. But of course, in reality, I’m sharing it with everyone.”

The pair began working with a first draft of the script in early 2011. With Robertino producing the film as a sideproject to his commercial projects, they were able to indulge a year or so of visual development, experimenting with a variety of different styles to determine what would be the best fit for the script. With the project initially quite ambitious in scope, it was then essential to edit down the script to make its completion more feasible. Ultimately, tightening up the film at this stage proved to be beneficial,

especially as Robertino's initial hope was to produce it using traditional, frame-by-frame animation.

"By then, we had a 15-minute script that we hacked down." Robertino recalls, "I tried to get it to 7, but I think we settled on around 9. That was when I thought, *I don't think I'm gonna do this in 2-D; let's start doing some 3-D and cheat our way through compositing to get it looking nice!*"

The most important factor was creating a piece of art that would reflect the tone of its source material, especially when considering the personal nature of the original essay. In this respect, *Love in the Time of March Madness* also serves as an additional case study alongside other works of animated nonfiction we will look at in [Chapter 7](#). It is clear when comparing the two that the film is a faithful adaptation of the essay, albeit streamlined to create a flow more suited to a short film narrative. Condensing the film in this way chiefly fell on Melissa's shoulders.

"As a writer, I had to cut a lot of words and trust the visuals to do the work. For example, in the essay, I say, 'I was a walking Rorschach, mirroring their self-image'; I cut the line in the film because Robertino took it on and was able to visually communicate it. So I think for me, I had to really go in with a red pen and strip away a lot of language and then explore the complexity of his animation and think about what to simply."

"At the start, I was very informal about storyboarding and doing all the layouts," says Robertino of the earlier stages of production ([Figure 4.7](#)). "It was only as we started getting deeper into making the film when I really realized that I should have been as disciplined with this as with commercial work!"

A major motivator for laying out a solid production plan came with bringing on other animators and delegating tasks. With a crew to be accountable for, production on the film began proper, using a combination of approaches to the animation itself ([Figure 4.7](#)).

"We built most of the raw elements, such as the characters and most of the main props, in Maya. There are a couple of shots in the film that are actually just frame-by-frame 2-D, done in Flash, but the majority of it is generated through CG. We brought all the footage into After Effects and did all our compositing in there, adding any treatments and other little elements, backgrounds, layouts, et cetera."

The result is a truly unique and seamless blend of digital animation processes. Rendered in stark black and white, Melissa's animated counterpart occupies an ethereal world of visual metaphors, inventive transitions, and wry onscreen gags that perfectly complement the humor of her original essay. An extra detail that gives the production an instant identifiability is the line work, which runs together to create a painterly effect, something Robertino had previously experimented with for a commercial project, TED-Ed's: *The Science of Stage Fright*.

"Photoshop has this oil-paint filter which looks really hokey if you just apply it, straight up, to any image, but the thing I saw that it did—which most effects didn't do—was it actually picked up a lot of the contours in the image, so you could extract some really cool painterly effects." With this in mind, the Maya render settings were adjusted so that each shot would contain enough visual information to be picked up on in this way. To reduce the artificiality of the effect, the footage was combined with an assortment of hand-generated digital textures during the compositing phase in After Effects ([Figure 4.8](#)).

"It really helped, especially when we had some of the more frame-by-frame Flash-generated stuff, where I was wondering how we were going to marry these two animation

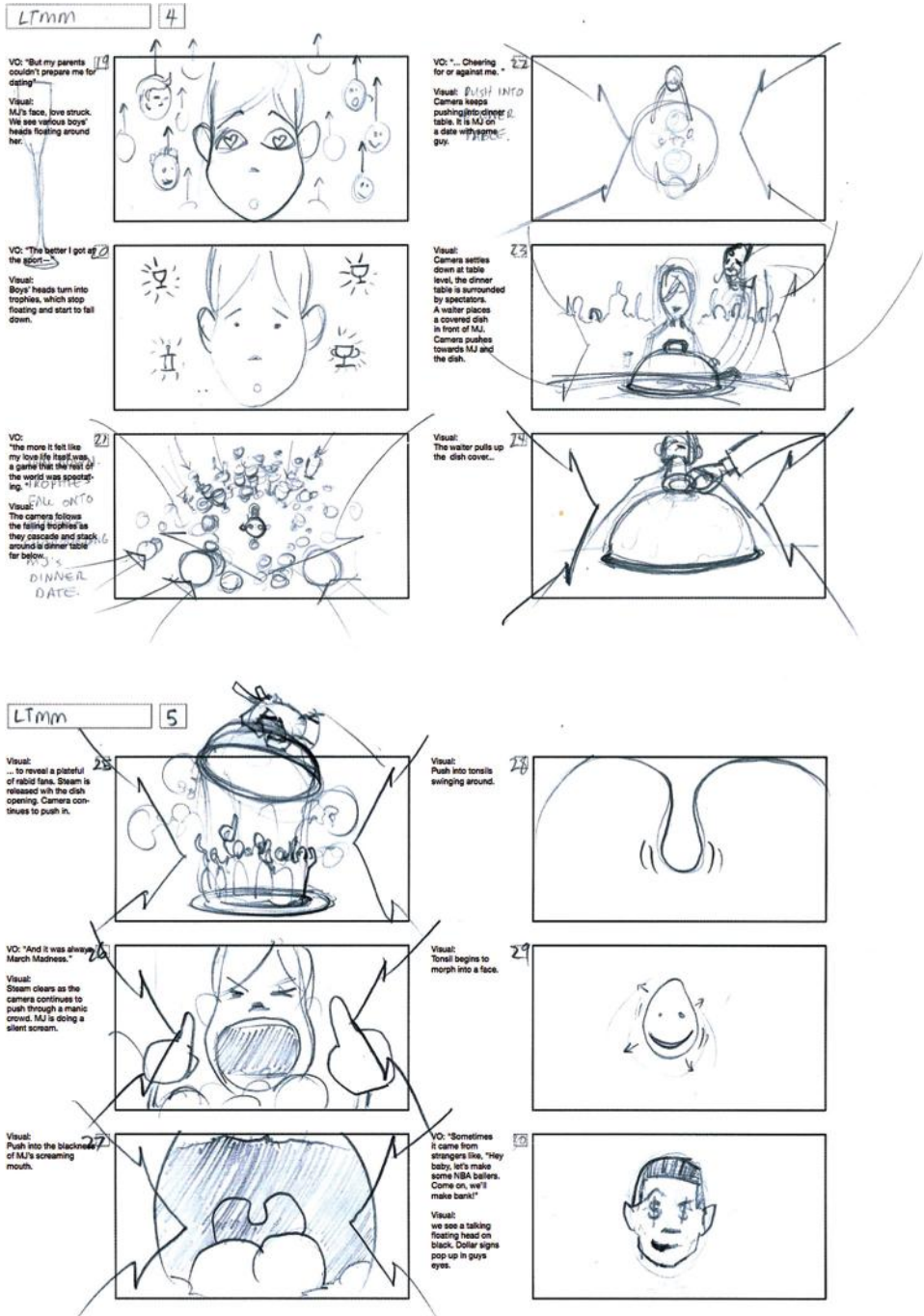


Figure 4.7
Love in the Time of March Madness storyboard excerpts. (Courtesy of KAPWA Studioworks.)



Figure 4.8

Stills comparison demonstrating the textural effect applied to the animation of *Love in the Time of March Madness*. (Courtesy of High Hip Productions/KAPWA Studioworks, ©2014.)

styles together. A lot of the scenes at the start, where they're all coming out of Maya, were looking very 3-D, so it was trying to break up the perspective so it didn't look so 'nice.' When you get to that point where someone who's watching it wonders, *How did they make that?* then you've done something right!"

Like-Mindedness

Were it not for the synchronicity and mutual understanding of Melissa and Robertino's creative partnership, both artistically and circumstantially, it's hard to say whether or not *Love in the Time of March Madness* would have come together in as successful a way, if at all. Though they came from notably disparate backgrounds, it is encouraging to see that the pair's instances of common ground revolved around an art form they both clearly care about. This is important to remember when contemplating any type of collaboration; pairing up with somebody with whom you share little by way of empathy or interests will probably not result in a successful film. Certainly, you can have differences, or even wildly dissimilar personality types, but it's crucial to know for sure that, on some level, there is an understanding and focused idea of what you both want out of the project.

Amongst the variety of genres and filmmaking methods covered in the extensive filmography of director Chris Shepherd is one particular adaptation that came about from an artistic rapport with Cheshire-born humorist and Turner Prize-nominated artist David Shrigley. The eventual collaboration began during Chris's stint on the BBC sketch show *Big Train*, for which he animated a series of vignettes—*The World Stare-out Championship*

Finals—whose minimalist absurdity would foreshadow the short to come. Discovering David Shrigley’s work through a collection of his drawings titled *Why We Got the Sack From the Museum*, Chris was immediately enamored.

“I looked at it and thought it was really great, because when I was a kid, I always used to draw crazy pictures, and in a sense, his book reminded me of that. It reminded me of the drawings that I’d do that would in fact be very dysfunctional. I always think it’s like graffiti—in London, you can get graffiti that is superornate and beautiful, but when you go up North, it’s just your straight, four-letter expletives on a wall with no frills. This book was like that; these moments that are really raw; they just go *bang*, and there it is. That really appealed to me.”

With David’s star having not yet risen within the art world, the possibility of collaboration appealed to a mutual fondness for animation, but a suitable concept couldn’t be decided on. In 2003, the binding premise of a new David Shrigley collection titled *Who I Am and What I Want* served to finally get the ball rolling. The following year, with the assistance of Arts Council England’s Animate Projects and Channel 4, the pair embarked on an animated adaptation of the book (Figures 4.9 through 4.12).

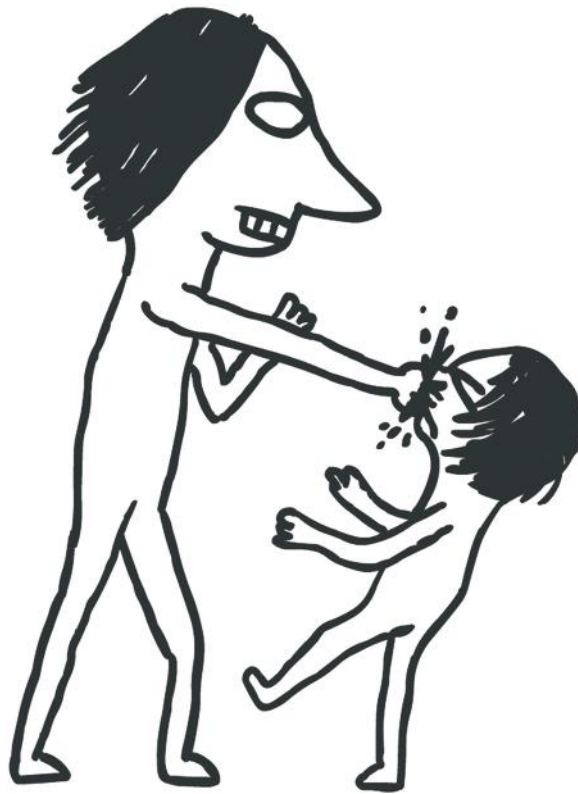


Figure 4.9

Still from *Who I Am and What I Want* (Dir. Chris Shepherd/David Shrigley). (Courtesy of Chris Shepherd/David Shrigley, ©2005.)

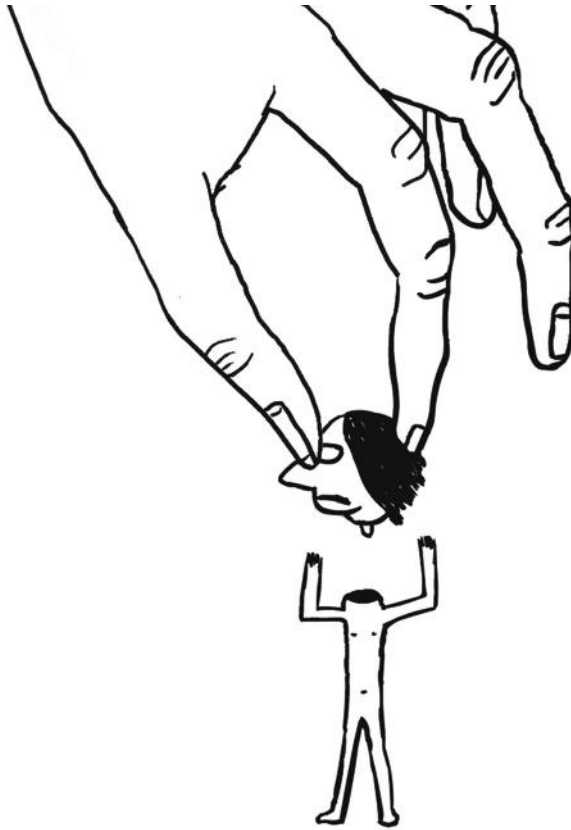


Figure 4.10

Still from *Who I Am and What I Want* (Dir. Chris Shepherd/David Shrigley). (Courtesy of Chris Shepherd/David Shrigley, ©2005.)

“What was great about that book for adapting was that it was all stories of one person. Most of his other books are like snapshots of time, vignettes; they’re all different moments, so they don’t have that narrative. I remember the first thing I did was scan all the pages in the book and put them in a timeline. What I ended up with came to something mad like 40 minutes, with no shape to it.”

The absence of a narrative in any strict, traditional sense was remedied by the addition of a framing device in a manner bearing some similarity to that of Magic Light’s *Grufallo* adaptations, though wildly different in terms of tone and audience, with the addition of scenes set in a forest in which the protagonist (voiced by natural-born odd-ball Kevin Eldon) is established as a societal outsider and woodland-dwelling hermit. In this context, the disconnected musings as presented in the original book are presented as remembrances of a life he has left behind. Despite maintaining the nonsensical nature of the narration’s array of nonsequiturs, the film effectively builds a structure for itself.

“It starts off in the woods and ends in the woods, to give the illusion that it has a story. Then when we did the animation, I drew the animatic all in Flash, really roughly and just

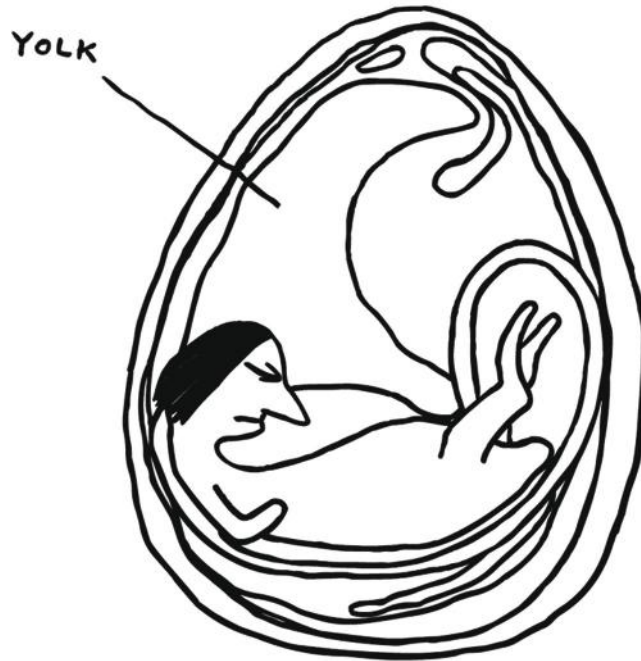


Figure 4.11

Still from *Who I Am and What I Want* (Dir. Chris Shepherd/David Shrigley). (Courtesy of Chris Shepherd/David Shrigley, ©2005.)



Figure 4.12

Still from *Who I Am and What I Want* (Dir. Chris Shepherd/David Shrigley). (Courtesy of Chris Shepherd/David Shrigley, ©2005.)

in my own style. Then I'd ask Dave, who was getting really megafamous then, and sort of superbusy, to give me some drawings of buildings or some trees, different things, street furniture. He'd give me pages of those, and then I just assembled it, a bit like Letraset, in the computer. That way of doing it worked really well because it meant he didn't have to draw the whole world."

With Chris taking the lead on the animation itself, David maintained an active involvement in the codirection of the film and the adaptation of the script.

"When we did the script, we did it together. I'd write and bounce it back to him; he'd come along to come up with ideas, do voices. We changed some things and created some great inversions on the film. There's a line where he says, 'I want to be in a cage with the lions and dress like a clown,' but I think it was different in the book; I think it was 'I want to be in a cage with clowns and dressed like a lion.' At the last minute, he said, 'I know, why don't we just swap it?' and it was much more surreal. It was a good collaboration because nobody was precious about it; we just got on with it."

The final film, an appealingly bizarre affair all at once filthy, violent, and curiously thoughtful, proved a major hit on the festival circuit, winning 13 major awards in its first year of release alone. In 2014, 9 years after its production, it also won the Filmmaker Grand Prix at Japan's esteemed Sapporo Film Festival, a further testament to its relevance and longevity.

Traveling in creative circles will generally lead to opportunities for collaboration, but a more proactive approach may be handy too. If the concept of applying your knowledge, skill, and passion for animation to an adaptation of a preexisting work is something that appeals, then it may be worth stepping outside of your comfort zone and reaching out to writers directly. Montreal-based animator Claire Blanchet's understated and haunting National Film Board of Canada short *The End of Pinky*, for example, began life as a film noir short story by Heather O'Neill that appeared in a magazine the director happened upon fortuitously one day. Instantly enamored of the writer's style of humor and feeling a connection to its evocative tone and use of familiar Montreal locations, Blanchet made contact with O'Neill. The eventual film was able to showcase the director's own sense of mood while complementing the original text, even featuring O'Neill as the film's narrator.

Writers' groups, literature festivals, meet-ups, and of course the Internet are all good facilitators for potential collaboration. At the risk of sounding drippy, it may very well be that making the effort and reaching out will become the catalyst for something special.



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5

The Beat of a Different Drum



Still from *Dub of a Preacherman*. (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2011.)

The composition, production, and performance of music are creative exercises not without their animation parallels. It's no surprise, then, that music and animation have so often made fine bedfellows. From the very dawn of animation throughout its golden age, music was often the thrust behind the early shorts and feature films of every major studio. From

Norman McLaren's work for the GPO and NFB to the musical sequences of The Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*, music has been an established linchpin of the animation world since long before the dawn of MTV. Once the concept of music videos became mainstream, animation was quickly integrated and, on occasion, propelled forward as a medium. While showing their age nowadays, early videos showcased exemplary animation techniques, such as rotoscoping for A-ha's *Take On Me* (Dir. Steve Barron, 1984), early computer-generated (CG) images in Dire Straits' *Money For Nothing* (Barron again, the following year), stop-motion in Michael Jackson's *Speed Demon* (Dir. Will Vinton, 1989), and the mixed-media masterwork of Peter Gabriel's *Sledgehammer* (Dir. Stephen R. Johnson, 1986), which depicted the singer alternately through live-action, Plasticine animation, and pixilation against a predominantly stop-motion backdrop, serving as a formative outing for the talents of Aardman and the Brothers Quay.

As time has gone by, the role of the music video as a promotional tool has hugely diminished in importance. With the nature of music sales a completely different beast than it was in the 1980s and 1990s, along with the oversaturation of music-based channels (their originator MTV having long succumbed to the lure of cheap 'n' cheerful "reality" shows making up the bulk of its schedules), music videos are no longer considered an indispensable branch of an artist's, band's, or album's advertising. They do, however, remain quite vital in the cultivation and preservation of a band's image, and the viral potential today's online outlets allow for is mutually beneficial to both musicians and filmmakers. Mainstream examples of modern animated music videos remain plentiful, outfits as diverse as Queens of the Stone Age, Radiohead, R.E.M., Daft Punk, U.N.C.L.E., and The White Stripes making up a mere fraction of those who've had their work represented through animation in some form or other, not to mention the entire branding of Damon Albarn's Gorillaz.

Alas, this isn't a history book you're holding (which is a bit of a shame for me as I'd rather love to bang on about this subject at tiresome length), though hopefully, the aforementioned helps to legitimize a music-oriented project as a tenable prospect for short-form animation.

Bristol-based studio Rumpus Animation began life as far back as 2007 in the way many studios do, as an assortment of hypothetical film ideas and character concepts discussed between animator Joe Wood and designer Seb Burnett. When the two officially began the company proper in 2010, there was a long road ahead as far as forging their brand and reputation.

One formative project that served as a valuable exercise in establishing the studio's identity was *Dub of a Preacherman*, a collaboration with DJ Count Skylarkin, a mutually beneficial exercise that also served to develop his own visual branding. The music video embraces some of Rumpus Animation's major strengths, a wide variety of quirky character designs coupled with short, endearing, loopable animations (a perfect fit for the up-tempo music), composited together to create a showy animated barroom scenario (Figure 5.1).

An issue to consider is that "independent," be it animation, music, or otherwise, tends to go hand in hand with nil budget. As Seb reasons, "Most record labels or indie bands who might want you to produce work for them as an indie studio are going to be broke as well. So unless you're working with big bands through an agency, it tends to have to be more of a labor of love."

"But it's the only one where they probably *can* pay you in exposure," adds Joe, in reference to the dubious lure most emerging creatives find themselves faced with when embarking on the first stage of their career. "It actually works sometimes, as opposed to lots of

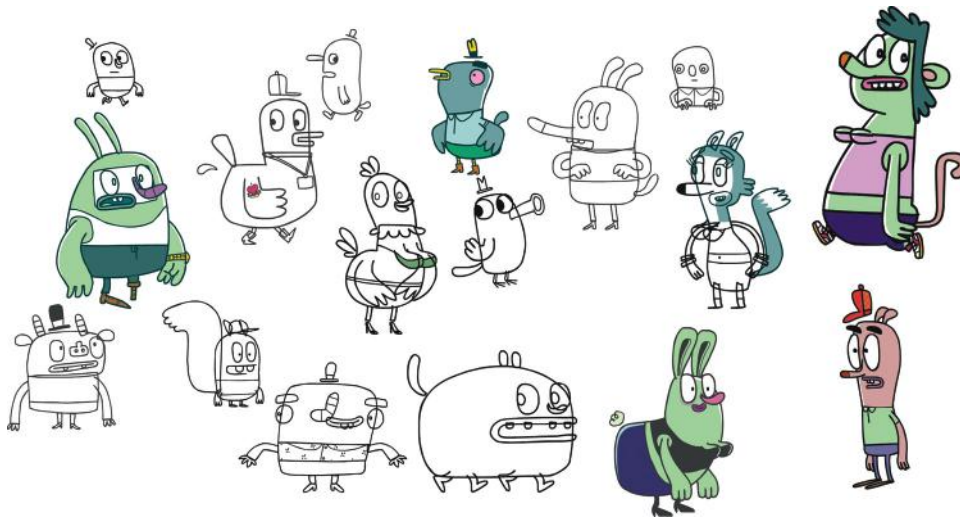


Figure 5.1

Dub of a Preacherman character designs. (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2011.)

projects that offer to ‘pay’ you in the exposure. At least with music videos, sometimes you can get quite a free reign to do what you want.”

As a means of getting the ball rolling for the studio itself, the advantages are fairly obvious. There may very well be a plethora of half-formed film ideas, character concepts, and vanity projects that come with establishing a studio’s identity, though without a focus for these creative energies, it’s likely that they won’t take flight. “Apart from having the musician chasing us all the time to make sure we’ve actually done it, all you need is the music and the animation, and it’s done. Our job is to make some cool stuff to go over this music, so it’s quite a nice thing to do. Although it took us a while to get it done, we were chased up quite a lot, which made us do it.”

“Because it was our first project, instead of doing something quite simple, we put as much as we could into it,” explains Seb. “The idea was to keep everything really simple, reuse, loops—that’s the thing with music videos; they’re sort of made for reusing visuals. We started enjoying the fact that we could put any character we wanted in there; it sort of mushroomed a bit.” The assortment of characters, a tradition that Joe and Seb enthuse is paramount to the Rumpus MO, regardless of medium, were amassed from sketchbooks, stalled projects, and pitches. The premise of the video itself uses simplicity to its advantage, with bar patrons and soul singers animated in a variety of dance loops. To Joe, this simple setup made the overall process “quite fun, because you can pretty much use anyone you like the look of, and they won’t be out of place in the film” (Figure 5.2).

“In fact, it was a chance to just do the funniest stuff we’d normally not make for a commercial film,” adds Seb. “We had a bit more free range. I think originally, it was set in the woods—I just like setting everything in the woods—it would be the same except at the start you would go down into an old tree trunk. For whatever reason, we decided to change it to a city; that way, it’s sort of based on an area in Oxford he does a lot of DJing in. We’re mostly interested in funny characters or funny stories. Whether that’s for a game or an



Figure 5.2

Artwork demonstrating the visual development of a sequence in *Dub of a Preacherman*. (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2011.)

animation or comics doesn't matter, as long as we're enjoying making something funny happen that hopefully people will enjoy—light relief, daft little characters falling over or pulling things out of their pockets in a funny way. It's always the story and characters that are the most interesting.”

Producing work for friends carries with it a diminished risk factor when compared to producing work for major clients, who are less accommodating about missed deadlines. Though it took longer than expected, it served as a ropes course in the realities of production that, as well as making their mark on the animation community, cemented their more disciplined approach when the commissions began.

The film and song both performed well, with the music video making the Annecy International Animation Festival official selection and the song receiving extended airplay from prominent UK DJ Craig Charles, leading to a significant boost in YouTube hits. Since then, Rumpus have dipped their toes in the waters of music video production with a follow-up Count Skylarkin video, *Dubplate Iko*, in collaboration with live-action director Miho Lomon in 2014, preceded by 2011's *Dresinen* for the Norwegian band Casiokids. Though the opportunity didn't offer a huge budgetary advantage, weighing up their own fondness for the song itself as well as the opportunity to appeal to an entirely new, international audience again proved vital to the company's visibility. Seb, who took the lead on the project creatively, looked at it as “a chance to experiment for the first time by combining stop-motion and Flash. So it's all cut-out characters arranged in Flash, then animated as if it were stop-motion, with real fingers. I'm still quite proud of that one because it looks quite different; it's still got identifiably Rumpus characters, but it looks quite different as a technique to what we've normally done, so that made it worth it.”

The chance to develop a technique that the studio most likely would not have happened on otherwise proved another advantage, with Seb drawing upon influences such as the 1977 Polish adaptation of Tove Jansson's *Moomins* series. “I had been playing around with ideas of how we could make it, and the song was a really good opportunity because they're Scandinavian and the sound of the music fit rather well with the imagery. That was probably one of our more successful projects because it was for a more established band.” The opportunity originally arose through the brother of a studio friend owning the independent record label the band was signed to, which makes a case for exploring all avenues of networking when they present themselves.

As with *Dub of a Preacherman*, Rumpus was afforded creative reign in lieu of a hefty budget, which, hand in hand with the exposure, made for a successful end result (Figure 5.3). This too makes its own case, that the circumstances under which monetary compensation need be strictly proportionate to the labor involved are not necessarily that cut and dry. Whether a studio or individual, we are all of us aware at some level of our own worth and the value that being associated with a certain project can bring. If a high enjoyment factor, genuine visibility that will lead to more regular work, and an excuse to try new approaches all align, then accepting the odd honorarium or stipend now and again will not grind our careers to a standstill, so long as they can be time-managed effectively.

“Definitely the indie stuff we've done, like the music videos, have led to getting some work in,” Seb reflects. “Then when you're pitching work as well, you can show stuff you've made to prospective clients. It just shows that you're making work as well. We try and keep Rumpus so that funny animation comes first. Occasionally, we do quite a lot of work where there's no humor involved whatsoever, but they've seen some of our work and realized,



Figure 5.3

Still from *Dub of a Preacherman*. (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2011.)

technically, we can animate, but the project will be in a completely different style than what we usually do. We work with different illustrators as well; I've got constant freelancers coming in; it's quite a flexible way of working, but the basis of it all is the humor, basically.”

“We've tried to keep a balance doing our own little experiments, and as visual language changes and different things become fashionable, new techniques emerge. You need to keep trying to experiment with different approaches to different films, so you're not just 'that' studio with 'that' style.”

Going Solo

The ways in which music and animation can complement each other need not even be dependent on collaboration, as plenty of animators with a musical bent have demonstrated.

There is clearly a place for music and its potential to take hold of an audience in the world of web-based animation (an area we shall explore in more depth in the following chapter). The viral success of self-propelling online personalities such as Jonti Picking, a prolific producer of online content under the moniker Weebl, is often peppered with animated musical numbers (Figure 5.4).

The roots of Jonti's enthusiasm for bringing music and visuals together began before his first major strides in the world of design and animation. He took a music tech course, which introduced him to Macromedia Director (an early incarnation of Adobe Director), which ran alongside Flash in the development of interactive CD-ROMs, which, at the time, were quite prevalent.

“Music was hugely important to me,” Jonti recalls, “until I became sort of disenfranchised by the whole music scene. Eventually, I decided to write tunes to amuse myself and try to annoy other people, which made it all fun again. Songs like *Badgers*^{*} and *Scampi*[†]

^{*} <http://weebls-stuff.com/songs/badgers/>

[†] <http://weebls-stuff.com/songs/scampi/>



Figure 5.4

Narwhals—a viral phenomenon. (Courtesy of Weebl's Stuff, ©2009.)

use the most obnoxious melodies and sounds possible, so that they are really hammered into the brain.”

Said clips, as well as a smorgasbord of others, including *Narwhals*,* *Magical Trevor*,† and *Kenya*,‡ serve less as music videos than as hook-centric microshorts that take advantage of their Flash SWF file format to play on a perpetual loop. As with many of Weebl's viral companions from the earlier days of webtoons, they use simple visual concepts, oftentimes random and surreal, combined with musical earworms that linger with their audiences for days. While these have frequently proved extremely popular, racking up millions of views, Jonti has been keen to evolve and embrace the broader role music can play in his work. More recent song-oriented projects include Savlonic, a series of animated music videos for a faux-electro band that has quickly developed a considerable fan base in its own right, with successful crowdfunding campaigns ensuring the professional production of their studio albums (Figure 5.5).

“As I've gone along, the technology and equipment I've been able to buy has improved, so it's been nice to dabble with slightly more sensible stuff. Hence Savlonic, which will possibly become a proper, full-on electro band. It was meant to parody electro bands, but their lyrics became as daft as ours. There's not much point in parodying something that's become a parody of itself anyway, so we may as well write proper music.

“People attach themselves to tunes; they're easy to share and understand; straight away, music videos are engrained on our psyche. You can come back to them as well; with a comedy script, obviously, with each viewing, the comedy will be less and less, generally, whereas with music, you can get the comedy element and then go back and watch it for the tune because that's stuck in your head. I think that's why music is so successful with animation. It's rewatchable.”

* <http://weebls-stuff.com/songs/Narwhals/>

† <http://weebls-stuff.com/songs/magical+trevor/>

‡ <http://weebls-stuff.com/songs/kenya/>



Figure 5.5

Still from Savlonic music video *The Driver*. (Courtesy of Weebl's Stuff, ©2012.)

Even when dealing with the supershort, absurdist subsection of music-driven animation, there are certain disciplines that differ from standard webtoon production. “You don’t generally have a script to begin with, so the tune very much drives what’s going to happen. With a script you’ll write it, then you’ll do the audio, then you’ll animate everything to the script and add background music last, so for music videos, it’s sort of the reverse of that. It means you can do things quite quickly as well, which, when dealing with online content, is a bonus.”

Branching Out

Beyond reinforcing one’s independent career, as with Rumpus and Weebl’s Stuff, music videos are also capable of allowing individual creatives on the periphery of animation to proliferate and take the plunge. Illustrator Tony Johnson, having traditionally trained as a fine art sculptor, took his first steps into the animation world as a hobbyist.

“I started combining film with animation in the early 2000s, which slowly progressed into just straight animation, mainly because of budgets, things like getting camera crews together. Although it is time-expensive, you don’t have to have a huge budget with animation. I could still keep creating in my bedroom and just plough on, so it kind of stemmed from there. I taught myself through online tutorials; I was quick to pick up the software side of things and could already edit, so it was another step further to learn about animation timing and theory. It was kind of a natural progression because the same sort of elements you get with editing transpose quite cleanly over to animation.”

Following a modestly received, low-key animated music clip for indie artist Benbo in which Tony displayed a sound comprehension of stripped-down After Effects animation, musician Holly Dearden approached Tony with an animated music video concept for “Marzipan Reindeer,” a song by her band Holly and the Wolf (Figure 5.6).*

* <http://hollyandthewolf.com/>



Figure 5.6

Still from *Marzipan Reindeer* (Dir. Tony Johnson). (Courtesy Tony Johnson, ©2012.)

“They essentially just wanted to release a Christmas single, so it was a case of meeting up with them and chatting through their ideas. They wanted something that was kind of fairytale-esque, and I had been looking quite a lot at Russian and Czech animation around that time: cutout animation, Jiří Trnka, *The Merry Circus*, things like that. I was trying to think of a way to knock this video out quite quickly and economically without having to hand-draw everything, which is how the style came about, trying to capture that sort of fairytale look along with retro puppet animation while keeping everything on budget, so it wouldn’t take too long.”

The mutually beneficial nature of such collaboration suited both the needs of the band’s expanding visual identity and Tony’s own impulse to further develop his animation skill set. Beyond an initial meeting, Tony was given largely free reign over the visual concepts and execution (Figure 5.7).

“The one meeting I had with them was just talking over what the music was about and what they could picture it being. There was this whole story embedded underneath the events of the video, as a bit of a subtext for her, one which the audience probably wouldn’t read but that she can see quite clearly. On the surface, however, she wanted things reminiscent of *Little Red Riding Hood* with a bit of an edge to it. I went away; wrote them a one-page treatment outlining everything; and sent it back along with a few sketches, some character mock-ups and a few style ideas (Figure 5.8). I sent it to them as a little package and then just kept in contact with them via e-mail. As I progressed through it, I kept sending them updates so they could see where I was and I could get a temperature of what they thought about it.”

Production proper on even an independent music video carries with it some early essential considerations. To get the project delivered on time and within budget, Tony developed a working process formed largely by his own intuition while partly emulating established production pipelines.

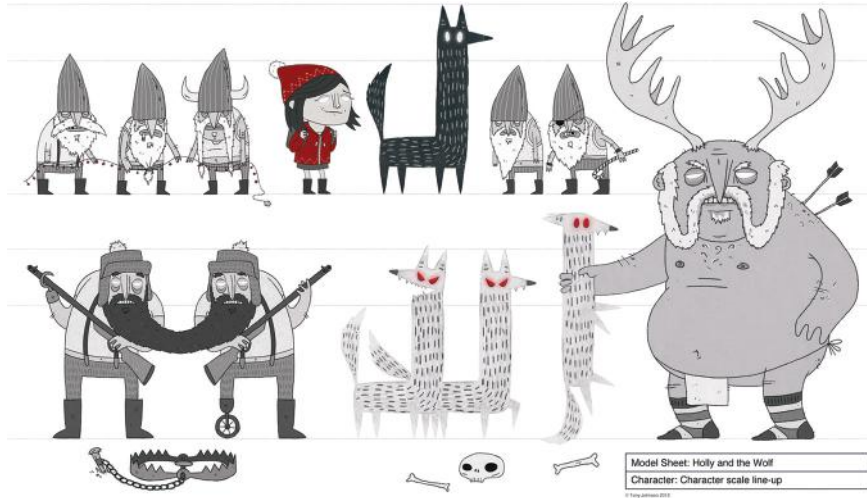


Figure 5.7

Marzipan Reindeer—character designs scale sheet. (Courtesy of Tony Johnson, ©2012.)

“I started with the treatment. If you don’t nail it in the treatment, then you’re just going to run into problems. From there, I fleshed it out into a larger script, which is great, but I find in short form, a script is very difficult to be able to gauge timing in animation, especially when you’re working very closely to music. A lot of what you write in a script often has to get dumped for timing reasons, so you have to be quite concise; the narrative can’t be too complex; you have to strip it down quite a lot. Once the script is in place, then I try and do an animatic, working on character designs alongside it. I think a lot of people go into doing the design side of things first, before going into animatics, but I tend to do them parallel. It’s perhaps not the best way to work, and it may take me longer than it should do, but it’s a way I prefer to work; it just seems more organic to me. Maybe that will change in the future.

“The next step is to get all the timing right with the music, which should at least be delivered as a temp track by then so the timing is exact. Once that’s nailed down, I’d break the video down into shots. I had a big board on the wall that took over my living room for a while, lots of sticky notes with each shot laid out, along with a shot list. As I did each shot, I could just cross it off as I went, so I could visually see on the wall how things were progressing. It’s a good way to work because you can see how much you’ve got to go, as well as which scenes made use of the same effect or the same backgrounds. You certainly might see issues with continuity, so it can be a bit of a time-saver in that way; if there are three or four shots with the same background, then they can all be comped and worked on together. Then it was just a case of getting the final mix, editing, and sound put on and exported in all the different formats. There’s lots of bits in between, but that’s the essence of it.”

When it comes to scripted, narrative animation, there’s realistically very little margin for improvisation along the way. So much of the movement, design, and overall tone will be set down in preproduction to the point where any derivation will potentially



Figure 5.8

Marzipan Reindeer—storyboard/shot list. (Courtesy of Tony Johnson.)

create problems, if not throw things out of whack completely. Music videos can potentially be a little looser for creative experimentation, while benefiting from an upkeep of self-discipline and stylistic consistency.

“I think the biggest challenge is getting it tonally right, because although it was a fairytale story, a quite lighthearted Christmas tune, they wanted this little edge to it. Even when getting the timing stuff really nailed down, it’s the tone which is the thing that can change. You might find that in the animatic, because they’re still shots, certain movements actually take longer than you expected them to, or they don’t play well at the same pace as the animatic. Sometimes, you have to be brutal in terms of cutting it down even further or combining shots, so there’s still an element of fluidity to that animatic. It’s like a road map; it serves as a rough guide, but it doesn’t point out all the challenges and problems you’re going to face. It’s only when you’ve finally got everything edited together and the music’s there that you start to notice whether shots don’t match properly or the timing feels off, or if it slows somewhere and doesn’t build in the right place. So there’s always an element of trying to rebalance all the elements of the project.”

With a sound knowledge of timing and forethought in design, character animation can be approached economically without looking “cheap.” Using a combination of assets for each character, some with rotational pivot points, others rigged using the After Effects puppet pin tool, Tony applies swift, fluid movement to the characters throughout, infusing them with life and character despite being comprised of very few drawn elements (Figure 5.9).

“Probably about 65%–70% of the character work was puppet animation. Then I would say maybe 15% would have been a little bit of the After Effects puppet tool, just fudging things around a little bit, with the rest hand-drawn. There are a few effects as well, for example, the snow was actually just After Effects particles. While I try to keep it mostly puppet animation, there are times when traditional animation—or at least drawing a few frames that you could whip through really quickly to give that illusion of drawn animation—can actually be a lot faster. Basically, every decision was always an economic one” (Figure 5.10).

The other major challenge that Tony found himself working against was time management. “It was quite involved for the time I had, which was 3 months working alone, part-time, alongside a full-time job, so quite an intensive period. That and possibly the render time—not having a very fast computer at the time, there were often shots that, although they look quite simple and flat, have a lot going on in them, and it could sometimes take days to render a single shot! Fortunately, I’ve gotten a faster computer now, but when you’re looking at a 2-day render, planning is the key. Whatever time you’ve got, it’s a matter of knowing quite clearly what you have to do and hitting those key markers all the way through a project so you know whether you’re ahead or behind. Always build some leeway into your plan, because you’re going to need it. It always takes longer than you expect.”

The seasonal nature of the story has infused in it some extra longevity, inasmuch as the holiday season inevitably leads to a boost in views, posts, and shares. Perhaps ironically, the video’s online and festival success has led to more of an influx of illustration-based work than animation, although the positive experience of the project has kindled more enthusiasm in Tony for animated personal projects. From the perspective of the band themselves, the collaborative effort was a gambit that paid off.

“They’re very happy with it; it’s been their most successful so far. They’ve had a lot of live-action videos and have said that there’s something about animation that seems to



Model Sheet: Holly and the Wolf
Character: Holly - Character Turnaround



Figure 5.9

Marzipan Reindeer—“Holly” character turnaround and assets. (Courtesy of Tony Johnson, ©2012.)

have a lot more longevity and stands out more. There are lots of incredible live-action videos out there, but there are also quite a lot which are generic. With animation, even if it’s not perfectly executed or really well animated, there’s just something very graphic about it that just seems to stand out a little bit more. So I think the music video helped push their sales and prominence a little bit more than their past videos.”

From Scratch

Another virtue of collaboration, in a manner not dissimilar from that explored in [Chapter 4](#), would be one in which a piece of music is not only the basis of an animated short but created specifically for it. A project preceding her success with *Bottle* and *Move Mountain* saw Kirsten Lepore joining forces with fellow undergraduate, animator and songwriter Garrett Michael Davis.

The two met during their time at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), when Kirsten was working in the experimental animation department and Garrett in interdisciplinary sculpture. Over time, they would begin a series of creative collaborations, Kirsten providing ideas and concepts to prompt improvisational monologues and character performances from Garrett. In their senior year, finding themselves both studying

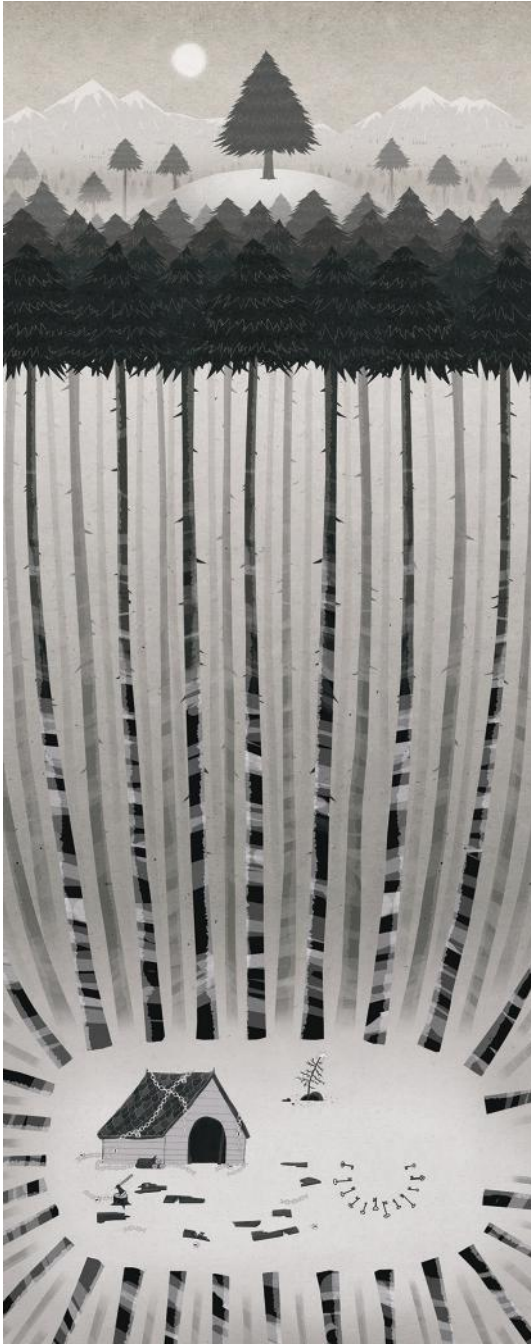


Figure 5.10

Marzipan Reindeer—opening shot background art. (Courtesy of Tony Johnson, ©2012.)

animation, they decided to work together on their final project, having composed a piece of music originally titled *The Spider Song*, in which a frightened boy entreats his father to dispatch a spider and is instead met with a series of increasingly surreal and existential hypotheticals (Figure 5.11).

“The spider song was written well before we had film in mind,” confirms Garrett. “I wrote it while spending a summer in Colorado, working in the gift shop of a white-water rafting company and trying to write songs. Lacking ideas, I asked my girlfriend at the time what I should write a song about, and she suggested a girl asking her Dad to kill a spider in her room. Obviously, it became about a little boy, but the seed of the idea came from her; hence, she’s thanked in the credits.”

Deciding to animate a video for it, the two collaborated on the retitled *Story from North America*, originally intending to professionally rerecord the song but ultimately preferring the raw, hastily recorded demo version (Figures 5.12 through 5.14).

“It was the natural preference. I recorded it on my Nikon Coolpix digital camera that had an audio recording function. I recorded it very soon after writing the song, and since at that point, I had not yet memorized the lyrics, the page turn that got animated as the narrator turning the page in a barren field was me turning the page of my notebook as I read the lyrics. Aesthetically though, recording in such a low-fi way was just how I liked to do things then, and still do now, though that process has evolved quite a bit.

“I’m not impressed by the technical slickness which is so idolized at the moment (and was back in 2007 as well). We did rerecord the song with an extra guitar in a sound booth, and it was just so obvious that the original version was better. On this point, I also must mention that having a finished audio track like this to work with is a dream come true. There is no need to think about sound effects if you don’t want to, as the skeleton of the timing is already present. Working with music has such a rich history in animation, and having a set audio track to animate to, whichever way it has been generated, simplifies things a lot. It gives you set limits within which to explore, makes a lot of decisions for you at the outset so you have more time and energy to go wild generating ideas of how to fill it.”

Though Kirsten contributed, mainly insofar as the animation of the spider itself and the ever-beseeking child tormented by it, obligations toward her own production and thesis meant that Garrett ultimately took the lead on the visuals, though the idea generation behind them harkened back to their earlier, improvisational collaborations.

“I animated all of the Dad’s parts, and things like the narrator, the devil in the cloud of smoke in the kid’s room, the spider family blessing their feast, the scene where the kid has a glass of blood on his nightstand, the spider at the end. Our working dynamic was very natural and effortless. For any given line of the song, we’d just say, ‘What should this be?’ We would think of ideas, decide on one, and go do it. We both understood each other’s sense of humor intuitively, so it just flowed.”

“Garrett did most of the animation and made most of the design decisions on the film,” Kirsten assures. “We definitely approached the visualization in a very unique way where we wouldn’t plan too far ahead, but instead meet, assign each other a verse, loosely figure out what we think we’d animate for our respective verses, and then go off and animate separately. We never boarded anything; the animation itself was relatively stream of consciousness. When we’d meet back up, it was always exciting to show the other person what we had animated. Since we had not pencil-tested, it felt like Christmas every time we shot a scene because we were seeing our finished animation for the first time.”

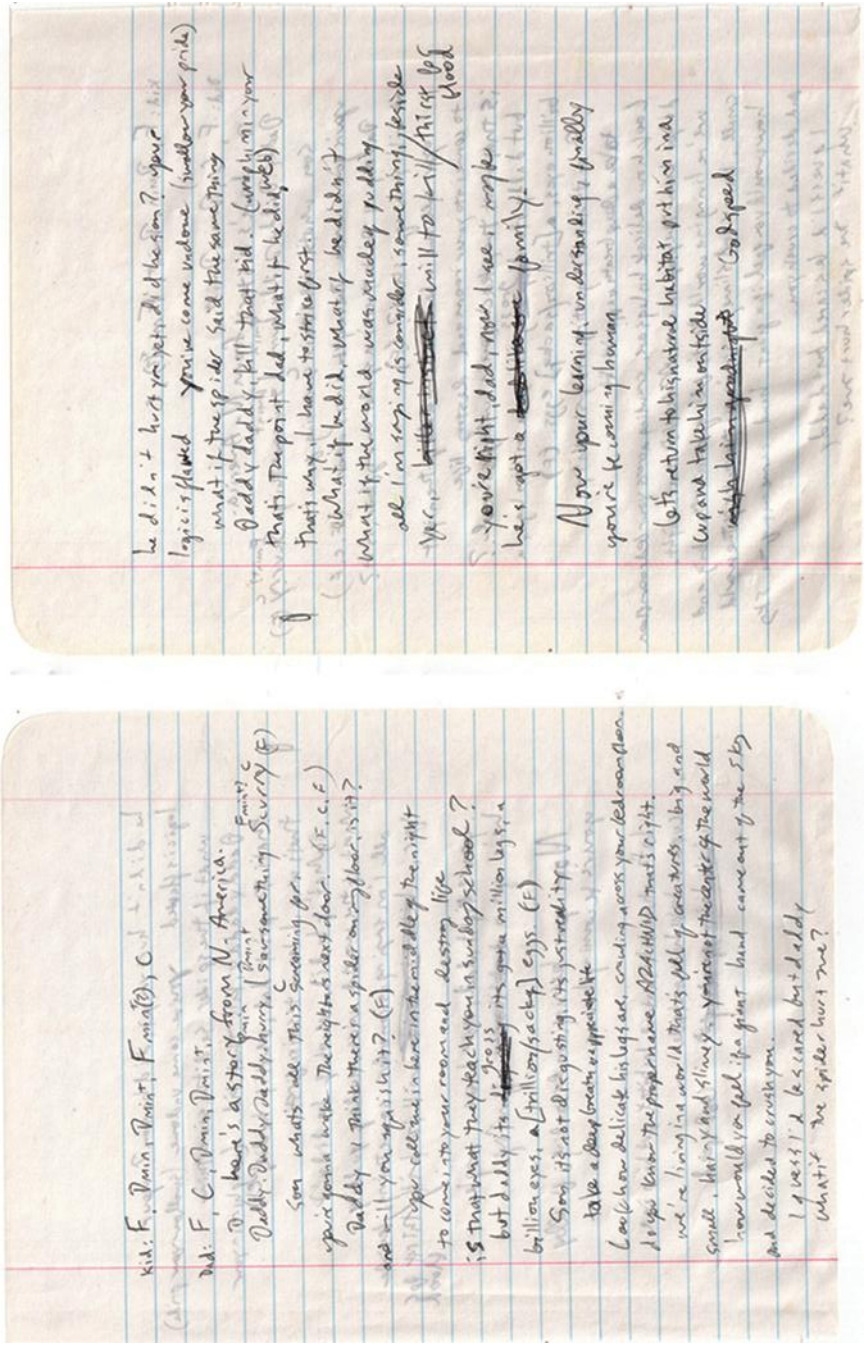


Figure 5.11 Original lyrics for The Spider Song by Garrett Michael Davis. (Courtesy of Garrett Michael Davis.)

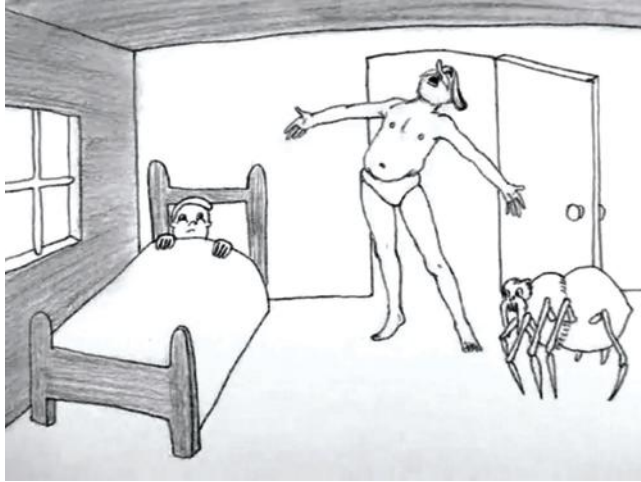


Figure 5.12

Still from *Story from North America* (Dir. Garrett Michael Davis/Kirsten Lepore). (Courtesy of Garrett Davis/Kirsten Lepore, ©2007.)

This sustained commitment and fondness for the process is what Garrett credits for the success of what, on its surface, might not be the most accessible of films. Through the scratchy designs and fuzzy audio, a film with no small amount of appeal shines through, something that never would have happened without their combined forces.

“It was also just the friendship and camaraderie of it,” says Garrett. “Staying up all night in Kirsten’s apartment drawing and then her cooking up some ingenious meal out



Figure 5.13

Still from *Story from North America* (Dir. Garrett Michael Davis/Kirsten Lepore). (Courtesy of Garrett Davis/Kirsten Lepore, ©2007.)

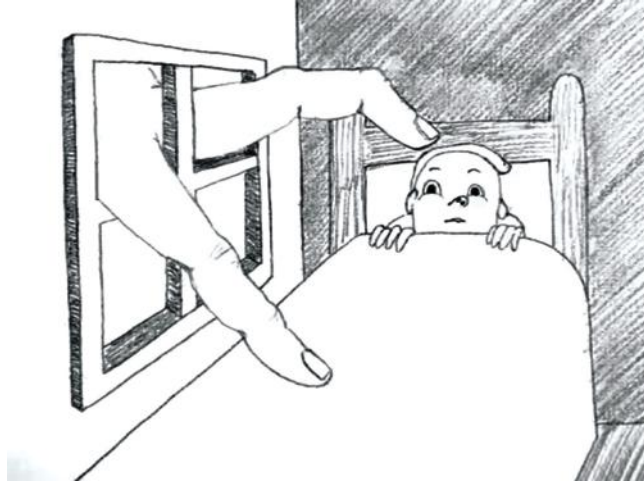


Figure 5.14

Still from *Story from North America* (Dir. Garrett Michael Davis/Kirsten Lepore). (Courtesy of Garrett Davis/Kirsten Lepore, ©2007.)

of the scraps she had in her kitchen. Making the rounds of the computer labs, taking paper out of the school printers to draw it on, and bringing giant stacks to this one particular security desk that had a three-hole punch that would punch about a hundred sheets at a time.”

Alongside these rituals was an overall rejection of how “best” to approach the production pipeline, instead opting to wing it without tests or storyboards. Working to a primitive dope sheet in Flash for timing reference, the pair wound up working straight-ahead for the most part.

“Our classmates were completely shocked that we didn’t storyboard it. We didn’t care about the accepted way of doing things. We found those methods stiff and boring, an unnecessary layer of tedium heaped onto the already nearly unbearable tediousness of the animation process itself. While everyone was busy imitating those who had influenced them by drawing off-brand anime, we were doing our own thing.”

“I think the spider with the knife up to the kid’s throat is one of my favorite of Kirsten’s contributions. It’s hard to say, people always ask who did this, who did that, but really it all blends together when the collaboration is successful, and it doesn’t matter who did what. I guess it matters to other people cause they are curious and they always ask, but I don’t really care as long as the final product is good. And honestly, with animation, when it’s done, you’re just glad that it’s over!”

Certainly, amongst Kirsten Lepore’s work, oftentimes focused on tactile stop-motion projects and Flash-based 2-D, *Story of North America* stands out as unique, again attributed to Garrett’s taking the lead on the look of the film. “Although this was probably because I was trying more to match Garrett’s style of drawing. I really had only done 2-D/drawn animation up until that point. *Sweet Dreams* was pretty much my first stop-motion film. We also decided from the beginning that we wanted *Story from North America* to remain a fun, super loose project where we resolved never to pencil-test anything, but

instead to embrace all the weirdness and shiftiness that came naturally. It was such a wonderful, liberating way to work.”

Completed in 2007 during their senior year, the film’s ensuing viral success validates the time spent on it as a university side project. Despite it being mostly Garrett’s vision, the most-viewed versions of the film have been uploaded to Kirsten’s YouTube and Vimeo channels, a decision made for pragmatic reasons, chiefly that Garrett had neither of his own at the time.

“I was living in a converted Airstream trailer inside a warehouse in Philadelphia for \$140 a month, working as a furniture mover and a slough of other weird jobs. Kirsten was building her freelance career and ‘had her stuff together’ way more so than I did.” Though this has generated a modicum of confusion amongst audiences, as stated earlier by Garrett, the film stands up either way. “The overall audience response has been overwhelmingly positive. I’ve received loads of nice messages from people who’ve enjoyed the film, and it’s been a point of connection with so many people I’ve met in the animation world in Los Angeles.” The visibility of the film would also help Garrett secure freelance commissions and festival exposure the world over.

“It usually gets interpreted as a political statement, though it was not consciously intended to be one. Overall, I think what people respond to is its *rock and roll* spirit.” The film would also eventually be followed up by *Story From South America*, though the alternate funding circumstances (it being commissioned for Fox’s Animation Domination HD late-night programming block) and absence of Kirsten’s input would make both production of the film and the end result quite a different beast, as we’ll learn in [Chapter 9](#).

Playing with the Majors

When it comes to independent animation figurehead Bill Plympton, music videos make up a percentage of his output and help him fund his more independent work. Though these are more often than not commissioned and not entirely “independent” by some classifications of the term (see [Chapter 1](#)), the independent *spirit* of his style and creative approach has become, over the years, a valued commodity to a diverse array of mainstream artists, from Kanye West to “Weird Al” Yankovic. As such, his approach remains applicable to those approaching their own indie music video.

“I think that the union of music and animation is one of the great duets of culture; putting the two together is always beautiful. I mean, look at some of the old Fleischer Brothers films with Cab Calloway. *Fantasia* of course is another great example of the union of music and animation. It’s just a fun art form for me. There’s a lot more freedom and a lot more chance for experimentation. There’s not necessarily a story you’ll have to deal with, and it’s a lot of fun creating images that are really fascinating, interesting, and hopefully, compelling. Sometimes the money’s great, sometimes the money’s not so good, but more than anything, you’ve got to love music.”

From the earliest days of Bill’s work, this passion has been evident, most notably in *Your Face*. The film, made in 1987 to an original song by Maureen McElheron, introduced the world to his capacity for hypnagogic insanity, as a well-dressed man simplistically lip-syncs the song’s eerily slowed-down lyrics while his face melts, contorts, and metamorphoses throughout. The wide-reaching effect of Bill’s striking imagery extended to Kanye West, who, in late 2005, eschewed the live-action video Michel Gondry had directed for the song *Heard ‘Em Say* in favor of an animated interpretation from Bill. Shortly afterward, Bill was

recruited as one of several prominent animators to direct a video for Weird Al Yankovic's twelfth studio album *Straight Outta Lynwood*. Bill's work animating the album's closing track *Don't Download This Song* stood alongside that of the likes of John Kricfalusi, Jim Blashfield, and Doug Bresler, who also directed videos for the album package.

"Kanye West was very hands-on; in fact, he came to my studio for 2 days and actually looked over my shoulder while I was drawing. He definitely has certain ideas, and they're great ideas. He's a very smart, talented guy, and he's very visual, whereas other people like Weird Al Yankovic are much more easygoing to work with. Al doesn't need to see the storyboards; he just wants to see it when it's finished." Bill was brought on board again with Al's 2011 follow-up *Alpocalypse*, to direct and animate the video for *TMZ* (a parody of Taylor Swift's *You Belong with Me*, the new lyrics and video depicting the hounding of an unsuspecting celebrity desperately trying to avoid the titular website's notorious paparazzi). "I also did one for Joe Cartoon, the guy who does *Frog in a Blender*. He has a wonderful album out and asked me to do a music video for one of his songs, which was a lot of freedom; it was really fun.

"There was another one I did called *Mexican Stand-Off* by Parsons Brown from the Netherlands, a cowboy-themed one. I really had fun doing the cowboys because I'd loved to draw them since I was a kid, so I sort of developed a whole new side with that."

Bill's experience on this particular video proved to be an informative new creative direction. Approaching the animation entirely using ballpoint pen, something he had never tried with animation before, the process and overall look of the end result inspired him to apply a similar approach to a subsequent independent short. In 2013, *Drunken than a Skunk* is an animated poem created during the last year of production of his feature film *Cheatin'* (see [Chapter 8](#)), mainly with the (successful) aim of inclusion at that year's Annecy festival. The film is visually reminiscent of *Mexican Stand-Off*, also adopting the ballpoint pen look. Previously, Bill had used the opportunity of creating *Heard 'Em Say* to take his style in a more extreme direction than he had before, using highly caricatured proportions and ambitious approaches to layout. This was an approach that ultimately determined the overall aesthetic of *Cheatin'*, a film that might have had an entirely different tone and comedic sensibility otherwise. These further serve as a testament to the value of taking on different creative projects for the sake of one's own artistic direction, and music videos have a demonstrable ability to give artists an outlet for experimentation they may not find elsewhere.

Here we have looked at how songs themselves, from chart hits to hastily recorded indie offerings, can serve as a basis for an animated music video. This is, of course, quite a different practice than an animated short that uses a musical score as its thrust, something we will explore more in [Chapter 21](#). Before then, however, let's venture into one of independent animation's more anarchic arenas, the Internet, and consider how viable an option it remains so many years since the birth of the online webisode.

6

Going Webisodic



Still from *Carpark* (Dir. Ant Blades). (Courtesy of Ant Blades/Birdbox Studio, ©2013.)

It is a sobering thought to look back and see how swiftly web culture of all varieties has blown up over the past couple of decades. Humankind can barely get anything done for the glut of vlogs, cute animal clips, video game playthroughs, and autonomous sensory meridian response (whispering, ostensibly) videos out there. It may seem a distant

memory now, but the sheer quantity of today's procrastination bait was not always within such easy reach, calling to us like a siren song from our smartphones and minimized browser windows. As most of you reading this are probably aware, it is animation in its most independent form that started that particular ball rolling.

In many respects, we live in a very different world from that of the dawn of animation on the web. Video content and the Internet were rarely a comfortable pairing, short MOV clips taking up *entire megabytes* of hard disk space, provided that one's household dial-up connection had the fortitude to survive the hours-long download process. The concept of streaming high-definition (HD) content was so far out of the general public's grasp that the very phrase "streaming HD content" most likely wouldn't even have made sense to anyone who heard it. By the late 1990s, however, several enterprising creatives began taking advantage of a fortunate loophole facilitated by both the possibilities of creating animation, however rudimentary, in a program called Macromedia Flash. Said loophole was the software's ability to export its projects with small enough file sizes to be watched online with relative ease. The mechanics of the hows and whys are surely well known to anyone who knows their vectors from their bitmaps (which I'm cautiously optimistic includes anyone who is reading this). An entire subculture was born, in a semilawless online world where broadcast regulations had no authority and content could be as provocative, daring, and gratuitous as their creators desired. Though originally leaning toward juvenilia, some of the Internet's most significant webtoon pioneers got their start through a mix of Flash-animated animal misfortune and vaguely risqué celebrity impersonations. Certainly one of the more entrepreneurial-minded of this first wave was John Kricfalusi, who helmed several online, Flash-animated properties from 1997 onward, following his rise to fame as the creator of the revolutionary-yet-troubled *Ren & Stimpy Show* near the beginning of the decade. Making use of characters he'd retained the rights to following his much-documented dismissal from his own show, new series such as *The Goddamn George Liquor Program* (1997) were ambitious ahead of their time and called for a particularly labor-intensive approach:

"We had a really elaborate system when we were first doing the Flash cartoons," Kricfalusi recalls, speaking to *Skwigly* in 2012. (We) drew everything in pencil, inked it, but once we turned it into vector art, it would destroy the lines, make them look weird. So we had to add a step called *optimization* where I had a whole army of people who would take the screwed-up vector lines and move those little points around to make it look like the original. That was expensive and time-consuming—and irritating—but I don't have that problem anymore. The (Toon Boom) brush is so good, it eliminates all the stages in between the pencil line and the inking. Not only is it faster; it looks better."

In a manner similar to how *Ren and Stimpy* had an undeniable ripple effect on the landscape of contemporary animation culture, paving the way for shows that would enjoy more success, it was this degree of early trial and error that laid the groundwork—and opened the floodgates—for an animation revolution, one that has evolved and incorporated itself into the cultural mainstream.

Yet the independent roots of this relatively new approach to animation have always remained, and with the advent of social media and influx of platforms through which to showcase original, self-made content, the potential for profitability is stronger than it has ever been. To get a clear sense of how this corner of the independent animation world has developed, it is worth looking at webtoon creators who have consistently produced original content to this day, forging entire careers out of it.

A Life in Webtoons

Having begun his career as an interactive developer at AMX London, Jonti Picking mainly worked on Flash development for blue-collar clients until the dot-com bubble burst at the start of the millennium (Figure 6.1). In the ensuing lull, Jonti took to using Flash for his own purposes, animating cartoons for the web, initially through the website B3TA. At this point, the phenomenon was slowly building serious momentum.

“There was Joe Cartoon’s *Frog in a Blender*, you had Joel Veitch of Rather Good doing his dancing kittens and *Homestar Runner*, who were fantastic and still are. There were loads of Newgrounds people obviously, using their horrible speech synthesis to do stuff. Newgrounds was big noise back then. It was definitely a more creative environment.”

Starting with small, quirky GIFs, Jonti soon graduated to using Flash for web shorts that would accommodate the limitations of most household Internet capabilities. With most of the public connecting to the web with 56k or 28k modems, even the small file sizes of Flash cartoons could prove taxing to people’s connections. In creating his own animated characters, Jonti opted to bypass this concern as much as he could through sheer minimalism, creating the duo *Weebl and Bob* as a consequence.

“Obviously, the simpler the shape, the smaller the file size. The sound was designed around short little music loops and snippets of speech to try and keep everything as tiny as possible, which just about worked.”

Whether or not the asset-light approach made the cartoon easier to stream, its immense audience reaction when it debuted in June of 2002 was a clear indication of the mileage in



Figure 6.1

Jonti Picking, AKA Weebl. (Courtesy of the artist.)

the characters. Cemented by a 2-month stint producing *Weebl and Bob* shorts for MTV, Jonti quit his day job and used the funds to host his work on his own site, *Weebl's Stuff* (Figure 6.2). Since then his output has extended to multiple series, with a variety of writers and animators to add in extra dynamic visual range. As for what grabbed the attention of the public initially,

“It’s really hard to say. I think it’s that there is a lot of catchphrase-oriented material, easily quotable lines and such. The fact it had quirky music choices I guess helped it along, that it was very simple and iconographic, so that you knew instantly what it was. Ambient comedy was quite big at that point as well, and looking back on the early *Weebl and Bob* shorts, there were massive pauses between each line. It had this weird flow to it that wasn’t really seen, which I think helped.”

Having taken on corporate work alongside his web-based output, Jonti has a firm concept of how web-based production differs from the more business-driven animation industries.

“It’s very improvisational, though if it’s scripted, then obviously, that will give some direction. We tend not to bother with animatics, because if you’re making Flash video correctly, it should be done in a way where you can make changes fairly quickly. I like the improvisational approach because people often bring their own approach, their own style or timing, which is why I like to pick certain animators over others.

“Generally, I’ll do a callout for animators via social media. People will send their stuff, link me up to a few of their videos, and if I like the style, then we’ll chat more on e-mail. I generally give them one short test animation, a tune or a short script, to see what they would do with it. This gives a better idea of what their sensibilities are, because I like to bring people on for their methods as well. I don’t force them down a specific route unless it has to look or be a certain way; generally I think it’s nice to mix it up. I like the sense of

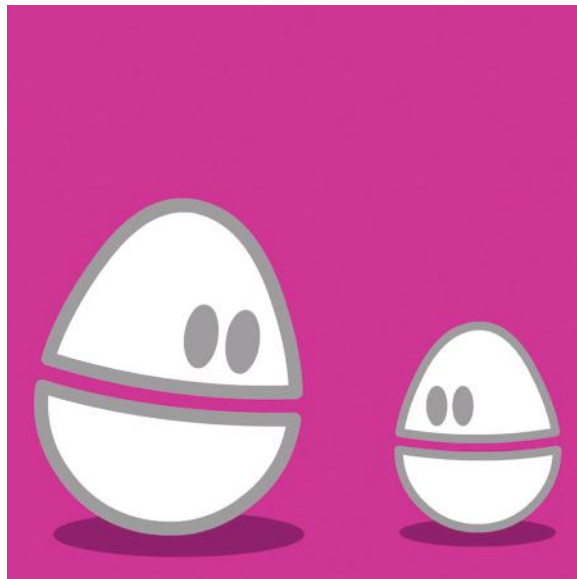


Figure 6.2

Online animation superstars “Weebl” and “Bob.” (Courtesy of Weebl’s Stuff.)

community; I can link to their other work; it's important to me that people get to appreciate them for who they are rather than what I've made them do.

"A lot of the mistakes that people working in Flash will make is to put everything on one layer or timeline. It makes things a lot easier to break everything down into layers so you can change anything within the project really quickly. I'll spend the extra time setting things up, building the asset library, and then I can change assets on the fly as and when I need to. I think that's the best way of doing it, especially if you're doing advertising work, where the client will often do rewrites. You don't want to lose months of work when you can get it right in 2 hours. So I'm very much about that; just build your assets, then animate, then change as need be."

Different Worlds

While cult phenomena like David Firth's *Salad Fingers* (2004–2013) would occupy very insular universes and appeal to very specific—though large—audiences, Mike and Matt Chapman's ongoing *Homestar Runner* (2000–2009, later to resume in 2014) is a prime example of how one main series can expand into different narrative strands. One of the crucial audience draws the series maintained was the expansiveness of its universe and the Chapman brothers' intuitive impulse to spin off strong concepts into their own series, ultimately creating metaphysical universes within universes that fans were hugely receptive to. Chief amongst these was *Strong Bad Email*, which served as an outlet for new webisodic content on the site with the added appeal of using real fan mail as a jumping-off point. Another example of a well-received show-within-a-show concept is *Teen Girl Squad*, which began life as a crudely drawn and barely animated comic created by antihero Strong Bad about four high school girls who inevitably meet surreal, grim ends. Beginning as a one-off, the identified potential following the strong audience reaction led to further episodes, each maintaining the same degree of crudity and individual sense of humor, serving to both broaden the world of *Homestar Runner* and expand on the personality of its "creator," Strong Bad himself (Figure 6.3).

As hugely popular as the phenomenon of independent webtoons has grown to be, it remains curiously separate from the comparatively insular world of broadcast animation production. In many respects, the initial sense of individuality and informality that allowed for such creative freedom has been retained, prominent practitioners more occupying the world of online celebrity rather than industry notoriety. In this universe, the type of viral success a major studio would dream of achieving is noticeably less earned by the ingenuity of a piece of work than the established fan base of the online personalities who have produced it. I myself had never truly appreciated this disparity until my first rolling contract producing animation for web content developers Channel Flip in 2012–2013. While it served as an especially gratifying gig with many creative freedoms, I was aware throughout that I was disconnected somewhat from the other artists, many of whom had their own YouTube channels and an established following. My comparative anonymity gave me some free reign to take risks that might have had greater ramifications working on a broadcast series at an animation studio. For others, however, the work produced was a very visible extension of their online persona, and there were significant audience expectations to meet. At the reins of Channel Flip's specially developed online channel was Jonti Picking, contracted to produce consistent, rapid-fire animation content over the course of



Figure 6.3

Assassin Babies—skit from the web series *Wobble Box*. (Courtesy of Jelly Penguin, ©2013.)

that year. With this, certain mainstays of the Weebl universe were brought over, notably *Weebl and Bob* themselves.

“We’ve got a *Weebl and Bob*-only channel, so every single episode is now uploaded in HD with better sound. I decided not to put them on the main channel because of the way YouTube works—if you put something up that people aren’t expecting, don’t necessarily like, or aren’t aware of its context, then it’s going to affect everything else.”

The demand for regular original material with new characters in this environment was high, with numerous interwoven series boasting their own independent, ensemble casts. Amongst these was *Wobble Box*, an animated skit show where each episode required an assortment of one-time characters, premises, and styles created from scratch.

“We generally have a writers’ meeting round our house, with everyone at the table bouncing ideas around. If we think there’s something to an idea, we’ll do maybe a rough block of what would happen in the sketch and then assign writers. If I need to fill time, then I will simply draw the first things that come to mind and ask myself what would happen.”

From these intense sessions come occasional instances of ideas and characters with enough of a hook to recur in multiple episodes. The potential appeal of a concept beyond its first outing is a major consideration for all of Jonti’s work. Sometimes, an idea intended as a one-off or throwaway gag organically evolves into the basis for an entire series in its own right. The opposite, inevitably, has also been known to happen.

“There’s stuff we’ve written as a series from the off which has just not picked up. We did a short called *Zombie Street* that we thought would be popular; it wasn’t until it was finally animated that we realized it probably wasn’t going to work. Then there are one-off ideas like *Rescue Whale* and *Bad Advice* where the audience response was ‘This’d be a great series!’ The ideal thing about YouTube is that you receive brilliant feedback straightaway; we learn what people like so we can do things without giving up the ideals we have. Instant

feedback has always been there on the Internet; when you can read comments straight-away, you just go with it—if people are liking it, then do more; if they don't, then don't be afraid to just dump it and move onto the next thing.”

So of this feedback, what are the main recurring wants and needs of an online audience that have been picked up on? After so many years of evaluation, Jonti has some idea.

“The songs are generally popular. A few people have a bit of a bee in their bonnet about the more puerile jokes, but they've always been there and always will. They actually seem to be more popular; they get shared a lot more because people want the world to think they're above something, while secretly, they're chuckling away. These days, people have quite a short attention span when it comes to online videos. You shouldn't spend too long developing a character; you have to hit it straightaway and start moving the plot along quite rapidly. If you're doing something that is slow, then *maybe* you can get away with it if it's beautiful, but that's a big risk, I would say. It's nice to do something along those lines occasionally, but mainly, it's all rapid-fire.

“The Internet's always been quite segmented in a way, so specific websites that you deal with will have their own preferences. The original ethos was ‘Bad equals Good,’ which kind of worked back then; it was punk; it didn't matter what it looked like as long as you had the core idea. I think this was carried across on Newgrounds to a certain extent, but their idea was to push yourself and become better, which is why you have people like Harry Partridge* and Egoraptor,† who really started pushing what Flash could do, more in the direction of traditional animation in many ways.

“Then there's YouTube, who like catchphrases and memes. There's still an appreciative audience there, but the main audience who are the driving force tend to just like the things they already know reinforced. There's a ‘tipping point,’ as Malcolm Gladwell put it. In television, there are rewrites; they like to hone ideas, and there's time to do it, for the most part. Their budgets have dropped quite extensively, but they still have a mind for production values. With online content, there's an attitude of wanting the same values, except the money's terrible and you have to upload something new three times a week!”

Amongst the core team who make up Weebl's Stuff is Jonti's spouse, Sarah Darling, who became heavily involved in producing content during a commission for the iconic children's series *Sesame Street*. Sarah's natural inclination toward writing for younger audiences led to her commandeering some of the website's more innocuous fare such as *Cat Face*, a series whose titular protagonist floats through the air due to his inflated head (Figure 6.4). Though tinged with occasional innuendo, this series is largely stripped of content that would limit its audience. Directing these energies into an outlet more focused on child-friendly content, the pair developed the online channel JellyBug in 2014. The channel, for which Sarah is head writer, serves to accommodate the increasing demand for quality children's entertainment through such staples as catchy music, repetition, and bright, simplistic visuals, occasionally remaking existing family-friendly Weebl's Stuff videos such as *Badgers* with a more distinctly children's aesthetic (Figure 6.5).

“We've got two young kids now, and when we sit them with a tablet and YouTube, they just swipe away. It's good that they're using computers, and there is a lot of stuff on YouTube that's well made but mostly stuff that isn't. If you're out with your family and

* <http://happyharry.newgrounds.com/>

† <http://egoraptor.newgrounds.com/>



Figure 6.4

Cat Face (Dir. Sarah Darling). (Courtesy of Weebi's Stuff, ©2007.)

your kids start screaming while you're trying to have a nice chat, now we can show them something safe on their tablets and have a little break. But we were sick of them watching really shoddily animated stuff, some with millions of hits that were really poorly sung, looked atrocious, and were of zero educational value. So we thought we'd make something better, some great kids' stuff in our own little style. Around that time, YouTube really started pushing that side of things as well; there are some interesting things happening on that front. It's something we're really passionate about; I really want good kids' animation to be out there for people to watch."

The Virility of Virality

The career potential of a viral short, one that transcends ephemera and the fickle attention spans of online audiences, has been proven elsewhere. Matt Stone and Trey Parker's satirical animated sitcom *South Park*, a show presently in its second decade, would never have existed without their first, seemingly-halfhearted stabs at animation going viral before the term even existed in such a context. The duo's seasonally themed short *Spirit of Christmas* (a loose remake of their 1992 University of Colorado student film of the same name, commissioned by Fox for a video Christmas card) was a word-of-mouth sensation following its initial distribution in December 1995, ultimately serving as a style guide and precursor to the show's eventual pilot, which aired in 1997.



Figure 6.5

Badger Badger Badger—original and redesigned (for online preschool channel JellyBug) versions. (Courtesy of Weebl's Stuff, ©2003/JellyBug, ©2014.)

More recent examples of virality translating into mainstream success largely take advantage of the new relationship that has developed between creators and audiences. When an established fan base reaches the millions, it is more than just opportunities for merchandising that become valid; a supportive viewership can nowadays further the animation itself. Web series such as Simon Tofield's *Simon's Cat* and Natasha Allegri's *Bee and Puppycat* have been able to successfully crowdfund (a phenomenon we shall explore more in [Chapter 9](#)) proposed projects more ambitious than their standard output, audience enthusiasm for both exceeding their proposed goals by hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Nowadays, the influx of original, auteur web series and one-offs is so voluminous that to stand out and achieve a significant viewership is especially challenging. As always, there are key components that will serve as a leg-up, such as quotability, anarchic/surreal humor, and effective use of music, but it's all too easy to miss the mark; for every bright-burning flame

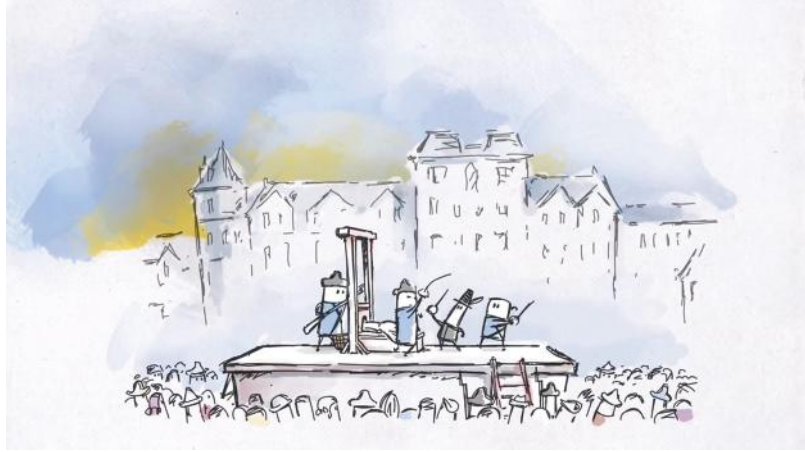


Figure 6.6

Still from *Chop Chop* (Dir. Ant Blades). (Courtesy of Ant Blades/Birdbox Studio, ©2012.)

such as Jason Steele’s *Charlie the Unicorn*, there will be hundreds, if not thousands, of forgettable imitators who do little more than replicate these traits on an entirely superficial level.

Breaking this mold somewhat is British animator and cartoonist Ant Blades, whose work has proved that today’s broader web audience can be as impressed and bowled over by technical skill as by comedic hooks. Having worked as an animation freelancer at Tandem and Prism Entertainment, Ant eventually found himself disheartened with “the hard graft of other people’s animation,”* gravitating more toward the world of online design. Working for Google as part of YouTube’s creative team, Ant found that his enthusiasm for animation began to rekindle over the years (Figure 6.6).

“It was fairly limited in terms of what I could do creatively, so there was an itch to do stuff on the side. Being very aware of YouTube, I knew of the stuff that was out there and thought it would be quite nice to have some really short but nicely animated stuff, to put it out there. After I had put about four of those out, then people started getting in contact and saying they wanted me to do some work for them. That was always the plan, though I never quite thought it would come off. Then work started coming in, so that was the point to jump and then go for it. It’s weird though; as soon as what you enjoy becomes your job, suddenly it’s not quite the same anymore. Now it suddenly seems like work, but it’s work I want to be doing.”

An early motivator for Ant’s work came via a local comedy festival that would showcase short films and up-and-coming comedians. Setting himself a monthly deadline tied in with each festival event spurred him on to create new, short-form work that was not unreasonably labor intensive or demanding on his time.

“I’d be amazed that students would be making a film for a year or two that was a 5- or 10-minute masterpiece. It just seemed such a commitment. So I quite liked that I was only trying to get these quick-as-possible ideas, and because that was successful, I’ve tried to

* *Skwigly*—An Interview with Ant Blades of Birdbox Studio: <http://www.skwigly.co.uk/ant-blades-birdbox/> (interview conducted by Steve Henderson)

keep them going, keep them short and very funny, and try to remember what got them started in the first place.”

Birdbox has since served as an avenue for Ant’s personal creative work, creating a series of unfailingly viral sensations that go against the grain of established webtoon culture, instead indulging the public’s appetite for more sophisticated humor, rich in physical comedy and slapstick. Rarely longer than a minute and a half, every second is meticulously thought through, a process that required some adaptation after his prior career as a newspaper cartoonist.

Working on his weekly strip *Bewley* would, from time to time, present an opportunity to execute a sight gag without the aid of dialogue balloons. Although this proved a rare instance in the strip itself, taking that approach with the Birdbox shorts of physical comedy-based payoff humor was essential. One of the major concerns about appealing to a broader audience is the automatic limitations the inclusion of dialogue can incur; a particular regional accent, in spite of whatever the creator’s intentions may be, can appeal to one audience while simultaneously alienating another. A particular intonation, characterization, or turn of phrase can similarly cordon off a presumed target age range. Consider shows such as *South Park* or *Beavis and Butt-Head*, made for adults but ultimately finding maximum viewership amongst the demographic they were in fact skewering, due undoubtedly to the well-observed and effective use of relatable vernacular. Naturally, if a filmmaker wants to target a specific niche audience, then dialogue can be used advantageously, but in the world of viral appeal, the more universal, the better (Figures 6.7 and 6.8).

“If I can avoid words, then I will. If, in a script, it looks like someone can say something, I will do my best to think how can we avoid them saying it, or have it be a mumble. Or how can we avoid there being writing anywhere in the background, things that will keep it as open as possible (Figure 6.9). That probably leads to more slapstick than anything else.

“To be honest, I’ve actually got out of the habit since the cartoon ended some years ago. It was a weekly strip, so I was definitely used to having to sit down, trying to churn out ideas, having to throw away the bad ones that weren’t working, and then having that

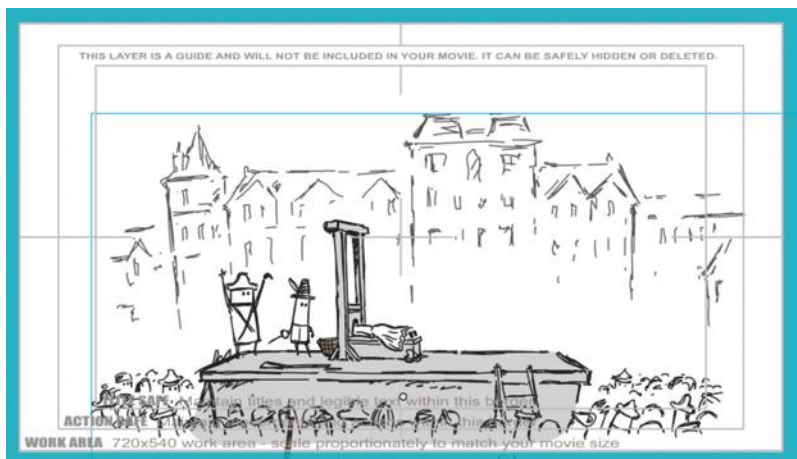


Figure 6.7

Chop Chop character animation in Flash. (Courtesy of Ant Blades/Birdbox Studio, ©2012.)



Figure 6.8

Chop Chop background colors in Photoshop. (Courtesy of Ant Blades/Birdbox Studio, ©2012.)

deadline, so even if something wasn't working, to have to push through the barrier of thinking what I had was awful until *something* eventually emerged. Translating that to shorts worked quite well. Going off and spending an hour or so without getting any good ideas didn't dishearten me, because I knew that was part of the process, that if I just kept pushing, eventually, something would turn up that would be worth doing. I used to put aside a morning just to sit down and, even at the end of the morning, not have anything at the end of it, but it definitely helped with the process of hammering out bad ideas."

The earlier shorts made their way online via the BBC, who at the time were after original comedic content for their website. Accompanying similarly short and punchy commissioned vignettes created to raise awareness for World Mental Health Day in 2010, the first handful of Ant's shorts premiered on the network's official channel exclusively, an arrangement that worked well in terms of initial visibility. From 2012 onward, new content was put out independently through Birdbox's own channel to better serve the studio's interests. "For what I was getting back, I thought I'd rather have this bank of my own shorts on my own channel rather than selling them off. Even though you only get pennies back from YouTube, it made more sense as a brand to have them all together."

Relying less on repetition, music, or asset-based design, Ant's shorts have more of an archetypal focus on silent comedy, with an assortment of visual gags leading up to a main payoff. The only concession made to the first handful of shorts is retaining a rough, digital line-test style, presenting the films without cleaned-up line work and sometimes without color. Rather than devalue the work, this "sketchy" quality of *Guard*, *Duel*, *Blues*, and *Ice Creams* (the most popular of the four, in which a hapless father is left disastrously in charge of his children for mere seconds) allows the fluidity of movement, timing, and sound design to speak for themselves. As each of the films plays out in one continuous shot against a single background, special attention is paid to the character animation

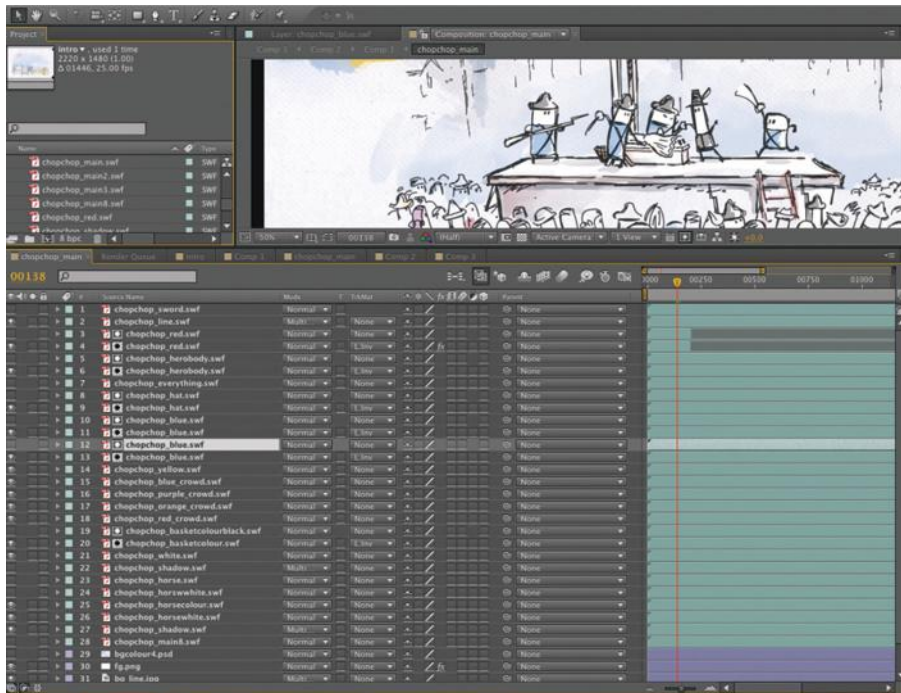


Figure 6.9

Chop Chop compositing in After Effects. (Courtesy of Ant Blades/Birdbox Studio, ©2012.)

itself (which, by and large, makes use of the entire layout of the shot) so that the viewer is visually engaged throughout. This approach rules out the idea of mass-produced, weekly content, though producing several films over the course of the year provides the dual benefits of a maintained viewership and higher-quality ideas. As a result, the films play as stand-alone works of art whose presentation happens to be well served online.

“I tend to have around 10 personal works on the side at any point. I’ll have an idea and quickly sketch it out in Flash, which is a very easy way to sketch out an animatic of the idea. I normally have other work on, so I will spend the first morning working on it, show it to other people, and leave it for a month. I always know that if people are after something, I will have a few things to one side that can be used.” Although over time, this style has veered in numerous directions, from Ant’s perspective, this hasn’t had any aversive effect on the audience. With public feedback on most of the work largely visible, it’s clear that the substance of the content itself is what has kept his viewers on board. “I think *Wildebceest* could have worked in a different style. As you’re coming up with an idea, you sense certain styles will lend themselves to it better. With *Wildebceest*, it definitely helped to have that look where it felt like wildlife documentary, something a bit more realistic. It also helped because there was minimal movement in it anyway, so it was quite nice to make something that looked a bit more plush, a bit more colorful. It might have been a bit boring if it had just been a line drawing because so little is going on” (Figure 6.10).

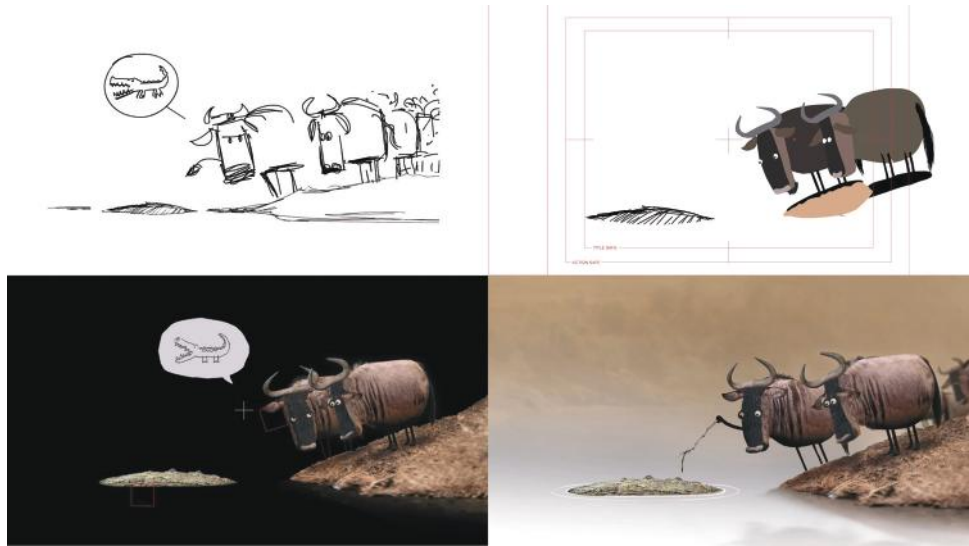


Figure 6.10

Stages of production for *Wildebeest* (Dir. Ant Blades). (Courtesy of Ant Blades/Birdbox Studio, ©2012.)

Regardless of these shifts in visual style (it is worth noting, despite all of the aforementioned, that the most successful of Ant’s work in terms of viewers alone is the more traditionally webtoon-designed, asset-dependent *Wildebeest*), each short carries with it equivalent economic concessions that accentuate the artistry of the animation; more often than not, Ant’s shorts have been approached with speed in mind, and as such, the production carries with it an acute awareness of its circumstances.

Dinner, for example, uses simple digital painting in lieu of sketched line work. Carrying on the tradition of the original *Sketchy* quartet is 2012’s *Chop Chop*, where a gallant knight crashes an execution too late to rescue an already beheaded maiden. Of all Ant’s work, it is this film in particular that required the most fine-tuning.

“Certain films were labor-intensive just because I was messing around with them for so long. *Chop Chop* could have been done months before, but I was just fiddling around with it for ages, with no real point at all. The original idea, I came up with 4 years before finally finishing it, and looking back at it, the first pass almost worked as well or better than the others. Having no deadline just makes it so much worse; you just keep messing around with stuff forever. I’m sure as I try and make them a bit more polished, they’re gonna stretch out a bit more, and more time will go into them.”

Setting Ant’s work further apart from standard online fare is his altogether more traditional approach to the production itself, which is a major contributor to timing and choreography. “As the animatic is kicked off, I definitely am aware of the kind of rhythm that the films will need to be, so you can see as it’s starting, *Okay, this is kind of building up to something, so we need to pick up the pace*. Then you can start to feel that there’s some kind of rhythm to it. You’ll get that in most of them, or you play with the rhythm, and as you feel it’s going somewhere, then you just cut it short and end it. When it comes to *Chop*

Chop, that's playing in a slightly different way in that you know it's going somewhere and then just kind of tails off. That's part of the humor, I suppose, that it's not really ramping up in any way; it's just tailing off to nothing, to failure.

"The timing is definitely in the back of my head as I'm planning it out, that I know there will be a certain rhythm to getting there, getting the best comedy from it. When you look at a film like *Carpark*, with the dog in the car, you know that you'll need a slow buildup because he's got the shopping and you need to wonder what's happening; there's a tease and then the jump. Mostly, the ending has to be fairly snappy—bam bam bam, then there has to be a finish."

Work produced since has continued to range in quality and ambition, animations such as 2011's *Singing Christmas Hedgehogs* making use of YouTube's in-video hyperlinks to present the viewer with an interactive, "choose your own adventure"-style film. Perhaps the most visually "slick" of Ant's films is 2013's *Carpark*, which retains all of the hallmark strengths of his earlier work with additional cleanup and a well-rendered, textural quality. One of the reasons behind the alternate approach was the short's origin (Figure 6.10).

"*Carpark* was a personal idea I wanted to get out there (Figure 6.11). This was actually a rejected idea from the *Life is Full of Ups and Downs* BBC Headspace campaign from a couple of years ago. It was put to one side as it was too long and not quite the right message, but it made me laugh, so I thought it was worth tidying up. The approach is pretty similar. The difference between commissioned and personal work is mainly how time is spent on them. Commissioned work forces ideas through to completion a bit quicker, which can be helpful. It feels more productive. Personal work can drag out longer than it needs."*

As time has worn on and commissioned work has increased in direct correlation with Birdbox's visibility, the speed at which new original work makes its way online has inevitably slowed down. Given the ruthless nature of YouTube's tendency to favor consistent output in its rotation, the quality-versus-quantity argument bears some evaluation.

"I suppose a bit more time's gone into them, because they do have to stand out from the rest of the content people are quickly churning out. A lot of that stuff is really funny, such as the *Cyanide and Happiness* shorts."

It stands to reason that if you produce a lot of videos on your channel, there's a far greater chance of building and maintaining a strong following. In terms of sheer volume, however, each new film will be far less likely to strike an audience—or traffic-generating outlets such as comedy blogs—as especially ingenious. Whether you make one film a year or one a week, the law of diminishing returns will always play some part in your work. In the case of Internet fandom, once regular output has been established, audiences no longer tend to seek ingenuity. There are some exceptions, such as *How It Should Have Ended*,[†] another revived entry in the pantheon of web series. Each episode astutely appropriates both what makes a viral film stand out (humor, topical references, accessible satire, fast-paced timing while appealing to its audience's love/hate relationship with pop culture) and what will keep audiences coming back, such as consistency and a relatively fast turnaround. The vitality of a filmmaker such as Ant Blades, however, hinges on the notion that each film is served by its own uniqueness (Figure 6.12).

"If you wait a bit longer to do something new, then it does have to be something a bit standout that makes people think, *This is funny in a slightly different way, and I'm*

* *Skwigly*—Ant Blades Launches His Latest Short *Carpark*: <http://www.skwigly.co.uk/ant-blades-carpark/>

† <http://www.howitshouldhaveended.com/>

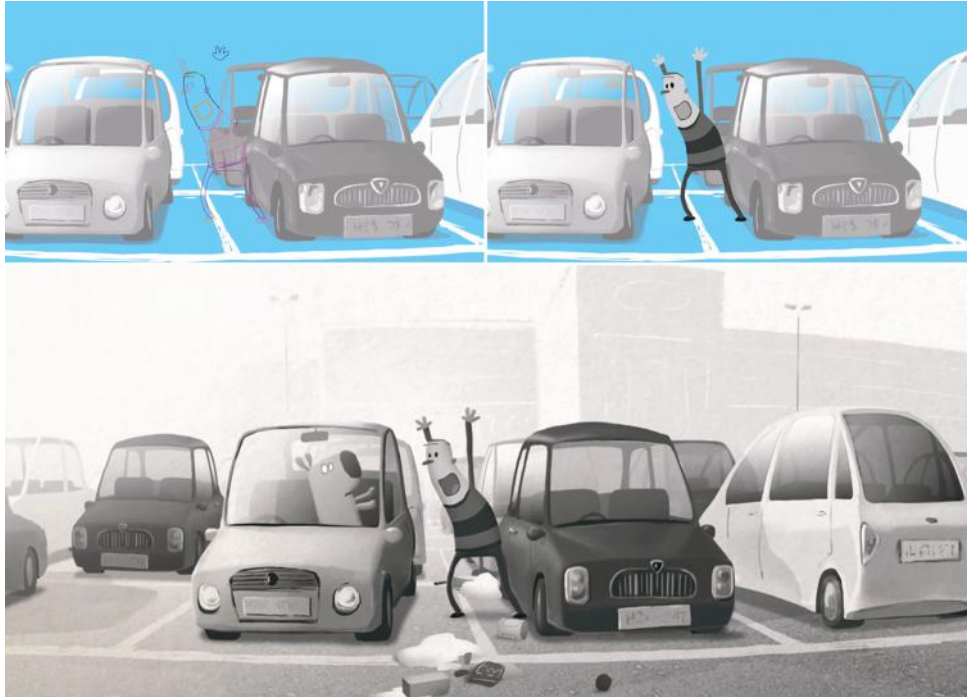


Figure 6.11

Stages of production for *Carpark* (Dir. Ant Blades). (Courtesy of Ant Blades/Birdbox Studio, ©2013.)

gonna share it with my mates. It does pile on a lot of pressure, because the longer I wait until the next one comes out, the more it feels like it has to do well. Obviously, it is better if you want to build an audience to do one or two a month—even one every couple of months is enough to keep an audience aware of what you’re producing and make sure they keep coming back. It can be a bit more forgiving, because it doesn’t matter if you haven’t produced anything particularly great as long as you have another one coming along. So if you haven’t made something new in over a year, your next film really needs to have something especially funny or quirky about it that’s going to make people want to send it round.”

Although Ant himself confesses a tendency to hammer out ideas for years without ever seeing them cross the finish line, the number of his successfully completed undertakings affords him some perspective on when and, more crucially, when not to persevere.

“If I was talking to myself, I’d say not to get hung up on one idea too much and, if it’s not working quite as you want, move on to the next one. I think it is quite easy to think you’ve come up with some genius idea and then get stuck on it for so long because you can’t quite get it to work, when you might find that three ideas down the line is one that works a lot better—if only you could actually get there!

“Also, if you are kind of trying to come up with ideas, do a vague sketch of what you think will happen. It doesn’t need to be sketched, but as soon as you’re doing the animatic, just try



Figure 6.12

Ant Blades in studio. (Courtesy of the artist.)

and get as much of it done in the first pass. It's quite easy to do half an idea and think, *This could be good*, and think you'll come back to it, but then by the time you do, you've lost your energy for it. If you've got that first spark, you have to make use of it while you're interested and excited about it—try and get it as finished as soon as possible, in terms of an idea.”

What we learn from Ant Blades' success is that Internet audiences are a very different beast than they were at the dawn of the online animation revolution. As with every major cultural shift, it usually takes one practitioner to make the first move so that others may follow. From Ant's perspective, in his preceding years working with Google and YouTube, there is one pioneer in particular he cites as being especially influential.

Simon Tofield, whose formative animation influences were such Saturday morning fare as *Transformers* coupled with the more artistically valuable (one might argue) work of Bill Watterson and Gary Larson, set himself the personal task of getting to grips with Flash by creating a short animated skit inspired by the behaviors of his cat Hugh. Fast-forward to 2012, 4 years after the short was originally uploaded to YouTube, and Tofield is regarded as the creator of one of the most recognizable characters of modern animation, producing new work through Disney with an audience in the tens of millions. Since then, his popularity has stayed consistent, but how did one short have such a monumental cultural effect to begin with?



Figure 6.13

Simon's Cat: Off to the Vet crowdfunding campaign image. (Courtesy of Simon's Cat Ltd, ©2014.)

There are many qualities of *Simon's Cat*, now a long-running series, that are worth dissecting in determining its public response. Luck and circumstance will always be a factor in anything that goes viral, certainly, but in this instance, the sheer volume of enthusiasm and fundamental staying power of the premise stands out as exceptional. This is owed in no small part to its sense of visual comedy and the fact that audiences from all walks of life—even those who don't own cats—can engage with it. Certain varieties of humor will always be universal, and as with much of Ant Blades' work, the absence of dialogue is another major win as far as international appeal is concerned (Figure 6.13).

Subscribing more to the storytelling approach outlined in Chapter 3, Simon's process generally begins with writing a "visual script"* in the form of a rudimentary storyboard. With the animation itself being especially sophisticated, the economics at play are largely regarding postproduction. This is best exemplified by the disparity between most standard episodes of *Simon's Cat* and the crowdfunded, full-color, and significantly longer outing *Off to the Vet* (again, to be explored further in Chapter 9).

To wrap up on this subject, the somewhat manic glut of arbitrarily rewarded web animation has definitely subsided two decades on, or at the very least, the arbitrary rewards are being designated elsewhere, to online "personalities" and the worlds of commentary, gaming, and other such easy-to-produce ephemera. The advantage of this is that animation is no longer a novelty on the Internet but as respected a medium as any other form of filmmaking. So is the era of the animated web series behind us? As we once knew it, very possibly, but in its place, more doors are open for creatives to use the web for collaboration and to keep one another inspired.

* <http://www.skwigly.co.uk/simon-tofield/>

7

The Animated Documentarian



Making animation with *Yellow Sticky Notes* (Dir. Jeff Chiba Steams).
(Courtesy of Jeff Chiba Steams.)

Just as with live action, some animation filmmakers can find themselves more at ease with the world of nonfiction. Of course, dealing with real-life as the subject of a film isn't some hidden cheat to sidestep the labor of coming up with an original work of fiction; it

carries with it its own set of disciplines, some even trickier to master. Crafting a structure that an audience acclimated to the pacing of television and cinema can appreciate—be it drama, comedy, or anything in between—requires a great deal of forethought and attention to detail at all stages of production. The story a documentary filmmaker might hope to tell at the outset can turn out to be wildly disparate from the final product. Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman’s *Catfish*, for example, begins as a fairly unremarkable study of a child prodigy, one that only becomes compelling when it takes a bizarre turn and winds up an alarming portrait of psychological delusion and deception over social media. Seth Gordon’s *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters* starts off as a fluffy look back at retro video gaming, escalating into a surprisingly emotional underdog story with an antagonist almost too joyfully idiosyncratic to be believable in fiction. Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky’s famous *Paradise Lost* trilogy is a series of films spanning 15 years, beginning with a chilling case of a group of allegedly homicidal teenagers, which unravels as a jaw-dropping dissection of how manipulatable and presumptuous society (including, by the third film, us as the audience itself) can be, with little provocation.

While all of the aforementioned are examples of live-action documentaries, the veracity of all questionable in varying measure (there is, naturally, some artistic license taken in the construct of a nonfiction “story”), the same major principles should apply to any filmmaker who appreciates the potential a documentary film can hold, regardless of the medium he/she chooses to make it in.

So, given that it can hardly be considered a labor-saving device, what *are* the main advantages of choosing animation over live-action? Largely, it depends on the subject matter, tone, and artistic direction best suited to the director. Animation, whether used exclusively or in conjunction with live action, can be an ideal way in which a director might experiment with visual concepts in a freer, less-linear fashion.

A film dependent on talking heads can be made visually rich or even have its meaning subverted, as with *Wallace & Gromit* creator Nick Park’s groundbreaking and often-imitated 1989 Aardman film *Creature Comforts*, in which the accounts of British citizens alongside recent immigrants acclimating to life in the United Kingdom are ingeniously recontextualized as those of animals evaluating their quality of life in a zoo. *Creature Comforts* carried on the tradition of Aardman’s prior short films that were largely based on recordings of the general public set to animation. While earlier shorts such as *Down and Out* (1977), *Confessions of a Foyer Girl* (1978), and *Late Edition* (1983) relied on eavesdropping, feasibility issues forced Nick to deviate from his original plan of doing likewise.

“I went around Bristol zoo with a hidden microphone,” Nick describes, speaking to *Skwigly* in 2014, “the idea being to try and record what people said about the animals but reverse it, so in the animation, the animals were saying these things about people—‘Look at that strange-looking thing; what’s he doing?’ But the recording situation was never that good or easy, and the zoo didn’t really want me to record there either! Afterwards, I thought, *Why not just go up to people?* We had done some vox pops as a test—approaching people outside the zoo and asking for their thoughts about zoos and animals in cages. It was good, but people all said the same thing, that it was nice to see the animals, but a pity they were locked up.

“So myself and an interviewer went to people in their houses, small flats, old people’s homes, and foreign students to get a view on what it’s like living in the UK, things that had parallels to animals being dissatisfied with their environment. And I happened to find this

student from Brazil, who just loved ranting about how he hated living in Britain compared to the hot Brazilian weather. He stole the show.

“What I had liked about what Aardman had done before was that it was different to how you thought about animation. It wasn’t whiz-bang, exciting, fast-quipping, big cartoony jokes, but it was like minimal and realistic.”

The Brazilian student’s vocal contribution to the film was, as an example of the film’s contextual subversion, animated to a mountain lion, who in the film comes across as yearning for the plains of his home country. Granted, this type of subversion takes the film a step away from straight-ahead documentary, but it serves as a prime indicator of how banality can be repurposed to become engaging and visually rich. The film was produced as one of five films for Aardman’s *Lip Synch* series commissioned in 1989, two others being Aardman cofounder Peter Lord’s *Going Equipped* and *War Story*. While the former is rich in atmosphere, the focus of the animation is largely a straightforward interpretation of the interviewee, detailing the lamentations of a former convict through the minutiae of Plasticine character animation. *War Story*, by contrast, incorporates vibrant, witty, and occasionally slapstick interpretations of the stories told, more fully making use of the freedoms of animation without changing its overall context.

While animation and nonfiction had undoubtedly crossed paths before, the cultural impact of this early, comparatively independent work (from a studio that has since grown to become an industry powerhouse) is undeniable, as Peter Lord himself is aware. “I couldn’t take credit, but I do feel a certain satisfaction that we kind of started a genre. Nowadays, if you go and see any student degree show, there will be three or four films based on these self-revealing soundtracks. It’s quite a big deal now, when no one had thought of it before.”*

To get a greater sense of how nonfiction can serve as a legitimate basis for powerful, witty, and emotionally engaging animated films, let’s take a look at a sampling of some recent exceptional filmmakers who have taken it on.

Oral Histories

The influence of Aardman’s early work has spread far and wide, as demonstrated by the impact on brothers Mike and Tim Rauch, who were living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, when they were introduced to these early shorts via magazine-order VHS anthologies. As Tim recollects, “We wore that tape out. The first two pieces on it were *Going Equipped* and *Creature Comforts*. Everybody loves *Creature Comforts*, it’s wonderful and hilarious, but we also really responded to *Going Equipped*. It’s just this little stop-motion puppet in a room by himself, talking about his life of crime, and yet it was completely riveting. That you could do something like that with animation just blew my mind as a kid, and I really wanted to do that ever since—certainly to do a documentary but also just to tell stories that are more about the drama of regular life.”

Far removed from the brothers’ general impressions of what animation was all about (impressions forged mainly by “*Animaniacs* and Disney movies”), seeing it used as a valid storytelling tool beyond children’s fiction, fairytales, and slapstick comedy was a joint revelation to Mike and Tim. The brothers had a long history of working alongside one

* <http://www.skwigly.co.uk/nick-park-peter-lord/>

another, from restaurants to swimming pools, going all the way back to sharing paper-routes as kids. This working dynamic manifested itself early on in creative ways, also, with the creation of a family newspaper alongside their four other siblings.

“It had comics in there and stories about the one-on-one basketball games of the week,” Mike describes. “I think it was, in some sense, destined that we would spend some time working together as adults.”

Now operating as Rauch Bros. Animation and based in Los Angeles, the two have a more refined working process that sees Mike generally taking on producer roles with Tim focused on the artwork itself, both of them sharing directing duties for the most part (Figure 7.1). As with most studios, different projects will dictate just how firmly these positions are held; sometimes, they’ll collaborate in all areas when external directors are



Figure 7.1

Mike and Tim Rauch outside of their “Brooklyn studio” (Tim’s Bed-Stuy apartment). (Courtesy of Adam Smith.)

involved. This arrangement, spurred on by their mutual fascination with the animated documentary format, ultimately led to a major project with StoryCorps, for which they brought to life a series of real-life personal accounts through animation.

“The way it started was just as independent short films,” Mike remembers. “We did one short every year for 3 years, starting in 2007, when we began work on the very first short.”

Said short is their 2007 piece *Germans in the Woods*, a brief (coming in at a mere two and a half minutes) yet immediately affecting account of retired infantryman Joseph Robertson, recalling a life-altering moment during his service in the United States Army during World War II’s Battle of the Bulge. Though minimal in its execution, the film achieves what many independent shorts strive to, by having its visual approach steer clear of muddying or overwhelming Robertson’s story. The gathering of such stories was an important part of Mike’s early involvement with StoryCorps.

“StoryCorps’ stories air on National Public Radio in the United States, but they actually are an independent nonprofit based in Brooklyn, New York, which is where we were based until we moved to LA about a year ago. Initially, I actually worked as an intern and then what they call a ‘facilitator,’ which in some ways was sort of like a field producer—the person out there recording the interviews, asking questions to get the best story on tape and give them the best shot at having something that they can then produce as a radio piece. Also, every single story, with the participant’s permission, does get archived at the Library of Congress. It’s sort of a collection of oral histories of everyday people.”

Following *Germans in the Woods* were a series of similarly constructed minidocumentaries, setting the stories (be they amusing, tragic, or, on occasion, combinations of both) of people from all walks of life to the brothers’ animation style. These include *Q&A*, in which 12-year-old, Asperger’s-diagnosed Joshua Littman interviews his mother, shedding unexpected light on both the struggles and the positives of their relationship (Figure 7.2); *No More Questions*, in which a reluctant and guarded grandmother is cajoled into being interviewed by her son and granddaughter, offering the briefest of snippets from her life story; and *The Human Voice*, featuring Studs Terkel, whose own work chronicling American society and culture, largely through oral histories, was a major influence on StoryCorps. Amongst the most popular and emotionally resonant of the StoryCorps stories to eventually be animated is *Danny and Annie*, a reminiscence of the titular couple’s 27-year romance, reflecting on what is most important in life.

Despite the brevity of these films, they are loaded with emotion and information and oftentimes present a surprisingly full impression of their subjects. *Q&A*, for instance, paints a picture of not just the relationship between Joshua and his mother but also, in a mere handful of sentences, his perceptions of other family, friends, and confusions regarding the world at large. The effectiveness of these audiovisual snapshots is largely down to the approach taken during the recording of the interviews themselves and a keen ear for which moments in a long audio session have the most impact and relatability.

According to Tim, “*Miss Devine* was an early one that really came off the way we wanted it to. It’s a piece about two cousins and their memories of a larger-than-life Sunday school teacher. That’s some of the best character design I did before Stephen DeStefano got involved and helped take the design to an even higher level. I was really looking a lot at Milt Gross’s comics from the 1930s and 40s. Then the work (background artist) Bill Wray did there really was amazing, very evocative, with a different mood for each scene.”



Figure 7.2

Mike and Tim Rauch with Q&A's Joshua Littman. (Courtesy of Sarah Littman.)

Unique to *Miss Devine* is it being primarily a humorous short. While many of the other films incorporate humor to varying degrees, they are frequently counterbalanced with emotionally charged, heavy-going, and sometimes dark subject matter. It served as welcome respite to make a film that was entertaining mainly for its comedic value, with a strong central character.

"I think that was another thing that really made that story work," Mike concurs. "The strongest shorts always had a very interesting, unique character at the heart of the story. That was an essential ingredient we looked for when considering which stories would work well in animation. And after several years, one reason we felt it might be the right time to move on to a new project was that StoryCorps' creative preferences eventually seemed to run in a different direction from the kind of character animation we hoped to pursue."

As more films were made, a disparity between Rauch Bros.' and StoryCorps' ideal approaches to the animated segments would gradually make itself known (to be elaborated on in [Chapter 9](#)). During this period, a number of other powerful shorts would be made, including a series of three films specifically referring to the events of 9/11. To Tim, taking on such demanding subject matter was, to an extent, an important creative and emotional exercise.

"Most of these tended to be pretty heavy. *John and Joe* is about a firefighter and a cop who both died on 9/11, and their father, a former firefighter, is telling the story. Again, Bill Wray did some really evocative work with the background designs that I think that came off really well.

"As New Yorkers, it meant a lot to us to be able to do those stories and get to know more about that event and the people who lived through it. So it was a great experience in a lot

of ways, to get involved with that, but at the same time, it was just a really difficult process to spend half of the year living through thinking about what had happened that day and what those people lived through and what happened to the people who passed away.”

The flip side of this was in part brought about by just how immersive the animation process in and of itself can be. For Tim, the time spent visualizing such harrowing stories led to nightmares and anxieties when it came to flying on planes, for example. It’s important to bear in mind that, even for the sake of your art, becoming so involved in a difficult subject is not to be taken lightly. Yet levity remains a vital element of all the Rauch Bros.’ StoryCorps shorts, whether it be simply a matter of the playfulness of each film’s design style. This approach would continue into their last year of involvement, roughly half of the films produced in that time—*The Nature of War*, *The Last Viewing*, and *1st Squad, 3rd Platoon*—focusing on military subjects as part of an initiative for veterans and their family members to represent their experiences of post-9/11 combat. The prospect of taking on a more long-form version of these films in the form of a half-hour special ultimately signaled that it was time for someone else to take the reins and for Mike and Tim to move on to the next chapter of their animation career.

“From a budgetary point of view, that type of project is much more costly to do; there’s more research and more detail in the animation,” reasons Mike. “Those sorts of stories are also so much more emotionally draining, and the prospect of spending 12–16 months with that just seemed very daunting.”

With KZ Animation picking up with StoryCorps in 2015 where Rauch Bros. Animation left off, there remains a strong future ahead for all parties and, most crucially, a legacy of vital studies in how independent approaches to animation can tell important stories with sympathy, empathy, and genuine interest, both heightening their engagement and broadening their appeal. Says Mike of the overall experience,

“I remember saying to some of the team at StoryCorps when we finished that I felt like I definitely accomplished one of my bigger life goals by telling those kind of stories in animation, and I meant it. It was a tremendous opportunity, and I’m very thankful to StoryCorps, the generous funders such as the CPB, and our broadcast partner PBS’ *POV* to have had that chance.”

Anecdotal Value

A traditional hand-drawn animator based in Minnesota, Tom Schroeder’s various films have been screened at major festivals including Sundance, Annecy, Edinburgh, and Ottawa. Although he has been active since 1990, it was the 2000 documentary tale *Bike Ride*, his fourth self-directed film, that served as his first significant step into the waters of animated nonfiction. The film is a 7-minute tragicomic recollection of James, a man who travels 50 miles by bike to see his girlfriend, only to have to return home after getting dumped immediately, with an improvised drum track from musician Dave King (of The Bad Plus and Happy Apple) “reacting” to the events of the narration. It was from this soundtrack that Tom took an adventurous, creative cue in his approach to the animation.

“When you’re animating off of an audio track, the first step is to chart out the sound frame by frame on an exposure sheet (Figure 7.3). When I’m drawing, I’ll have the structure

		07				10
		08		ting		11
(kide)	a	09				12
dim	n	10				13
		11		(kick)		14
		12				15
dom	d	13			and	16
		14			I	17
		15			got	18
dom		16		(kick)		19
		17			very	20
		18			sick	21
(kick)		19				22
		20				23
		21				24
there		22				25
was		23		(kick) test		26
a		24				27
man		25				28
day		26				29
		27				30
when		28			and	31
		29			hang	32
(kick)		30			over	33
(kick)	I	31				34
		32				35
		33				36
was		34				37
still		35				38
		36				39
		37			and	40
		38		(kick) test	sad	41
call		39				42
ing		40				43
		41				44
ev		42				45
re		43				46
body		44				47
		45				48
(kick)		46				49
tick		47			and	50
(kick)		48				51
		49				52
da		50				53
da		51			can	54
da		52			find	55
tick	a	53		dim		56
(kick)	n	54				57
		55				58
		56				59
	d	57				60
		58				61
		59				62
(kick)	You	60			and	63
	were	61				64
		62		tick	very	65
		63			much	66
		64			in	67
only		65				68
and		66				69
that		67				70
could		68				71
		69				72
		70				73
		71				74
	came	72				75
		73				76
Dim		74				77
		75		ting(kick)		78
		76			and	79
(kick)	yeah	77				80
		78				81

Figure 7.3

Bike Race dope sheet. (Courtesy of Tom Schroeder.)

of both the story and the drum performance to use as a guide. My original idea with *Bike Ride* was to have Dave King record his drums to the story, to animate to both tracks and then pull out the voice in the final audio mix, so that you just had the visuals and the drums with the story hopefully implied. When I tried that, it was clear the film didn't work as well. The quality of (narrator) James Peterson's personality and the conversational tone of the film were lost. I think a lot of the appeal of the film is that people can identify with the situation very readily and find something appealing in James' self-deprecation.

“In general, I’m following the vocal tracks first as a guide for the content and the acting of the characters, and then I’m following the drums for accents and beats in the rhythm of the movement. Having both of these structures as a kind of architecture that exists before the animation gives me the freedom to improvise and work loosely without much of a plan.

“In the improvisational spirit of the audio track, I draw straight-ahead without a storyboard or plan. I don’t think I revised anything that I drew; the simple graphic white-on-black ink drawing style helped with that.” The success of *Bike Ride*, the first of Tom’s films to prove a hit on the festival circuit, led to a series of commercials with Klasky Csupo’s commercial division Ka-Chew, making use of the film’s unique style. In 2010, Tom produced *Bike Race*, not a follow-up film so much as a companion piece, dealing with a completely different story albeit retaining some of the crucial themes of love, relationships, and misunderstanding. Though many of the qualities of *Bike Ride*’s aesthetic remain, there is a discernable style shift partly brought about through bringing on board additional techniques from his commissioned work.

“When I was working on the commercials in the *Bike Ride* style, I was compositing photographic color cereal boxes into the line animation, and I liked the way that it looked against the black field. So when I made *Bike Race*, I hired a former student of mine from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Lindsay Testolin, to do the inventive photo collage sections that you see in the film. I always liked the style that Lindsay developed in After Effects and gave her a lot of freedom as regards her contributions to the film. She provided another layer of improvisation in the conversation, so to speak.

“When I started designing the characters for *Bike Race*, I intended to use the same thick ink line style as I used in *Bike Ride*. But I found that the complexity of the story and the subtlety of the acting demanded from the characters required more detail than the thick lines would allow. So I used a thinner pencil line; the film really is an inverted, cleaned-up pencil test in the traditional sense of how character animation is created. I liked the feeling when I inverted it that it looked perhaps drawn on a blackboard with chalk (Figure 7.4).

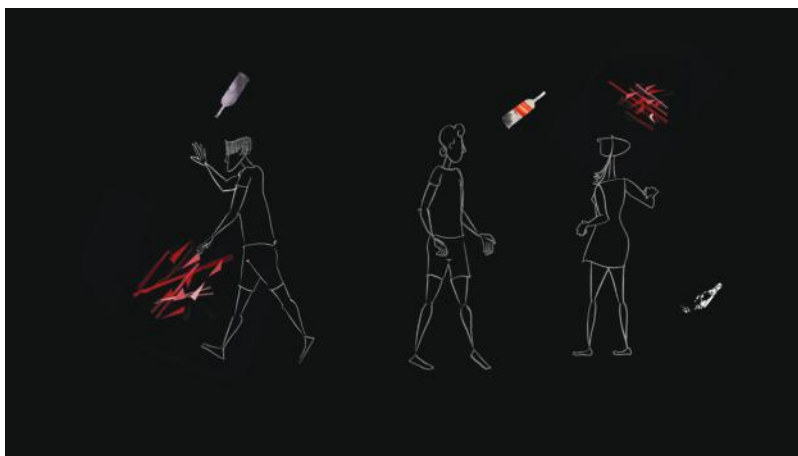


Figure 7.4

Still from *Bike Race* (Dir. Tom Schroeder). (Courtesy of Tom Schroeder, ©2010.)

Both *Bike* films were drawn and rendered on paper, scanned into the computer, and composited in After Effects. I like to think of the films as representing the manner in which thought flows, because a long period of my thinking gets compressed into a short duration in the finished film. I would aspire to make a film that is ‘thought’ rather than ‘told.’

“There was no initial plan to make *Bike Race*. But people really responded to the combination of elements in *Bike Ride*; the sound, the picture, and the story worked very well in support of a single idea. So I decided that perhaps there should be a trilogy of films exploring this approach and thematic content, one every 10 years, thus *Bike Race* in 2010. I have just recorded the vocal tracks for *Bike Trip*, which I plan to finish around 2020; it’s in a queue of other films that I have planned. When the third film is finished, I imagine them playing together as one half-hour program.”

Since *Bike Race*, Tom has gone on to produce another, entirely separate documentary with 2012’s *Marcel, King of Tervuren*, another festival hit and crowd-pleaser (Figure 7.5). This film serves as a prime example of how animation can infuse anecdotal storytelling with wit, passion, and visual gravitas, chronicling the dramatic life of a Belgian rooster belonging to Ann Berckmoes, a friend of his wife and also the film’s narrator.

“Each time we visited Ann in Tervuren on the outskirts of Brussels, we would drink Belgian beer, and she would give the latest update on Marcel, her rooster, while chain smoking, drinking, and punctuating each section of the story with a throaty ‘cuculurucoo’—Ann is the archetypal bon vivant and reminds me of Jeanne Moreau in the 1960s. During May of 2011, Ann visited my wife and I in St. Paul, Minnesota, and I took the opportunity to record her telling Marcel’s story. She recorded the story in English, Dutch, and French. I speak Dutch, and my wife Hilde helped with the French, so between us, we edited three versions of the story in the different languages.”

The film, described by Tom as “Greek tragedy enacted by Belgian roosters,” also deals with a love triangle, this time of the bestial, crime passionel variety. The story tells of Marcel, who, having lived through a rooster cull during a bird flu pandemic, finds himself ostracized from the farm where he lives after being half-blinded and cuckolded, essentially,



Figure 7.5

Still from *Marcel, King of Tervuren* (Dir. Tom Schroeder). (Courtesy of Tom Schroeder, ©2012.)

by his own offspring. The bloody battle that ensues when Marcel seeks to reassert himself as the “King” of Tervuren is evocative of numerous Grecian myths, carrying with it a curious sense of humanity.

“I remembered a specific line from Albert Camus’s essay on Sisyphus: ‘There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.’ I saw in Marcel an attractive, willful defiance, but also the comic possibilities of contrasting the grandiosity of ‘King of Tervuren’ with the ordinariness of the backyard setting.”

Tom’s approach with the film made use of developing technology in a manner that worked to its aesthetic advantage, drawing the animation directly on computer using a Cintiq.

“Somewhat ironically, the loose, painterly style of the film developed from working digitally rather than drawing on paper. The animation was about half rotoscoping from live-action footage I shot and half traditional character animation. I gravitated to the rotoscoping initially because I was still a little uncomfortable drawing with the tablet.

“As for the abstract transitional sections, these came about as a formal expression of the main theme of the film. As Marcel fights to stay alive, his representation in the film struggles to fight against the forms breaking into an abstraction of line and color (Figure 7.6). Form and abstraction, life and death, matter and energy—I’ve always felt that the most successful animated films demonstrate an awareness of the relationship between the technical aspects of the production and the narrative content. My sense of this really comes from modernist literature rather than graphic design, from having read James Joyce at a formative age.

“Between *Bike Ride* and *Bike Race*, I was gaining experience with the software as a creative tool in making the films and in the storytelling. When you arrive at *Bike Race* and *Marcel*, I’m thinking less in terms of traditional film language and more in terms of continuous flow and transition. The technology has obviously evolved very quickly, and you can see it in the period between *Bide Ride* and *Marcel*. In *Bike Ride*, I’m still drawing on paper, but it’s the first film I made that I didn’t shoot with a film camera. By *Marcel*, the last vestige of a physical process has disappeared—no graphite, no paper. It’s a bit of a challenge to continually make these transitions demanded by the technology, but the



Figure 7.6

Still from *Marcel, King of Tervuren* (Dir. Tom Schroeder). (Courtesy of Tom Schroeder, ©2012.)

new tools always present opportunities in reinventing how you tell a story. From *Marcel* onward, I've drawn directly in Photoshop with a Cintiq. At first, I found the feeling of working this way alienating, but now I like it a lot. I can still get the illusion of naturalistic media but with the advantages, versatility, and speed of working digitally."

Introspection

Of Tom's work, it's *Marcel, King of Tervuren* that most represents a perfect marriage of animation and storytelling, though the strengths of all his work are in the stories being told themselves being relatable for the audience. Themes of love, loss, victory, humiliation, redemption, and revenge are all staples of highly effective narratives, whether fictional or otherwise. How effective, then, can venturing into comparatively unknown territories be?

Harvard animation professor Ruth Lingford's path into animation is a particularly atypical one, stepping away from a career as an occupational therapist to pursue the arts and eventually studying at the Royal College of Art. Having gone on to work with the National Film and Television School (NFTS), Animate Projects, and Shynola among others, her Harvard role as professor of the practice of animation came about following a stint as visiting instructor in 2005. Her filmography frequently explores strong, pervasive, and sometimes sexual themes, notably the shorts *What She Wants* (1994), *Death and the Mother* (1997), and *Pleasures of War* (1998), and upon receipt of a Harvard Film Study Center fellowship, she set about applying these to an independent documentary project.

"It's important to me that when I tell people the germ of the idea, they react to it as something they would like to see. Provoking curiosity in an audience is something I really do value, so giving them something that they would be interested in is important."

The result was 2011's *Little Deaths*, which proved a strong talking point of the major festivals it screened at. As with many affecting documentaries, the film tackles a subject rarely discussed in casual conversation, in this case, the nature of orgasm as articulated by an expansive cross-section of the public.

"I'd been working for some time on a documentary called *Secrecy*, directed by two of my colleagues at Harvard, which was a film about government secrecy. The animation's role was to kind of be the unconscious of the film and to try and look at what secrecy means to humans. A lot of that was images of Adam and Eve, the tree of knowledge, and sex. I ended up doing a lot of animation that wasn't used in the end, some of which I liked. I was a bit embarrassed, having been at Harvard a few years and not having made a film of my own, so I was thinking of ways to use this leftover footage to make a quick, 2-minute film. I hit on the idea of taping interviews of people and asking them to describe orgasm, thinking, *Obviously, you can't describe orgasm, so people will run out of words.*"*

When dealing with a documentary that depends on a handful of outside contributors, there are certain questions of handling and etiquette. One might assume that anything pertaining to human sexuality might be automatically taboo and off-limits; In the case of *Little Deaths*, however, this turned out not to be the case (Figure 7.7):

"My plan was to edit together the moments where people ran out of words, accompanied by vague sexual images, and that would be the film—but when I started doing the

* *Skwigly*, The Films of Ruth Lingford, <http://www.skwigly.co.uk/ruth-lingford/>



Figure 7.7

Still from *Little Deaths* (Dir. Ruth Lingford). (Courtesy of Ruth Lingford, ©2010.)

interviews, I found that nobody ran out of words at all. I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is the home of Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and a lot of very clever and articulate people, so that may be why—but I found people were really wanting to talk about it. People would say, ‘I’ve never put this into words before,’ then make a big attempt to do so, getting really interested in what their own experience was, and of course, I got quite interested in the differences and the similarities between people. So then it became a quite different project, and the animation had to start from scratch.”

This serves as an important reminder to documentarians that you should not be dissuaded before you have even tried. Our internal self doubts—or perhaps even the voiced doubts of our peers and immediate social circle—may not necessarily line up with the realities of the matter. Indeed, in this case, the documentary highlights how society’s mores quell discussion of a subject about which many people have a lot to say.

Self-Reflection

While other people’s stories may be compelling and offer you as a filmmaker a variety of new perspectives to work with, this should not rule out the option of turning to one’s own firsthand experiences for inspiration. As we saw in [Chapter 4](#), Melissa Johnson’s Salon.com memoir “The Tallest Woman in the Room Tells All” proved tremendously engaging and popular when adapted to the animated film *Love in the Time of March Madness* ([Figure 7.8](#)). Though the visual execution predominantly fell to codirector Robertino Zambrano, which of course allowed for a fresh twist on the film’s aesthetic, Melissa’s own involvement with the film version of her story was also integral to its success. Though she was not previously versed in animation production, her established talent as a live-action documentary filmmaker had a considerable part to play when turning the focus on herself.

“I think when you’ve made films about other people, when you tell a story about yourself, you must operate on two levels. One: go deep into yourself and your experience. Two:



Figure 7.8

Still from *Love in the Time of March Madness* (Dir. Melissa Johnson/Robertino Zambrano). (Courtesy of High Hip Productions/KAPWA Studioworks, ©2014.)

You have to take a step back and say objectively as a storyteller, *If I was making this about someone else, what does the story need? Let me get some distance here and figure out from a story arc and character development from the perspective of someone who does not know me at all* (i.e., the majority of people seeing this)—*does this make sense? Is it compelling? What else does the subject—in other words, me—need to reveal here?* So, absolutely, my background in documentary storytelling was a huge asset. It’s just helpful at times to forget that the story is about me, so as to make it a better film.”

As *Love in the Time of March Madness* proves, putting forward our own nonfictional stories and observations as fodder for animation can yield tremendously appealing results, especially when combined with visual invention and self-effacement. Another such example is Latvian animator Signe Baumanes’s *Teat Beat of Sex*, a series of semifictionalized personal recollections that stem from the artist’s firsthand experience and an array of viewpoints on the subject (Figure 7.9). As with Ruth Lingford’s *Little Deaths* (to which Signe also contributed as an interview subject), the films are uncompromising yet refreshingly candid, oftentimes dealing with somewhat taboo areas that can serve as discussion points.

The series has perhaps the broadest appeal amongst Signe’s other short film work, though they very easily could have not come to be at all, as the director recalls:

“*Teat Beat of Sex* came to life by accident. A few years ago, there were these websites that were looking for content, and one of the sites contacted me and said, ‘We really love your work; would you come over and pitch us your ideas?’

“So I gathered all my ideas that I had and brought everything to the meeting. There was this big table in the middle of the room, with three men in suits and jackets sitting around the table. I wanted to make small talk, but when I’m nervous, I always have to talk about sex, for some reason.”

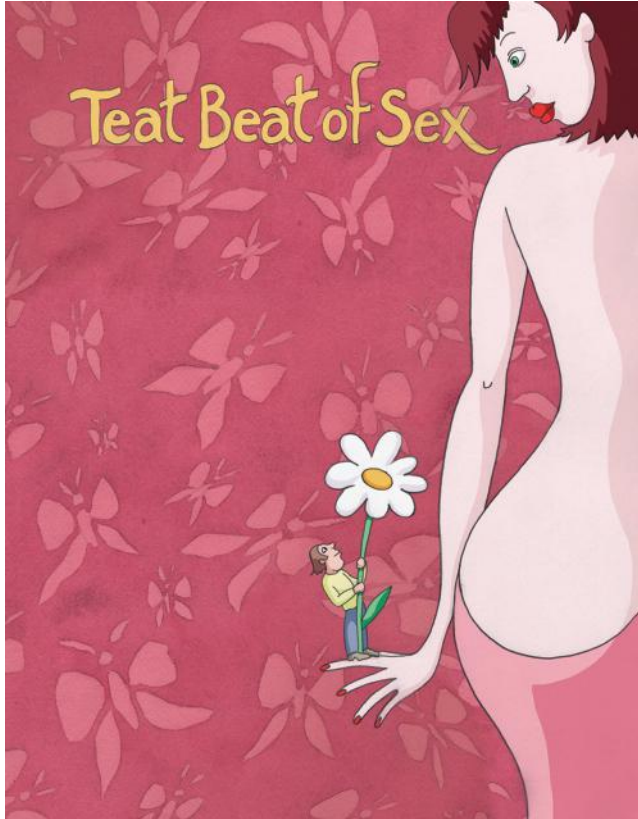


Figure 7.9

Teat Beat of Sex poster. (Courtesy of Signe Baumane/Pierre Poire, ©2009.)

With a gift for ribald anecdotal storytelling, Signe’s small talk ultimately became the pitch itself—a series of films in which she would present her personal perspectives on sex through a series of recorded monologs set to animation.

“I was so excited, because this project was a combination of three of my favorite things—animation, ranting, and sex. So when I started to work on the film, I was so excited until I thought, *Wait, it’s a really original story, with original character designs; I wonder how much they’re gonna pay me.* So I called them up and asked how much. They were offering \$1000 for each episode along with all the rights.”

Her enthusiasm soured by that caveat, she proceeded with *Teat Beat of Sex* on her own should a better offer come along. During the production of the second of these micro-shorts, she was approached by Pierre Poire Productions, an Italian production team looking for a new project dealing with love, sex, and bridging misunderstandings between genders. This fit in perfectly with the spirit of *Teat Beat of Sex*, and the partnership would eventually yield a full series of 15 uncompromising and “explicitly educational” shorts.

Each film of the series makes consistent use of bold jump cuts stringing together minimally animated visuals, some of which are so steeped in visual metaphor that they require repeat viewings to be fully appreciated.

At face value, these films come across initially as more shallow than in fact they are. To a casual viewer, or one perhaps not interested in the complexity of Signe's explorations of psychosexuality, the films may appear to be little more than a succession of dirty jokes and visual innuendos. Once one is acclimated to the strange appeal of her truly unique style and energy, however, the series proves to be something deeper altogether.

The narration is provided by Signe herself (as is also the case with her feature film *Rocks in my Pockets*, explored in [Chapter 8](#)). At times, these monologs are scripted, quasi-autobiographical anecdotes that tie several films together consecutively, though more often than not, each episode is a stand-alone recollection, musing, or venting session. The candor of each film's monolog enables a tremendous range of visual expression when translated to animation, and few efforts are made to temper Signe's enthusiasm, passion, anger, or, at times, unabashed naivety. Though all of these make for compelling visuals, it is perhaps the latter that leads to the most effective, with glimpses of endearingly literal visual analogies peppering the narrative as a consequence. The subject matter veers from the amusingly frivolous (*Hair, Juice*) to the poignant and introspective (*Envy, Respect*), with Signe's on-screen counterpart renamed Cynthia in acknowledgment of the blurred lines between fiction and nonfiction ([Figure 7.10](#)).

"It is a composite of both, because if I really launched into the 'true' story, then that story would be an hour long, so since the premise of each final episode is 1 minute, you can



Figure 7.10

Still from *Teat Beat of Sex—'Juice'* (Dir. Signe Baumane). (Courtesy of Signe Baumane/Pierre Poire, ©2009.)

imagine how many layers are stripped off. But mainly, I chose to call the main character Cynthia because the depiction of the mother is not really accurate. In *Teat Beat of Sex*, she comes off as very odd, dressed in strange garbs and so on. But for me, the mother in the films represents the conservative voice, the voice of society that you sometimes hear in your head, of what you ‘shouldn’t be doing’ because of what society might think. So the mother is really not my real mother; it’s that conservative part of society that tries to get you to fit to its standards. And so that’s why I choose to be in character as ‘Cynthia.’”

Sticking Points

Independent Canadian animator and documentarian Jeff Chiba Stearns trained in animation at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver, graduating in 2001 and immediately embarking on a career in animation filmmaking and teaching. Governed by a fastidious need to plan and make lists, he found himself at the mercy of a barrage of yellow sticky notes covering every available surface of his office by the mid-2000s.

“As an animator, I definitely admit to being a little OCD; I don’t think you can *be* an animator and draw thousands of drawings if you’re not a little. I need my life organized, but I still live in a sense of chaos, so my life is organized by sticky notes and to-do lists that are scattered haphazardly around my office. I think I was going through a bit of a crisis because I had just finished a film and was broke. I needed to find work; there wasn’t a lot of animation work out there, so I became a teacher. All of this was being written down on sticky notes, to the point where I was feeling really overwhelmed with the fact that these to-do lists were running my life, and as fast as I was writing stuff down, I couldn’t accomplish all the stuff on these lists in time.

“I realized that when I self-reflecting on the last 9 years of my life to the point where I decided I wanted to pursue animation, some major world events had an impact on those decisions. I had just graduated and was looking for work when 9/11 happened. That’s when the entire animation industry in Vancouver kind of crumbled again—Disney left town, a lot of the studios were closing, senior animators couldn’t find work—and so for a recent graduate, it was the worst time to be in the job market. So I started to look back on that, starting to sense this connection, and I figured I’d take revenge on these sticky notes, make a film on self-reflection based on these to-do lists.”

Without a deadline, funding, or a budget of any description, Jeff embraced the organic nature of the process. The film, titled *Yellow Sticky Notes*, progressed in fits and starts, the sporadic nature of his process entirely down to whether or not he felt the impulse to work on it on any given day. Jeff coined the term “animation meditation,” and the making of the film became a therapeutic, self-reflective exercise where ideas could flow freely from his subconscious. This was largely enabled by his production approach, which called for little more than the sticky notes themselves (Figure 7.11).

“It was all straight-ahead animation, without even a backlight. I don’t in-between; in fact, I don’t know if I have the patience for it. I like the idea that I can draw from one drawing to the next, and the next, and the next; I think if you can do that right, you can capture some really nice animated motion. I was teaching animation at the same time, so it was a good way for me to get back into just drawing, pen-on-paper, and with sticky notes themselves being very portable, I could take them wherever I needed to, including hotel rooms and aeroplanes.



Figure 7.11

Behind the scenes of *Canadian Anijam*, Jeff Chiba Stearns' follow-up (see [Chapter 14](#)) to *Yellow Sticky Notes*. (Courtesy of Jeff Chiba Stearns.)

“It took me about 9 months to do all the drawing. When I finished the film, all I had were these sticky notes stacked about the place; I just arranged them from the earliest date to the latest date, put them in little sections, spread them across the room, and said, ‘I guess I’m done!’ Then I just sat myself in a dark room with a camera stand and shot it all. The editing took a few days because it was already kind of in the right sequence; I just pulled drawings out here and there to make it succinct.”

After he tested a rough cut of the film with an audience of students at a Taiwanese animation festival, the positive reception inspired Jeff to move past his doubts about the film and package it properly for festivals.

“I kept saying it was either going to be the greatest thing I ever made or the worst; there was no middle ground; it would either tank or take off. It ended up winning for best animation at an Asian festival in Toronto, and the guy who ran What Media saw it and called me personally to say it was brilliant! That’s when it started to catch on, then when it hit Tribeca, it just took off; YouTube saw it, and from there, it screened everywhere, won People’s Choice at Clermont-Ferrand, racked up all these awards, so luckily, it became that film that resonated with people.”

The Animation Advantage

Certainly, nonfiction can be a rich and invaluable resource for exciting short-film content. Another crucial factor to address is the necessity of animation as a medium. In the

preceding case studies, all of the films discussed were subjectively improved by having been animated as opposed to taking a live-action approach, but why precisely is this? What is the edge that animation itself has in this realm?

Jeff Chiba Stearns makes a strong case for animation's practical ability to, more than anything, make a documentary film more entertaining. "In the world of creating a documentary, sometimes if it's spoken with a lot of talking heads, where it's not so much cinema verité but more a survey film, animation makes a kind of sense because it gets us away from just seeing heads talking. Animation has the ability to bring those stories to life in a way that's appealing for the audience, an appeal that helps keep people's attention spans, helps keep them within the film, helps expand their imaginations. That's why I love animation and documentary, because it goes hand in hand. Sometimes you can't always find the right B-roll; you can't find something that's going to bring those stories to life; you can't recreate. I'm not a big fan of documentaries that do reenactments, and I think the great thing about animation is that we can be a little bit more descriptive of these stories, but in a way that's more imaginative rather than specific interpretation."

Ruth Lingford's attitude is similar, while also acknowledging the significantly increased range of expression animated imagery can bring to the mix, particularly its ability to visualize the internal: "The thing about animation and documentary is that animation can document the subjective, or can try to. When I was making *Little Deaths*, people would say, 'Oh, that's been done before.' There have been projects where people's faces are filmed as they have orgasms, which are kind of interesting but don't really tell you too much about what's going on inside. In the way that people were grasping for ways of expressing their feelings in words, I was grasping for images. There are moments where the film gets close, but it's always a foreign land, a struggle to communicate this essence of your experience. It seemed to me that animation could get nearer than live action, just because in this circumstance, the superficial isn't very interesting to me. Also, there is something to be said for the poetic mutability of animation, a poetic metamorphosis of sorts that seemed to me to get close to one's experience of one's own body during sex; that that is so subjective and so mutable, it seemed to me that animation was the right means to try and approach expressing that feeling."

"It's a side to animation that encapsulates that struggle as well, because people know when they watch animation that the images are hard-won. There's often a poignancy to animation when you feel the animator's time and struggle in their film."

Bearing these qualities in mind, animation can also have a role within live-action documentary, especially if dealing with a longer-form project. While feature-length animation in and of itself will be explored further in [Chapter 8](#), the use of animation as an embellishment of an otherwise live-action film is exemplified in another of Jeff's works, the multi-award-winning 2010 documentary feature *One Big Hapa Family* ([Figure 7.12](#)).

"I never looked at *Yellow Sticky Notes* or my previous film *What Are You Anyways?* (an autobiographical look at Stearns's mixed-raced heritage, produced in 2005) as though they could be considered documentaries, but when I was at Tribeca and they actually put *Yellow Sticky Notes* in the documentary category, that's when it made sense. When I started thinking of it as a documentation process through animation, it seemed logical to make a documentary of greater length. Even though the majority of the film is live action, there's a lot of animated components to the film. That's when I started looking at the collaborative animation process, because as I was the one editing the film, it meant that I didn't have a ton of time to be animating on it myself."



Figure 7.12

One Big Hapa Family (Dir. Jeff Chiba Stearns) poster. (Courtesy of Jeff Chiba Stearns, ©2010.)

Jeff having been on the festival circuit since 2000, many years of networking with like-minded independents served to provide him with a pool of talent to reach out to for assistance. Bringing on board six established animators—Jonathan Ng, Louise Johnson, Todd Ramsay, Ben Meinhardt, Kunal Sen, and Sean Sherwin—who were willing to give their time to the project, Jeff assigned each a segment of the film to animate based on his familiarity with their respective bodies of work.

“As a lot of the interviews are historical or are telling a certain story, I had an animator at the back of my head for each; for example, Louise Johnson is really good at doing paint on glass, so for a historical story of Japanese internment one fellow was talking about, I could see it coming alive with that technique. I let everybody animate in their own style, which I think allowed me a chance to work in my own style too, so I could work with chalkboards and different hand-drawn or stop-motion elements. It became what I call a ‘candy shop of animation,’ very eclectic in its animation approach.

“I didn’t give storyboards to the animators; I basically just gave them the chunk of the dialog and asked them to animate it, so for them, they were able to do all the preproduction, design, animate in their own style, do all the drawing themselves, and do the post; essentially, they were in charge, because I trusted them in their style and ability. Some animators would keep in touch with roughs; they’d send storyboards, and we’d go back

and forth, but for the most part, I could trust that they would do what they do best. The long and short of it is that animation both complements and enhances the appeal we need to help the audience get into the mindset of the interviewees. The interviewees are going back into their brain and pulling these stories out, and essentially, we're bringing these stories to life.

“The other thing that's great is all the animators can work together at the same time, independently of each other, which is a good way to get a lot of animation done quick as opposed to having one animator who's working on 20 minutes of animation that would take them probably 6 months, if not a year or longer, whereas we can get 20 minutes of animation done in 2 or 3 months by having different animators working on it, understanding and being content with the fact that the animation's going to look different. In a film like *One Big Hapa Family*, without the animation, it could be a boring film because it's just a bunch of talking heads—at least bringing a visual sense to the film by giving it that kick of animation worked out really nice (Figure 7.13). If someone's going to sit through an hour and a half of this documentary, we better make sure they're entertained as well as being educated, inspired, and taken into the film.”

Audience consideration is a major factor when it comes to any type of film production, be it animation, documentary, or otherwise. Pure self-indulgence, or the assumption that everyone will find what interests you just as riveting, is never an advisable approach. The artistry of nonfiction comes from how it is structured, packaged, and presented to the audience, and the success of *One Big Hapa Family* undoubtedly benefited from the addition of these visual representations in a way that an audience sees beyond what is simply being said, to the spirit and relevance of it. While you don't want an audience to feel condescended to, there's something to be said for holding their hand through more challenging territory. As Tom Schroeder sees it, audiences are generally not accustomed to the notion that animation and documentary can coexist until they see it in front of them:



Figure 7.13

Still from *One Big Hapa Family* (Dir. Jeff Chiba Stearns). (Courtesy of Jeff Chiba Stearns, ©2010.)

“Some people are excited by this apparently contradictory idea of a ‘poetical truth,’ as opposed to the ‘truth of accountants,’ as Werner Herzog likes to characterize it. Others seem to like the fact that something as simple and immediately accessible as a rooster in the backyard can be material for larger allegorical themes, that the viewers can then project their own content into the situation. With *Marcel*, people tend to find appeal in the lived-in rough quality of Ann’s voice, as well, her mingled amusement and affection.”

While the endearing quality of the narration serves as a firm audience foothold in Tom’s case, with Jeff’s *Yellow Sticky Notes*, it came more in the form of audience–artist solidarity: “I started to realize, when it hit online and I was reading through all the comments, that it was starting to inspire people in really cool ways. I’d get comments from old ladies who hadn’t picked up a paintbrush in 30 years who were inspired to paint again after watching the film! I guess the biggest compliment I ever got was that there’s an honesty to the film—that we’re all busy people, and when people see other people’s lives as being busy as well, they automatically relate to it. It’s very voyeuristic too; I think people enjoy, especially in this day and age, glimpsing someone’s life and getting to read their to-do lists; you’re seeing how they visually reflected on that day through the animation process. Which is sort of what the 9/11 or tsunami or Columbine sequences were about: taking in the world around us. I think that’s why people gravitated toward the film as much as they did.”

8

Going Long



Still from *Cheatin'* (Dir. Bill Plympton). (Courtesy of Plymptoons, ©2014.)

For anyone who has already dabbled in the often-laborious, anxiety-inducing process of creating his/her own independent short, the concept of tackling a feature-length project in the same way probably seems like madness. Surely, it's too impossible to even contemplate?

If it takes you years to make something that lasts 5 minutes, anything above 40 (this being the official point, categorically, where a short film becomes a feature) will leave you forever friendless and riddled with every kind of thrombosis your veins can throw at you.*

Well, in some respects, sure. It's farcical to entertain the idea that going about creating an independent feature won't carry with it some significant sacrifices to time, social life, and (worst-case scenario) emotional and physical health. I hope I'm not overselling the prospect here.

All that being said, while it is certainly a taxing and full-on commitment, today's resources have made it considerably more feasible and less intimidating than one might initially think. But first of all, there are some realities worth chewing on.

The cold, hard, and most obvious consideration to take on board would be that your indie feature will never look like a major studio production. It should go without saying that the high-performing merchandise machines put out there by the likes of Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks are not going to remotely resemble what you come up with on your lonesome. That needn't be a bad thing, as fortunately, we've learned from several major films that, when it comes to features, strength of story and idea can conquer all. Adam Elliot's *Mary and Max*, true to the established style of his earlier independent work, is stop-motion of the purposefully nonslick variety, yet I defy anyone to claim that it is neither moving nor hilarious. Ari Folman's *Waltz With Bashir*, rendered in a distinctly nonmainstream animation style by Yoni Goodman, is an undeniably gripping and haunting account of the Lebanon War that bowled over critics and audiences alike.

The same applies to those operating outside of a studio system altogether, where keystone crews and even solitary individuals have proved that the seemingly impossible can be achieved with enough passion, dedication, and clear thinking. One such filmmaker is Signe Baumann, who, after a respectable career as a director of shorts, made the transition to an indie feature. Over the course of 4 years, she successfully wrote, directed, and animated the full-length film *Rocks in my Pockets*, largely from her chilly Manhattan loft (Figure 8.1).

Following on from the success of her *Teat Beat of Sex* series brought up in the previous chapter, for her first feature, Signe instead turned her attention toward an altogether more heavy-going subject: hereditary mental illness, including, but not limited to, observations of her own bloodline's propensity toward depression, anxiety, and, on occasion, suicide. Created ultimately as an exercise in learning to better understand and live with her own suicidal thoughts, through her wit and intuition for visual interpretation, the end result is funny and thoughtful and has been met with critical acclaim.

A main motivating factor for Signe to take on such a large-scale endeavor can be attributed to many years spent as a protégé of Bill Plympton once she moved from Latvia to New York. Bill's much-documented history as an artist and filmmaker stands out as being one of the most prolific, with over 40 short films and 8 features produced independently over the course of his 30-odd-year career. Once his work as a newspaper cartoonist and

* This happens, people. I once heard tell of an animator who nearly did himself in when he developed auxiliary vein thrombosis in his shoulder after cramming in too much track reading in one go. So, if you're planning on an all-nighter or several, treat it like a long-haul flight and try to throw in the odd break.

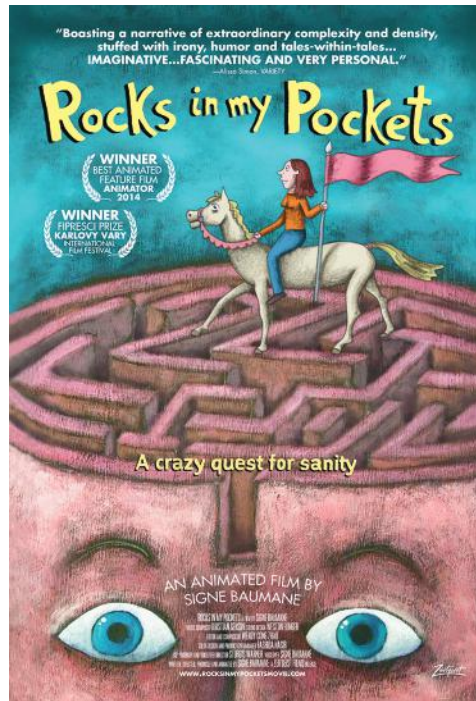


Figure 8.1

Rocks in my Pockets poster. (Courtesy of Signe Baumane/Zeitgeist Films.)

illustrator evolved into a fondness for short-form animation, the rate of his initial output was the first sign that his own independent feature was not out of the realm of possibility.

“I started making animated short films in 1985. I did a film called *Boom Town*; then I did a film called *Your Face* (1987), which was a huge hit; it got an Oscar nomination and made a lot of money, so I gave up illustration and started to make animated shorts. I did a whole bunch of them: *How to Kiss* (1989), *One of Those Days* (1988), *25 Ways to Quit Smoking* (1989), and *Plymptoons* (1990). I put them all together on a videocassette—they didn’t have DVDs back then—with some of my earlier shorts that I did in college, and I realized that I had an hour’s worth of animation!

“It occurred to me that I’d almost made a feature film in the last 3 or 4 years without even trying. Of course, it had always been my dream to work at Disney on some big feature film, but then the thought occurred to me—*I can make my own film; who needs Disney?* The films were making money, plus I was doing a few commercials, so I had the finances to spend on a feature film. I did a storyboard with a friend of mine, Maureen McElheron; we did the script together, she did the music, and I just started drawing. It took about a year and a half to make the film.”

This hard work resulted in *The Tune*, a musical comedy released in 1992. Steeped in hallucinatory visual motifs and incorporating elements from short films produced concurrently, it served as a crucial first long-form outing, one that wears its *naïveté* on its sleeve.

“I was really sort of ignorant about the history of independent filmmaking. I had of course heard of Lotte Reiniger’s *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (a German masterwork released in 1926, animated in silhouette with many qualifiers to be considered the first known independent animated feature), but I didn’t know that it was such a breakthrough, that it was so unique for one person to animate an entire feature film. I just thought it’d be kind of fun to do, an adventure, and a challenge to see if I could. Then when I finished, we entered the film into Sundance, and it was a big hit there. We got huge audiences and lots of applause—and the film got distribution. It was just such a high, such a *thrill*, to actually make a feature film, that I decided to do it again!

“So since then, I’ve made seven more animated feature films. What’s really interesting now is that anybody can make an animated feature film; it’s not nearly so far-fetched as when I did it. Back then, it was kind of stupid; it was absurd. Now it’s as though *all* my friends are making animated feature films. I applaud that! I think it’s great. Plus it’s so democratic now; you don’t have to go to Hollywood and get a \$50 million budget to make your film; you can do it at home on your computer. I think that’s really exciting.

“A lot of people look to me and the film *The Tune* as a sort of breakthrough, something that shows it is possible for one person to make an animated feature film and anybody can do it. I’m proud of that fact, and I’m happy to have started this whole revolution.”

The original feature-length films produced alongside Bill’s subsequent shorts and commissions display an increasing level of comfort and ambition, all embracing the freedoms of content such independence allows. His self-penned features to date (2015’s *Revengeance* being a collaboration with writer Jim Lujan) are *I Married a Strange Person!* (1997), *Mutant Aliens* (2001), *Hair High* (2004), *Idiots and Angels* (2008), and *Cheatin’* (2014). It is 2014’s *Cheatin’* that presents the most harmonious mix of what are considered to be staples of his work: ribald adult themes, perfectly timed slapstick, cartoon hyperviolence, deftly interwoven musical numbers, and impeccable draftsmanship (Figure 8.2). The film also benefits from elements of emotional pathos introduced in its predecessor *Idiots and Angels*, which see themselves further developed in this instance, chiefly, the



Figure 8.2

Still from *Cheatin’* (Dir. Bill Plympton). (Courtesy of Plymptoons, ©2014.)

absence of dialogue, which allows for greater appreciation of the characters' animation and subtleties of performance.

“An interesting thing about *Cheatin'* is it features better storytelling, I believe, than my other films. It's not so much just a lot of gags, sex, and violence; it has a little more emotional impact, especially for women; a lot of the women really love it, they love the story, they love the characters, they love Ella, the lead character. This is rare for me, that a lot of women really would be moved by my storytelling and characters.”

Another artist to successfully take on a feature film project more or less entirely on her own is animation freelancer Nina Paley. Her own desire to loosely adapt *The Ramayana*, a classic of ancient Hindu literature, developed during a period of her life when she found herself drawing parallels between the text and her own marital circumstances. Nina's affinity with the poem and a recently discovered fondness for the music of Annette Hanshaw led to an animated interpretation of the 1929 recording *Mean to Me*, featuring *The Ramayana*'s protagonist, Rama, being appealed to in song by his estranged wife, Sita (Figure 8.3).

“I was a syndicated cartoonist at the time, and I had made a bunch of festival shorts. *Sita* started because nothing made me want to get out of bed; I was so uninspired. I had just burned out on everything except animating this one thing. I was reaching a crisis professionally, because I did not want to work on my comic strip, but I *did* want to work on this animation thing, so I just sort of let it happen. I did manage to fulfill my obligations to the comic strip—barely—and then I quit as soon as my contract allowed me to.”

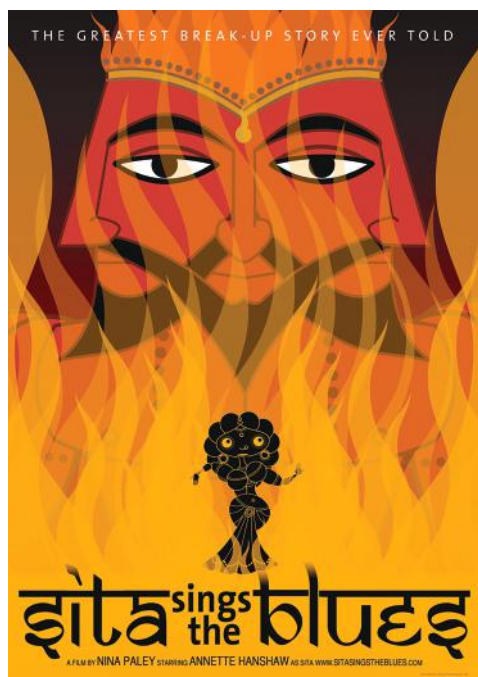


Figure 8.3

Sita Sings the Blues (Dir. Nina Paley) poster. (Courtesy of Nina Paley, ©2008.)

The following winter, finding herself experiencing the same creative ennui as before, Nina devoted her time to another musical episode, marrying Hanshaw's music to a section of *The Ramayana*. Identifying that an incremental production process could lead to a movie-length passion project, she threw herself into producing more. The final result was *Sita Sings the Blues*, a feature created almost entirely in Flash and eventually released in 2008.

The aforementioned films are all examples of how perseverance and commitment can achieve the seemingly impossible. Realistically, of course, this only scratches the surface as far as the practicalities go. It is important for us to further explore some of the critical areas that led to the success of each of these films.

Harsh Realities

Realizing one's own limitations is vitally important during such a huge undertaking as an animated feature. In the case of *Rocks in my Pockets*, the success of the film depended in many respects on the skills of others. For Signe Baumane, film has always been a collaborative enterprise (Figure 8.4):

"For a long time, people were asking me, 'You make your own short films; why do you need a sound designer when you can do sound yourself?' Or 'You work digitally; why do you need a cameraman?' The reason is because I like collaboration; I like when I get given a hard time."

Collaboration provides new perspectives, ways of working, and practical solutions that would otherwise never be brought to the table. The *Rocks in my Pockets* crew consisted of Signe's friends, colleagues, and enthusiastic interns, whose specialist expertise proved crucial to the final film's overall watchability.

"We had the voiceover director, my boyfriend, Sturgis Warner, who directed the film's narration. He is also a theater director and, because he works with new playwrights, was able to give me opinions and feedback on the script to get it in shape while I was writing it.

"Wendy Zhao was one of the first people who came on to work on the film. She started with coloring, but she also composited and edited the film and did a lot of other things. Our color designer was Rashida Nasir. As I didn't have time for all of the micromanagement, I would approve the colors, but Rashida would choose them. She had an interesting and very different sense of color than myself, so it took a while for us to get on the same page, but I liked working with her because I liked how she tried to sneak her color sense in with my own sensibilities. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't, but I liked that challenge, that other point of view.

"Then after that there's a collaboration with a sound designer, Weston Fonger, followed by one of the most amazing collaborations, with the film's composer, Kristian Sensini. He brought so much to the project that I, to this day, am thankful. I had told him to use the spoken voiceover as a soprano in a music piece. Not only did he do that, treating the voiceover as the main lead of a melody, but he also at times harmonized his instruments with the voice! It was just mind-blowing."

Sita Sings the Blues was, by contrast, a more solitary endeavor, Nina Paley eschewing many of the established protocols of film production for gut instinct.

"It was absolutely not traditional filmmaking. There was no storyboard. I didn't know how to make a feature, and so I got books about screenwriting and asked people I knew who had worked on features. They suggested I should write a treatment, which I tried, but I eventually realized that it really just wasn't good for the film, so I abandoned all of what I had written."

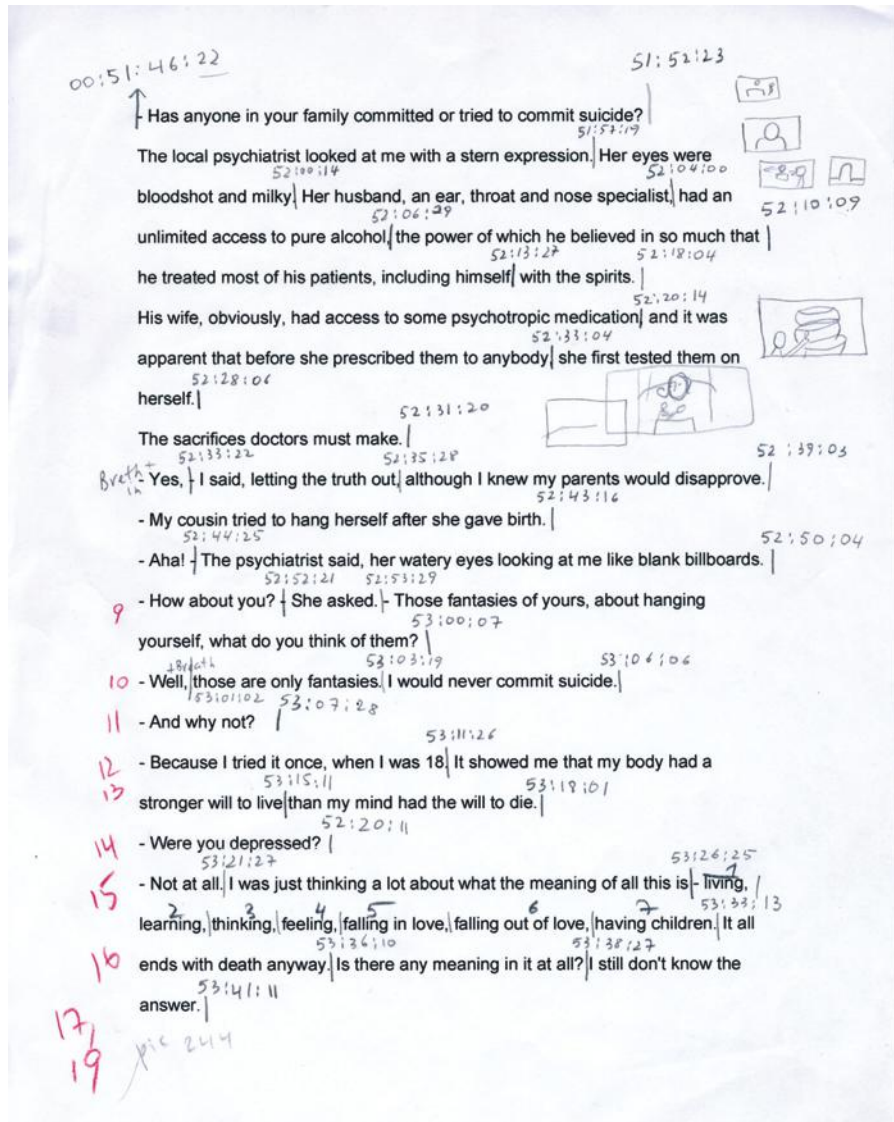


Figure 8.4

Rocks in my Pockets script excerpt with notes on timing. (Courtesy of Signe Baumann.)

Instead, Nina built the film in increments, matching lyrically germane Annette Hanshaw songs to sequences from *The Ramayana* as before, until she finally had 11 completely animated musical numbers to craft a film around. These vignettes all share the same relatively simple digital cut out style, the characters constructed in segments attached by animatable pivot points.

“I never pictured the whole thing at one time; I pictured little pieces of it at a time and would execute what I saw. It starts with cycles—I really like Macromedia Flash, not

Adobe Flash, and I began making little cycles in it. I wouldn't know necessarily what the whole scene was going to look like, but I'd know, let's say, *Okay, it's got to have dancing monkeys; I'm going to animate this monkey dance*. Once I had done that, I could copy it as many times as I wanted, to create whole groups of them moving together. Seeing what they would look like, I could then make more or fewer of them and arrange them. It was really fun, like making toys and then playing with them (Figure 8.5).

"I've found that the hardest part for me is designing the characters; I have the most mental blocks with that; I procrastinate the most and get the most tense as I do them. I also spend a long time—more time than I would like—on designing props and backgrounds and stuff, but once they're done and I have all these pieces, then I get to start doing cycles again."

Accompanying this recurring visual style were several others, attributed to separate running strands of the film. As the viewer accompanies Sita and Rama on their marital journey, the looseness of the Western interpretation of the source material is explained and celebrated through a variety of alternate visual approaches.

"Basically, I started with the songs. Once I had all of them animated, it was like a skeleton that I would then start making connective tissue between. I wanted to use as many different styles as I could, partly because I'm interested in different styles but also because *The Ramayana* has so many different tellings and such variety of art associated with it—it's also a way to maintain a little bit more viewer interest, because it can get so boring to watch the same style for so long."

The main story arc is told through character animation that, while rigged in a manner not wholly dissimilar to the musical sequences, adopts an entirely different look, evocative of traditional South Asian Mughal paintings. The quality of movement, in homage to prior, more straight-faced *Ramayana* adaptations, is purposefully stilted—as are the performances of the voice actors. By contrast, peppered throughout the film are a series of ad-libbed, expositional segments in which traditionally designed shadow puppet figures discuss their conflicting accounts and interpretations of the source text as well as the motivations of its characters.

"Initially, I had tried to get photographs of the narrators and was going to animate in a cutout style with them, but they were too busy to send me them. That's when I thought of the shadow puppets, which was *much* better!" Starkly juxtaposed against the stilted, somber Mughal sequences, the fluidity of these moments brings the film effectively down to earth and serves as an important counterbalance.

Tying the film together are the autobiographical retellings of Nina's own personal crises, wherein the homologous circumstances of her dissolving marriage and the increasingly terse relationship between *The Ramayana*'s Sita and Rama are made clear. These scenes adopt an entirely separate approach to the movement, design, and layout, making use of full animation and character design truer to Nina's established comics style, albeit looser and sketchier.

"It's my least favorite part of the film, but I felt it was important to put that in to show very explicitly that this is a personal film, from a personal point of view, from somebody with a particular history. I didn't want to make any pretensions that I was telling any kind of 'official' *Ramayana*."

The Commitment Factor

The use of multiple styles, as detailed, also proved to be vital to the aesthetic richness of Signe's *Rocks in my Pockets* (Figure 8.6). The character animation for her film is, for

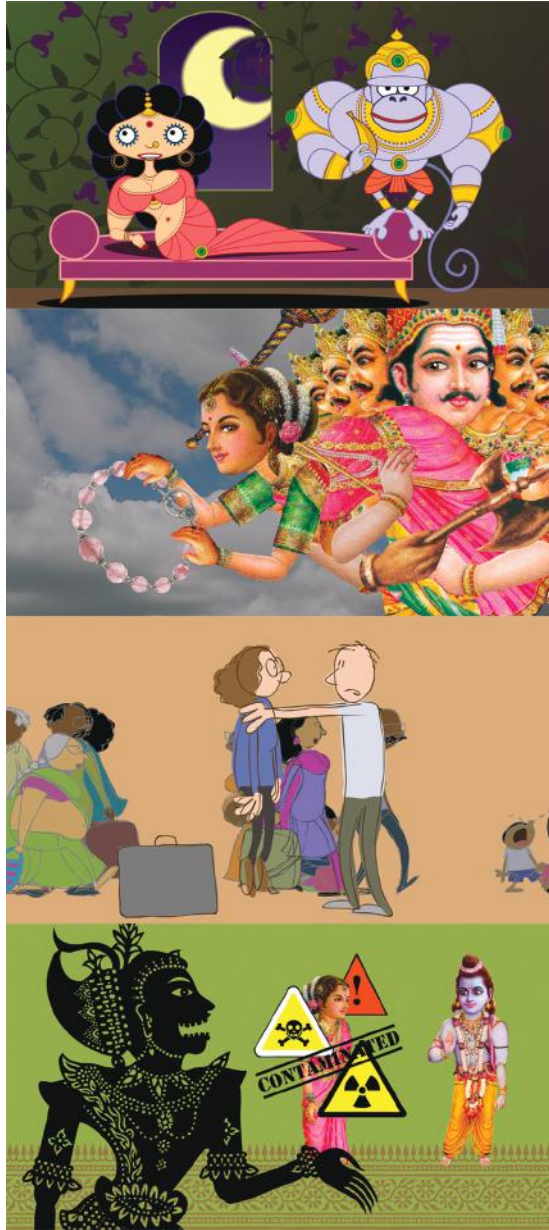


Figure 8.5

Still from *Sita Sings the Blues* (Dir. Nina Paley) demonstrating the variety of design and animation styles. (Courtesy of Nina Paley, ©2008.)



Figure 8.6

Signe photographs background elements for *Rocks in my Pockets*. (Courtesy of Signe Baumane.)

the most part, hugely limited, in some instances taking a backseat to the narration and story. While this is mainly to serve the long running time and ensure the completion of the project itself, the film remains charming and watchable throughout for several reasons. Consistent with Signe’s approach to prior short films, the action is a mix of literal interpretation of the stories being told intercut with abstract, metaphorical concepts to help elucidate each character’s state of mind. Adding real depth to the action is the atypical approach to layout, for which the 2-D character animation is composited onto photographed (and occasionally animated, using stop-motion) physical sets sculpted out of paper-mache (Figure 8.7). While this approach blesses the film with a unique visual personality all of its own, it represented one of the more intimidating aspects of production.

“The areas that I had no expertise in whatsoever, where I didn’t even know where to start, were the most nerve-racking. The first was the lighting of the sets—I can create paper-mache sets, and I can draw, but the skill of lighting or the talent and knack to understand it, I don’t have at all. As a camerawoman, I knew what looked good, and I could make pretty decent pictures, but I couldn’t even begin to set up the lights. So Sturgis, because he had a better sense of lighting, was able to help me to light the set. Otherwise, I don’t know how that would have happened.

“The other part was creating the voiceover, which was very intimidating. I did *Teat Beat of Sex* with my voice, so you would think, *Oh, just go ahead and read it, right?* But *Rocks in my Pockets* is a 90-minute narrative, it has to have an arc and consistency and drive because people have to stay with you for that length of time (Figure 8.8). So again, I asked Sturgis to direct the voice. We worked on it for 7 weeks, 5 hours a day, and then we read it in front of a small audience of 30 people. It was really nerve-racking. I never ordinarily have stage fright, but I had stage fright for a week before the presentation, which lasted until it was over. I was so nervous, almost to a point where I felt that I would faint, because I am not an actress. After all, you can’t cram in 7 weeks and think you’ll be as good as Meryl Streep; that’s ridiculous.”

Aside from working through hurdles of production that seem daunting, the realistic completion of a long-form independent feature hinges on a particular level of dedication

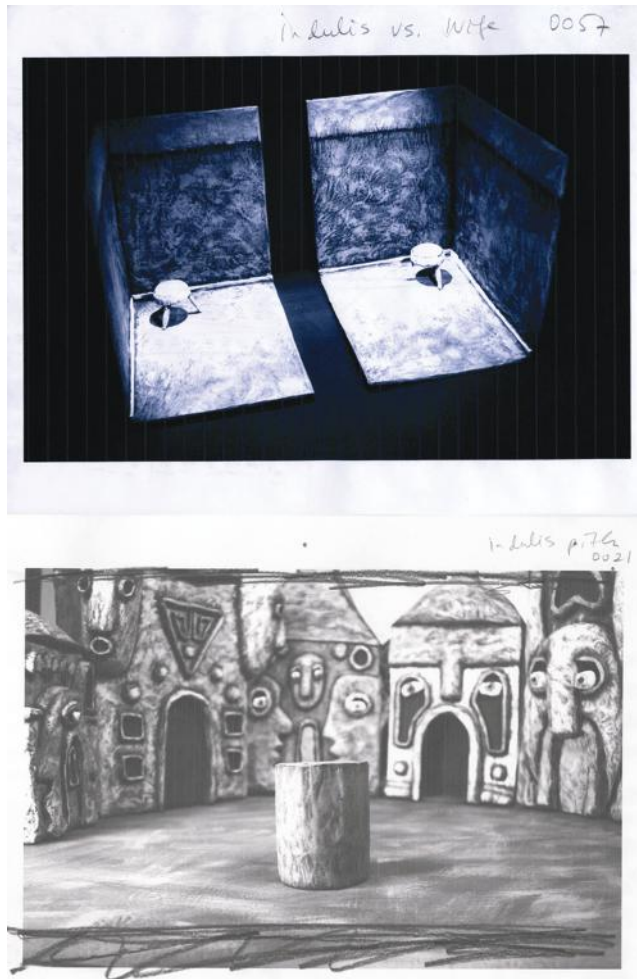


Figure 8.7

Photographs of *Rocks in my Pockets* backgrounds for character animation reference. (Courtesy of Signe Baumane.)

one may not be prepared for. In the case of *Sita Sings the Blues*, Nina's symbolic commitment to the film gave her a vital psychological push to stick with it, with unanticipated benefits.

"It took 3 years of work spread over 5 years of time, starting in 2003. So when I worked on it in earnest, it took a little under 3 years, but I had already made the first short and the character designs and things like that. I learned a very important lesson by committing to *Sita Sings the Blues*: I bought a ring, I 'married' the film, and I just decided, for richer or poorer, that the film would be my priority. I wasn't going to worry about money so much—I had enough savings at the time from freelancing to last me about 8 months—but what happened from making that commitment was I no longer took low-paying jobs that took a lot of time. It emboldened me to charge more money when those jobs came in. If



Figure 8.8

Still from *Rocks in my Pockets* (Dir. Signe Baumane) demonstrating 2D character animation against constructed backgrounds. (Courtesy of Signe Baumane, ©2014.)

somebody said ‘no deal,’ that was fine, I would use the time to make my movie, and the result of that was I got some really great high-paid gigs! By having that attitude, that was the first time in my life I got really good gigs; I was kind of amazed by that.”

As someone who has worked on features since before the digital revolution, Bill Plympton’s perspective on just how much more achievable such projects are today holds particular weight (Figure 8.9).



Figure 8.9

Bill Plympton animates “Thug” from *Cheatin’*. (Courtesy of Plymptoons, ©2013.)

“I think the big help is the digital technology. The cost of making a film has come way down; when I shot my first film, I had to use a big rostrum camera, 35 mm film, and paint on cels. The editing was done on a Steenbeck flatbed, and the sound mix was really expensive; you had to do it in a big lab and pay between fifty to a hundred dollars an hour. The technology was so old-fashioned that it was very expensive, whereas you can now make a feature film on your home computer, and it will probably be better than the one I made. I think that’s the real key, even more so than funding; it’s all down to new technology—and new distribution. Now you can distribute it online without worrying about getting someone to distribute the film.”

Even bearing such technological progression in mind, the fundamental sacrifices of time and resources remain just as taxing and need to be considered when planning such a large-scale project around other work and life commitments (Figure 8.10).

“Generally speaking, I do a feature film about every two to two and a half years, and I’ll do maybe two or three shorts a year. In between, I might do a couple of commercial jobs, an ad or part of a documentary or compilation film; that’s the kind of work pattern I like. The storyboard and writing process will ordinarily take about a year—though not full-time; it’s sort of part-time in between other projects. Then I will do animation for roughly a year (*Cheatin’* took a little bit longer—it took a year and a half because it was a lot more drawings), and then postproduction takes about 6 months, so it’s about two and a half years to make the film. While I’m doing the storyboards and the writing, my studio will be working on the postproduction and editing for the previous film, so it kind of balances out; there’s always a different part of the production going on all the time.”

Story Development’s Greatest Ally: Feedback

With such an extensive filmography under his belt, Bill Plympton’s sense of his audience’s wants and needs is doubtless more attuned than most, although this doesn’t get in the way of what, to him, is prerequisite to the development of his story ideas.

“One of the important things that I do—and I think other filmmakers should do—is test it at almost every stage of the production. I do this for my shorts, too. I’ll show the storyboards to really close friends in animation, because most animators understand storyboards better than the man on the street. Then I’ll do a rough cut of the film, maybe even a pencil test with sound, and I’ll show that to a test audience of mostly strangers, not necessarily friends, so I get a hopefully unbiased opinion. Then when the film is close to being done, when it’s all colored with rough sound and rough music, I’ll show it again to get some feedback as this is my final chance to perfect the film.

“A lot of people think that since I produce, finance, and draw the films myself, that there’s no censorship. There is; I really censor myself a lot because I want the film to be popular, so if there’s a scene in there that I don’t think works very well or will be offensive or turn people off, I will cut that scene because I really want this film to be a success. Now I *will* try to put in ideas that I think are kind of crazy and wacky and bizarre, that aren’t necessarily ‘normal’ ideas, and I will fight to keep those in, but if the test audience doesn’t like them, I will cut them out and put them on the shelf.

“I think an important quality to have is considering the audience as the master I’m working for. I’m not working for myself; I’m not working for good reviews or winning lots of prizes; I’m working for the audience, and that’s the way it should be.”

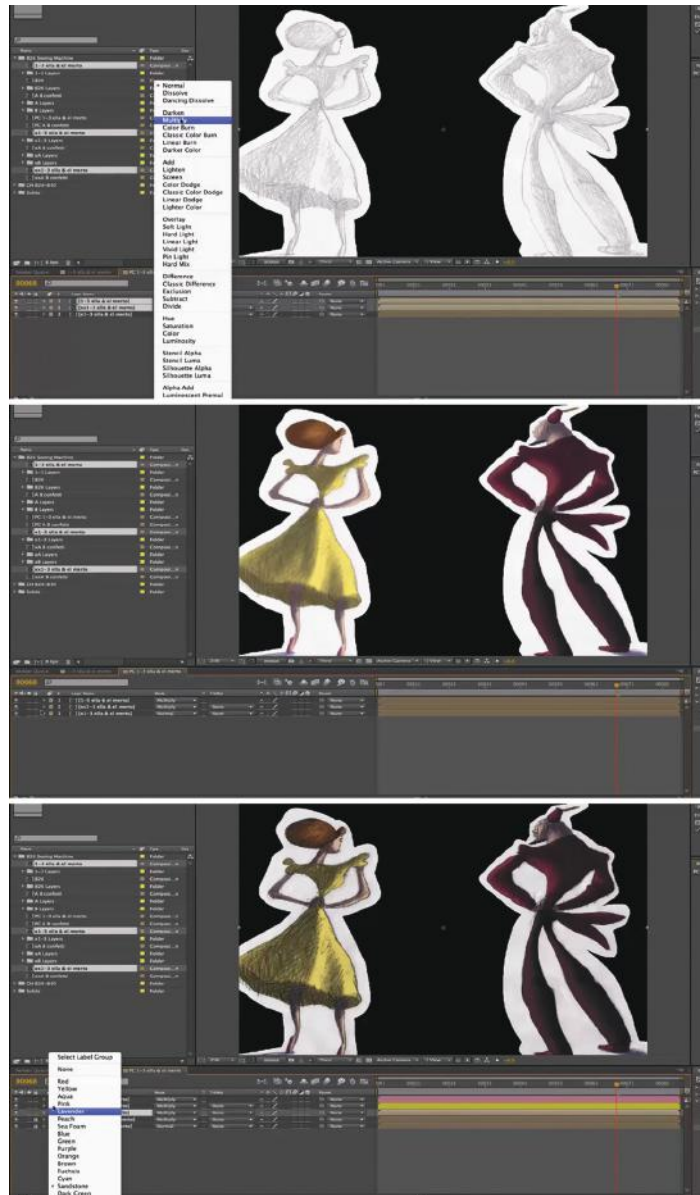


Figure 8.10

Compositing pencil art and digital color layers for *Cheatin'* in After Effects. (Courtesy of Plymptoons, ©2013.)

Signe Baumann similarly doesn't make films for herself: "It's not like I'm going to make the film and lock myself in a room with it and watch it for a year (Figure 8.11). You make a film to communicate ideas, and before you release the film into the world, you want to know if you have somehow succeeded. At the very least, I want my points to come across, I want the story to be clear, but there is a line of how much you give in to the audience or to the demands of people who are not used to seeing something so utterly different. Very early on, when I presented the first 5 minutes in screenings and online, the feedback was very strong and very consistent that the voiceover was horrible and that I would have to hire some decent actress or get rid of the voiceover altogether. So for me, early on, I had to consider, *Do I do that?*

"The way I conceived the film was like an acorn that I'd planted in the ground, and I had to wait and work on it. The people were saying to me that they wanted to have wheat or barley, or a rose, but the seed that I had put into the ground was for an oak tree, so what can I do? Dig it out and find a seed of a rose, or wait and see how my oak tree grows, how this will turn out, and what my options are? So it was very hard for me with this early



Figure 8.11

Rocks in my Pockets thumbnail boards to final stills comparison. (Courtesy of Signe Baumann, ©2014.)

negative feedback to stay loyal to the acorn that I had put in the ground. I was full of doubt and insecurity, but I decided that even if I failed, even if this oak tree came out crippled, I wanted to see it. So I stayed loyal to that idea.

“I didn’t just rerecord my voiceover; we had a test reading where I read the script in front of a small audience of 30 people who gave feedback. They said which parts were interesting, which parts they liked, and where they felt it dragged. So we cut out some stuff, I stayed loyal to my acorn, and I worked and worked. Then towards the end, in December 2012 when we had most of the film animated but only half-colored, I had two test screenings. One was at Bill Plympton’s studio, where we had about 10 people crammed around a TV set who we took feedback from afterward. Another took place a week later at a small art-house café in Sunset Park in Brooklyn. That had roughly 70 people, and we had a very intense feedback session. Out of 70 people who saw the film in these two feedback sessions, 50 said they loved the voiceover, seven said they absolutely hated it, and then the rest of them said they could go either way. For me, that was interesting, that people still hated the voiceover, but only 10% of them. So if you were to bring it to 10,000 people, then 1,000 people would hate it, but the bigger percentage loves it. This was at a time when the film didn’t have music and was barely colored, when the voiceover was really right in your face. In that instance, because way more people loved it than hated it, I decided to keep the voiceover.

“Then there’s a certain type of feedback where people say, ‘Oh, I think that you shouldn’t do this’ or ‘If I were you, I would do that,’ where it’s them trying to make my film. That feedback is hard to take, because it’s not really helping the film.”

This degree of awareness to pick and choose which feedback is applicable speaks for one’s self-assuredness as a filmmaker, though as Signe herself concedes, the more consistent feedback is usually consistent for a reason: “People were confused in the beginning as to who was the main character, because she doesn’t kick in until around 14 minutes into the film. That was important feedback that I was scratching my head about for a good 6 months, until in June 2013, I was ready to do something about it. It took me 6 months to understand what had to be done, which was to create an opening sequence that wasn’t there before, of the small woman pushing a big rock up the mountain so that you knew she is the main character; when she reappears in the film, you know that it’s her story (Figure 8.12).

“I cut out the first 5 minutes of the film, which was very hard because they were fully colored and they were kind of funny, but they had to go because they were prolonging the time where you didn’t know what was happening, or why. Then we cut out some parts that we felt could be tightened up, parts I was really attached to but ultimately felt were unnecessary. Then we had the final test screening in the Fall of 2013, after which I did small adjustments for moments where people were confused about how the characters related to each other. Then of course, we added the music and sound design, and that was it. So overall, there were four testing events.”

Nina Paley’s process for soliciting feedback during the production of *Sita Sings the Blues* was more focused on her potential audience, taking what, at the time, was a progressive approach to engage with the rest of the world.

“With *Sita Sings the Blues*, I was posting little QuickTime clips of it—before YouTube existed. I would finish a bit and post it on my blog. Nobody read my blog back then until some people found these clips, when other websites wrote about them. Then my site just kept getting shut down because there was too much traffic, and I had to pay all these coverage charges because I was hosting the video myself. That was totally worth it, it was a really



Figure 8.12

Still from *Rocks in my Pockets* (Dir. Signe Baumane). (Courtesy of Signe Baumane, ©2014.)

good thing, so I learned early on that yes, sharing the work while it's in progress is a really good thing in terms of building interest for it.

“I like to share things as I finish them. Occasionally, I'll seek feedback for a particular design, and I'll just post it on my blog or on Facebook or Google+ and ask people what they think of something. I don't want feedback on everything, and the great thing about using the Internet is I can only ask for feedback on specific things. Of course, what this means is that people *will* be offering me unsolicited feedback, but I've gotten better at ignoring information that's of no use to me while gleaning information that *is* useful to me. It's great having a bunch of people that are following my work as fans, and when I want feedback, I can get it; it's a luxury. Otherwise, it's like I'm totally in isolation, in a vacuum, because I work all by myself. If I worked in a studio, I would have studio colleagues to show it to; I'd be part of a team; and even if it was a secret from the rest of the world, there would be enough encouragement, probably, to keep me going. But for a number of reasons, I don't work that way; I work alone; I pretty much *need* to work alone. So my studio is the Internet!”

Staying Visible, Keeping Afloat

Both *Cheatin'* and *Rocks in my Pockets* benefited from coming together at a time when social media and blog culture had firmly taken hold. Signe Baumane's production blog,^{*} which began with a cryptic first post in September 2010, would venture into all sorts of territory beyond being a strict breakdown of the making of film. As in the movie itself, her gift for anecdotal storytelling is frequently on display, the site serving a repository for

^{*} <http://rocksinmypocketsthemovie.wordpress.com/>

childhood recollections, memoirs of early adulthood, and accounts of shambolic relationships that serve as well-articulated companion reading to the eventual movie. Though plenty of the posts do explore her process and detail the successes, pitfalls, and challenges faced during and after production, it is Signe’s unabashedly idiosyncratic personality and the heart of who she is as a filmmaker that shines through and grants the film’s potential audience an avenue to communicate with her.

“I had no idea what I was doing with social media when I was making the film, but it was very important to me to connect with people. One interesting thing that happened was, after one screening of the film at DOK Leipzig in Germany, a man came up to me and said that he’d followed my blog and the Facebook page for the 4 years I had worked on the film. He had stumbled across my blog by accident, without any interest in animation at all, but every update that I posted helped him to understand and connect with the project better, and at the end, he was a complete fan of the project. When it came time for him to be able to see the film in Leipzig at a screening, he was just beside himself; he was so thrilled. That was something interesting that I’d never considered, and probably, if I had known about it earlier, I would have done a better job, maybe, or consciously written things about connecting people to the project. I was just writing random stuff; I’m not really a very well-organized person, so I’d just do random posts. There’s no real strategy for me, but I guess my personality comes through. Who I am, my passion, the simple pleasures I underwent to make this project happen, and my sense of humor also comes through. The tagline ‘A funny film about depression’ could be many things, but if you followed my blog and Facebook page for 4 years, you would know exactly what to expect—or you would hope that it would be what you think it is going to be.”

Supplementing her blog is a short series of video entries, a means of documenting the process further, also embraced by Bill Plympton throughout *Cheatin’*. The extensive production blog* put together by Bill and his Plymptoons studio crew painstakingly covers the key processes and technicalities, offering fans and enthusiasts a look at his unique approach and the ways it differentiates from a traditional feature pipeline. While very different films, these windows into the more or less simultaneous production of *Rocks in my Pockets* and *Cheatin’* (coupled with Signe and Bill’s prior working relationship) offer their fan base an insight into their solidarity as independent creatives and mutual encouragement (Figure 8.13).

Such support is integral to staying motivated while in the thick of production, especially at points where the light at the end of the tunnel is so hard to see. For Signe, the sacrifices that might otherwise have stood in the way of perseverance were tempered with some good fortune in the sense that collaboration maintained an important personal relationship.

“One thing that, in my case, was extremely lucky was that my boyfriend Sturgis realized early on that I was embarking on a project he could not stop me from, so he integrated himself into it as the voiceover director and the lighting designer. In Q & As when we are together, sometimes people ask the question, ‘So why did a theater director decide to be part of this animated feature project?’ And he says, ‘I had to do it if I wanted to see my girlfriend!’ In the last year, he became coproducer, and we raised money together for the last batch of distribution and marketing; we formed our own LLC, did research, and prepared marketing materials together. We work quite a lot, and we communicate all the time about business. If I was communicating so intensely with somebody else, I wouldn’t have *time* for a boyfriend!

* <https://vimeo.com/plymptoons>

Sc. Length - 162
BG-pan access on a pos.
change of (1728,540) to (200,540)

Signe
Sc. 035

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B004 pos. change of (1640,548) to (504,548) over 60 frames 97 frames in	G004 Pos. change of (3192,440) to (-404,404) over 87 frames 43 frames in.	G 002 Pos. change of (2700,356) to (-896,420) over 87 frames 43 frames in.	Z004 Pos. change of (2976,484) to (-904,484) over 83 frames 108 frames in.	Z 002 Pos. change of (2976,484) to (-904,484) over 83 108 frames in.
B002 Pos. change of (2528,476) to (328,476) over 75 frames 146 frames in.	Daina Pos. change of (1512,516) to (-168,516) over 37 frames	Augusts Pos. change of (1824,556) to (456,556) over 27 frames	Rasma Pos. change of (2688,548) to (120,548) over 47 frames.	Martins Pos. change of (1736,588) to (-960,588) over 32 frames 50 frames in
Sarta pos. change of (1920,516) to (-312,516) over 37 frames 26 frames in.	G005 Pos. change of (2760,444) to (832,444) over 37 frames 52 frames in, to (-1152,444) over 31 frames.	G001 Pos. change of (2784,572) to (-1208,572) over 74 frames 46 frames in.	G 003 Pos. change of (3712,532) to (-776,532) over 74 frames 46 frames in	Z 003 Pos. change of (2976,436) to (-968,484) over 168 frames. 114 frames in
Z001 Pos. change of (2976,436) to (-904,484) over 68 frames 114 frames in.	B003 Pos. change of (1952,572) to (-448,612) over 29 frames. 137 frames in.	B001 Pos. change of (2896,540) to (-1776,540) over 37 frames 154 frames in.		

Figure 8.13

Rocks in my Pockets exposure sheet. (Courtesy of Signe Baumann.)

“As for the personal sacrifices, they are obvious: I lived very frugally, I lived on the edge of being insanely poor, and all the money I had went towards the project. I barely had time for friends—I believe I *had* friends, but I hardly saw them. There are people in our lives who come in and expect a certain level of friendship, a certain level of communication that I couldn’t give them, and they would get very upset and walk away mad at me. So I can only be friends with people who understand what I do, and why, people who would not try to barge in and take big chunk of my time, that have respect for this thing that I try to do. ‘Be prepared to work long hours, and be prepared to become a family with your team.’ The other thing I would say is that one has to foster good relationships with people who are wealthy! When people put down wealthy people, I don’t agree; I think that they’re fun, and when you need to raise money for your film, a person who believes in you as an artist, who believes in your project, and who is able to support you with a little more contribution that just \$10, that is also very handy.”

Bill Plympton’s own resolve is predicated more on having found a working rhythm that feeds his personal contentment (Figure 8.14). “Well, first of all, just to let you know, I get up every morning around 5 a.m. and go to my drawing board and start drawing—and



Figure 8.14

Cheatin' (Dir. Bill Plympton) drawn animation to final film comparison. (Courtesy of Plymptoons, ©2014.)

sometimes I'll draw until 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. at night, so it's a long day! Certainly, during the day, I have to do phone calls or business or write checks or have meetings, but it is a long day of animation, and, I'll be honest with you, it's really fun. If you're doing it right, if you really have an interesting story with interesting characters, then it's a really exciting process; it's a joy and a pleasure. That, I think, is the number one reason why I do it, but also, at the back of my mind, I have this fantasy—and sometimes it's a reality—of *Oh, this one will win the Oscar; this'll win the Nobel Peace Prize; this will get a standing ovation; this will get lines around the block waiting to see the film...*

“And you have to believe that; you have to believe that this is the best film ever made, better than *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and *Citizen Kane*, because if you don't, then you'll lose your passion, you'll lose your excitement for the project, and it will turn out pretty bad. So I always have a very optimistic attitude about my films; I always fantasize about winning all these prizes and going to all these wonderful festivals. That's the other part, getting a huge response and nice ovation from the audience; that's really what drives me. For some of the films, I've gotten that, and I must say, it's very gratifying after all the work to know that the audience likes what I have produced” (Figure 8.15).

To filmmakers who would follow in the footsteps of herself, Bill, Nina, and others who've run the animated feature production gauntlet, Signe Baumann recommends a soupçon of denial. “When I started *Rocks in my Pockets*, I thought it could be done for \$100,000. Well, it was not; in the end, when we had finished everything including marketing and distribution, it was three times that. That number is huge, I will never hold that much money in my hands, so I think that I protected myself from knowing exactly what was going to happen; if I had known how much the film would have cost from the start, I might have never begun. So you have to be delusional to start any project, and you have to say it's going to be easy, which is how I started. The hardest thing for me was that, once I



Figure 8.15

Still from *Cheatin'* (Dir. Bill Plympton). (Courtesy of Plymptoons, ©2014.)

had been animating for half a year with an assistant who was coloring for 4 months as fast as she could as I had these drawings piling up, in 4 months, we had only colored around 3 minutes! That feeling of despair, that I had a 90-minute project to accomplish and in 4 months, two of us had accomplished so little, that feeling of that long tunnel ahead, I felt like I have to walk across the Earth! But then everybody got faster; it was the beginning, the early stages. We got more help, and so things moved along, and it went ahead.”

For Nina Paley, the “marriage” of her and her film proved to be a vital exercise in catharsis. On top of it being an outlet for an emotionally tumultuous period of her life, the sheer amount of time making *Sita Sings the Blues* demanded of her had the added healing value of putting distance between her and the events as they had transpired. “I did think it was a pretty transformative experience, that I took this horrible event, and by making a feature film out of it, I changed my life in a really dramatic way. So by the time I was done, I was really grateful for this event, because the film just totally changed my life and brought me all these gifts that I never would have had if these things had never occurred.”

9

Funding

In an ideal world, the landscape of funding would be so evergreen as to be able to provide you with a list of relevant organizations, schemes, and networks to reach out to for financial support of your independent work. In the cold light of day, however, these circumstances are constantly shifting, with a multitude of political factors determining the perceived relevance of the arts throughout the world. Consequently, any list of resources I could present at the time of writing would be quickly outdated, so you as the filmmaker or producer will need to put in the legwork when it comes to just what opportunities to bolster your budget will be available at any given time, wherever it is you reside. In a huge number of instances, filmmakers have managed to make fantastic work with no official budget at all, save for their time and, when handled respectfully, the time of others who pitch in (more on this in the next chapter). Through carefully saving money or even producing a film alongside a day job, it is not out of the realm of possibility for certain film ideas to come together unfunded. Of course, you may very well have a film idea where that approach simply is not viable, so here, we will look at a number of other funding options to contemplate.

Going into one's own pockets may be a grim inevitability, but the perceivable value of your film—whether it has an educational purpose, for example, or examines a major social issue—can help bring in supplemental funds. When seeking support for their animated Louis Spohr tribute *Virtuos Virtuell*, directors Thomas Stellmach and Maja Oschmann



Figure 9.1

Still from *Virtuos Virtuell* (Dir. Thomas Stellmach/Maja Oschmann). (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach, ©2013.)

were well aware that the high quality standard they hoped for the film would be far easier to achieve with more than self-funding alone (Figure 9.1).

“I had to produce a film which could go to festivals; that was why it was necessary to get this high quality,” Thomas assures. “The film had to go to cinemas; that was the only way could I get funding. On the other side, we had some patrons from the city, because the idea was to also produce this film for the exhibition of Kassel’s Louis Spohr Museum. At the end of the day, we managed to get roughly half of the production budget, from companies, banks, and the mayor, for example.”

Funds were gathered from a variety of sources, patrons including the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media, the Hessian Film Fund, companies, banks, stores, and individuals, not to mention the Louis Spohr Museum itself. Thomas and Maja’s own financial contributions came not through dipping into existing funds as much as countless unpaid hours working to finish it. This was made possible by limiting the film’s crew to just themselves. While it might seem that bringing on board a larger crew would have reduced the overall production time down from 3-plus years, it’s worth remembering that the entire aesthetic and emotion of the film hinged on a very personal system of communication and idea generation—an artistic *folie à deux*, almost—that, if extended to salaried outsiders, may have both cost money and protracted the length of production.

The Snowball Effect

In the case of Amsterdam-based artist Rosto, whose prolific output we will explore in greater depth later in the book, geographical circumstances have also proved fortuitous when it comes to securing funds for new projects, even if he has to look further afield than his home country of the Netherlands: “We are very lucky that we are European, and although things can go rapidly in the wrong direction—it’s always easy to break stuff down that took a long time to build up—we still have good government funding systems. In my

case, I often collaborate with other European countries, especially France, who have been very good to me—they are a cinephile country, and there are a lot of people there sitting on money, so to speak, who really appreciate what I do. So a film like *Lonely Bones* (2013), for example, was only financed by French money; I didn't get any financing from my own country, but France was there. But for a film like *Splintertime* (2015), there were three countries involved—Belgium, France, and Holland—and some television money. That's basically how we'd gather all the little bits and pieces of funding together" (Figure 9.2).

The additional streams of funding are again owed to the snowball effect of each Rosto project being more visible and aesthetically polished than the last, a mutually beneficial arrangement for both artist and production company that sees him more than happy to continue a professional association with Autour de Minuit for the foreseeable future.

"While I'm often being told that I'm one of their 'trophy' authors, I'm always being reminded how lucky I am to be with a distribution/production company that has become synonymous for quality work out there. So I think we both not only enjoy each other's company; we also benefit a lot from it."

It is something of a rare case, however, for outside funding to not contribute significantly to the creative side of the process. In the world of mainstream cinema—or any form of marketable art, for that matter—there is an inevitable correlation between the level of outside financial assistance and the amount of creative control a filmmaker has to relinquish. Sometimes, this is a good thing (think of all the director's cuts of films you might have seen that only serve to belabor or convolute the story, paling in comparison to its tighter theatrical release), though the idea of having your vision as a filmmaker curbed is, in principle, an idea that most people will not be especially fond of. This is especially true in the case of independent films, where the potential to profit from and market your finished film is significantly less. One example of an independent project that became a different beast over time through its changing funding circumstances would be the series of StoryCorps films



Figure 9.2

Still from *Splintertime* (Dir. Rosto). (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D./Author de Minuit/S.O.I.L., ©2015.)

produced by brothers Mike and Tim Rauch. Though StoryCorps and Rauch Bros. had a largely clement relationship with a fantastic body of work to show for it, there is a notable disparity between the project's origins and what it would eventually become.

"We were producing the shorts without funding for the first 3 years," says Tim. "It's always true that once there's money involved, then more people—especially the people providing the money—are going to have input. So it does change things."

In the beginning, the brothers' higher level of creative control over the various aspects of the project, such as art style and overall tone, was a major contributor to the enthusiasm and energy that surrounded each film. As the funding circumstances evolved over time, so did StoryCorps' creative vision and input, incrementally shifting further away from Rauch Bros.' ideal scenario.

"Over time, I think you just get to a point where you've done a project long enough and it's time to move on," reasons Tim, "but also where, creatively speaking, you realize that if you were to keep doing it on your own, you would be doing it differently."

"There were things we would have loved to have explored over the years, with that series," adds Mike. "I think we were always interested in the possibility of experimenting with sound design and the use of music to set different moods. I think from a point of view of budget as well as just a creative direction that they wanted to go with, that was something StoryCorps never wanted to do, which was fine. We made it work with their approach, and it was an amazing opportunity on so many levels to make all those shorts. We're so thankful to have done it, but there are new vistas we wanted to be able to explore creatively. We knew that if we were to keep doing the same thing, we would not necessarily have had that chance" (Figure 9.3).



Figure 9.3

Sketches for unproduced StoryCorps film *Ralph Donald* by Rauch Bros. Animation. (Courtesy of Rauch Bros. Animation.)

On reflection, Mike and Tim have a keen sense of the benefits of self-funding and its inherent freedoms, though in comparing the two situations, they acknowledge that with the development of the series came a number of undeniable perks. The most advantageous of these was being able to bring on board serious talent in the form of animated television industry veterans, such as background designer Bill Wray and storyboard artist Stephen DeStefano, whose combined TV credits include such projects as *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, *Samurai Jack*, *The Venture Bros*, *The Mighty B!*, and *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes*.

Bringing on board these artists was an unexpected outcome of initially pursuing recent graduates to work on the show. When scheduling conflicts arose that saw Rauch Bros. without a crew right before production began on the first group of StoryCorps shorts to receive funding, panic soon gave way to ambitious logic, as Mike recalls.

“What we would have done when we hired our background artist would be to then specifically show him lots of Bill Wray’s work, to put across what we wanted to carry over into the series. So I thought, *What do I have to lose at this point? I’ve got nobody else on deck; I might as well shoot for the seemingly impossible*—which was to get Bill onto this production.”

Fortuitously, Mike happened to live in the same building as animation historian, Amid Amidi, who was able to put Rauch Bros. in contact with Bill Wray. With some resourcefulness, they also managed to reach out to fellow Spūmcø alumnus Jim Smith, who would contribute to several StoryCorps shorts as a layout artist.

“I e-mailed both of them, and they called me back within an hour agreeing to come onto the project! That was a pretty huge surprise to me; I remember just literally pacing in circles in my apartment, almost running and jumping up and down. That was a lesson in not selling yourself short when it comes to your creative vision of what you want to do and who you want on your team. You might as well just go for it instead of telling yourself that it’s not going to work out.”

Even without outside funding, this lesson is one that should be taken on board and can apply to other areas of production as well, such as casting for your film (as we will see in [Chapter 12](#)). As well as guaranteeing a more authentic end result than simply having someone replicate these artists’ style, in many respects, their experience and advanced artistry would not just be confined to their respective roles but bleed into the production as a whole.

“Even the quality of our character design vastly improved once we did have money and a team to be able to produce these things,” Mike acknowledges. “Stephen DeStefano, for instance, was never hired as a character designer, but the quality of design in his storyboards—sometimes before we had even established certain design concepts—was so strong that it heavily influenced the look of many StoryCorps shorts.”

As Tim describes, this ripple effect was also the case with the background art that Bill Wray would produce for the films. “Over the years, I feel like I’ve learned so much just through observing Bill’s work, seeing how he handles simplicity and creating focus and tension and using color, so it’s been invaluable to have had funding. People complain about having less creative control, which is true, but you also learn and grow as an artist. There are always advantages to every experience you have if you embrace it fully.”

There remain, from Mike’s standpoint, clear benefits in taking on film projects completely independently, with an unfettered approach to direction and animation style,

though he is quick to concede that it is a far more solitary experience that is not always preferable to what can be accomplished with a larger team and all of its associated benefits.

“The way that first group of shorts started was independently, made on our own time, on our own dime. We had an agreement with StoryCorps where we jointly owned the shorts that were produced in that time period. I think that the fact that we had something established about an approach for these, even though it evolved after that, put us in a different place than we would’ve been otherwise. First of all, I don’t think it would have *happened* as a series of shorts without having done those independent ones first; I don’t think we could have walked in a room, pitched that idea, and have them say, “That’s great, let’s get money and make this as a series!” I also think that we did have a certain level of creative freedom in producing them that we would not have had if it had come to life through just a pitch to StoryCorps. I think that we had proven something about our vision and our approach, previous to becoming a funded series, that generated this certain amount of trust and freedom for us in producing them. It’s always a give-and-take.”

Another example of how the presence of corporate funding can affect the independent spirit of a project refers back to an earlier case study in the book. The viral visibility of *Story from North America*, the auteur song-based project by Garrett Michael Davis in collaboration with Kirsten Lepore, ultimately led to a sequel film, *Story from South America*, commissioned by the Fox network’s Animation Domination High-Def (Figure 9.4). Though Kirsten was not involved, Garrett once again took up the roles of



Figure 9.4

The raw edge of 2007’s *Story from North America* (Dir. Garrett Michael Davis/Kirsten Lepore) did not prove to be as present in its 2013 successor. (Courtesy of Garrett Davis/Kirsten Lepore, ©2007.)

writer, composer, performer, designer, and animator with the hope of ensuring a film that, although a more “produced” affair with higher production values, would maintain the outré spirit of the original. Ultimately, Garrett would wind up approaching the process of this follow-up in an entirely different way.

“I made a full-on animatic for it, in contrast to *Story from North America*, and then the whole thing was animated in 2 weeks, compared to the 6 or so months we spent on the original. It was also animated in Flash as opposed to on paper, but (collaborator) Ben Jones had the idea to do all the backgrounds on paper. They were then painted in Photoshop, and the result was amazing.

“Mostly, I learned what I already knew, that you don’t need a studio to make something good. And it’s probably easier to make something good without a studio, if you have vision.”

In the absence of former collaborator Kirsten Lepore, *Story from South America* features a larger team of animators and designers: “Working with any kind of crew was totally new for me. It was fun, and I really enjoyed what the background designers did especially. They were all really young kids who just got out of CalArts, and everyone was scared of being fired.”

Though it proved somewhat difficult to maintain the tone of the piece (“I didn’t even really know what the tone *was*”), the final result was not entirely satisfactory to Garrett, but with a fairly tight production window available, compromises had to be made.

“I allowed individual people to contribute their own ideas, and I didn’t shoot anything down. Ultimately, I just wanted everyone to have fun working on it. There is always a degree of letting go that has to happen on any collaborative project, but I much prefer working alone or with one other person. The more people, the more diluted the vision gets, unless you are a tyrannical director—which I may become someday, but I wasn’t at that point.”

Despite the lo-fi approach to its predecessor, the time restraints on the development and production of *Story from South America* ultimately outweighed the benefits of the additional funding and manpower available for it. Embarking on a piece of music that was more of a “skeleton of a song,” one not “totally resolved, lyrically or musically,” as opposed to the sturdier “Spider Song,” on which the first film was built around was another major drawback. The newer song also suffered due to unforeseen scheduling issues conflicting with Garrett’s personal process when it came to performing the piece.

“I had been growing the fingernails on my right hand out pretty long because the song used this specific finger style that I came up with. The producer kept telling me, ‘Tomorrow we’re going to record; be ready.’ So I kept my fingernails. It kept not happening, so after a couple of months of that, I figured it was never going to happen, so I cut my nails, because they were annoying me. The *next* day, we were recording, and we were rushed because we only had 20 minutes in the booth. I got gigantic blisters on my fingertips because I had no nails and couldn’t even play the song properly.”

In Garrett’s mind, it remains clear which of the two works best as a film: “*Story from North America* is far better in every way. The sequel for me is more about an experience of becoming a part of the larger animation world. Through ADHD, it’s been aired on American television; my friend told me once that it came on the TV while he was eating in an Ethiopian restaurant. That gave me a really nice feeling.”

Digging Deep

When it came to diving into his fifth short, *Ernie Biscuit*, Melbourne-based director Adam Elliot eventually had to concede that the funding options that had been in place to enable the completion of such films as his Oscar-winning 2003 short *Harvie Krumpet* and 2009 feature film *Mary and Max* simply did not exist anymore (Figure 9.5). With the Australian film industry having taken a knock, there were significant compromises to be made should his new short ever be realized. One telling consideration is that *Ernie Biscuit* had not originally been intended as a short film at all, but a second feature.

Self-funding the film was certainly not the plan from the start, especially with the script in its longer-form state. With Adam working alongside executive producer Brian Rosen, whose prior credits included Henry Selick's stop-motion adaptation of *James and the Giant Peach* (1996), the journey to get *Ernie Biscuit* off the ground began shortly after the release of *Mary and Max*. Despite Brian's former position as chief executive of the Australian Film Finance Corporation, this journey proved to be an uphill one.

"I was very lucky to have him on board," Adam recalls with admiration. "He's very proactive, energetic, and enthusiastic. He never throws in the towel, he never gives up a battle, and he was determined that *Ernie Biscuit* as a feature would one day get fully financed."

Conviction and perseverance are both vital in getting a passion project off the ground, but it's important to have enough of a grounded sense of what is and isn't attainable. While it's never the desired outcome to settle for an alternative, knowing when to compromise can save a lot of unnecessary hassle and heartbreak.



Figure 9.5

Adam Elliot with *Ernie Biscuit* puppet. (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)



Figure 9.6

Still from *Ernie Biscuit* (Dir. Adam Elliot). (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)

“I’ve always been aware of filmmakers who’ve been ‘developed to death,’ and I didn’t want to be one of those. So I think after about the third year, when we had started to raise some of the money, we had sales agents and distributors all interested and enjoying the script, but they all said it wasn’t family-friendly enough. We were very lucky to make *Mary and Max*; if we tried to make that film today in Australia, there would be no way we’d even get half of the budget, because the average Australian budget has now gone from eight million to one and a half million, and that’s just tragic.”

As Adam and Brian persevered with the pursuit of feature film funding, the writing incrementally etched itself onto the wall as the proposed budget would continually diminish. Having started at AU\$40 million, considered a modest sum to strive for in the world of features, the hypothetical funds eventually dropped to a tenth of that amount. With no viable way to create a film that would remotely resemble Adam’s vision as scripted (the final act as written hinged on a dynamic and elaborately animated chase scene) for \$4 million, a rethink was in order. So as not to severely compromise the aesthetic and tone of the film, *Ernie Biscuit* was reinvented as a companion film to *Harvie Krumpet* (Figure 9.6).

“I said to my executive producer that I was throwing in the towel, that I was going to reinvent the script. I was determined it would get made, but I thought it would probably work as a short if I could get the script to under half an hour.”

Observing the changing tide of independent film, it occurred to Adam that other filmmakers were beginning to take matters into their own hands in a way they hadn’t before. Proactivity and entrepreneurial ingenuity served as an inspiration to Adam, especially when coupled with the realization that concessions need not be a negative thing. In truth, the absence of funds and resources, and by association, being beholden to the demands of those who provide either, can be a major positive.

“I thought, *It’s about time I should stop being one of those filmmakers who just expect government grants. I should start to be a little bit more entrepreneurial and clever, work out other ways of getting a film made.* So *Ernie Biscuit* was an experiment not just in technique but also in financing as well. All my films up until then had been government grants. I don’t own *Harvie Krumpet*; I don’t own *Mary and Max*; all the royalties from those films go to the government. I only just got the right to *Uncle, Cousin, and Brother* a few years ago; I thought it would be great if I owned one of my own films so if I sell it to a broadcaster or an airline, I get 100% of the royalties. So that’s what’s happened. I own *Ernie Biscuit* 100%, and it’s great. I don’t have to answer to anyone, there’s very little paperwork, and it’s nice to own something that I made!”

A Collective Effort

Depending on the circumstances, crowdfunding can be something of a dirty word. To many, it can be an empowering process to seek out something that excites us and be able to seize the opportunity to play a part in getting it made. It provides a platform to communicate directly with artists on a personal level, and it humanizes the production process. With public and general film funds so dishearteningly depleted, it has frequently been a boon to not just independent animation but the animation industry as a whole. So why is there a stigma attached to it nowadays?

As with anything that has been around for more than a handful of years, crowdfunding is just as susceptible to mishandling and misinterpretation as any other form of online transaction. It really should not be underestimated just how much of an undertaking a crowdfunding campaign really is. Even animation studios have been known to struggle with the influx of customer relations if they aren’t appropriately prepared.

In this section, I want to take a look at five successfully crowdfunded projects showcasing a range of funding goals. These are as follows:

Project: *Armikrog*
Creator: Pencil Test Studios, Inc.
Goal amount: \$900,000
Amount raised: \$974,578
Year: 2013
Platform: Kickstarter

Project: Simon’s Cat in *Off to the Vet*
Creator: Simon’s Cat
Goal amount: £275,850
Amount raised: £310,734
Year: 2014
Platform: Indiegogo

Project: *Mister Plastimime*
Creator: Tandem Films
Goal amount: £33,450
Amount raised: £34,500

Year: 2013
Platform: Kickstarter

Project: *Submarine Sandwich*
Creator: PES
Goal amount: \$30,000
Amount raised: \$48,922
Year: 2014
Platform: Kickstarter

Project: *The Patsy*
Creator: Sam Morrison
Goal amount: £1500
Amount raised: £2340
Year: 2012
Platform: Kickstarter

One of the primary benefits of crowdfunding is the ability it affords the creatives at the helm of a project to retain complete creative control. When external funding or investors are brought in, inevitably, there will be a proportionate obligation to allow their input on the project itself. Certainly, this can be advantageous if these contributions come from a place of experience or, at the very least, a set of fresh eyes, but that is never a guarantee. On the flip side, it can be a process that carries with it the risk of tarnishing an original vision, if not destroying it completely. The desire to eschew this reliance is, as touched upon previously, one of the main lures of independent animation in and of itself.

Later on in the book, we will explore the origins and development of *Armikrog*, an independent, interactive stop-motion animated adventure game by Doug TenNapel ([Figure 9.7](#)). In a similar vein to his cult success *The Neverhood*, which was one of the



Figure 9.7
Still from *Armikrog*. (Courtesy of Armikrog, ©2015.)

first examples of a game to effectively incorporate traditional stop-motion into its sprite animation, the universe of *Armikrog* is richly detailed and elaborately constructed with all the creative freedoms an independent project allows. The premise sees intergalactic explorer Tommynaut (voiced by Michael J. Nelson) stranded in a strange land with his blind, doglike companion Beak Beak (Rob Paulsen). After being captured, the player guides the characters through the story so that they might escape Armikrog, the elaborate fortress in which they are being held captive.

With its creative development to be examined further in [Chapter 17](#), the project also bears consideration here as it also owes its existence to a successful crowdfunding campaign. Though it shares the element of visibility with the *Simon's Cat* campaign, the established fan base in this instance was called upon to fund an entirely new intellectual property. With Doug teaming up with Mike Dietz and Ed Schofield of Pencil Test Studios, crowdfunding a large-scale animated project presented itself as a viable option following Doug's own prior success in that arena. In 2012, Doug had successfully financed a limited print run of *Sketchbook Archives*, a hardback collection of sketches and concept art from his various projects over the years. The following year, he achieved similar success with the funding of *Sketchbook Archives: Volume 2*, both campaigns achieving their funding goals several times over, bolstering Doug's resolve.

"I went to them and said, 'Guys, what if we did an animated feature?' I had written a story of a book I was working on, and I sent the character designs to them. When we started looking at the numbers of what features got, we realized you can't raise millions on an unknown comic book when what you're known for is video games. After probably a week or two of plunking around with the movie idea, they came up with the idea of a video game. It made perfect sense as soon as he said it, and we all said at the time, 'Puppet animation? Puppet animation!' Because the other thing is we've gotten so much better, especially Mike and Ed, at that. On *Neverhood*, we were just kind of figuring it out. Now what you'll see is amazing, feature quality, beyond what we ever did before. It just doesn't even compare."

Sinking every penny the team had at their disposal into the creation of the campaign video, a compelling animated microshort in itself, was a major risk. Despite the hand-crafted, Claymation aesthetic, the puppets themselves were professionally molded and cast. Cost-cutting measures—such as recording the dialogue in Mike's home rather than a professional studio environment—were necessary to keep the risk potential as minimal as possible.

Something the entire team were aware of was that there had to be a distinct cutoff point where funds would not be sufficient to ensure production of the game. Dubbed as the "walkaway" amount, they needed to come up with a budget that, if not reached by as little as a single dollar, would be the deciding factor as to whether or not to go ahead. This principle is certainly a fit for the Kickstarter model—should a project make anything less than the amount set at the outset, none of those who committed to donating in the event of success are charged, and the creators get nothing.

"We were always asking how much were we going to ask for. It was so hard because we knew the game would cost more than what we were going to get, and that was just something that we never really addressed in our own minds. In a way, the worst thing that could happen to us is to *just barely* make that amount."

For smaller-scale crowdfunded projects, some creators have doubtless come up with the workaround of, in the event of very nearly reaching a goal, footing the remainder by donating themselves. As Doug and his team had set their Kickstarter goal as the same as

their walkaway amount (which, after much research, was determined to be \$900,000), this was not a feasible option; it was, literally, all or nothing. Fortuitously enough, the eventual funds raised came to \$974,578, exceeding Doug, Mike, and Ed's walkaway figure by enough to commit the team to the project, though without much buffer or wiggle room.

"At \$975,000 it was probably the most difficult way to make *Armikrog* that you could do (Figure 9.8). We had to get very creative with financing and free work. That story is never told because, to the public, how amazingly and easily we did it is all supposed to be some big magic trick. It's not. It's very difficult, it's very grueling, it costs the team everything, and they're doing it because we believe in what we're doing. We love it!"

On a basic level, the fans who are contributing to the production costs are essentially treating the exchange as a preorder. Based on Doug's successful track record in the video game world with the 16-bit classic *Earthworm Jim* and *The Neverhood* franchise having developed a dedicated fan base on PC and PlayStation, fans who had grown up on his work were now financially solvent and eager to affordably support a project such as *Armikrog* that would scratch their nostalgia itch.

"We didn't know if the fans would show up or not. They really surprised us with how many of them did. You're getting \$25 at a time for the most part; there are very few big spenders in there. That there were people donating from across the world who just didn't have a dime, yet were scraping it together to buy a copy of the game, that part of it was amazing. When it went on sale, our fear was that maybe our fan base was exactly 18,000 people, that we had tapped all of them and no one else would buy it! If 18,000 people already have their game, our top, most rabid fans would be satiated by just delivering them what we said we'd deliver. So it did have to sell."

Simon's Cat, as explored earlier in the book, is something of an animation phenomenon, whose independent roots have led to unforeseeable mass adoration. Following her



Figure 9.8

Still from *Armikrog*. (Courtesy of Armikrog, ©2015.)

association with Tandem Films, producer Emma Burch (whose own work we'll explore in the next chapter) subsequently went on to work on *Simon's Cat* for the production and campaign management of their crowdfunded short *Off to the Vet*. Her first experience of crowdfunding took place during her tenure at Tandem, overseeing the fundraising of *Mister Plastimime*, a mixed-media animated short from Oscar-winning director Daniel Greaves (Figure 9.9).

"Dan had gotten so far down the line with the film but had run out of funds. It was frustrating, as we were looking at various public completion or funding schemes, but there were very little in the UK. I had had my eye on crowdfunding for ages, as when Kickstarter was launched in the United States, I was researching it for my own film, *Being Bradford Dillman*, but they had not launched in the UK at that point. So I suggested Kickstarter to Dan, who was a little reluctant as he didn't want to be asking people for money. After talking about it further, we felt that there was more to lose by *Mr. Plastimime* being shelved half-finished



Figure 9.9

Mr. Plastimime crowdfunding backer poster. (Courtesy of Daniel Greaves, ©2014.)

than if we took the plunge and tried crowdfunding. Going with Kickstarter’s all-or-nothing model also meant that if we didn’t raise the funds, we didn’t owe anything to anyone.”

Although *Simon’s Cat* found success on Indiegogo, a crowdfunding alternative to Kickstarter, from Emma’s perspective, their more flexible model—in which all money raised goes to the creator regardless of whether a goal is met, and therefore, all obligations to the funders should also be fulfilled—can be more useful for campaigns offering presales of new products.

“If you’re trying to make a film and you need a certain amount of money, you might only get £500 out of £25,000. You have to plan how you will honor your promises to the people who did support your campaign, by fulfilling the perks or rewards offered, despite not having the funds to complete the project you set out to do. I don’t feel that it’s worth the risk or the potential stress and work involved.”

The risk element was present in both campaigns, even when considering how much more visible and topical *Simon’s Cat* is as a franchise. As the audience for Daniel Greaves’ *Mr. Plastimime* was less defined; there was more allowance within the campaign itself to be tongue-in-cheek and appeal to a broad range of potential backers. Courting an existing and comparatively voluminous fan base with the *Simon’s Cat* campaign called for a more specific approach (Figure 9.10).

“*Simon’s Cat* was a lot easier because I was better prepared after the *Mr. Plastimime* campaign. We also have a highly engaged audience and a large social reach with 1.5 million likes on Facebook, et cetera, so in that respect, it was a lot easier to put our focus on existing fans. When it came to *Mr. Plastimime*, Dan didn’t have an online following when



Figure 9.10

Simon’s Cat plush reward for *Off to the Vet* backers. (Courtesy of Simon’s Cat Ltd, ©2014.)

we launched the campaign, so I had to leave no stone unturned to reach people. I was even contacting people I went to school with to help spread the word!

“There were often 10-, 11-hour days of constant e-mailing and trying to think on your feet as to how to reach new people. Then we were really lucky that Kickstarter got behind it and featured it in their newsletter and as one of their Projects of the Day. You cannot guarantee that happening, obviously, and without it, I do wonder whether or not we would have made our goal. There was quite a learning curve in terms of what goes into the planning and fulfilling rewards, because you end up setting yourself up as a shop where you manage orders and handle customers. The work that goes into the rewards really shouldn’t be underestimated.”

Even when factoring in a subscriber base of more than 3 million, reaching their target proved trickier than anticipated.

“We were expecting far higher numbers of individuals contributing smaller amounts, whereas in fact, we had these real diehard fans that just kept putting their hands in their pockets, so in the end, our average pledge was higher than Indiegogo’s overall average.”

Although the final amount raised exceeded the goal amount by over £30,000, the fact that the full tally of contributors came to 10,155 from just 7500 individuals, roughly 0.3% of their prospective audience of 3 million, should prove sobering.

“Obviously, once the campaign’s over, there’s still a lot of administration to be done; the larger the campaign, obviously, the more funders you have to keep happy. Coordinating the many combinations of perks has been a bit of a logistical nightmare. Luckily, our partners, Portico Designs, have a warehouse and a production team, so at least they’re taking care of all of that, but we’re the first point of contact for the funders themselves. So it’s a matter of making sure that communication is very clear between *Simon’s Cat* and the funders as well as between *Simon’s Cat* and Portico.”

Customer Etiquette

One of the hardest things to get a handle on for most new to crowdfunding is precisely how you go about directly soliciting funds. For Emma, the answer is the most obvious, yet also the most laborious and time-consuming, approach:

“Social media is a fantastic tool, but direct e-mail communication gets a far higher response. Be personal and make your e-mails individual and specific to each person, so it takes ages. You *can* send out automated, e-mails but I do think that when you’re asking for money, especially if it is people that you have never contacted before or you only know to a certain extent, you need to be personal about it; it’s just that it takes so long. Even if you have a template e-mail, you still have to personalize each one, even if it’s simply adding their first name at the beginning, so just be mindful that there’s no mass-mailing everyone. You should think about who you’re talking to and how to speak to them. That’s why you can’t always necessarily have blanket communication across all your target audience; you should tailor it to the different types of people you’re trying to reach, categorizing groups if you can. It’s about putting in the preparation and planning before you launch, which takes time but improves results.”

The human race, delightfully idiosyncratic though we are, is not always the most understanding bunch. Higher-profile campaigns always run the risk of facing criticism, constructive or otherwise, especially if an audience has their own preconceived notions.

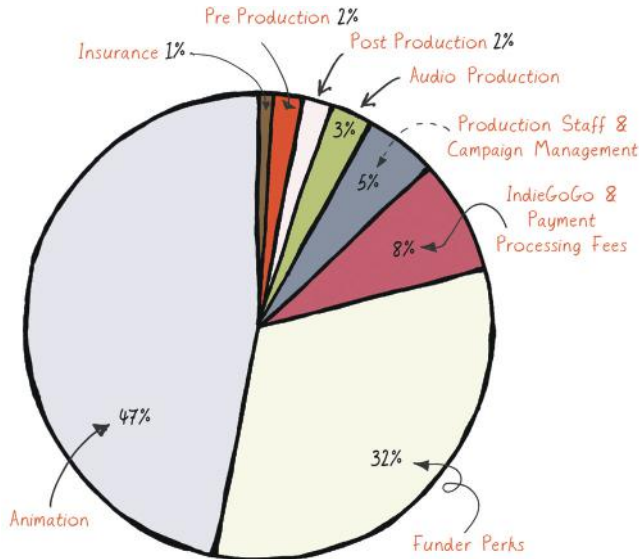


Figure 9.11

Pie-chart from the *Off to the Vet* campaign to clearly communicate to backers how funds would be distributed. (Courtesy of Simon's Cat Ltd, ©2014.)

The visibility of *Simon's Cat* inevitably carries with it an assumption that it has access to funds that would render crowdfunding redundant (Figure 9.11).

“There was definitely a backlash to the campaign’s target amount. First of all, there’s a complete misunderstanding of how much work goes into *Simon's Cat*, because it looks so simple. People don’t realize that it is traditionally hand-drawn animation, from roughs to cleanup, so there wasn’t much of a public understanding of how much production costs. We don’t believe in paying people a pittance just because they should feel like they’re getting something out of working on a project that’s popular; we think people should be paid a fair wage to reflect their skills, so that obviously bumped up our budget. We also believe in delivering quality perks, so a great deal of the money we were trying to raise went to the items that people were then going to receive, including UK postage costs—it’s amazing how quickly some things can actually add up.”

These cost accumulations boil down to the fact that *Simon's Cat* operates on a business model that puts the public first, inasmuch as it produces new content on a semiregular basis to an exceptional standard of animation rarely seen on broadcast television and puts it out into the world for free. Granted, advertising revenue does exist, but not to the extent that would facilitate any project more ambitious than the company’s standard fare. A YouTube film produced for somewhere between £10,000 and £20,000 carries with it its own cash flow risks and takes considerable time to break even on.

Another significant oversight often made by those whose crowdfunding campaigns failed is that the obligations to the public don’t end when a campaign draws to a close. Some backers may very well have no interest in the film being funded and simply gave their money in exchange for the incentive, as they would any online store. So, while some of your audience

ALL NEW PERKS - VINYL DECALS!!

 <p>Approx in USD-EUR \$20/€15</p>		<h3>2 x Car Decals</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">* 1 x window and 1 x car side removable vinyl sticker decals. (2 sheets / 1 design per sheet)
 <p>Approx in USD-EUR \$25/€19</p>		<h3>12 x Laptop Decals</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">* A set of 12 laptop removable vinyl sticker decals. (3 sheets / 4 designs per sheet)

Figure 9.12

Simon's Cat decals perks for *Off to the Vet* backers. (Courtesy of Simon's Cat Ltd, ©2014.)

may happily accommodate delays in the knowledge that it's for the benefit of an animated masterwork they want to see turn out as good as possible, others may be simply disgruntled that the perk they paid for is not wending its way to them on time. As this stage of the process goes hand in hand with the production of the funded film itself, having a campaign manager in place to help deal with such warring stresses is hugely important (Figure 9.12).

"We always try and respond to e-mails as quickly as possible, treating it as typical customer service. At peak times, we have been sent 300 e-mails or more in 1 week, that all need to be replied to. You can't take people's money and ignore them. The main frustration for me at the time was when we had criticism from fellow animators, very talented animators who were saying that they could do it far, far cheaper. These individuals, I feel, are undermining themselves, their own talent, and also the animation industry as a whole by saying how little they are prepared to work for and pay others to collaborate.

"It's really important not to launch until you really feel that you are ready and your diary is clear for the campaign duration. You end up living and breathing crowdfunding when the campaign is live—it probably sounds a bit dramatic, but it took me about 2 months to recover from the *Simon's Cat* campaign because there was so much riding on it. So much work goes into it that it becomes immensely stressful and immensely personal as well because you feel like you're exposing yourself. It's been extremely important to me that the fans that chose to support us have a positive experience from it, which I hope people have done from both of the campaigns I've managed."

Combined Resources

PES, an animator whose creative process will be scrutinized in Chapter 13, also used crowdfunding to successfully guarantee the completion of his 2014 film *Submarine Sandwich* (Figure 9.13). The film, in which athletic equipment substitutes deli meat in the construction

of the titular sub, is the third of what has been dubbed his “Food Trilogy,” following *Western Spaghetti* (2008) and *Fresh Guacamole* (2012). The film drew funding from several sources, firstly himself in the gathering of props and set pieces that were essential to the aesthetic he hoped to achieve.

“The big purchase I had made up to that point was the deli case; I had bought that because I had been watching the eBay space for over a year. I thought it was gonna be easy to find an old piece of deli equipment that had a bit of personality, that matched my notion of what this cool deli could look like. I always loved the old scales, all that white porcelain and enamel equipment, that real old-school, New York deli feel, and I thought I could go to a junkyard of delis and have my pick of the litter.”

It transpired that the deli junkyard of his dreams proved somewhat elusive, and procuring the exact type of deli case required for the film, eventually came down to over a year spent scouring eBay listings. When one that conformed precisely to his style demands finally appeared, he bought it instantly, the expense and space it took up in his living room more or less committing him to following through on the film itself.

“I was starting to collect the boxing gloves and the athletic equipment that would go in the case, but that process is also one that extended over months. It’s not like you can go to one shop and say, ‘I’d like 30 old boxing bags, all off-white.’ I had to shop for those one by one and find specific vendors. So that sort of hand-picking was going on, which made me confident to approach Nikon for support.”

With PES’s strong track record of high-quality viral hits under his belt, the camera company became a film sponsor, which offset the budgetary concerns associated with purchasing new technical equipment. By timing the proposed launch of the film with a new

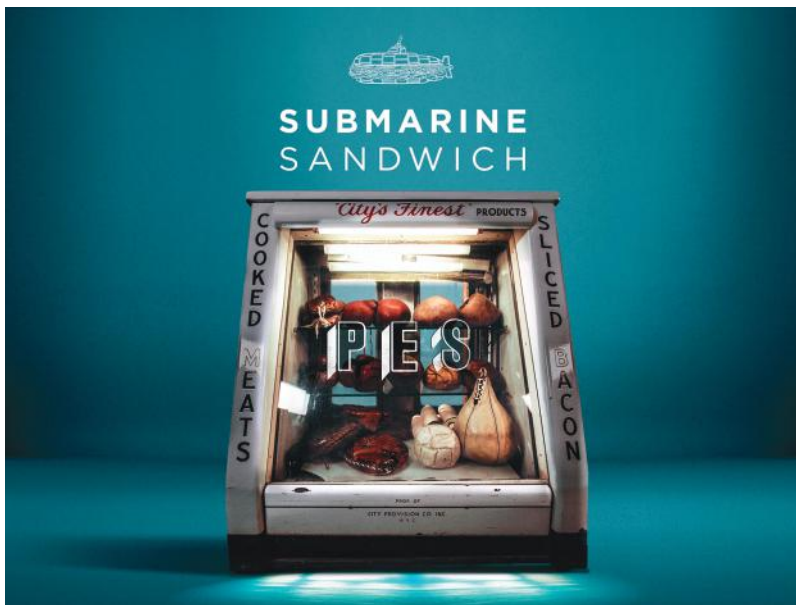


Figure 9.13

Submarine Sandwich crowdfunding promo image. (Courtesy of PES, ©2014.)

product release, the final film acts not as product placement but a rather effective demonstration of the technical specs.

“It was fun; like a kid in a candy shop, I had all these lenses that I was now able to experiment with.”

Although a boon in terms of hardware costs, ultimately, Nikon’s involvement didn’t finance the labor and on-screen materials of the film itself. At this stage, with a great deal in readiness, crowdfunding held the most appeal as a viable option.

“Crowdfunding was something that we had been tossing around for a long time,” explains Sarah Phelps, PES’s wife and manager. “There was more money available elsewhere, but all that money usually comes with strings. We had both gotten to the point where we were tired of that, and PES wanted zero creative compromise, including when it came to the release.

“We agreed that crowdfunding would be an interesting publicity opportunity as well as a different way of working for me.” PES says, “In the past, I would just take money from clients or whoever was financing my films, and I would just sort of work away at it for months until one day, I would post the film online. So the whole idea of having to explain my vision up-front to people, to get them excited and raise the money for it, was a major step for me.”

Consistent with other crowdfunding case studies, preparing to solicit funds from fans required a considerable amount of research and forethought. As Sarah recalls, “Going into it, we had done a lot of research and knew a lot of the challenges we were going to face. Some of the challenges we ended up facing were unanticipated, so on top of what we knew about was a whole new basket of challenges.

“Figuring out how much to ask for was also a really big deal. Right off the bat, I felt like the biggest decision I made was that we couldn’t ask for what we actually *needed*. I feel like with crowdfunding, there’s this understanding that people are willing to fund your project but they are not willing to fund your life, and that what you get in return is your art project, but you have to figure out how to support yourself. So I decided right there off the bat that we were going to do that.

“The second decision I made was we can’t ask for how much this film actually *costs*, because while people who understand stop motion and production know how much these things cost and how long they take, when it came to anyone else, there was a line I didn’t want to cross. Beyond that line, people would have thought, *There’s kids starving out there and you need how much money to make a one-and-a-half-minute film?* So it was just trying to balance that.”

Another issue in PES’s mind was the idea that the film’s premise and twist would have to be revealed months before anyone might see the final film, which ran the risk of diminishing its impact. “In the past, I think I would normally say, ‘Well, it won’t be a surprise anymore! Why would I want to tell anyone about it?’ I’m also very suspicious about creating expectations, and with crowdfunding, once you start telling people your idea, you open yourself up to people’s expectations.”

What makes PES’s take on crowdfunding notable is that his experience of it is one of a number of completely separate funding scenarios that have brought his “Food Trilogy” into being. The first entry, 2008’s *Western Spaghetti*, received financial aid from Mike Judge, known to many as the creator of MTV’s *Beavis and Butt-Head*, in exchange for an exclusive launch as part of *The Animation Show*, a touring program he curated with

fellow independent animator Don Hertzfeldt. In 2012, the second film, *Fresh Guacamole*, was commissioned by the cable network Showtime as part of their “Short Stories” series, a scheme that also commissioned original work from animation directors Bill Plympton and Cyriak.

“All three of these situations have allowed me to make films without making any creative compromises, so there’s no real difference in that respect. Crowdfunding was a head-scratcher because it was a really positive experience and it is wonderful to be a little bit more connected to the fans, but it’s so much more work than just making a film! You really have to take into consideration that it exponentially creates work. I try really hard to focus on the quality of the film, but it really is like running a pop-up business for 6 months.”

Another perceivable advantage of the crowdfunding process is the ways in which incentivizing can be another creative outlet, rather than a chore. When it came to the rewards for the *Submarine Sandwich* campaign, PES used it as an opportunity to indulge a desire to experiment with building a merchandise element around the project (Figures 9.14 and 9.15).

“It doesn’t really just come from the idea of wanting to make money; it’s more that I studied printmaking for 4 years, I love making prints and shirts, so crowdfunding was an outlet for some of my other creative interests.”

What makes *Submarine Sandwich* especially noteworthy as a crowdfunding case study is its near-immediate success, reaching its target well within the first week of the campaign. While this would seem, on the surface, to be a dream come true, pragmatism on Sarah’s part was necessary to keep their obligations from spiraling out of control.

“It just burst out of the gate, got picked up by a lot of blogs, was a Kickstarter Project of the Day, then after we hit our goal, it just ticked up slowly for the last 3 weeks of the



Figure 9.14

Still from *Submarine Sandwich* (Dir. PES). (Courtesy of PES, ©2014.)

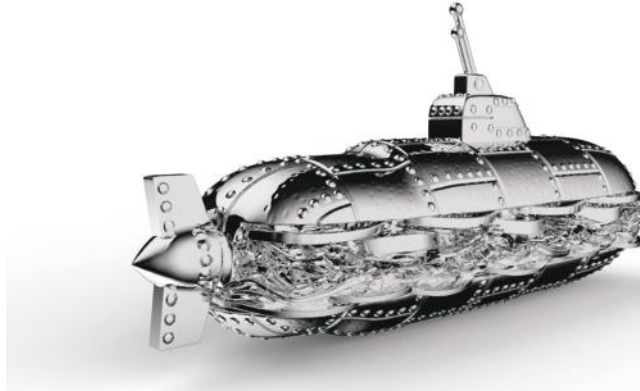


Figure 9.15

Submarine Sandwich model—one of the available backer rewards. (Courtesy of PES, ©2014.)

campaign. I very quickly saw certain reward categories were more lucrative than others, percentage-wise. Plus you have to subtract the cost of taxes and shipping rewards. The most popular were the T-shirts and screen prints, which were the most expensive for us, so if we'd have gotten another \$10,000–\$30,000 in backing, we'd have almost directly relative, costs yet it would look like we had more money. So after we reached our goal, one of the decisions that I made was to back off."

This means of accompanying the release of his film with an array of products that, to those who missed out during the campaign itself, would still be purchasable online, was a bonus unique to the crowdfunding process, as merchandising options are rarely, if ever, available to creators if corporate funding has much of a role to play. Indeed, when the same idea was floated to the network during the production of *Fresh Guacamole*, it didn't bear much fruit. Logically, it stands to reason that if a channel has paid for content, they would rather audiences click through to other such content rather than to an independent merchandiser. Beyond the excuse to flex his product-making bent, the positives of his relatively low-key campaign have opened PES to more direct interaction with his fan base (Figure 9.16).

"Obviously, having people talk about your film for 4–6 months before it comes out is really cool and, frankly, something I didn't do too well in the past. When I got the money for my films, I'd work in the dark and put them online; there wasn't much of being in touch with the people who really care about the work and getting to know them a little, so that was a nice addition of that relationship. So all three situations worked out; they seemed to be a bit of the evolution of how things are moving."

Chances are that your means and resources are not equatable with those of the *Simon's Cat* empire, nor as long established in the indie world as PES. So what makes crowdfunding a reasonable option to the less visible, or those just starting out?

Ultimately, it comes down to perspective and a healthy, realistic sense of self. What do you think your film, and by extension, your talent, is worth?

Be honest. Take the time to systematically break down what your production costs will be, subtract that amount from what you first came up with, and evaluate again based on



Figure 9.16

Still from *Submarine Sandwich* (Dir. PES). (Courtesy of PES, ©2014.)

what's left. Now think hard about what you've read so far in this section and ask yourself if it's really within your capabilities. If you have a crewed studio, or a devoted fan base, or a team of hardworking friends who think the world of you, then certainly, your options are going to be more open. But if you're going solo, which is far from uncommon in the independent animation world, it may be practical to bring your level of ambition a little closer to the ground.

Sam Morrison, whose approach to the story we looked at earlier in the book, managed to round out his *Rocket Science* trilogy through crowdfunding. Above all, the Jack Hersey films are personal, auteur film projects whose primary function (alongside being entertaining) has been to further establish Sam as a writer and director. While his short film work has been successful, it does not share the same built-in audience factor as PES or *Simon's Cat*, nor is it made more visible by an Oscar-win association, as with Daniel Greaves. The crowdfunding option was therefore approached from a place of relative anonymity.

"We've used crowdfunding a couple of times and found it helpful, but set our sights reasonably low without doing any big promotional stuff." Naturally, as Sam reasons, a lower goal amount necessitates lower demands and far less pressure that would needlessly distract from the end goal of getting the film itself made. "We just sent out little reminders through social media to people for the duration of the Kickstarter campaign, sending out little reminders on Facebook and Twitter and that sort of thing, and just managed to get a couple thousand together for *The Patsy*."

Even considering this low-key approach, your accountability to your audience isn't ruled out entirely.

"We realized that it's quite a lot of work when you've finished your film and sent your pledges. There is a whole new wave of stuff, which you should have anticipated, really, because you wrote them yourself, but it costs money and takes a lot of time. We did them all, even though I think we've been late some of the time, but we do get them done, and because of the people we've got money off tend to be friends, family, or friends of friends, then nobody, thankfully, has been too angry about us being a little bit late.



Figure 9.17

Stills from *The Patsy* (Dir. Sam Morrison)—one available incentive to backers was the option of having their names incorporated into the film. (Courtesy of Evil Genius Ltd, ©2013.)

“I knew it would be a sort of realistic way to raise a couple of grand, and because we were putting in some of our own money, basically funding the film, crowdfunding sort of topped it up and made it viable for Ian and myself to work on it for a long time. We would have been below the minimum wage or something ridiculous, so crowdfunding just bumped the overall budget to the point where it became more workable for us, just because we couldn’t work that long for that amount of money and survive” (Figure 9.17).

To wrap up, here are some important campaign page essentials as outlined by Emma Burch:

- “Images always go a long way. I do actually feel that we didn’t have enough development material on the site. When it comes to film or anything creative, people want to see the product that they’re actually backing.”

-
- “Certainly, showing where the money’s going to be spent in a pie chart is quite sobering for the fans.”
 - “You have to be short, sharp, but informative—make sure that you don’t repeat yourself by going over the same facts.”
 - “In terms of the tone of the writing, it can be very tricky to get right. Sometimes, you need to step back from it and return to it later, reread and see how you would feel if you were reading it for the first time.”



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10

Keeping It Real

Getting a project off the ground is a wonderful feeling. With a script or concept in place, officially being able to categorize a project as “in production” is the first step of a complex, rewarding, exciting—and long—journey. A very long journey, in fact. Long, long road ahead. Good grief, it’s long. Why did nobody say how *long* it would be?

This is the point where any lingering romantic notions you may have about an animated production just being able to come together are cruelly extinguished. When you’re in it, you’re in deep—and possibly with funders and a crew to answer to. In this chapter and the next, we’ll look at how some of independent animation’s best and brightest have soldiered through, whether going it alone, dealing with creative concessions, managing teams, or being literally separated from their codirector by the ocean. Yes, depending on the type of project you have set yourself, it can be a long road ahead, but everyone has to go down it.

Having had to strip down the ambition of his feature-cum-short film *Ernie Biscuit*, Adam Elliot was insistent on being directly involved in virtually all areas of production, not just going back to the auteur roots of his original trilogy, *Uncle*, *Cousin*, and *Brother*, but delving into entirely unexplored independent territory (Figure 10.1). This approach to the film was a stark contrast to his previous project, the 2009 feature film *Mary and Max*, going from overseeing a large crew to essentially a one-man operation.

“I wanted to do everything, not because I am a megalomaniac but because I felt that there were certain parts of the process with my previous films I didn’t have a full



Figure 10.1

Adam Elliot on the set for *Emie Biscuit*. (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)

understanding of. I wanted to learn more about producing a digital film and strengthen the areas of the filmmaking process I'd always felt were weak points for me—editing and sound were areas where I felt very inadequate—so by the end of the film, I'd have a better understanding. Now I certainly know a lot more about editing, things like 5.1 digital surround sound, DCPs, digital cameras, megapixels.”

Though the familiar funding avenues that had allowed his five films prior to be made had dried up, corporate sponsorship did assist the production in some measure. Making a deal with Apple to produce the film entirely using their products—Final Cut Pro, Aperture, and Motion, primarily—covered the hardware and software costs.

“I animated blind in many ways; I just had a Leica camera, one lens, three lights, some Plasticine, wire, and paint. I had no fully-articulated armatures, I didn't have any mold making, there's no airbrushing, just three paintbrushes, three jars of paint, and that was it! I had a very limited palette if you want to call it that, which was great; it was very liberating having less choices, just having the basics. It forced me to focus more on what was important.”

Toward the end of the production, unforeseen personal issues reared their heads and demanded Adam's attention. As a consequence, the planned completion date was not met on time, and while certain festivals were understanding enough—and appreciative of his sterling track record—to extend their deadlines, the postproduction was not afforded the time and care Adam wished it could have been (Figure 10.2).

“The biggest regret I have is that the postproduction was severely compromised and rushed, and that hasn't sat well with me. But that's life, a lot of postproduction is rushed, and you make mistakes. I would definitely get a sound designer in earlier and allocate more money towards the sound mix—I also would like to have spent more time with my actor; I just would've loved another couple of months of shooting time. I lost my



Figure 10.2

Still from *Ernie Biscuit* (Dir. Adam Elliot). (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)

focus, and I had to make very quick decisions, such as having to finish off the editing of the film in only 2 weeks instead of having a month. Some of these things were out of my control, but some of them were in my control, so you learn a lot of lessons. Having said that, in all of my films, there have been areas where we've had to compromise. With every film I've made, I've had to think laterally and be a bit of a renegade in terms of how to get the film completed. With every film, I've learned lessons and learned from my mistakes."

Moving forward while having the wisdom of hindsight (more on this later) is doubtless the best option for filmmakers eager to continue to produce new work. Sometimes, a project executed badly is worth revisiting (as with Robert Grievess' *Sausage*, discussed in [Chapter 3](#)), but when it comes to a largely successful project with mere kinks, most of which are only visible to the directors themselves, the best way to apply these lessons learned is toward future works.

Manual Labor

Stop-motion itself is arguably the most difficult animation medium with which to achieve independent success. Not to denigrate 2-D, computer-generated (CG) images or any other

approach that requires similarly vast reserves of skill, patience, and effort, but the fact remains that digital softwares have advanced so tremendously that the outright physical labor of animation, not to mention material costs, has rapidly diminished. That being said, stop-motion is certainly benefiting from recent technological advancements that make it increasingly viable with each passing year. On top of this, its relevance as a storytelling medium has barely diminished, flying in the face of prediction. During the making of his student short *Uncle* in 1996, Adam was assured that by producing his film using Plasticine, he was “pursuing a dying art form.” With the advent of Pixar features and the rise of CG processes ousting stop-motion, animatronics, and similarly practical processes from the world of visual effects around that time, it most likely seemed a reasonable theory that within 5 years, the medium would have died off altogether. Cut to 20 years later, and factoring in the peaks and valleys any filmmaking medium will experience, stop-motion remains ever-present in the industry. Mainstream television shows and features are still proving lucrative and critically successful, competing for Academy Awards alongside their digitally animated brethren.

“I think stop-motion is alive and well,” insists Adam. “Digital cameras and digital technology have liberated stop-motion animators; we can now see what we’re doing, and we can predict what we are doing a lot better. There’s software out there that are wonderful tools for stop-motion animators, who can go into their studios now with a little bit more confidence. They know that they can make a stop-motion film for a third of what it used to cost.* That’s mainly because of the ‘death’ of celluloid and that processing costs have just vanished. So we can edit ourselves; not that that’s necessarily a good thing—I still believe you need a good editor—but it’s far more egalitarian now to make a film.”

For many younger animators presently working in the industry, an era in which digital processes take care of the areas of production that would have proved physically or financially challenging is all they have ever known. There’s something to be said for investigating the production processes and materials of old that these digital shortcuts derived from, especially as regards stop-motion. For filmmakers such as Adam Elliot, whose body of work spanned the transitional period in which analog switched over to digital, the benefits of having had feet in both camps are clear.

“The technology has absolutely been a wonderful, timely event, and I wonder whether if I was graduating today, having not ever experienced an analog world or a celluloid world, I would have had the same career path. I think I’m lucky in many ways that I was on that crossover period of analog to digital; I got to edit my first two films with a Steinbeck; I spliced the film; I sticky-taped it together; I got to mix my sound on magnetic tape, so I learned the traditional techniques and also watched these new techniques come into the workflows and the pipelines, and then watch stop-motion become popular. I mean, when I started animating, I was considered an odd person and nerdy, geekish, whatever you want to call it, but now, stop-motion is quite popular. It’s almost fashionable!”

One artist whose attitude toward stop-motion lines up with this observation is Kirsten Lepore, director of *Bottle* and *Move Mountain* (Figure 10.3). Having produced an impressive array of her own films using the medium, she’s especially grounded

* This is evidenced by the fact that *Ernie Biscuit*, a film with comparable production values to 2003’s *Harvie Krumpet*, was produced at a third of the budget over 10 years later.



Figure 10.3

Kirsten Lepore working on the set of *Move Mountain*. (Courtesy of Kirsten Lepore, ©2013.)

regarding the production realities stop-motion animators must face: “You have to be willing to work your butt off. Stop-motion takes tremendous patience, dedication, and time, and if you’re one of the rare few that can take on a whole production alone or with a small team, you need to be the type of person that can meet a deadline, be reliable, and have a clear vision.”

In Kirsten’s view, the trickiest requirements when it comes to stop-motion production (especially if one person is at the helm) are extensive knowledge of cameras; lighting; rigging; fabricating; animating; cleanup post; and a locked-down, highly controlled space in which to shoot. “I’ve worked most of my life on learning as much as I can in all these areas and more. There have been many times someone has told me not to bother learning some very technical thing—instead just to pay a professional to do it down the line—but that attitude just made me want to learn it more. Almost all of those things I’d been discouraged from learning have popped up in random jobs and saved me tons of money since I already knew how to do them myself.”

For the most part, Kirsten handles every area of her production process herself. Though this ultimately saves time in having to communicate her ideas to other people, she acknowledges that the limitations of her own skill set can be a significant downside.

“It can be both exhausting and rewarding. Lately, I have been much more interested in collaborating and having a studio, since you are able to accomplish much more in a shorter time span, as well as achieving a product of much higher production value.” Her current setup is a far more preferable arrangement to the circumstances of her student short *Bottle*. Though massively acclaimed, the shoot was far from smooth sailing and was plagued by “major issues” throughout. “There were unforeseen obstacles at every step of the way: the snow wasn’t packable, the sand would crumble past a half meter, my camera remote broke, seagulls constantly stole my props, I was covered in shortening and lard

(part of puppet construction), my car smelled like dead crab, I couldn't take a pee break for the full 8 hours of shooting, et al. To say making the film was challenging would be a gross understatement, but somehow, it still got made."

By contrast, *Move Mountain*, made in the far more reliable indoor environment of her studio, allowed for more by way of experimentation with new materials and an easier production time frame that afforded her 6 months in which to educate herself on the mold-making and casting processes for silicones and urethanes (Figures 10.4 and 10.5). "Constructing and rigging the flexible trees and the clear flexible waterfall pieces were the biggest challenge. I have an entire binder where I would document my process and record data about which castings worked and failed, slowing improving with each prototype.

"I mostly experiment as I go, sometimes to the detriment of the project, because I'm usually too eager to jump into building and shooting to spend the amount of time I should doing R & D beforehand. *Move Mountain* did require a fair amount of testing in the pre-production phase to figure out how I would even construct certain things—but regardless of how much you plan, there are always problems you will have to solve in the middle of production."



Figure 10.4

Armature building for *Move Mountain* (Dir. Kirsten Lepore). (Courtesy of Kirsten Lepore, ©2013.)



Figure 10.5

Casting and molding characters for *Move Mountain* (Dir. Kirsten Lepore). (Courtesy of Kirsten Lepore, ©2013.)

Garrett Michael Davis, with whom Kirsten collaborated on *Story from North America* in 2007, has his own perspectives on how his methods of producing his auteur work differ from more traditional production pipelines.

- “The real advantage of a studio pipeline is that it includes a step that deposits funds into your bank account. And also, it allows you to focus on one aspect of the process rather than having to wear all the hats yourself. It’s nice to only have to think about storyboards, or only animation, or only design. Thinking about all of those things is very challenging, but people everywhere are doing it all the time.”
- “The present ease and accessibility of technology makes it very simple if you use your ingenuity. You don’t need a studio. You really just need access to a computer. You don’t need a fancy camera if you have a phone. You don’t have to storyboard. Werner Herzog has some devastating things to say about storyboards, and with a much more expanded view on filmmaking in general. If you watch his films, you know he is involved in something that goes way beyond filmmaking.”
- “That said, working in a studio pipeline is just like being in school, or boot camp. You learn a lot, and you sharpen your skills to a very high degree. I’m an example of the kind of artist I would never think could work happily at a studio, yet I have, and I do. But to me, it’s more about taking everything you learn there and then applying it in way more interesting ways in your own projects.”
- “I throw off the illusory shackle that is ‘being on model.’ If you are doing frame-by-frame animation, that means every frame is a different drawing, and a character is going to morph and change and grow just like a living thing. I do try to place limitations on that to some degree, but in my opinion, the only reason to ‘stay on model’ is if someone is paying you to do so. Even then, I find it excruciatingly painful, and my whole being rebels against it.”
- “Animation is tedious enough as it is. Japanese artists are masters of fearlessly representing characters in wildly different ways even within the same scene, but nobody says, ‘Wait, for a second there, I didn’t recognize that character; I’m lost: shut it off!’ when that happens. This art is supreme illusion, illusion of movement, illusion of change. People care so much about consistency, about reality, but personally, I can always tell when I’m watching an animation. I don’t confuse it with real life, no matter how high-res the CG is.”
- “I’m interested in bringing in a much wider range of things to animation, to the point where it becomes a kind of life philosophy. I get ideas from dreams. I use collage in many different ways, a method which has been around since at least Picasso but still seems untouchable to some people.”
- “I don’t feel guilty about rotoscoping something if I want to. I pack too much stuff into a scene to even see; I include things that are ‘distracting’; I don’t want people to ‘get it’ on the first watch. I want them to watch it a million times and see something new every time.”

Staying Balanced

When weighing up the funding circumstances and available resources, Matt Walker considers the most categorically “independent” film of his back catalog to be 2007’s *Little Face*, codirected with Benjamin Lole (Figure 10.6). The film is unique amongst his work as being predominantly live-action with animation composited on top. Accommodating the 3-day live-action shoot were funds from Southwest Screen and Calling the Shots, but the animation itself was largely down to him to complete in his own time over a period of 6 laborious months.

“It’s good to be ambitious, but also to be realistic, and balancing ambition with what’s realistically achievable. I found that *Little Face* in particular ended up being far more ambitious than I was able to achieve on the budget. So I wasn’t really happy with the final



Figure 10.6

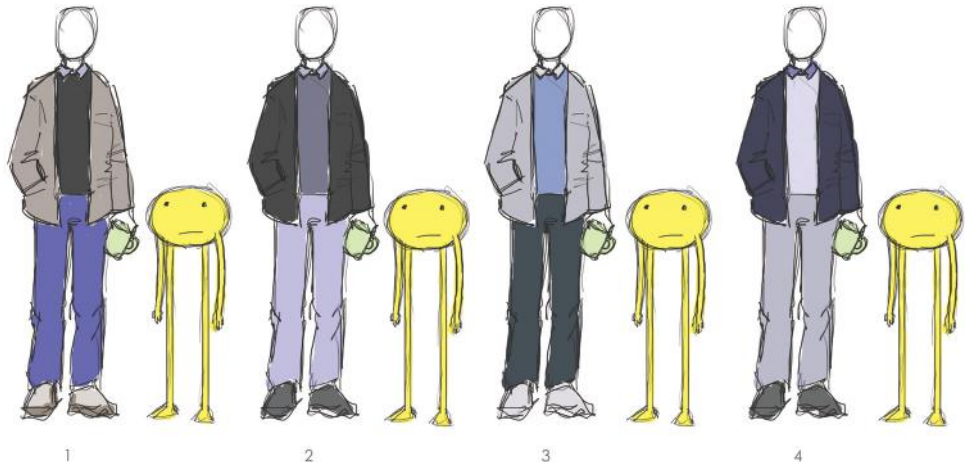
Production still from *Little Face* (Dir. Matthew Walker/Benjamin Lole). (Courtesy of Matthew Walker. *Little Face* ©2008 UK Film Council/South West Screen.)

film, just because it was so restrained by time, and also having to animate the character completely on my own. I had someone helping with compositing, which I wouldn't have been able to do at all myself, but that was definitely a film that I think suffered from trying to do more than was achievable on the budget.”

The premise had been significantly pared down from the original concept as pitched, in which a man finds himself reunited with his childhood imaginary friend, who takes the form of a large, lumbering robot. The final script sees the adult Nathan (played by British comedian and presenter Adam Buxton) briefly stop by his hometown during a changeover, bumping into Little Face (voiced by Chris Grimes), his childhood imaginary friend, who, for economic reasons, is now a diminutive, yellow, *Mr. Men*-type figure. The two reminisce and contemplate all that has changed before Nathan catches the train for the next leg of his journey, seemingly leaving Little Face behind forever (Figure 10.7).

For Matt, there was more tumult associated with the production than there had been with his animation-only films. Regarding the concessions made to the film's premise (an earlier version of the concept was a far lengthier, darker affair that involved man and imaginary friend living together as roommates whose relationship grows increasingly terse), he looks at it as a learning experience. Having not dipped his toe into these waters previously, there are certainly areas he would approach differently if doing so again.

“The edit, I would have liked to have spent more time on, because I think it ended up being a very slow film. It was always meant to be kind of slow, but I think it definitely could have been a little bit more punchy. Part of the reason was because I needed to just get on with the animation, and I was kind of doing that as we were editing, just like setting things up, and I just couldn't get my head around the edit at that point. So I think it ended up being a bit rushed at the editing stage, and then the animation stage, which was very drawn out. Also, the animation, I would have liked to have been able to do more with,



Nathan costume design - variation 2

Figure 10.7

Costume designs for *Little Face* (Dir. Matthew Walker/Benjamin Lole). (Courtesy of Matthew Walker.)



Figure 10.8

On location for *Little Face* (Dir. Matthew Walker/Benjamin Lole). (Courtesy of Matthew Walker.)

especially his face, because his eyes were just the dots. I would have preferred to do a bit more expressive facial animation, but I just ended up running out of time. I ended up with lots of little things that I had to compromise on, so overall, it could have been a lot stronger film if I'd spent more time on the edit in particular. I think if it was just live action, I could have spent a lot longer just playing around with things and trying different stuff, and not having to worry about animating it afterwards" (Figure 10.8).

Outside Assistance

While Sam Morrison's *Rocket Science* trilogy of films conformed to convention as far as his and cowriter Andrew Endersby's approach to scriptwriting, the animation process itself proved to be an altogether different affair, relying on a small crew, with the bulk of the animation taken on by Ian Hickman and Sam himself.

"Obviously, the actors contributed a good deal as well, but there certainly wasn't a big production team that moved into place. Basically I was producer, editor, director, and animator, but I don't think I credited myself, as I don't like those films where you see the same name, over and over. I'm not *averse* to seeing my name, it's good, but it felt like a two-man band once we got past the voice record—essentially, it's just myself and Ian from then on, with Andrew periodically looking in to see how things are progressing."

Other assistance did come in the form of students in search of work experience, thanks largely to ties with local universities, though some made the approach of their own volition.

"I generally get people contacting me every year from the Bristol School of Animation at the University of the West of England. I usually say 'yes,' as long as there's something for them to do. I don't like people just to come in if there's nothing happening in the studio, because then it's really boring for them, and I feel really self-conscious about it as well. So if there's a project they can work on, such as a commercial, then they can get involved, and I can pay them as well. If it's a short film, then there probably won't be money in it, so they have to decide if it's good for work experience. I sort of like to feel like I'm helping people out and not exploiting them; if there's money in the production they work on, they'll get some of it, and if there isn't, they'll get some experience."

Kirsten Lepore's *Move Mountain* benefited greatly from artistic collaboration for one of the film's most elaborate and appealing sequences, in which the wounded protagonist

hallucinates a mountainside dance party (Figure 10.9). The assortment of characters who appear in this sequence were designed by fellow animators including Garrett Davis, David O'Reilly, Mikey Please, and Julia Pott.

“Using friends’ characters for the dance scene in *Move Mountain* was part of the concept from the conception of the idea and also one of the things I was most excited about executing. All of the contributors are close friends who work in animation—many of whom were attending CalArts alongside me. For those people who lived nearby, I threw a puppet-making party where we all sat around, drank, and designed and built armatures for our puppets. I finished the puppets from that point on, using their initial sketch as reference. For the few people who were overseas, I either created the puppet for them or borrowed their existing puppet. It was a fun challenge, but it also served a larger purpose in the conceptual scheme of the film.”

The idea of international collaboration need not just be limited to the occasional contribution to a film, especially in an era where networked production pipelines are common and online transfers of entire project files or fully rendered footage files are the work of minutes. Even a film whose entire visual production is based across the world from one of its directors can be achieved, as was the case when it came to the majority of the production of Melissa Johnson and Robertino Zambrano’s *Love in the Time of March Madness*. Taking place with the two directors living on opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean, the animation itself was made entirely by the in-house team at Robertino’s KAPWA Studioworks in Sydney, while Melissa contributed to its direction from Los Angeles.

“I feel like Skype almost deserves a credit in the film, in terms of how we actually used it for communication—and as a digital media management tool—when you don’t actually have the luxury of being in the same room with the other person for almost the entire time,” says Melissa of the team’s unconventional setup. “I’ve been conditioned as an



Figure 10.9

Still from *Move Mountain* (Dir. Kirsten Lepore). (Courtesy of Kirsten Lepore, ©2013.)

athlete to be on teams my entire life, and a lot of the fun of that is getting to banter with people, and go back and forth in real-time, in person. So it was a challenge. We definitely surmounted it, but it was hard dealing at a greater distance, when you have to do a lot more coordination.

“You have to figure out the time zones and when you can talk, so I think that the only way to get a project like this done, with the kinds of challenges we have in terms of distance and no budget, was to be obsessed with doing it and getting it done. There’s just no one behind you cracking a whip; you *are* your own whip! You have to just continue it and finish it to that high degree, or the sacrifices you’ve made so far are for naught.”

While working on his segment for Scott Benson’s international, multiartist *Ghost Stories* project, the origins of which we will expand on in [Chapter 18](#), director Alex Grigg was motivated to bring on other talents for certain areas of the film that he felt were not his strengths, as well as a crew of animation generalists who would be able to expedite the overall turnaround time of the film by taking on shots simultaneously. Despite the fact that *Phantom Limb* was essentially an unfunded personal project, the strength of its premise and that of the overall anthology proved to be an appealing enough incentive for people to volunteer their time and skills ([Figure 10.10](#)).

“I think everyone had their own individual reasons for being excited about it. I think that when I talked to people about it, I just treated them how I would want to be treated. If I wanted to work with someone, I’d just e-mail a friend and say, ‘Hey, I’ve got this film project; would you be interested in doing a couple of shots?’ While just really defining the scope of their involvement and trying to make sure they have enough ownership that it can be fun and they can really flex their muscles on the shot.”



Figure 10.10

Character designs for *Phantom Limb*. (Courtesy of Alex Grigg, ©2013.)

Being candidly up front and respecting the time people are giving to your project are both vital. Even though it is potentially an opportunity for people to refine certain skill sets, try something new, embellish their showreel, and potentially get exposure, they are still giving time and expending effort for your benefit in a way that, in any other circumstances, would have a monetary value. As such, it's important that everybody who gets involved with the project is on the same page and has a clear idea of exactly what they might get out of it as well as what the plan of action is for the film once completed. As with any creative collaborative effort, it is also important to have a clear idea of what precisely the project will be and how it will come together. For Alex, *Phantom Limb* proved a far better attempt than any that had come before, due to its forethought and focus (Figure 10.11).

“I think when I first started trying to collaborate with people ages ago, we'd come into it all as equals, and we'd say, 'Hey, let's make something together!' And we'd sort of 'um' and 'ah' while being really polite to each other, and no one would actually make anything. So I found that in this situation, giving a really clearly defined role and giving it a defined timeline saw me more committed to the project. I knew that I didn't want to waste that time, so there was no chance that I could *not* finish the film, because other people had put their time into it for free, and that would do them a disservice.”

The end result was undoubtedly successful, and bringing on additional talent to help realize the film was beneficial in many respects, but along the way, the value of just how much contributors were actually helping the production along came into question.



Figure 10.11

Phantom Limb color boards by Colin Bigelow. (Courtesy of Alex Grigg.)

Although it could not have been predicted, during the latter stages, having a crew in place would actually add unnecessary complications and slow things down.

“Eventually, I would be at a point where I could just largely do it myself, so in the end, there were parts where it probably was more work to get someone else to do a couple of shots than it would have been for me to just do it, just because I needed everything to be on style.”

In spite of this, the primary benefit—and the one that makes the entire endeavor worth the effort—is the opportunity that collaboration creates to observe the working processes of others whose skill sets lie in different production areas than our own and learn from them.

“There was a bunch of stuff, like sound and backgrounds, that I really needed people on, and I will continue to use people for that stuff. I worked with Colin Bigelow, who is a phenomenal designer and helped with the backgrounds in the early stages. It’s hard to learn from someone that good; you sit in awe of them. It did mean that future projects were really easy to work together on as well; I just knew how to work with him. The process that he uses, this iteration process, I have sort of transferred onto other designers that I’ve worked with, as it’s a great way to work, and it’s how I now prefer to work. So I did learn a lot from him for sure, but not how to do his designs; his are too good.”

One major detail that separates many independent animation productions from those that have been funded or commissioned is the nature of the production management itself (Figure 10.12). While in a larger sense, the *Ghost Stories* project was produced and managed by Scott Benson, who frequently maintained contact with all filmmakers in order to make sure each segment was on track, within the shorts themselves, it was largely down to the director to take on the producer role as well.

“It didn’t feel too unnatural to me, in this case, because there isn’t a lot of money involved. The only people who got paid were the cleanup artists, because there was nothing to be gained creatively from that, so I wasn’t going to ask them to do that for free. Basically, I offered the rate that I got paid when I was doing my first animation job, which isn’t very much, but it’s something, I guess, for students who weren’t working at all. As far as producing, it came down to making a big spreadsheet and keeping track of shots and shot numbers, making sure I’ve got all the assets. In the end, it was taking up half my day each day, working with artists and making sure they all had their stuff, which is a lot of energy, to sink into that.”

The nature of small-scale auteur film production is often such that, when a larger team is formed, it is actually beneficial for the director and producer roles to not be mutually exclusive. While a competent producer is certainly capable of maintaining the artistic vision of the director, when they are one and the same person, it’s automatically easier to communicate precisely what is required of the visuals, style, and tone. Being able to engage with each specialist team member firsthand with no buffer proved a boon to the production.

“The actual process was fine; I would actually feel weird if someone else was dealing with artists that were giving me help for free. I’d rather reach out to them myself and not have them at arm’s length.

“We had some really strong design documents and animation guidelines for the process, the feedback, stuff like that. I really like systems; I use them a lot in my commercial directing, making sure everyone knows when feedback is and everyone knows what they’re expected to show. I think that lets people relax and focus on what they need to

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Figure 10.12 Phantom Limb production spreadsheet. (Courtesy of Alex Grigg.)

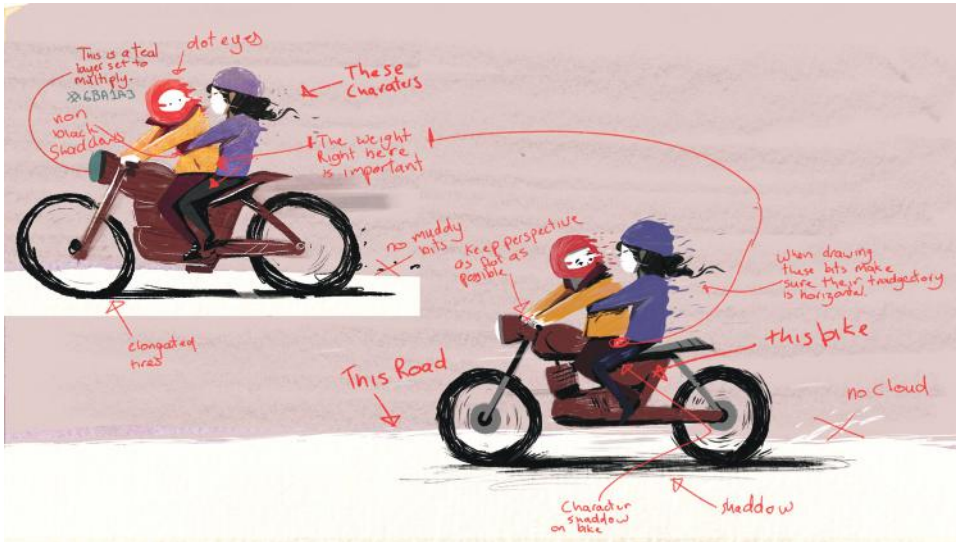


Figure 10.13

Example of the notes animators (James Hatley in this instance) working on *Phantom Limb* would be supplied with. (Courtesy of Alex Grigg.)

focus on. Generally, it was fine, sometimes Skyping, mostly e-mail, a lot of draw-overs. I just let everyone have my Dropbox password, and we shared a Dropbox; it was cool.”

The end result of *Phantom Limb* is a film that feels like a singular vision, which, far from being a slam on the contributing talents who brought it together, is a testament to their ability to consistently maintain the directorial intent of the film (Figure 10.13). There is, however, no delusion that a film so successful in its execution can, without funding, simply come together without massive sacrifice to time and spirit. Though it was a worthwhile endeavor and an incredibly strong directorial debut, there will always be a personal toll.

“I kind of destroyed myself, sleep-wise, which is definitely one of the things that makes it hard to dive into it again. It’s one of the reasons it would be nice to have funding; it’s just that it takes a lot of pressure off that, having to be the bottleneck for everything.”

Work Ethic

The drive and self-determination that led to the successful completion of Robert Morgan’s *Bobby Yeah* sans funding or a rigid deadline goes back to his filmmaking roots, when he was working on his student short *The Man in the Lower Left Hand Corner of the Photograph*.

“In my last year of college, I just really put my head down. Something I just knew—and I think this is good advice to students generally—is to spend your student years trying to make a good film. It’s the most important currency you can have when you leave, to show you can make a good film.”

This attitude certainly paid dividends. The film performed well at festivals, earning top prizes, funding for subsequent shorts, and ultimately carving the path of Robert’s career. This domino effect is the most recurring aspect of almost every notable filmmaker’s story:

throwing themselves into a student project potential employers simply could not ignore. “By the time I got to *Bobby Yeah*, which was totally self-funded on my own, I already had a body of work; people already knew my work; and therefore, there was an audience for it. It all comes down to that student film; if I hadn’t made that, if I hadn’t worked hard at college, I really wouldn’t have made any other films.”

One of the by-products of *Bobby Yeah*’s improvised story development as discussed previously was Robert’s ability to hand-build new characters on the fly whenever the action or a new scenario called for them (Figure 10.14). This too is a skill retained from his prior work, for which he has made a point of always sculpting his own puppets, “because I don’t think anyone would be able to do it in the way I like it. I think that people would probably be able to do it *better*, but it’s not about ‘better’; it’s about being right. I think for me, I have to get my hands on them. For the imperfections in the look, it has to be a certain way, so I will always sculpt the character myself.”

One notable quasi-exception to the overall look of Robert’s work would be *The Separation*, arguably his least independent short, having been commissioned for a large

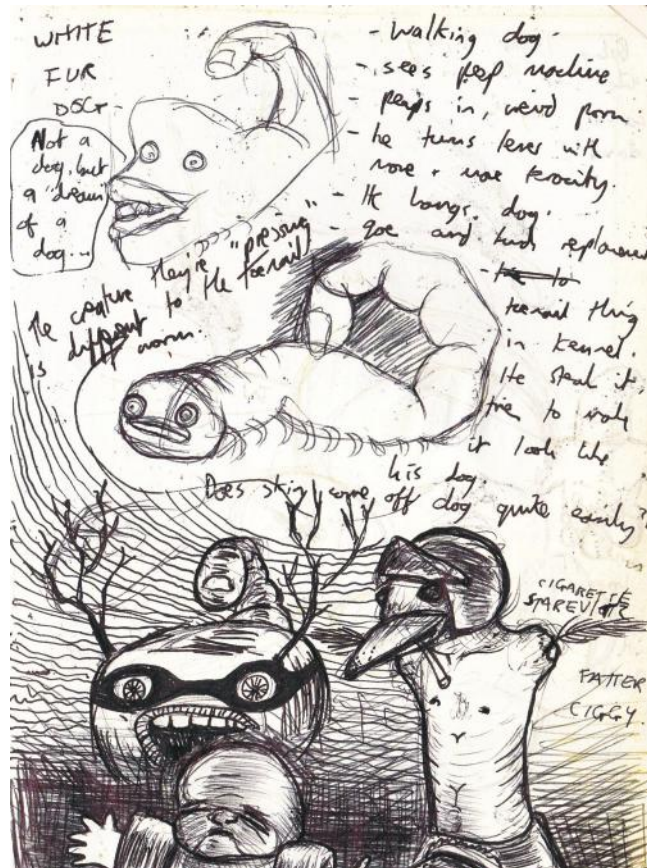


Figure 10.14

Bobby Yeah concept sketches. (Courtesy of Robert Morgan.)

budget by the Welsh cable channel S4C. Featuring additional design assistance from production designer Stéphane Collonge and slick cinematography by Philip Cowan, the film does stand apart as being more outwardly ‘produced,’ though at its heart, it remains a Robert Morgan film through and through, with all the dedicated grotesquery that comes with it. Robert happily concedes that collaboration brings with it rewards of its own and that *The Separation* includes visual ideas he most likely would never have thought of himself, had the opportunity not arisen. The puppets themselves, however, remain purely his. “If I sculpt the puppets, then I can feel like I’ve made them; I feel like they’re my characters then. I don’t think I could do those films if someone else had sculpted them.”

Flashing forward to several years later, the production of *Bobby Yeah*, now acknowledged as one of his best works, more than anything went back to his early days as a student animator, working for the most part as a one-man crew.

“As far as the visuals of the film itself were concerned, it was basically me. I got a little bit of assistance here and there, such as my partner being a photographer, who helped me shoot the exterior sequence; I wanted to have a moment where he suddenly goes outside. We’re used to seeing dark, gloomy interiors in my films, and being so bright and open on a sunny day really made for an interesting contrast, I think. We went to Dungeness because it’s technically the only classifiable desert in the UK, and I wanted something primal and basic, but very open. I also have a cinematographer friend, Marcus, who helped with the shots of the weird, psychedelic sky at the end of the film, which was created using ink in a water tank. The bit when the octopus bursts out of him, I got my friend Dominic Hailstone, a fellow director and a special-effects genius, to help me spruce that up a little bit. So there are bits and bobs along the way where friends were able to help out with particular bits, but essentially, it was just me in a room.”

To Robert, the progression of story in this way is largely instinctual and, consequently, a process that cannot truly be planned out or intellectualized (Figure 10.15). “I think it’s great when somebody says that my films have achieved a sort of nightmarish quality, because that’s definitely something I aspire to. I suppose I would say that I’d really like my films to achieve that level of feverish delirium. But because nightmares are sort of irrational, you have to use an irrational part of your brain to do it, so in a way, that’s why I think I tried to do *Bobby Yeah* in a kind of stream-of-consciousness kind of way.”

By going down this route, the story serves to tap into the irrational part of the audience’s brains, which makes the work divisive yet, to those on board with it, tremendously appealing. Had *Bobby Yeah* been traditionally scripted, it undoubtedly would not have carried nearly as much foreboding volatility, nor as much absurdist humor. “Very often, when you try and write a script, there’s a certain amount of sense that has to take place, so you’re juggling plot with these horrific visuals. The nightmarish sequences, or the feeling you get, is very much to do with a certain escalation of images and, in particular, sound as well, to create an ambiance that is both dreamlike or nightmarish.”

Also worth examining is the choice of medium itself. Save for the live-action *Monsters* (2004) and the mixed-media films *The Cat with Hands* and *Invocation* (2013), Robert’s entire short filmography has indulged his first choice of stop-motion. With the advances of CG processes over the course of his active career, what are the elements of this medium that so lend themselves to, for lack of a more fitting term, the horror genre?

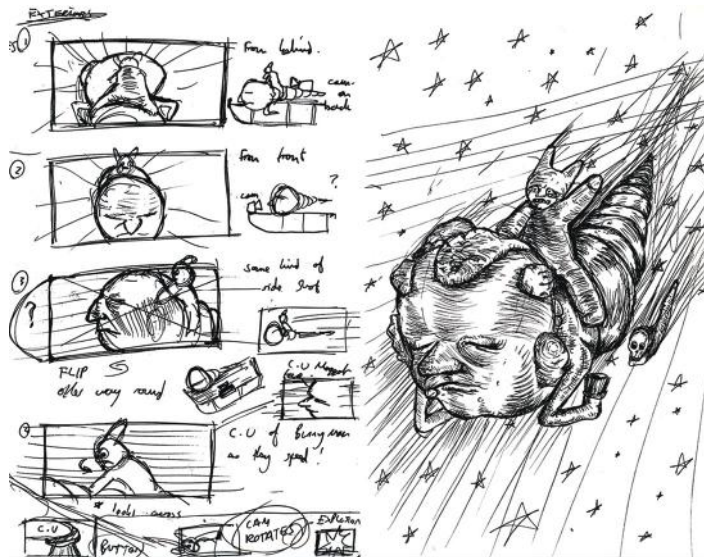


Figure 10.15

Out for a jaunt—*Bobby Yeah* (Dir. Robert Morgan) exterior sequence thumbnail board/concept sketch to final film comparison. (Courtesy of Swartz Can Talk/blueLight, ©2011.)



Figure 10.16

Still from *Bobby Yeah* (Dir. Robert Morgan). (Courtesy of Swartz Can Talk/blueLight, ©2011.)

“To me, the great, untapped dimension of stop-motion animation, which very few people have really truly harnessed, is the inherent uncanniness of it. Švankmajer’s done it, as have the Quay Brothers and some others, but I’m surprised that not more people have tapped into it. I think a lot of people somewhat miss the point of it as well; they will try and be spooky, and they end up doing a cartoony version of it which is not properly uncanny. I think the very nature of bringing inanimate objects to life and that kind of weird automaton way in which things move in stop-motion animation just lends itself to creepy or nightmarish filmmaking” (Figure 10.16).

Wisdom in Hindsight

Robert Grieves’ perspective of what one might do differently if returning to a project is of particular note, having actually gone back and redone the film once before.

“A lot of the things that I would do again, I did wrong in the first place because I didn’t have the knowledge, so I would say storyboard it better. Don’t rush in; take your time really getting it right. I put a lot of time into the storyboard; I just didn’t know enough about film grammar.

“It depends on what’s important to you, but I really wanted to make a film where all the storytelling was 100% visual. Obviously, the music feeds into that, without a doubt, but maybe one of the reasons I didn’t put the soundtrack on initially was that I wanted a film that, without the soundtrack, could 100% convey what was going on. I had got it to that point, where I could sit with people I respected who’d never seen it before and didn’t know anything about it, who could watch it without the soundtrack, and they fully followed it. At *that* point, I knew that the soundtrack would only take it to the next place.”

Something to consider throughout production is to what extent it’s worth it to stay committed to our original vision if doing so impedes the production itself. In Robert’s case, there is one area that he concedes would have made the whole process a lot less challenging.

“The easiest thing would have been, by far, to use voiceover and dialog. I think we worry about dialog taking longer—or I do, anyway—because of having to lip-sync, but lip sync is a whole lot easier to do than tell every bit of the emotional, narrative thrust through

acting. I realized how hard that was, and so I would say to anyone (or if I could go back in time and give myself advice when I was coming up with the idea for *Sausage*) would be to use voiceover and dialog in it to at least *some* degree, because it just brings the audience along” (Figure 10.17).

The use of narration in particular is something that independent filmmakers seem hesitant about. As writers like Adam Elliot have clearly demonstrated, narration can be far from lazy gimmickry if crafted well enough. Its success also hinges on the performer, as we will see in Chapter 12. The only real instance where narration should be completely avoided on principle is when it fails to add anything to the film itself. If the work speaks for itself visually, as the final version of *Sausage* proved to, then the addition of a voiceover or dialog would be arbitrary and redundant.



Figure 10.17

Sausage (Dir. Robert Grievés) backgrounds before and after coloring/texturing. (Courtesy of Robert Grievés, ©2013.)

“I saw so many films that were just labored with voiceover, where all the picture is doing is illustrating what is already in place; the narrative is there in the storytelling, in the voiceover; and you make some pictures to go along with it. I thought my film would be elevated above that for not using that ‘cheap trick’; but audiences don’t care about that! It’s amazing; as much as I respect the sophisticated knowledge of the audience, that’s one area people just don’t care about.”

The remaining constructive critique Robert has about the second, crowd-pleasing incarnation of *Sausage* would be its length. While it was cut down to 6 minutes from the original’s runtime of 8, in Robert’s view, a purely visual story might better be served by something more succinct (between 2 and 4 minutes), if for no other reason than to make the production process itself less of a hardship.

Looking back at *Ernie Biscuit* a mere handful of months after its completion, Adam Elliot has mixed feelings that lean more toward the positive.

“It was a bizarre 5 years. I think out of all my films, it has been the rockiest, and it’s been a very inconsistent process, but I think in some ways, it’s a bit serendipitous. I went through a bad phase after *Mary and Max* where I really was disillusioned and I lost my enthusiasm.”

Although it came at the cost of his original vision for the film as an elaborate feature with significantly higher production values, his unexpected detour into the world of independent animation seemed, ultimately, to be the shot in the arm required for him to rekindle his enthusiasm for animation on the whole.

“I’m only just starting to use the word *experiment*, because with *Ernie Biscuit*, I really wanted to go back to basics, not just in terms of aesthetics but also just the process and the materials I used (Figure 10.18). I just wanted to try and go back to something a little bit more raw and organic. I really was quite happy if the film didn’t get into any festivals or no one ever saw it, because it was more about experimenting and having total creative



Figure 10.18

Still from *Ernie Biscuit* (Dir. Adam Elliot). (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)

freedom and total creative control, without any broadcasters or government investors or distributors pressuring me. So probably, I enjoyed the process more than I've been enjoying the finished result. *Ernie's* certainly not my strongest film—it's very light, I think it's probably a little bit too long, some scenes are a little flat—but it's an experimental film. The audience probably don't see it as experimental, but the way I made it was certainly very loose.

"I realized if I wasn't *enjoying* the process, particularly in animation, which is such a slow shoot, and that if I didn't get that love back, it would certainly show in the end result."

Inevitably, there will be moments during a production where maintaining any kind of enthusiasm for the process is more of a hard ask. Setbacks, delays, and disasters need not even be the cause; sometimes there are stages of the production that are just outright boring. Such is the case with any task we embark upon that demands hard work, concentration, and, if the deadline dictates as much, grueling hours. With tenacity, however, that impossible goal of making it to the other side with a finished film is reachable. In [Chapter 19](#) of the book, we will hear from several filmmakers whose accounts of their own resolve should prove motivational enough for you to do likewise. Before that, though, let's look at some of the inventive and unconventional independent approaches to other areas of production.

11

Getting Comfortable

What is it that makes a film a comfortable watch? When considering the various disciplines of strong animated filmmaking, these should be simple enough to determine—an engaging script, appealing characters, a capable sound mix, seamless editing, expertly refined color palettes, a keen knowledge of dramaturgy and shot composition, and so on. Technically speaking, the more well-versed a filmmaker is when it comes to the fundamentals, the easier a film will be to watch. In the world of independent animation, however, there are plenty of examples where films have taken an outsider approach, throwing off the shackles of traditional filmmaking and pushing the envelope to the delight of audiences worldwide. Sometimes, as we will see, films that are outright bizarre, challenging, and seemingly horrific can, in a perverse way, elicit the same response.

Here, we will look at the ways in which films that are that extra step outside of convention have been successfully realized. To begin with, it's worth revisiting the world of abstract animation and one of its most successful offerings in recent years. Without telling a story or featuring characters in any literal sense, our first case study, *Virtuos Virtuell* (2013), proved such a hit on the festival circuit as to pick up over 40 awards during its astounding run ([Figure 11.1](#)).

Thomas Stellmach is a filmmaker and animator whose prior filmography includes the Academy Award-winning animated short *Quest* (Dir. Tyron Montgomery, 1996), which he wrote and produced, as well as an extensive portfolio of commercial projects taken on during his time at the animation studio Lichthof, which he cofounded. Moving on from Lichthof in 2009 to focus on personal, more artistically driven projects, Thomas would

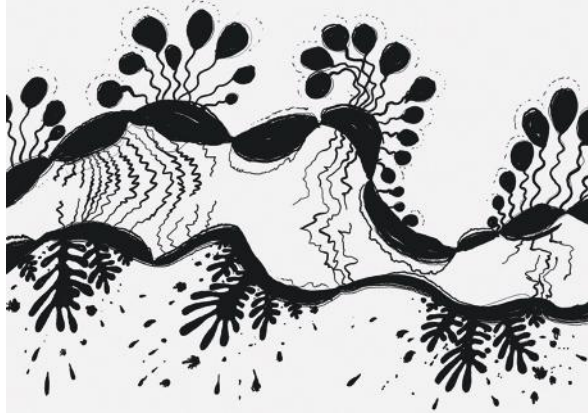


Figure 11.1

Virtuos Virtuell concept sketch. (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach.)

meet artist Maja Oschmann at an open day of Kassel’s ateliers. As they both studied at the Art University Kassel, though not at the same time, Thomas was intrigued by Maja’s abstract artistic approaches, in particular, her propensity toward music visualization, something the two shared a mutual enthusiasm for. It was not long before a creative affinity was realized, although there was some acclimation given their contrasting backgrounds—Maja’s being solely fine art, with little by way of film production experience.

“It took time to understand our different interests and understanding of quality,” says Thomas of the first handful of months of their collaboration. “That was an uneasy first step. Then suddenly, we understood one another. I wanted to make a project that achieved a special quality, so as to enter the international festivals. In my experience, I try to add more and more, to get something that nobody has seen before. Initially, that was not easy to explain.”

Once the pair came to an understanding of the scope of this potential collaboration, its focus needed to be determined. With the essential concept—to create an abstract piece that would interpret music through a hybrid of fine art, experimental film, and animation—pinned down, Thomas found inspiration for its source via Kassel’s Spohr Museum, the focus of which being the life’s work and story of highly prolific German composer Louis Spohr.

“The purpose of the museum is to make him better known and push his name. He lived in our city for a long time, and he did a lot of work, 170 different compositions; he composed 10 operas (*Faust*, for example), a Requiem, a lot of violin concerti—really a wide range of different kinds of music.

“Because I listen to it during my work, music inspires me very much. I was listening to all of Spohr’s different compositions, looking for a special kind of style that would be good for visualization, something which had a variety of dramatic aspects that change throughout.”

The piece that ultimately proved most inspiring was Spohr’s *Der Alchemist* (*The Alchemist*), a three-act opera originally composed in 1829–1830. Shortening the overture of *The Alchemist* to a seven-and-a-half-minute piece, Thomas wound up with a brief yet musically complex basis on which the moving visuals could be constructed. The dynamic range of the piece, with its wide variety of moods and rhythms, allowed for a film far more abstract and visually arresting than originally planned.

“The first idea was to make an animated documentary about him, but when I read about his life, it didn’t seem especially engaging, so I decided to visualize some music. So *Virtuos Virtuell* was my study about his life” (Figure 11.2).

The finished film, composited for stereoscopic projection as per the museum’s wishes, is a tremendously engaging piece of work that has clearly benefited from the meticulous attention to detail and time that has gone into every moment (more on this later). Presented as black ink on a white backdrop, the film increases in complexity and grandeur in perfect synchronicity with the music as it does likewise. Combining pure abstraction with the sensibilities of choreography and performance, it is also peppered with moments of pareidolia where more tangible forms can be glimpsed amongst the interplay between brushstrokes and random shapes.

“The idea began with a black ink stroke growing from an invisible brush. I did a lot of black-and-white drawings and abstract images to find something in that. During this step, I met Maja and saw her very abstract paintings. To begin with, we didn’t really know exactly what we would do together, but we soon recognized that we could combine all of our different ideas and experiences. Together, we developed a lot of the design for this film, especially the storyline.”

Though an experimental piece largely open to interpretation, a storyline of sorts can indeed be picked up on. As the overture progresses, the ink stroke evolves from a mere visual throughline, eventually becoming a “character” in and of itself, noticeably responding to the shifts in tone and mood within the music. To successfully achieve this, Thomas and Maja needed to determine the most appropriate style of movement for the ink, mainly through testing, trial and error, and recording a great deal of footage of ink in motion.

“The whole composition is made up of a lot of separate material pieces that I put together with masks and blending. I tried to get the same density of ink and maintain the speed of

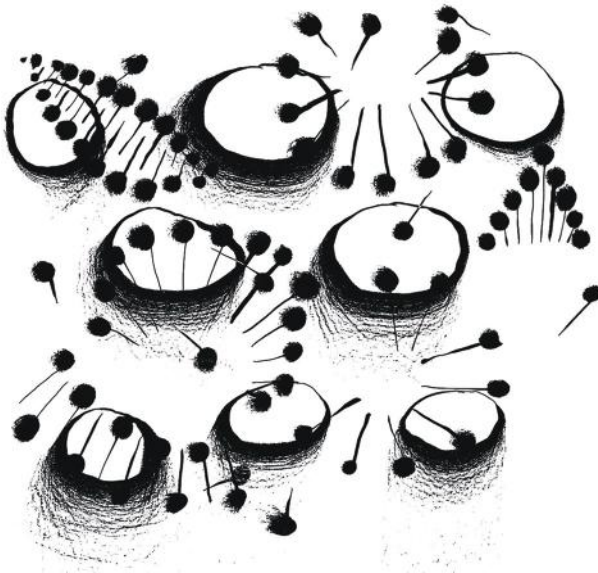


Figure 11.2

Virtuos Virtuell concept sketch. (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach.)

the motion, sometimes adjusting it. In the end, the audience should feel that there is only one graphic element, but in fact, there isn't" (Figure 11.3).

The next step was to develop a language where the two artists could effectively communicate their ideas to one another. Oftentimes, their creative interplay would begin with Thomas's musical interpretations relayed through physical performance to Maja, who in turn would endeavor to replicate these actions through the ink itself.

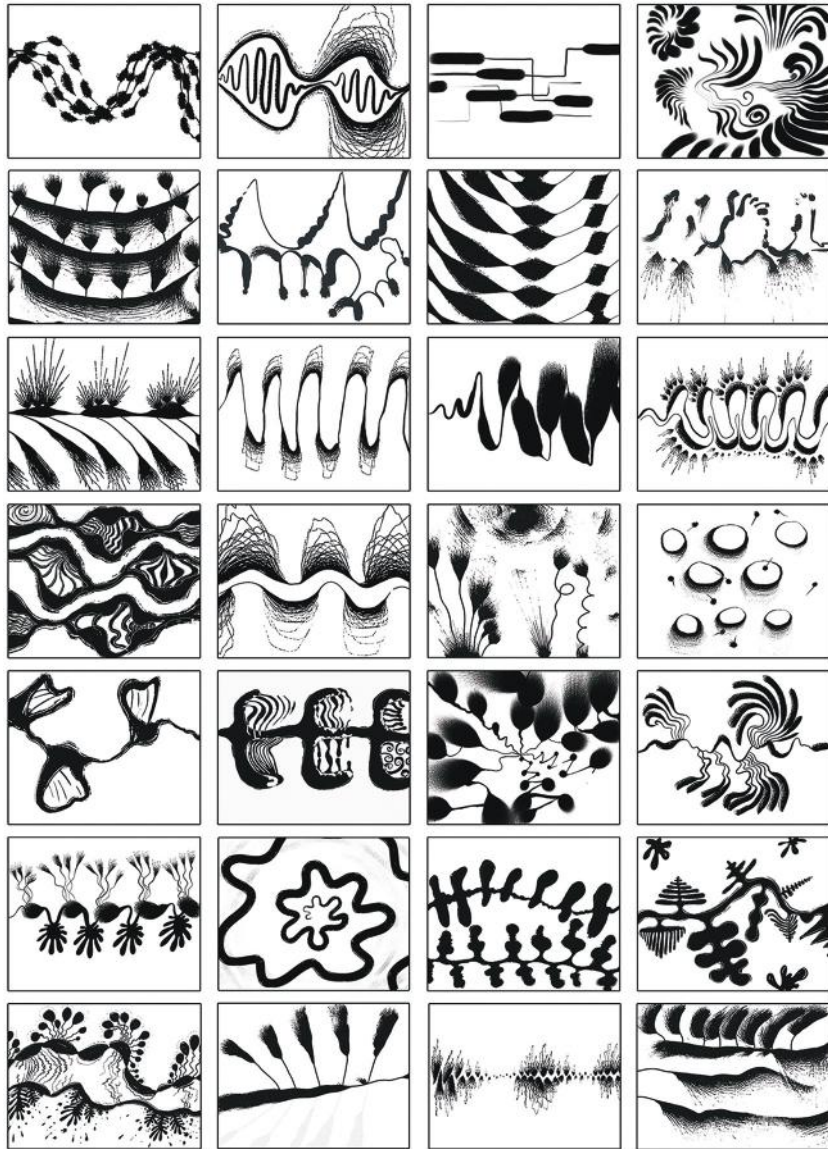


Figure 11.3

Virtuos Virtuell concept sketches. (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach.)

“When I listen to the music of Louis Spohr, I feel that someone is sad. That was the idea, that this black ink stroke, the ‘protagonist,’ should be sad. The other ‘character’ would be its surroundings, so when I hear in the music the implication of something dangerous, something disruptive or disturbing, that sadness can become fear, for example. Sometimes we would split the instruments into two different characters. What inspired me to choose this particular piece is that, when I listen to the first part, I can hear a dialogue between two different instruments. So the main character would be woodwind and violin, while the other instruments that were deeper and darker—the contrabass, for example—might suddenly join the others and express ‘danger.’ I would explain to Maja that it could be something like that, where an outside force comes in and creates a sense of dread, from which our character will try to escape. She would visualize this with the black ink stroke, moving in such a way whenever there were interruptions or moments in the film that create panic.”

One crucial moment in the film depicting such an “escape” also marks the transition from a flat plane to a three-dimensional environment, when the ink stroke seemingly breaks free of whatever threat has been introduced. Even when not viewed stereoscopically, the deftness of the film’s 3-D compositing (elaborated on in [Chapter 16](#)) clearly translates this extra level of dimensionality ([Figure 11.4](#)).

“We also needed to find words that we could use, very abstract words to understand which sequence we would talk about, for example. We separated every piece of the film into different sections and gave them each names—for example, ‘puddle skimming,’ ‘tulips growing,’ ‘dandelion sequence,’ ‘fire work’—this way, we could collect all these pictures and recordings into special folders with those names, for easier reference. Over time, we had developed a special language to understand each other and work together better.”



Figure 11.4

Still from *Virtuos Virtuell* (Dir. Thomas Stellmach/Maja Oschman). (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach, ©2013.)

The overall production was entirely taken on by Thomas (who went into *Virtuos Virtuell* with an already extensive career in film production under his belt) and Maja, developing and testing out the first ideas over the course of roughly 6 months. These tests essentially served as preproduction, with production (which consisted mainly of live-action filming of real ink behaviors in a variety of environments alongside digital brushstroke animation using a tablet) and postproduction (the compositing of both elements) occurring simultaneously over the course of 3 subsequent years. This extended production time can be attributed to Thomas and Maja’s discerning judgment as to when each shot or progression could be considered a success and, as such, usable in the final film.

“Every night, I composited all of the layers of pictures and footage together, and the next day we had to look them over. In most cases, Maja would redesign every piece again, and I would recomposite everything, usually three times (Figure 11.5)!

“It looks very simple, but we would have to create a great deal of material for each shot to choose from. We weren’t looking the *best* footage necessarily but something which had some mistakes; we wanted the ink to have a sense of human behavior to it, so to get the ideal movement we were looking for, there was a lot of preselection. Initially, it wasn’t very easy for us to get the right movement. We would redesign it and change it, trying to keep the shape of the black ink stroke that Maja would have to draw again and again. Looking back, it seems hard to believe, but for us, it was so ordinary to go about it this way, having developed this feeling and language amongst ourselves.”

To achieve the desired interplay between the music and the physical ink, it fell to Maja to breathe life into it, sometimes literally. Early experimentation involving breathing through a straw to control the motion of the ink proved promising but not reliable when dealing with longer musical notes that would last longer than breathing itself would



Figure 11.5

Thomas Stellmach retouches and edits thousands of ink film clips together with compositing software. (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach.)

accommodate. A variant of this approach, and one that proved more successful, was to “steer” the ink using an airbrush compressor, which also allowed for greater control over its behavior (Figure 11.6).

Experimenting with different materials, temperatures, and surfaces also enabled a wider range of behaviors. “We started on paper; we also drew on glass; we mixed oil with black ink; we added some oil *on* glass—and the behavior of the ink would change. We also turned the glass sheet vertically to get another result, for example. At one point, we used a syringe that was full of black ink!”

The digital animation process was similarly labor-intensive, painting brushstrokes in time with each music segment using a software that could realistically simulate drawing inks, recorded “live” using a screen-capture program. Frequently, the capturing of the perfect motion would prove just as elusive as when dealing with the unpredictability of the real-life, physical ink. One particularly troublesome 2-second shot was so intangible as to warrant an astounding 600 takes before a successful outcome was achieved. Another major part of the compositing process was the removal (through masking in After Effects)



Figure 11.6

Maja Oschmann blows the ink with an airbrush tube. (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach.)

of all the extraneous visuals that would accompany each piece of ink footage, such as hands, brushes, and shadows.

The finished film premiered as part of the *1100 Years of Kassel* anniversary celebrations in February 2013, projected to a live accompaniment of the soundtrack performed by the State Orchestra of Kassel. As well as the film's highly enthusiastic response from festival audiences worldwide, its initial purpose—as a stereoscopic exhibit as part of the Louis Spohr museum—also proved popular, extending to an exhibit at the German Film Museum in Frankfurt, and even being used as an educational tool to familiarize children with experimental film alongside works by such abstract pioneers as Len Lye, Norman McLaren, and Oskar Fischinger.

The Comfort of Discomfort

Curiously, a quality of certain films that enhances their watchability is an element of unease. The degree of this will vary, and it can be a tricky recipe to get right. A psychological drama may be far better served by the power of what *isn't* seen onscreen, so that when some visual horror does present itself, it can be underplayed yet have maximum impact. By contrast, a film that is held together by shock value alone can indulge onscreen violence, gratuitous sexual content, and strong language to far greater excess and wind up boring the audience. As demonstrated in the previously discussed work of Robert Morgan, independent animation can be a playground for the intense, the bizarre, and the horrific just as much as it can be for the comedic or poignant, as long as it's in the right hands. Becky Sloan and Joseph Pelling's phenomenally successful series *Don't Hug Me I'm Scared* is, on its surface, a simple send-up of children's programming, combining live-action puppetry with animated vignettes, bold colors, boisterous performances, catchy melodies, and simple topics such as the nature of love, creativity, and time, amongst others. Its execution is so on point, evocative of such iconic fodder as *Sesame Street*, *Rainbow*, and *Yo Gabba Gabba*, that little would be required to parody or subvert the genre. The extra mile that *Don't Hug Me I'm Scared* goes is the integration of not just dry one-liners or vaguely adult concepts (as with the broadly appealing *Avenue Q*, for example) but also elements of twisted metaphysical storytelling, nonlinear sequences of events, briefly glimpsed moments of loneliness and brutality, as well as a somewhat purgatorial throughline that its online audience relish and latch onto in comments and discussion threads. Despite its beginnings as a quirky, independent short taking a (genuinely creative) swipe at the irritating nature of “creative” types and seemingly predicated on an absence of continuity, Becky and Joseph have, in essence, cultivated an online fan base that have created their own rationales and mythologies for what precisely the show is or means (Figure 11.7).

Shock value for its own sake, however, tends to fall flat. From my personal experience gauging audience responses to my own work, if any such device is used arbitrarily or for a cheap laugh, the audience won't be fooled and will probably respond negatively—or worse, with indifference. For no reason other than having the automatic writing style of a young man raised on shows like *South Park*, my thesis film was riddled with crass language that I wrongly assumed would enhance its humor. Though the original 17-minutes-plus edit of the film did get some laughs at its various early screenings, the swearing came off as



Figure 11.7

The rotting antagonist of *House Guest*. (Courtesy of Ben Mitchell, ©2008.)

neither amusing nor provocative, more often than not being met with silence. The reason was relatively simple—that it was ultimately unnecessary. With the assurance that anything over 15 minutes would severely limit the film’s festival exposure, one of the easiest elements to trim out when excising 3 extraneous minutes was these moments of unnecessary swearing, as well as a number of similarly self-indulgent moments, such as shots that were kept in simply because I liked how the animation looked, or had taken some pride in sneaking in a visual innuendo. The difference in response from the under-15-minute version compared to the original was palpable—festival acceptances and positive online feedback surged, and it was a stark lesson that, despite its remaining flaws, at its heart, there was a solid little film there that was being held back by needless attempts to milk the gags and get a rise out of the audience.

I should hasten to add that this does not constitute an outright condemnation of bad language or provocative ideas and concepts. If a certain visual tone matches up with a script boasting a foul-mouthed ensemble cast or distinctly adult scenarios, it can be a very entertaining watch indeed; one example that immediately springs to mind is Pierre Mousquet and Jérôme Cauwe’s *Wind of Share*, an unrelentingly indulgent celebration

of animated machismo, sex, and ultraviolence that has proved to be a universal crowd-pleaser as far as international festival audiences are concerned.

Between making films and curating screenings, another psychological component that I have also found muddies the waters of audience appreciation is best attributed to Poe's law—a term coined in 2005 that refers to the line where parody and/or satire becomes undetectable from the genuine article, either through being expertly observed or from said genuine article's inherent ridiculousness. If somebody subscribes to a social or political ideology that is uneducated and facile, for example, it is much harder for a commentator or humorist to parody that person's outlook without coming off as simply sharing it. Taking advantage of this lack of clarity purposefully has become one of the mainstays of "trolling": simply inciting a reaction by espousing disingenuous opinions on a subject to watch the sparks and furor fly. Where this comes into play as far as independent filmmaking is concerned can be down to numerous factors—a sharply satirical script needs to have its tone appropriately matched by the film's visual execution, or the audience will be left scratching their heads.

An example that stands out in memory was a film that came onto my radar during a festival preselection in 2015. This film had some virtues, mostly in the modeling of the sets and props, but these fell prey to the weakness of the ego of the animator (who was also the director). Any flow the film might have had was undermined by an insistence on lingering shots of the capable modeling work, from multiple camera angles, without any rhyme or reason. The animation itself was also hugely misjudged, being almost a master class in what *not* to do to the extent that, in conversation afterward, the audience struggled to determine whether this lack of skill was in fact deliberate. Where it primarily misfired was regarding the premise itself, dealing with a subject that is still considered a huge political hot potato in certain territories and hugely incongruous to the goofy, cartoonish character design. What was this filmmaker trying to achieve? If it was a dark, *South Park*-ian lampoon of social propaganda, it didn't work, due to the misjudged style choice and incompetent animation. If, on the other hand, its social message was an earnest one (as turned out to be the case), it was equally a failure as there was no component to the story or visuals that an audience could conceivably engage with or be moved by. Put simply, the film in and of itself was a pointless exercise, undermined by the laziness of its execution.

Such is the way different brains are wired; there will always be a certain subsection of the masses who won't grasp even an instance of obvious parody (there may be very well be, for example, a miniscule percentage of an online audience who might stumble across a *Don't Hug Me I'm Scared* short and be outraged, genuinely believing it was created for kids), but there is a limit to how accommodating we can be as filmmakers and storytellers. The purpose of distancing oneself from the trap of Poe's law isn't to fetter our range of expression but, rather, consider alternative ways of communicating ideas, so that they might be clearer and perhaps even more impactful.

Odontophobia

Daniel Gray and Tom Brown began working together while studying animation in Newport in 2003. "He was a young whippersnapper," recalls Daniel of Tom, "And I was a mature student there. We ended up working on a project in the second year in a group.



Figure 11.8

Holbrooks portrait: Tom Brown and Daniel Gray. (Courtesy of Holbrooks.)

We found that we worked really well together, so we did our final film together and have continued to work together from then on” (Figure 11.8).

The final film was *t.o.m.* (2006), a staggeringly successful short that picked up 25 awards and over 50 official selections in the 2 years that followed. The film’s performance made a name for the pair, who have since operated under the shared name Holbrooks.* Though both initially working from a shared space in Wales, they’ve each since moved on to entirely different continents—Tom in New York, Dan in Budapest, Hungary—yet have continued to work as a creative pair successfully, represented by New York production company Blacklist.† The film itself is a 3-minute, firsthand account of a young boy’s daily routine, beginning with predictably mundane rituals and observations that grow steadily more uncomfortable as the audience is informed that he methodically strips off various items of clothing at particular locations on his route to school. Throughout the film, the audience is led to become increasingly suspicious of the directorial neutrality and intent, until the final shot, when all ambiguity is jettisoned; upon his arrival at school, the nude child is taunted with aggressive laughter from his congregated classmates. As university students, Dan and Tom’s writing process when it came to *t.o.m.* would be largely the same process they would go on to adopt on subsequent projects.

“The way that we tend to write is we’ll *overwrite*, mostly, and then make the story better for just using the bits that we like,” explains Dan. “For *t.o.m.*, we started off with this gross

* <http://www.holbrooksfilms.com>

† <http://www.blacklist.tv>

picture of this little naked beast in a classroom, on a desk. We had loads of sketchbook pictures that we'd make narratives around and made this overlong story about why he's naked in school. We'd write it all out, go through it and work out which parts seemed cheesy, or didn't work, focusing on what's interesting—chiefly, how does he actually *get* to school? The basic thing we were playing with was that we had a character delivering the narrative, which, to the audience, means he is the 'rule-setter'; what he tells you is what you believe.

"Animation is great because you can present your audience with anything and they come to it with a massive sense of innocence—they're ready to accept what you tell them. So he's giving you these rules, you're following it along, and obviously it's 'normal,' even though it is in fact very weird, but everyone's going along with it. Then at the end, we take away the narration, we pull the camera right back, and we have this theatrical, almost pre-Raphaelite composition of the kids behind the fence and him on his own, on the other side. So 'normality' was actually on the other side of the fence, and the innocence the audience has gone along with is taken from them."

That sense of being wrenched back down to earth almost serves as a wordless punch line moment, where it is not necessarily clear whom the joke is on—the titular Tom of the film or the audience itself. Dan also notes the effectiveness of protracting the final shot on purpose, so as to compound the awkwardness of the moment. Reveling in manipulating an audience's emotions and expectations could be seen as malicious were it not such a strangely satisfying—refreshing, even—viewing experience.

While *t.o.m.* could be seen as a test of to what extent an audience will go along with the farcically ridiculous, Dan and Tom's second film, *Teeth* (2015), could be seen as an outright endurance exercise (Figure 11.9). The film shares certain similarities with their student short, such as a rich, painterly style to the backgrounds against harsh-yet-sophisticated foreground/character animation, as well as an introspective narration that guides the audience through an increasingly unsettling series of rituals and memories. In this latter film's case, however, the unnamed and never-fully-visible narrator is an old man reflecting on a lifetime of dental masochism, in which he had set out to create the perfect set of dentures, methodically extracting his own teeth over the years and researching those of the animal kingdom for more optimal replacements. Perfectly delivered by veteran British performer Richard E. Grant, the compelling monologue that describes this inexplicable journey carries the viewer through an assortment of brutal visuals that tap into a primal urge to look away while simultaneously being compelled to keep watching.

"There's an interesting thing which I don't think I've seen elsewhere," observes Dan, "where, during the moments of silence, you can feel the audience not breathing, almost. It feels almost heavy, on the back of your neck, and I've heard some other people mention that as well. We wanted to really affect the audience, obviously, and it was really nice seeing these unexpected ways that happened. The nervous laughing, as well—when people laugh at the punch line, or the payoff, half the laugh is from dark humor, and the other half is from them thinking, *Well, this has got to be the end*, which is interesting as well" (Figure 11.10).

While uncompromising, there is a strange elegance and ethereal beauty to the film that somehow validates the nonsense logic of the main character and keeps the audience invested in the hope of some kind of resolution (will this elusive set of ideal teeth ever be completed and, if so, what then?). The directors are also careful to show a certain degree of restraint as to what is actually shown onscreen, never overstating the point by veering into

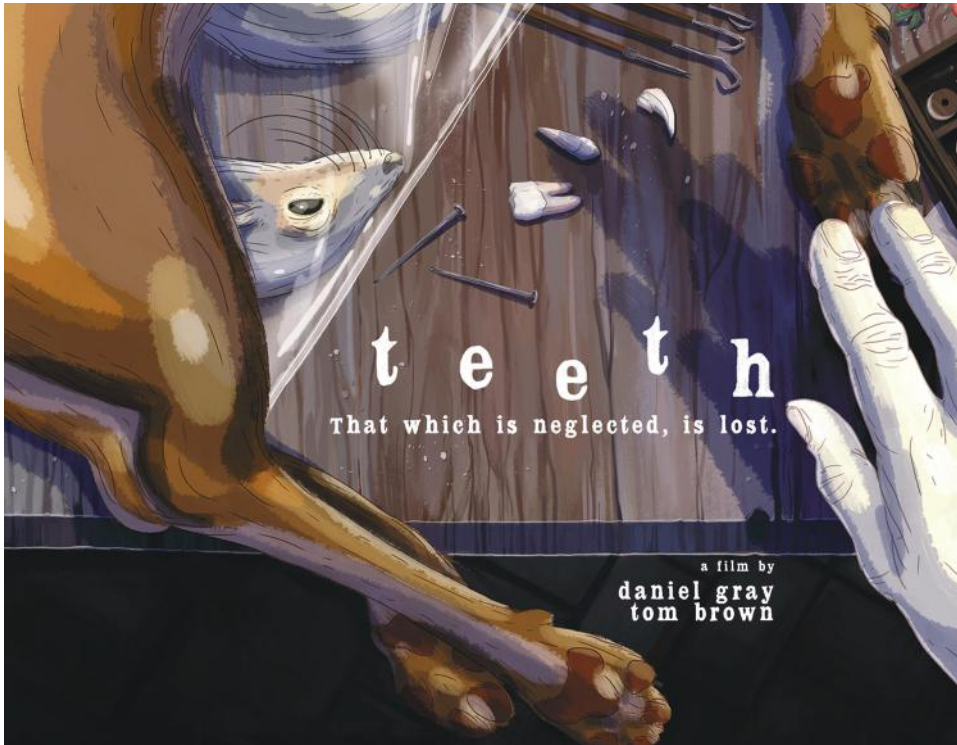


Figure 11.9

Teeth (Dir. Tom Brown/Daniel Gray) poster art. (Courtesy of Holbrooks/Blacklist, ©2015.)



Figure 11.10

Still from *Teeth* (Dir. Tom Brown/Daniel Gray). (Courtesy of Holbrooks/Blacklist, ©2015.)



Figure 11.11

Still from *Teeth* (Dir. Tom Brown/Daniel Gray). (Courtesy of Holbrooks/Blacklist, ©2015.)

outright gore but letting the audience's imaginations fill in the gaps, for maximum impact. This is best exemplified in one particular shot in which the obsessive lead scrapes a knife across his teeth (Figure 11.11). The image, when paired with horrendously accurate Foley work, creates an all-too-palpable sensation in the viewer.

"It almost threatens the audience. Normally, a film will escalate the gore and the disgustingness, so we put that visual there as a false promise, that we're going to *really* be this gross. So there's this tension, then, of people expecting us to keep ramping it up.

"As far as the development of the story goes, it's basically an allegory for short-sighted decisions. It was made around the same time as all the arts funding was being cut. Animation and art degrees were all being belittled as 'not necessary,' so *Teeth* was originally about the consequences of making the easy choices of closing these things down."

Without revealing the ending, consequences remain an important component of the film's resolution, though the denseness and heavy-handedness of the sociopolitical analogy ultimately turned out to not best serve the film. As with *t.o.m.*, the refinement of *Teeth*'s final script comes from being pared down from a broader concept, so that only the strongest ideas at its core remain.

"We kept a lot of the symbolism but made it a little bit more vague, because the more specific you get with what you're trying to say, the less enjoyable a film can be. With both films, we've used a pretty visual to hide this dark game we're playing, so with *Teeth*... well, everyone is squeamish with teeth. If someone were to hit their teeth with a knife or a spoon, you'd say, 'Can you not do that?' So the film was a way of tapping into the audience's feelings of disgust. Plus, with the sort of message we were originally talking about, we *wanted* the audience to be disgusted and angry about it, almost. In a way, it's subliminal, which is obviously not allowed in advertising and is frowned upon in general society—but it's what filmmakers do, isn't it? We have to play with the subliminal so as to be more aware of it."

12

Casting and Performance

Usually, before an animation production can properly begin, not only will the casting need to have been sorted, but also, the basic dialog track should already be laid down. This isn't always the case—films with narration, for example, can get by with a placeholder track until the postproduction phase—but either way, the process of actually finding the right performers and getting the best performance out of them may very well fall on your shoulders when doing things the independent way. In this chapter, you will be presented with a variety of circumstances that have determined an independent project's casting success that should hopefully demystify the process somewhat.

Going It Alone

One obvious time-saver when it comes to casting and directing is to use ourselves in our work. And why not? Who else will know exactly what kind of performance we want our own characters to give better than us?

Well, slow down there. Of course, there's something of a chasm between knowing what's best and being able to execute it on our own. Just as we need to know our limitations throughout the visual side of an animated production, when it comes to the soundtrack, we need to be equally vigilant—more so considering the increased likelihood that it will be territory outside of our usual field of expertise.

I write from firsthand experience in this regard as circumstances have regularly dictated I go this route for at least one character per each film of mine. At times, this has proved effective enough, though there are definitely instances where I have regretted doing so in hindsight. A stilted, horribly affected attempt at a British accent plagues my MA thesis film *House Guest* and is completely at odds with the characterization of the character I voiced: a gruff, necessitous hunting enthusiast who lives on his own in the woods.

If you are playing more than one character, you may want to take the time to really consider whether or not your vocal range is up to the task. The first independent short I produced that wound up being successful enough on the festival circuit to sell for broadcast was *The Naughty List*, an animated sketch about dealing with higher-ups not pulling their weight in the workplace, as depicted through an exchange between an anxious, beleaguered worker elf and Santa Claus (Figure 12.1). Turnaround time was tight, and budget was nil (dueling circumstances that will be familiar to many, I'm sure), so my workaround was to play both characters for the animatic, with an eventual plan to redub before lip-sync began proper.

The performances as recorded did not land as two separate characters, instead resulting in a voice clearly identifiable as mine affecting a clipped, fatherly voice for Santa and a Cod–New Jersey drawl for the elf. When it became clear that recasting/rerecording simply wasn't an option, I experimented with various processing effects, eventually settling on simply pitching up the Elf (to accentuate his stature and frantic state of mind) and pitching down Santa (to accentuate his age and lethargic bulk) roughly 20% each way. By keeping the adjustment fairly moderate, the cheat is not immediately obvious; pitching up a voice by a semioctave or higher, for example, will produce an identifiable *Alvin and the Chipmunks* effect, while you don't need to go too far when pitching any noise down before things start to sound outright demonic. By contrast, adjusting the audio by a smaller amount merely alters the tonality of the voice so that it becomes far less obvious as having originated from the same person. This option is what I've dubbed "the *South Park* cheat," in reference to the show's creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker's use of the same method in the preadolescent characterization of the main group of children they voice.



Figure 12.1

Still from *The Naughty List* (Dir. Ben Mitchell). (Courtesy of Ben Mitchell, ©2010.)



Figure 12.2

Boxhead and Roundhead creator Elliot Cowan. (Courtesy of the artist.)

Certainly, the more authentic approach is to use a performer with enough vocal capabilities to not warrant any additional postproduction trickery, or to use different actors per role altogether, but as a means to an end, this approach can be an effective compromise. Even performers as gifted as the great Mel Blanc (the man who originated such iconic voice performances as Barney Rubble and Private Snafu, not to mention Bugs Bunny and the greater percentage of the entire *Looney Tunes* ensemble) made use of this technique—his characterization of Daffy Duck, for example, does not amount to a great deal more than a pitched-up version of his performance as Sylvester the Cat.

Taking the lead yourself can be achieved without the digital trickery of such a cheating little cheater as I, provided you have the chops for it. Hailing from Melbourne, Australia, animator Elliot Cowan* is another independent artist, on top of those discussed in [Chapter 8](#), to have created a feature-length independent animation project with minimal resources. After having spent 11 years in Tasmania working on TV commercials, the call to return to something more animation focused saw him move to the United Kingdom for 18 months working for Uli Meyer before winding up in New York, where he, too, caught the bug to make his own animated feature (there must be something in the water).

Earlier in his career, Elliot had developed *Boxhead and Roundhead*, a concept for a book package that failed to generate much by way of interest ([Figure 12.2](#)). As it turned out, there

* <http://www.elliottelliottelliot.com>

proved to be some life and audience appeal in the characters when they were repurposed for a series of independently animated shorts. Embracing a time- and cost-effective approach to the animation, *The Stressful Adventures of Boxhead and Roundhead* would eventually gain enough momentum to warrant its own longer-form outing (Figure 12.3).

This ultimately led to a slight reworking of the main characters, who had previously been mute entities. Though the visual style of the shorts worked well enough without dialog, to carry anything longer than a few minutes, Boxhead and Roundhead would need voices and more thoroughly defined characteristics.

“They didn’t speak originally, although in the later shorts, they do what I call ‘indie speak,’” clarifies Elliot, referring to a nonsense language of murmurs and grunts. “They actually spoke to each other in the books that I had written, but at the time, I had no facility to record dialog, so I abandoned it initially.

“Originally, they were two very frightened characters that lived in this world where everybody hates them, but that also developed over time. One thing I was always trying very hard to avoid is, when you have the bossy character and the simple character, it resembles *Ren and Stimpy*. I tried very hard to make sure it was not that relationship, that they were very close, that they needed each other, and that it was a genuine friendship.”

The initial plan when it came to the casting of the full-length film was to use placeholder voices in anticipation of redubbing the dialog with bigger-name actors down the line, something that ordinarily would not work given the specific timing traditional lip sync requires. Though automated dialog replacement is not unheard of in animation, it



Figure 12.3

Still from *The Stressful Adventures of Boxhead and Roundhead* (Dir. Elliot Cowan). (Courtesy of Elliot Cowan, ©2014.)

remains a laborious process ordinarily reserved for dubbing films and shows into foreign languages. The nature of *The Stressful Adventures of Boxhead and Roundhead*'s uniquely economic animation process did accommodate this, however, lip sync largely being generated by single assets, manipulated in rough synchronicity to the dialog of either main character. The point becomes moot, however, with the fact that no such big-name actors would come to fill the roles. Instead, Elliot took the reins himself while also taking the risk of bringing on friends and colleagues:

“I’ve always done some voice-over work, so I knew it was going to be decent enough, but the plan was always that someone else was going to come and do the work. When that never happened, I did all the voices except for a few, so my friend Jeremy Beck played Boxhead, while fellow animator Boris Hiestand and one of my students Carl Doonan also did voices. In the end, I liked that, and I had lots of experience directing actors, so that part was easy.”

The fully voiced incarnations of Boxhead and Roundhead serve to match the key dynamic outlined previously. With Elliot’s performance as Roundhead being a nasal, New York drawl (“It’s basically Bugs Bunny if you listen to it, actually”), Boxhead needed to be the straight character that could be played against effectively. With his own particular approach to voice directing, one that went hand in hand with his hopes for the overall tone of the film, directing the others proved relatively straightforward.

“I don’t like ‘reads’; I don’t like feeling like the voice-over actors are in a booth, so it was nice and casual.”

Making use of friends and acquaintances when it comes to your animated projects may not even be considered a last resort. Not to sell the vastly impressive abilities and performance ranges of professional voice-over actors short, but an independent production is significantly less likely to require such extreme versatility, and it may very well be the case that somebody in your life has the chops to bring a particular character of yours to life. As long as you’re not arbitrarily throwing the part to a boyfriend or girlfriend who can’t act to save their life out of some sense of obligation, then there’s no harm in canvassing the talent amongst your friends and colleagues. An earlier case study this brings to mind would be the characterization of Rumpus Animation’s Bertram Fiddle, who has been voiced by Louis Jones (a fellow animator and creative director/cofounder of the Bristol animation production studio Sun and Moon,* also known for providing the voice of baby sheep Timmy in the Aardman/CBeebies preschool series *Timmy Time*) since the character’s first short film outing in 2007 (Figure 12.4).

“I’ve got quite a good idea of what I want the character to sound like” says creator Seb Burnett, “but also, when someone starts recording, when they go off on a different tangent and it feels right, then I just let them go with it. Louis especially will ad-lib a lot. Louis’ are some of the funniest lines, actually. There are lines where you can sense the joy that he was having recording it when you listen to it. I think that comes through in the game, the sense of fun he was having.”

The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle also features a mix of friends, colleagues, and professional performers mixed together, yet as the acting style the game’s universe demands is far from subtle or understated, the end result manages to remain consistent (Figure 12.5).

* <http://sunandmoonstudios.co.uk>



Figure 12.4

Adventurous evolution—the original “Bertram” from *The Films of Bertram Fiddle* (Dir. Seb Burnett) next to the character’s eventual Rumpus design. (Courtesy of Seb Burnett, ©2007/ Rumpus Animation, ©2014.)



Figure 12.5

The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle’s “Count Fulchmuckle” (voiced by your humble author). (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2014.)

Going Pro

Although St Albans-based Slurpy Studios was still in the earlier phase of building up a body of work and industry reputation, in the spirit of nothing ventured being nothing gained, they aimed big when it came to the casting of their independent short film adaptation of *The Fearsome Beastie*. While spitballing for who would be a fit for the titular role, Brian Blessed—a staple of British character acting with a propensity toward unmatched loudness—came to mind almost immediately. With some persistence, they were able to get the script to him and bring him on board (Figure 12.6).

Finding a fit for the narration itself proved less immediate and warranted more considered research. After some time, a short list of suitable female British actors was generated, with Alison Steadman's particular delivery style ultimately deemed the most appropriate.

"She did a really good job, in a slightly detached delivery, and that works really well for us," recalls creative director Katie Steed. "You can say, 'He ate them up' in a really scary way or in more of a bedtime story way, and I think Alison has that slightly comforting tone to her voice, and quite melodic as well; it really worked for the part."

This was in part owed to a notable similarity to Helena Bonham-Carter's successful performance in the opening and closing sequences of Magic Light's *The Gruffalo*, one of several children's picture-book adaptations analyzed during the research process.

"The hard thing was finding the voice for the kids," says the film's producer Aaron Wood, "because we'd used this scratch track with someone who worked at Farnham; she had an alright tone, but it was only a scratch track, so we then had to find somebody who could play four kids. Three of them are boys, one of them is a girl, so it had to be a female voice, and looking around for that was quite difficult."



Figure 12.6

Katie Steed and Aaron Wood of Slurpy Studios with *The Fearsome Beastie* voice performer Brian Blessed. (Courtesy of Slurpy Studios.)

After going through several different agencies, contacting individuals directly, and paying close attention to voice work heard while watching television, they eventually settled on voice-over performer Lizzie Watworth, whose work included multiple characters for *Horrible Henry and the Backyardigans*. Her versatility proved such as to fill all the children’s roles. As the greater percentage of the studio’s commissioned work leaned more toward corporate and commercial commissions than narrative fiction, by and large, prior working relationships with voice-over artists were limited to phone and e-mail contact. *The Fearsome Beastie* would be the studio’s first instance of directing performances in person. Certainly, firsthand directing offers numerous benefits, such as the ability to provide instant feedback and experiment with different approaches to the lines as written. This proved to be especially the case with Alison, who had the vast majority of the lines.

“With a professional actor like her,” assures Katie, “if you ask for a different take, they can find so many nuances of the line that you haven’t even thought of, and you can ask for 20 different takes, and they’ll all be completely different. It’s a real skill that you realize when you work with the pros.”

In the previous chapter, we learned about *Teeth* from Holbrooks Films and how its uncompromising and brutal visuals have proved strangely appealing to audiences worldwide (Figure 12.7). Finding the right voice for the film’s challenging yet compelling story of a man obsessed by the functionality of his teeth was crucial, and success was found through English actor Richard E. Grant, known for such iconic roles in cinema as the titular Withnail of *Withnail and I* (Dir. Bruce Robinson, 1987). Securing such a high-profile name for a relatively independent outfit such as Holbrooks was mainly attributed to taking the direct approach, as codirector Daniel Gray recalls.

“We didn’t have any money, obviously, so we phoned his voice-over agent. Phones, by the way, are very good if you want people to respond—e-mail is fine, but with a phone call, you can ask them what you want directly, and they have to at least talk about it. A phone call is worth about 10 e-mails; seriously, it’s just so much easier. So we phoned up, and we



Figure 12.7

Still from *Teeth* (Dir. Tom Brown/Daniel Gray). (Courtesy of Holbrooks/Blacklist, ©2015.)

explained the project, that we had no funding; can we at least just get it in front of Richard E. Grant? That way, if he likes it, we can try to come to an agreement.”

Given the nature of the film’s dialog being all narration, without cause for any lip sync, Holbrooks were able to complete the bulk of the production before making this approach. As such, presenting a near-final version of *Teeth*, with finished picture, sound design, and a scratch track for the eventual narration, clearly communicated the film’s intent and value. As such, Grant was easily swayed to be involved and lend his voice to the project. “We came to an agreement for a piecemeal amount of money, and he came and recorded it. He was an absolute pro; we could have used the first take, really, but he did about four or five in the end.”

Though he is a well-known actor on UK shores, Grant’s performance in the film is not instantly identifiable. Far from a simple recitation of the script’s narration as written, the unnamed protagonist (for lack of a more apropos term) is imbued with a husky melancholia, the abstract logic of his obsession tinged with ambivalent emotions. It is a fully charged performance, yet not remotely over the top. This is doubtless owed to Grant’s long years of professional experience lending him an intuitive sense of character, despite the shortness of the film’s length and the time available to record. Looking back, Daniel remembers that it took minimal direction to bring this fullness of performance to the fore.

“The first time he read it through it was really nice; we could have used that easily. Then we asked if he could sound a bit tired and a bit old, and then he suddenly was!”

The end result undeniably makes an already strong film stronger and further strengthens the case for reaching out to a performer if you instinctually feel they are right for a film, no matter how unattainable they may seem. Generally speaking, for a lot of actors, animation can hold a certain degree of appeal and has an edge over other forms of independent film in a lot of respects. These include easier hours, no costume or makeup concerns, and far less waiting around while technical issues are being ironed out, as would be experienced on a live-action set. As such, the seemingly impossible “gets” of the acting world may be a lot more within reach than expected.

A similar case study is that of Dutch animator, filmmaker, and storyteller Rosto, an artist whose output spans multiple narrative strands that, by and large, are all ultimately tied to the online graphic novel web series *Mind My Gap*. The extent of this elaborate, mixed-media universe and its associated spinoff galaxies will be explored more fully in [Chapter 15](#), though one of its less direct extensions is the 2011 half-hour independent short film project *The Monster of Nix*. The film, a story within a story of the mysterious Langemanne and troubled youngster Willy, originates from earlier projects such as the short films *Beheaded* (1999) and *Jona/Tomberry* (2005). It is also unique amongst Rosto’s projects as being intended for a younger audience, primarily a dark fairy tale rather than the intense and hallucinogenic work he is otherwise known for.

“I considered *The Monster of Nix* a children’s film because I did it for my son, who was my biggest fan at the time. He wanted to know everything about the Langemanne: who the forest creatures were who pop up in *Mind My Gap* and *Jona/Tomberry*. I had millions of stories to tell about them, because these universes are real—not externally, but inside me, all these stories exist. I often don’t use them in my films as narrative elements but more as snippets from those universes, but in this case, I literally wanted to tell Max, my son, a Langemanne story. So *The Monster of Nix* is related to *Mind My Gap*, but not part of the canon, so to speak.”

Afforded some visibility and legitimacy by the festival success of earlier projects such as *The Rise and Fall of the Legendary Anglobilly Feverson* (2002) and *No Place Like Home* (2009), *The Monster of Nix* also boasts an impressive roster of voice talents such as Tom Waits, Terry Gilliam, and Olivia Merilahti of European indie band The Dø. Securing such high-profile talent was more a matter of effective networking and mutual artistic appreciation than anything else, with Rosto having met Terry Gilliam in the States while touring with *Anglobilly Feverson* (“which was very serendipitous, because I was actually looking for him”). Enamored of the film, the two maintained a friendly correspondence that made a voice role on *The Monster of Nix* a relatively easy sell when it came around, despite having not provided voices for animation since his own animated contributions to Monty Python. “I asked Gilliam because I thought his voice was made for this role.” Rosto elaborates on the film’s official website, “He felt rather uncomfortable about the singing. And that’s exactly how I wanted this character to sound: scared and insecure. The poor bastard suffered, but I got exactly what I wanted.”

The notion of having Tom Waits supply the voice of Virgil S. Horn (*Mind My Gap*’s primary recurring antagonist) was an unexpected bonus, especially when considering that the character’s grand and darkly theatrical nature was largely inspired by the performance style of Waits himself.

“Virgil is both the God and the devil of this universe,” Rosto expounds. “He created it, basically, which is why Virgil in the films has my face. I first create my characters, I then create settings for them, and then I have awful things happen to them, because otherwise, it wouldn’t be interesting. So Virgil is my alter ego, although in the films, he’s like an *über* version of me. He has a bigger nose; he’s taller and lankier. However, the character’s voice in *Mind My Gap* isn’t me; it’s actually another actor doing the voice, but we always had Tom Waits as a reference, this sort of gravelly voice with a slight Romanian, Eastern European accent.”

With the premise of *The Monster of Nix* partially removed from the canonical events of *Mind My Gap*, Virgil’s depiction as voiced by Waits is notably different, portrayed not as a sinister, puppeteering deity but his spirit animal, “a giant swallow who hates being in a children’s film, because he considers himself an *artiste*” (Figure 12.8).

“I didn’t originally want to write the music for *Nix*, so I was experimenting with several other composers to see if they could write parts—or maybe all—of the soundtrack. For Virgil, I actually originally got in touch with Tom to see if he could write the leitmotif for that character, and maybe do the voice as well. For good reasons, I ended up writing the music myself, but we stayed in touch regarding the voice, because I didn’t know at the time when the production would begin.”

Once the film was green-lit, Waits readily agreed to lend his voice to the character. Despite being facilitated by various streams of government funding, it remained a small-scale production with actors’ fees generously waived so that the animators and artists brought on would not have to have their wages further compromised.

“It’s amazing to see that so many people worked for free—or for not nearly enough. Nobody actually got what they deserved on this project, so artists like Terry, Tom, and Olivia—or The Residents, for that matter—all worked for free on the project. I wouldn’t feel comfortable giving the actors a lot of money with some of my animators working for practically nothing; that would be totally out of balance. Fortunately, this was never actually a discussion; they actually proposed that I spend my money on people who really needed it, rather than on those who have a career and money in the bank already.”



Figure 12.8

"Willy" meets "Virgil" (voiced by Tom Waits) in *The Monster of Nix* (Dir. Rosto). (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D./Cinète/Autour de Minuit, ©2011.)

This generosity is not to suggest that the work and skill set of a voice performer is less artistically valuable than others who work on a film of this nature, but circumstantially speaking, it holds some water, especially when considering the actual time and labor involved. There is an obvious disparity between a handful of days working on voice-over (VO) for a project and the untold hours its crew of animators and artists will then spend bringing the performance to life. One certainly shouldn't approach a big name with the intention of getting free work out of them, but, in a similar way to Holbrooks and Slurpy's respective arrangements, one might be pleasantly surprised by the level of compromise that can be achieved by pitching a project idea with all of its budgetary limitations worn on its sleeve.

How you go about sourcing your voice cast is going to depend largely on exactly what type of production you are putting together—whether your film requires singing, narration, passion, high comedy, low comedy, understated nuance, or pantomime theatrics is something to bear in mind when researching available options, as a performer who will shine in one arena won't necessarily be able to bring much to another. From their experience producing both commercial work and creative projects, Aaron and Katie of Slurpy Studios can acknowledge a contrast between their experience directing the voices for *The Fearsome Beastie* and a more corporate project:

"For corporate films, you get what you expect; they're very quick at turning things around, and they must audition for hundreds of jobs, because every time we put a job up, we get 60–70 applications and have to pick one," says Katie.

"The other thing is that we don't make the decisions," adds Aaron, "so we just have to put the audition up, get a lot of voices, make a short list, and send them on to the client, whereas I think if you're casting for a short film, you're living that film

so much more. You're in its head, and it's in yours; you can hear the voices clearly, so you know what you want with a short film. With commercial projects, it's much more client based."

"Also, with *The Fearsome Beastie*, there was a slight element of wanting a name," explains Katie, "because our name obviously isn't going to sell a film, and the book—although it's a great book, we think—might not either. But with Brian Blessed and Alison Steadman's names on the poster, that does help sell it."

With this undeniable perk in mind, one should also not enter into this type of an arrangement with the expectation that a recognizable name on a poster will automatically increase the perception of the film's audience appeal by association.

"I didn't really want to exploit the fact that I had these amazing guys working on the film," says Rosto of his choice casting for—and subsequent promotion of—*The Monster of Nix*. "It felt very cheap to me that I would put on a poster, 'Look! There's Tom Waits! There's Terry Gilliam!' So I underplayed it a lot, as I had wanted to work with these guys because of who they were and what they would bring. But to see how little people actually *noticed* was slightly disappointing to me, at the time."

Fortunately, in the case of the examples we've explored in this segment, these casting choices were successful in so much as they manage to enhance the quality of the film from an artistic standpoint, rather than arbitrarily or cynically slapping a weak performance from a known celebrity onto a film's press kit. The major trap to avoid is the assumption that a film will automatically become more worthwhile through its voice cast (to hammer this point home, go ahead and look up the trailer for the 2012 film *Foodfight!*).

Adam Elliot's films have frequently boasted impressive casts, including *Harvie Krumpet* narrator Geoffrey Rush, *Mary and Max* narrator Barry Humphries, not to mention Mary and Max themselves, voiced by Toni Collette and the late Philip Seymour Hoffman, respectively. While these are tremendously accomplished names, the motivations for their use are miles away from the tendency in mainstream Hollywood features to cast whichever A-lister du jour is likely to have the most pulling power on a film's poster. In Adam's case, the performers chosen are sought after not because of their marketing potential, but because they are an ideal fit for the role.* Once one has seen the performances Philip Seymour Hoffman and Toni Collette deliver in the finished film, it is impossible to imagine the characters played by anyone else. By comparison, many other films with broader subject matter and less developed characters tend to boast ensemble casts that are, for the most part, interchangeable.

"Usually, by the second or third draft, I start to hear a voice in my head. It might be because that particular actor is popular at the time. For *Harvie Krumpet*, at that particular time, Geoffrey Rush was everywhere, so his voice stuck in my head. With Philip Seymour Hoffman, he was not the narrator, but his voice was probably the strongest in the film" (Figure 12.9).

Adam's fondness for the Todd Solondz 1998 classic *Happiness*, coupled with Hoffman's recent Oscar-winning turn in Bennett Miller's *Capote* (2005), firmly positioned the actor as a frontrunner for Max. With a particular gift for playing the tortured, damaged, and lovelorn, no other performer could hope to bring out the quiet, subdued tragedy of Max's

* It's especially fortuitous when a big name can both increase a film's potential marketability *and* be an ideal fit for the film, as with the earlier case study of Slurpy Studios' *Fearsome Beastie* adaptation.

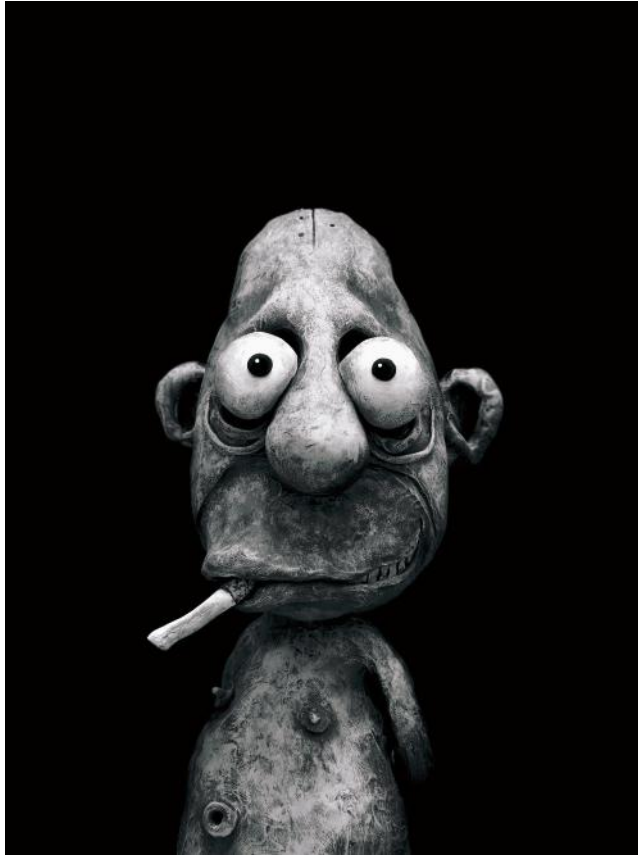


Figure 12.9

“Harvie” character sculpt for Adam Elliot’s *Harvie Krumpet*. (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)

perpetually lonesome existence, nor the glimmers of hope and depths of despair his epistolary relationship with his Australian pen pal Mary bring about. Whether a major feature or student short, the principles behind Adam’s casting choices have always remained the same.

“With my earlier films, what I’ve always gone for with the narrators in particular are people whose voices aren’t necessarily obvious or immediately recognizable, but have a tone or a timbre to them that is immediately likable, not saccharine or overbearing. I really like the narrators to be anonymous—which is what a narrator is, an anonymous voice—but a comforting, authentic, believable voice, almost so that in the cinema, the narrator is sitting just behind you, almost whispering into your ear as you’re watching a film, so that you sort of forget that he or she is there, guiding you along.”

Narration is a device a lot of filmmakers use, and one that receives some criticism, as touched upon in earlier chapters. More to the point, it’s a device that Adam as a writer enjoys, and as he sees it, if it works, then why not use it? The narration used in Adam’s films is far from a crutch, nor is it overbearing, only ever contributing to the emotion of a scene rather than distracting from it.

“My narrators have all been different people, and certainly, some of them have started to ‘act’ in certain scenes—Geoffrey Rush became quite Shakespearian in one rehearsal—where I’ve had to try and pull them back. I always have to say to them, ‘Look, I don’t want you to act; just pretend we’re in a bar at 3 a.m. and you’re telling me about this uncle you have, or this pen pal you’ve got.’ I really want them to be believable and authentic.”

One detail that critics of Adam’s work have picked up on is the absence of any strong female leading roles, as well as his tendency to favor male narrators.

“I don’t know why all my protagonists have been men. Mary in *Mary and Max* is sort of an exception, and the other women in my films tend to die or be tragic figures or be very one-dimensional and superficial. I’ve been called a misogynist quite a few times, but it’s not like I’m thinking of gender at all. This sounds pretentious, but I think the narrator is actually my inner voice.”

Given the consideration that has gone into each film and their outright refusal to coddle a broad audience by using safe subject matter, the gender issue seems more a semantic argument. I wouldn’t make such a facile social statement as to claim that misogyny doesn’t exist in any industry, but the label of “misogynist” as occasionally leveled against Adam by his critics doesn’t quite compute. In truth, the answer is simply that as the narrators of all his films are extensions of this inner voice, they’re more likely to share his own gender. The door is certainly open for more female characters with extra dimensionality when it comes to Adam’s forthcoming projects.* As it happens, had the original script for *Ernie Biscuit* not wound up so heavily abridged, this would have already been the case.

“I certainly have got ideas of making films about female characters, whether or not the narrator is male or female. In the feature film script for *Ernie Biscuit*, Angelina was a much more dimensional character. She had a longer backstory; she really was far more melodramatic and tragic and eccentric, so it’s a shame that with *Ernie Biscuit* the short, I couldn’t really develop her character more. I think that she subconsciously will reappear somewhere down the track, in another screenplay somewhere. I don’t know where she came from, Angelina, but I think she will reappear.

“Actors do understand that directors know what’s best for their stories, as an auteur filmmaker, and sometimes—most of the time—I think I make the right decision, and it’s hard to tell some actors what to do, but so, far so good; they’ve all been, nearly all of them have been well-behaved and trusting.”

What essentially set the tone, on one level or another, for all of Adam’s subsequent films was the casting choice for the narrator of his very first outing, the 1996 student short film *Uncle*.

“Originally, I was such a control freak and megalomaniac that I wanted to narrate my very first film, my student film *Uncle*, but the lecturers said, ‘No, no, Adam; you can’t act, you’ve got a squeaky voice, and you’ll ruin the film! You’ve got to get a real actor.’”

Adam was pointed in the direction of Queensland-born actor William McInnes, a friend of the course lecturer then known primarily for portraying a senior constable on the Australian drama series *Blue Heelers*.

* Though it cannot be denied that there is a skew toward male protagonists when it comes to film in general, as highlighted by the Bechdel–Wallace test, for example, this oversaturation might be worth considering when developing your own characters and story ideas.

“I thought, *No, I don’t want a cop; that’s too macho. I want somebody who’s got a poetic, tender tone to their voice.* She twisted my arm, and he came in and, of course, was fantastic. Then he ended up in the next two parts of the trilogy.

“I still feel that I don’t really direct the actors much; I give them a lot of freedom and room for spontaneity and improvisation because, again, I don’t want them to ‘act.’ Often, we’ll just get the actor in with very little rehearsal time, and we just let them talk. We record everything—we record the rehearsals, outtakes, anything that comes out—and then we piece it all together.

“I know most animators record the voices first, but I record them last; I let the animation sort of tell the narrator the tone of each shot and scene, unless it’s lip sync—but my films don’t have much lip sync in them, so I have that luxury of showing the actors what they have done and letting them gauge the tone of their own performance. So they sort of self-direct, in many ways.”

More than anything, the goal should always be to try and achieve a result that is believable and authentic, be it the unobtrusive, soft spoken narration of William McInnes evoking Adam himself or Philip Seymour Hoffman’s gruff, at-times-distressed characterization of New Yorker Max evoking the real-life pen pal on whom he was based. Suspension of disbelief is a difficult enough proposition when working in live action, and an animated film will carry with it the added battle of getting your audience to engage with “this blob of Plasticine,” in Adam’s words. When your blob is victorious, the intention is for the audience to rejoice along with it; when it dies, you want your audience to be moved. The skill of the animation itself can certainly cover some of the ground, but the competence of your voice actor can either make or break your characters’ believability.



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Thinking Outside the Light Box



Still from *Submarine Sandwich* (Dir. PES). (Courtesy of PES, ©2014.)

At the risk of sounding like the type of haggard old bore who sits rocking on his porch while nursing his inclement weather-detecting joint pains: the times, they are a-changing. As touched upon in several prior chapters, independent animators are expected to perform to significantly

increased expectations as far as presentation, originality, and overall content of their work. If your film will truly resonate, it will be down to one of two things:

1. The stars aligning in the most gloriously unpredictable way imaginable, where by happenstance, every stage of production comes off without a hitch and the final product communicates the genius of your work to a broad audience the moment it's put out into the world.
2. The comparatively less exciting prospect of heavily researching your proposed audience needs beforehand and reconciling yourself with the often excruciating and stressful juggling act of catering to the hypothetical masses while maintaining your core ideas and creative integrity.

So if you're confident the first will pan out for you (good luck with that), *mazel tov* in advance, and you need read no further.

It's not completely out of the realm of possibility, sure, but it might not be the most realistic outcome to depend on. As for the seemingly dull second option—well, there's actually quite a lot to get enthusiastic about, so buck up and get happy. To keep up with the folks who are putting out work that jolt festival, online, and television audiences awake, the main thing to try and stay aware of is how exactly audiences and consumers are relating to new media, and how this directly informs the filmmaking process.

The main spirit of this book, above all else, is to help animation filmmakers realize their full potential. Let's take pause before I continue: The phrase "realize your full potential" probably rings familiar, for good reason—it's bandied about as something of a catchall in the vast world of "motivational" literature, the kind of phrase that, in its vagueness, comes across as all the more accessible. It has many brothers designed to similarly stir up the "get up and go" of its audience—"Be all you can be"; "Take control of your destiny"; "MANIFEST"! It makes my fingers ache to even type this kind of thing. Yet, fundamentally, the reason why these are so prevalent in literature is that they do yield visible, if largely superficial, results. Positive thinking, clearheadedness, and determination do, generally speaking, assist tremendously in achieving certain life goals, and books on the subject fly off the shelves, so I'm in no position to besmirch them. Obviously, if I *did* have a book in me on the path to self-actualization, the road to spiritual fulfillment, or the expressway to emotional empowerment, this wouldn't be it.

So sticking to independent animation, what exactly do I mean by "full potential" when it comes to your work?

Ultimately, it's what differentiates two main attitudes about filmmaking—the "nailed it!" attitude and the "that'll do" attitude.

The "That'll Do" Attitude

How many times have you seen a film—be it short, feature-length, independent, commercial or otherwise—that just sort of happens by? It may raise a smile, it may even engage you in the moment, but once it's over, there's nothing about it that lingers with you.

I'm not going to lie: as a freelancer, I've not only witnessed directors succumb to this attitude in order to appease a client and meet a deadline; I've done it myself. As a director of my own films, I can appreciate moments in hindsight where significant improvements

could have been made to a scene's timing, a line record, layout, musical choices, and of course, the animation itself (man alive, this last one can sting). Even the best animators who would leave the likes of me in the dust would—and should—regard their previous work with a critical eye. We learn best from our own shortcomings, and the biggest lamentation an animator will have about their own work is “Why didn't I redo that bit?”

Therein lies the difference: in the moment, we may have just been so sick of the frame, the shot—or the entire universe that the film itself takes place in—that we only had the energy to get through it and move onto the next scene. Once we hit the “that'll do” moment, it can be the most tempting thing in the world to just move on.

The “Nailed It!” Attitude

This, predictably, is the hallmark of a filmmaker who doesn't succumb to said temptation. The filmmaker who takes a step back and acknowledges that more can be done to achieve perfection, even if that only amounts to erasing a flaw that might otherwise haunt them.

Give this matter some thought. Mull over the animators, directors, writers et al. who have had a lasting effect on you. Why can't you get that scene, or line of dialog, or musical cue out of your head? In the independent world, there are plenty of people who come to mind who so epitomize the “nailed it!” approach, though naturally, their work will seem flawed and riddled with inadequacies through their own eyes; such is the nature of this particular beast. Certain filmmakers produce work of such across-the-board satisfaction that pretty much everyone will take notice (Figure 13.1).

One such artist is Adam Pesapane, whose work put out under the moniker PES started strong, from the early days of his 2001 film *Roof Sex*, which depicted little more than animated furniture rutting on a rooftop (Figure 13.2). The overriding silliness of the concept



Figure 13.1

Still from *Submarine Sandwich* (Dir. PES). (Courtesy of PES, ©2014.)



Figure 13.2

Still from *Roof Sex* (Dir. PES). (Courtesy of PES, ©2002.)

was made authentic, innocuous, and humorous in a way that endeared him instantly to audiences of all types. There's nothing perceivably dirty about the film, the attention to detail of the movement relating the cavorting furniture to animals in the wild (on the street, even) rather than any kind of threatening or debauched behavior. Yet so easily, an idea of this kind could misfire if in the wrong hands, or executed with a more lackluster attitude. Comedic animation that relies on its subject matter alone oftentimes means that the animation itself is rendered crudely or hurriedly; not so with *Roof Sex*. PES's animation style and, perhaps most importantly, beautifully observed timing elevate the film as something noteworthy. The same applies to the greater part of his filmography, which includes *Game Over* (2006), a montage of familiar retro video game scenarios recreated using household objects; *Kaboom!* (2004), in which a military air strike is similarly conveyed using trinkets and other found miscellany; and his "Food Trilogy" of *Western Spaghetti* (2008), *Fresh Guacamole* (2012), and *Submarine Sandwich* (2014), whose funding circumstances we touched upon in [Chapter 9](#).

As is often the case, PES first acknowledged a sense of the greater impact his film work had on the world through their online viral success, especially when considering he was not the source.

"At the time of *Game Over*, I was just releasing them as QuickTime files on my website, and this amazing thing happened where people just came to the site, ripped the files, and threw them up on YouTube. At any given moment, you could look on YouTube and see a hundred different versions of *Game Over*."

The film had amassed millions upon millions of hits spread out over its multiple postings. Acknowledging that the online video craze was not about to die away any time soon, PES made the executive decision to release his own work via his own channel, ideally as a means to steer the public toward his other work, while at the very least guaranteeing they would be of an ideal quality standard.

“Once I launched my channel, the very first film that got into that viral territory was *Western Spaghetti*. I was going on vacation over the 4th of July 2008 and was scrambling to get this thing online so I could go relax for a couple days; I must have posted it around 4 a.m. I was off onto my vacation the day after when all the e-mails started coming in, so I was totally out of the house for the whole weekend, at the beach. My e-mail was completely shut down because of how many people and how many messages were coming through for that film; I had so many calls coming in on the phone, so much immediate response, that it really became its own monster online.”

While it would be impossible to quantify precisely how many hits earlier shorts such as *Roof Sex* or *Kaboom!* may have had, the decision to release work personally ensured a means of determining each subsequent film’s level of popularity and audience engagement.

“I would say what’s fascinating about *Western Spaghetti* is that it actually got more hits per year 6 years on than it did the first year. Obviously, the explosion of social media since 2008 is responsible for some of that, but it is nice to see that people are still finding value to these films (Figure 13.3). I hope they continue to do that for a long time.

“The success of *Western Spaghetti* is more of a personal thing; I found that the substitution of objects as something I like to do fit really snugly with the cooking film genre, which is very ingredient focused by nature. I was really pleased with the way that it was this nice little place for those ideas to live, as I had been sitting on a lot of the ideas seen in *Western Spaghetti*—sticky notes as butter, rubber bands as spaghetti—for awhile, not knowing what to do with them, so I gravitated towards the cooking show genre and went from there.”

Though it was certainly helped by the encouraging response, the motivation to continue more crucially came from still more cooking-oriented film ideas. Taking inspiration from all around him, the basic concept of the second “Food Trilogy” short came from a pondering of the visual similarities between avocados and hand grenades while grocery shopping. Having recently moved to California and feeling compelled to stray from his Italian roots for a second culinary outing, PES traveled to Mexico to research recipes and develop his next idea.

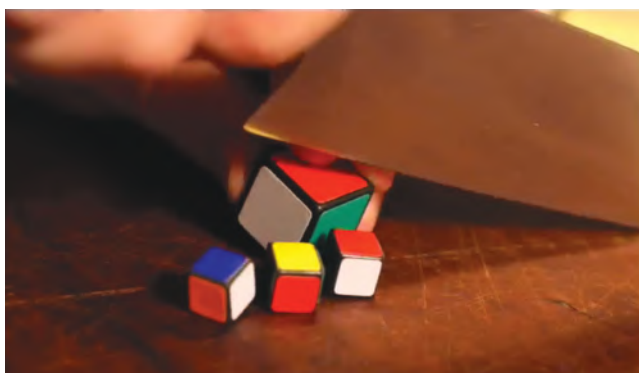


Figure 13.3

Still from *Western Spaghetti* (Dir. PES). (Courtesy of PES, ©2008.)

“There’s something in my brain where I fall in love with these ideas so much that I need to get them out into the world, so I set about making *Fresh Guacamole* coming from that seed of avocados and grenades. Okay, what do you make with avocados? Guacamole!”

As with *Western Spaghetti*, and indeed all of his popular work, *Fresh Guacamole* makes inspired use of household objects substituting ingredients, chosen for their visual resemblance and animated in such a way as to suspend disbelief entirely. The audience’s brain knows on a literal level that they are seeing Christmas lights being chopped into an assortment of Monopoly houses, but they understand on a contextual level that they are in fact seeing peppers.

“I’ve almost thought of myself as a documentary filmmaker in some respects; it’s just that I’m making these documentaries on the absurd. Even if it’s two chairs having sex, you’ll notice all these films are shot very much as though I believe wholeheartedly that they’re happening. I want my audience to take it as if I’m *really* cooking this (rubber band) pasta. *Kaboom!* is basically like a history channel show, just with child’s objects, and it’s the sort of believability that I approach ideas with that heightens the absurdity and perhaps the response to it” (Figure 13.4).

Real life consistently plays a role in the authenticity and believability of his visuals. Just as a character animator might study live performance or documentary footage for reference, so that their work can faithfully replicate a realistic style of movement, it’s the examination of how real-life objects look, sound, and interact with each other that makes his work shine. Even when considering a film such as *Game Over*, which entirely references video game sprite animation, anyone of a certain age who experienced playing the games referenced firsthand will acknowledge a truly impressive fidelity to the timing, framing, and even sense of mounting anxiety.

“Although there was really nothing to study in two chairs having sex, it really was just a sort of rhythm thing—how many frames forward or how many frames back in order to get that right. But with *Game Over*, I used an emulator on my computer to record



Figure 13.4

Still from *Kaboom!* (Dir. PES). (Courtesy of PES, ©2004.)

sequences of these famous arcade games and study them: how many frames does it take Pac-Man to die at the end, or what's the hold before the frog jumps each time? So I studied these things and broke them down to understand how many frames were used in the real game, so it was dead-on accurate when it comes to movement. It wasn't rotoscoped; I really just sort of studied the games so much that I understood what had to happen, then just recreated it.

"A film like *Game Over* is really built on my perception that what we remember most about these games is not all the wins we had but that thing that just drove you crazy, whether it was shooting centipedes down and then the spider just comes out of nowhere, or in *Space Invaders*, how even if you kill all the aliens so that you only have one left, he would come all the way down and get you. In stringing these famous death sequences together, it was the notion that it was more memorable for how you died than how you lived; that was really the concept there."

To achieve the desired result is not just a matter of simply scooping up as many trinkets and pieces of household debris as possible and moving them around, as many PES imitators have demonstrated while effectively failing to grasp the central binding premise of his work. Ultimately, the choice of props and items boils down to what he equates with an elaborate casting session, one that can be held for months at a time, often branching off from one initial idea. As with the avocado/grenade epiphany that inspired *Fresh Guacamole*, the third film of the "Food Trilogy," eventually dubbed *Submarine Sandwich*, similarly took shape around an initial visual concept PES had envisioned, of putting a boxing glove inside a deli meat slicer (Figure 13.5).

"I thought that was a really tantalizing image; boxing gloves always seem like cold cuts or fine Italian meats, so to speak, and putting them knuckle first toward the blade created a certain sort of palpable feeling." What followed was a series of musings on what could come out the other side, the "meat slices," effectively. This automatically narrowed down the variety of suitable objects to the very small and thin, such as patches, doilies, and in one particularly inspired instance, View-Master reels (produced when the "meat" being

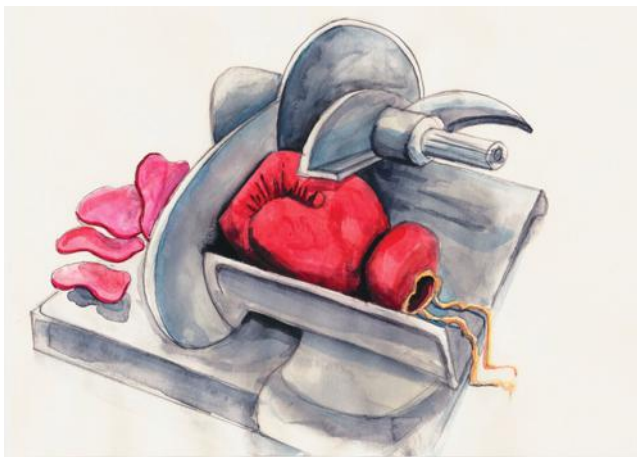


Figure 13.5

Submarine Sandwich concept artwork. (Courtesy of PES, ©2014.)

sliced is a British soccer ball). The limitations of shape and size proved challenging, and inevitably, some ideas come across stronger than others. “But at the end of the day, I have to go with what I think is the best decision I can make at any given time. So there may have been multiple ‘actors’ considered for the role of onion rings, but in the end, a slinky gets the job.”

“I guess a lot of people don’t realize how much thought and how much work goes into trying to decide or uncover those associations—sometimes, a great idea will strike you like a lightning bolt. If you recall, in *Western Spaghetti*, I used dice as sugar cubes, but the connection there really stopped at a look-alike level. Somewhere in between there and *Fresh Guacamole*, I realized that a better idea would be to use dice for dicing—because that’s what we say; we dice a tomato, and we dice an onion. Then it became a question of whether or not, having used it as a sugar cube, could I use it again as something totally different? Of course, the decision I made was, ‘Yes, I have to choose the best thing for every film,’ so I chose that for that dicing sequence—literally the exact same dice to create something totally different.”

This practice extends to all manner of objects, from the obscure to the instantly identifiable; flames, oftentimes, are represented as the iconic American candy corn, boiling water as bubble wrap, while a sliced lime can be make up of Trivial Pursuit playing pieces encased in a golf ball.

“I have a particular fascination for these strange objects that have so woven themselves into our lives that we almost stop questioning them.”

The “Food Trilogy” also incorporates a pixilation component, in which PES’s own hands are visibly part of the process, animated (with the assistance of Javan Ivey in *Western Spaghetti* and Dillon Markey in *Fresh Guacamole* and *Submarine Sandwich*) alongside the objects in the same stop-motion fashion (Figure 13.6).



Figure 13.6

Still from *Submarine Sandwich* (Dir. PES). (Courtesy of PES, ©2014.)

“There’s really two components to the animation in these films—one is the animation of the hands, which is me, and all the subtleties there that are required to make it feel believable and not ugly. Then of course, all the animation of objects that are based around my hands requires a partner, a teammate in the production. It’s totally different to a film like *Game Over* where you just have your objects and don’t need anybody else; this is more like two people who have to get on the same wavelength for months. Dillon and I had succeeded with *Fresh Guacamole*; he understands my tastes and things that I’m usually seeking to achieve in my animation; he’s become a great partner in that respect.”

When closing out his trilogy with *Submarine Sandwich*, PES himself is seen fully onscreen as the pixilated owner of a deli, a setting he had aspired to set the film in for some time beforehand, as made clear in [Chapter 9](#).

“This film really started with a simple idea of how old athletic equipment always reminded me so much of cold cuts that I started envisioning a deli case full of these things, a sort of ‘meat locker,’ so to speak, a cross between an athletic locker room and a deli, which was just an idea that occurred to me. I then started working on not just making a ham sandwich, but something bigger, a submarine sandwich.”

Having procured the deli case of his traditional Italian culture–steeped dreams, the vision for the film expanded to logically set it inside a realistic deli environment. With the notion of an on-location shoot rendered impossible by the production lengths and overall demands of the animation itself, PES set about building an authentic backdrop himself, choosing to favor authentic set dressing over generic Hollywood prop house fare.

“It’s just my nature to craft a space and make it personal, so I thought to myself, *This is gonna be the only time I’m making a deli in my life, as far as I know; why not make it that place that feels like a home to me?* If I were to have a deli, this is what it would look like; it would have busts of the patron saints Dante and Beatrice and pictures of the Pantheon in Rome. That was the fun of it, for me, was making the space with all these old signs, which are all real. I sourced those objects from around the world, from flea markets to Craigslist to eBay. It made for a much bigger build—*Fresh Guacamole* and *Western Spaghetti* were purely tabletop films, and this one made use of a whole space. I don’t think it makes the film any *better* for that reason; it was just what felt right for this particular idea.”

There is certainly an element of the abstract in PES’s films, in spite of being very simple to interpret and comprehend. As with other work we have discussed that could be labeled “experimental,” without this structural foothold, the films could very easily fall apart. PES’s filmography, and ultimately the reason why I feel he makes the most fitting case study for this chapter, serves to hammer home the duality of style and substance; all too often, they are looked upon as being mutually exclusive.

“All the things that people say you always need for a successful film—characters, a story—I don’t really buy that. If you can create a system where viewers want to know simply what happens next, if you can tap into that desire, *then* you have a short film, something equally viable in the world.

“I’m a big believer in traditional structures. I spend a lot of time working on trying to find a structure for my film that feels like it has that beginning, middle, and end. I’m always looking for that inevitable conclusion to a film that feels like it *had* to go there, yet is not quite expected. With *Submarine Sandwich*, for instance, the big idea for me is in hiding the submarine itself until the very end ([Figure 13.7](#)).

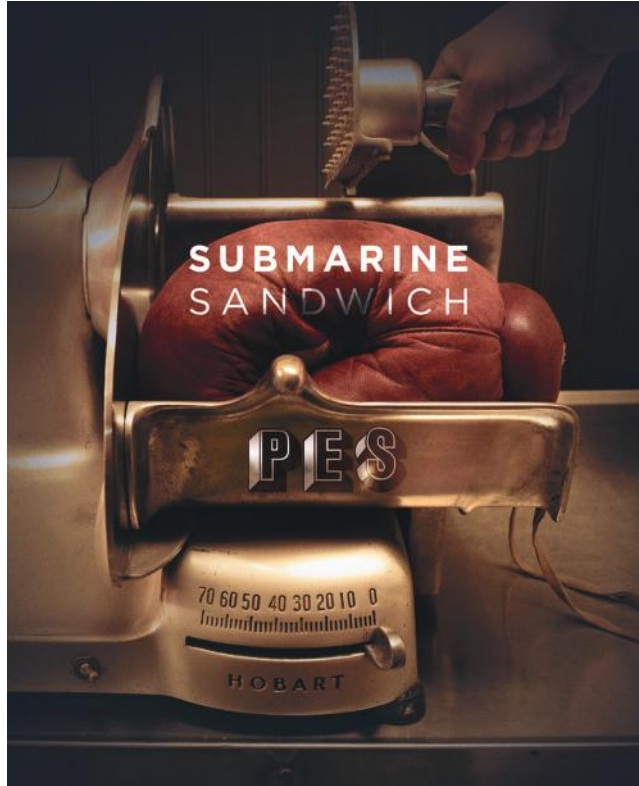


Figure 13.7

Submarine Sandwich poster. (Courtesy of PES, ©2014.)

“Transitionally, I might say I would start the film by picking my bread out, cutting it, and putting it down without revealing the submarine, as I had this notion that if I held it to the end, it would be more of a satisfying conclusion. Almost all my films have that priority on the ending, that sort of exclamation point at the end that makes watching the entire thing essential, or you miss out. There’s all sorts of different examples of that, such as *Fresh Guacamole*, with the chip being dipped and cracked at the end. I think when I animate objects, people are used to looking at certain structures that are familiar in one way, and then all of a sudden, I do something different with them; there’s a sort of unexpected quality that makes people want to know what happens next.”

While it is never fair to expect an artist to choose a favorite piece of work, when objectively assessing his back catalog to date, PES is able to impartially acknowledge one film in particular that fired on the most cylinders at once.

“I think *Fresh Guacamole* was one of those ideas that worked out particularly well; the puzzle of it fell together in a ‘total’ way that I have a particular fondness for. I’m too close to *Submarine Sandwich* to truly evaluate it fairly, but the nature of using a deli slicer was the challenge, because with a knife—which *Fresh Guacamole* is really about, a knife—there was a little bit more transformative magic. A deli slicer is more challenging in that

it's almost like having two rooms separated by a wall, seeing what comes out on one side. It's magical but not maybe as magical as some of those instances in *Fresh Guacamole* where the knife comes down and the objects become something different, but that's just me evaluating my own work. I think *Fresh Guacamole* just all worked out in the best possible way."

A seemingly indefatigable mainstay of the independent scene has, for decades, been film festivals, for fairly obvious reasons. The right festival can provide filmmakers with invaluable exposure, networking opportunities, and direct communication with a live audience to get a true sense of their artistic worth. There's no better context for a filmmaker to find out whether they have succeeded in impacting their audience than in a packed cinema, nor to determine precisely what form their audience will take. My own festival experience has shone a spotlight on the incongruities between the reaction I'd imagine a film might have and the realities of the matter; as someone who hopes his films will be funny, I can attest that it's a grounding experience to witness a moment you might assume had great comedic mileage play to silence, only for a throwaway gag you had never thought twice about beforehand to bring down the house. Naturally, as with everything, there are many factors to be weighed against one another when it comes to festivals, something that will be explored further in [Chapter 21](#), but a general home truth in this industry is that mass festival selection of a film is ordinarily a hallmark of its quality.

So how do you make a festival-worthy film? What do festival programmers look for in shorts that make them stand out? The best way to determine the answers to these is to seek insight from festival programmers themselves about what they look for and how they go about it.

Standout Animation: Programmers' Perspectives

Following an initial round where three key staff from a festival organization look over all the short film submissions, hundreds—or even thousands—of entered films are whittled down by eliminating films that don't fit the criteria outlined in the festival regulations or are downright unwatchable, at which point the festival's artistic director(s)' role in the second round comes into play. In discussions between the director and preselection committee, final decisions are made as to which films are eligible to screen, which are eligible to compete, and what category of screening they belong to. Unfortunately for filmmakers, uncontrollable issues such as timing and circumstances can be a major factor in whether a film is relevant or a fit for that year's edition of the festival it has been submitted to. In my experience, a handful of major festivals have included my auteur work alongside major studio productions for thematically-grouped screenings, where the tone or genre of my work happened to fit in with a festival's mission statement. Other factors include the prominence of certain stylistic or genre-centric trends in the animation industry.

Oftentimes, a festival has several screening categories for both shorts and features. Panoramas are helpful for filmmakers who wish to get exposure on an international level or the kudos of festival association, though it is inevitably the competition screenings that are most coveted. Next, we will take a look at two festivals with their own distinct identities and approaches to animation curation to give an idea of what makes a film "pop" during the selection process.

The United Kingdom's Encounters Festival has been a staple of Bristol since its beginnings in 1995, originally dubbed Brief Encounters. Over the years, it has taken several approaches to the incorporation of animation into its lineup, at one point operating as two separate festivals entirely taking place at different times of the year, one animation-based, the other, live-action. It has since settled into one event with the two program strands interwoven, the curation of its animation selection headed up by Kieran Argo. When it comes to the final selection, Kieran's bottom line when it comes to character-based, narrative shorts is how well the story is told.

"If they can tell the story in a compelling and engaging way, it doesn't *have* to be perfect or technically excellent. It can be forgiving in technique and many other aspects of production, but for me, if it fails to live up to the title, if it doesn't convey a story, the narrative thread is lost. There are certain basic levels of competence that need to be set, but the ones that really stand out are the ones that excel, principally, in storytelling. Sometimes, the often-overlooked importance of marrying sound and effects can tell a story better than the visual aspects, but combining good visuals with good sound is absolutely critical. The films that do that well, or have clearly put a lot of work and effort into that, are the ones that go up the priority list. The curator's role is not to be a gatekeeper in any way of refinement or quality; they really just have to make the painful decisions. The number of good films that have to be left out is always a bitter disappointment."

It is this sobering thought that is of critical importance for filmmakers—that to truly stand out is not to simply rise above mediocrity but to rise above the glut of exceptional films curators are bombarded with every year.

"Advice to young filmmakers would be to look at the films that get into festivals, look at the quality of the production, look at how well they're put together, imagine what the storyboard would look like, imagine how the film was conceived, look at the design. Are the characters convincing? The technical aspect should always be scrutinized very closely, as well as the fundamental storytelling ability of it. Break it down into its component parts and scrutinize each aspect of the production as much as you can, from what you're given: you can read the credits; you can read the synopses and whatever other supporting info you're supplied with; you can use that to understand the film in its whole, as much as you can.

"I think films that are brave, films that stand out, that go out on a limb in a particular area—for example, design—they're the ones that kind of jump the queue."

For many, the validation and personal satisfaction of making it into a festival's official selection is the ultimate goal. Others may be more incentivized by the prospect of winning awards, especially if they come in the form of financial assistance to support future creative projects or are qualifiers for major accolades that would help ensure future career stability. Encounters is one of a number of festivals where winning films automatically become British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) eligible, a coup to any independent filmmaker. The ultimate decision, however, is rarely up to one individual, and on top of his programming duties, Kieran himself has also had firsthand experience in adjudication.

"What I think filmmakers sometimes need to remind themselves of is it's often the case that juries are not all signed up to the same decision. Conflict within juries has been known, as well as a few occasions where the best films sometimes didn't get awarded when they should have done. When juries are at loggerheads, they may end up having to make a

decision whereby the top prize goes to a compromise between the jury, rather than it being a collective, unanimous decision.

“A lot of filmmakers see the Audience Award to be much more valuable because that tells them that it’s a hit with the crowd. It might be good to have the peer-reviewed thumbs-up from three or four well-respected professionals, but I think if I was a filmmaker, I’d much prefer to have a thumbs-up from two or three hundred people in the audience. But it is the awards that still confirm kudos and status on a film, which is very useful in progressing the film’s momentum around the festival circuit and how many awards it’ll go on to achieve. If you pick up a top prize at Annecy—or other such benchmark festivals—and you’re a filmmaker/ animator, you’re going to have so many more festival doors open and undoubtedly pick up more awards.

“You need to get the film out there; and don’t be disheartened, don’t just try it in five festivals, then forget it if it doesn’t work. There are always subjective decisions for what goes into a festival, so a festival that might be good for one film might be bad for another. A film can be hugely successful and win a top prize at one festival and not be selected for two dozen others, so any advice to filmmakers or whoever’s in charge of submissions to festivals is don’t give up; keep at it.”

One of the newer events of the European festival circuit is Amsterdam’s KLIK!, which grew out of a Belgian multimedia conference in the mid-2000s, taking shape as an animation festival from 2007 onward. The festival’s respect for the medium of animation and its unique tone of voice sets it apart from other more somber events, with Head of Program Tünde Vollenbroek a key figure in its approach to official selection:

“Every festival’s different, but for us, the core is just that the film has to communicate; it can do this in an experimental way or just a really basic, funny, lighthearted way. After that, of course, is whether the animation is well done and if the design is special compared to other work out there. But it really comes down to quality of communication. Don Hertzfeldt, for example—you cannot say that, because it’s not Disney quality, he doesn’t animate well, because he does; he animates very well for what he wants to communicate.

“We have a few categories, of course; we have animated shorts and animated student shorts, which are obvious, but then we also have a competition program for political shorts that are more socially engaged. Animation For Hire is commissioned films; in this category, if the films are really traditional and plain, then they won’t go through, whereas an independent or student short might. This is because we really try to highlight the artistic side of commissioned work.”

The preselection process for KLIK! differs from other festivals in some respects. The programming is done in groups (professional films, student films, and so forth), each headed up by a main programmer, with three additional colleagues brought in per group to keep perspectives fresh (Figure 13.8).

“Yvonne (Van Ulden, KLIK! managing director) and I both have our own tastes, which is important for the festival, but we don’t want that to be the main drive. You have festivals where the taste of the festival director determines everything that plays at the festival, but we try to avoid that because our festival is not just for people like us; it’s also for a very wide audience. We aim to get a mix of that wide audience into our selection committees.” When evaluating the films, a 1–5 grading system is used to more broadly survey the value of the submissions to the committee members, with Yvonne and Tünde jointly overseeing the final curation out of the films that ranked the highest.



Figure 13.8
KLIK! mascot in action at the festival's 2015 edition.

“For animated shorts, most of the films will, at this stage, be rated four and a half or above; films rated five will be the absolute best we’ve seen, which will come to about 3 films out of 1500! For student shorts, generally, films with a four and above get into the competition. Once we have those lists, then we evaluate whether or not we have enough variety in the programs. We try to make great film programs that have different kinds

of stories and different kinds of styles, so if people think they're not selected because we don't think their film is good enough, it's not always the case. Sometimes we just have too many funny films—or maybe not *enough* funny films—so it just depends on the year. If we have too many of one type of film, then we will have to leave out a few that we think were good enough to go into the competition but make the breadth of selection too narrow.”

These three perspectives shed light on a number of different approaches to curation, although in today's world, the visibility a lot of independent filmmakers seek can be gained through another avenue altogether.

Online: The Festival Alternative

The urge to share your film with the world the moment it is finished is no doubt especially tempting in an era where doing so is a very literal possibility. Long behind us are the days when the only evidence of your labors to share with the online community need be lo-res QuickTime files or horribly compressed 240p YouTube conversions sharing the same aesthetic appeal as early-onset cataracts. Nowadays, of course, our full-high-definition (HD) masterworks can be shared in all their glorious resolution, compressed by codecs sent from the heavens themselves, whose dainty touch yields barely a trace of visual artifact or blocky pixelation. I may be overromanticizing a tad, but the key fact remains that, thanks to exponentially increasing Internet speeds and the capabilities of video streaming services, there is clearly already a place for independent animation, with the road ahead looking bright.

Filmmaker Jason Sondhi saw the writing on this particular wall back in 2007, along with *The Thomas Beale Cipher* director Andrew S. Allen. The two founded Short of the Week,* a website championing largely independent shorts of all genres and mediums.

“We thought it was a really strong opportunity for storytelling in the online space. What was really getting passed around a lot were TV rips and viral videos; we didn't understand why all these short films we'd loved seeing at film festivals weren't dominant. The conclusion we came to was that festival shorts are a very small, insular world, and there was no guide to point people in the right direction, to what was worth their time. With Andrew being an animator and myself being animation-inclined, a lot of our early curation really leaned in that direction, and we slowly became experts.”

Several years later, with Short of the Week having earned its reputation through awards and impressive traffic, Jason began correspondence with Sam Morrell, a curator for the video website Vimeo, who had Staff Picked (the process where videos uploaded to the site are given a stamp of approval, so to speak, from the company itself) *The Thomas Beale Cipher*. Using his existing platform as a guide, Jason began forwarding other exceptional film suggestions to Vimeo and was eventually brought on board full time as part of their curation team.

“A big part of our job on curation is to be a point of first contact for all the tremendous talent that's available in the community. They want to know that somebody knows their work and respects what they do, so we get a lot of personal requests, a lot of questions; we

* <http://www.shortoftheweek.com>

do a lot of networking and socializing at events and festivals to stay on top of the creative community.”

Although Vimeo is a different beast altogether from animation festivals, the legitimization of independent work a Staff Pick provides is often sought after and serves as an appropriate yardstick for others in the industry, especially as the site’s audience has continued to grow. The immediate extra visibility—often guaranteeing a film tens (or even hundreds) of thousands of views, serving as a launching pad to go viral and achieve views in the millions—could reasonably be seen as something of a holy grail to independents. A particular incentive is just who may be watching.

“As a company, we don’t really prioritize views as our primary metric; it’s the understanding that people who are in the know—in production, in advertising, producers of all stripes, agents—really do pay strong attention to Vimeo, to Staff Picks, and to Short of the Week. It’s the *quality* of the views that’s really extraordinary; it’s an announcement of your talent to the global creative community. People who work for some of the commercial animation production houses will tell me that getting a Staff Pick is such a life-changing experience for a young animator that they know they won’t have to worry about booking gigs for another year, because there’s suddenly demand for their talent” (Figure 13.9).

As with the festival route, naturally, there are caveats that need to be met when it comes to sorting the wheat from the chaff. While it is an open forum for content creators to upload anything they wish, this creates a similarly oversaturated landscape as that faced



Figure 13.9

Sausage (Dir. Robert Grieves) would go on to receive a Vimeo Staff Pick as well as Cartoon Brew and Short of the Week Picks of the Day. (Courtesy of Robert Grieves, ©2013.)

by festival programmers. Jason's parameters for quality filmmaking come with their own ideologies:

"I think animators are let off easy a little bit, because people prioritize visual panache and technical excellence over storytelling. I do find this a little bit unfortunate and try to push back with my own curation where I can. As technology, tutorials, and overall levels of expertise of young animators keep improving, I find myself looking to story more, looking to scripts that are funny or well written and narrative structures that surprise, that are unfamiliar. On the other hand, the visuals are obviously super important as well. I've gotten to the point where, even though I'm not an animator, I have enough of a knowledge through practical experience of watching to be able to discern technique, to discern when someone is doing something new and what is it about what they are doing that is original. So I prioritize originality as well, pushing the medium forward in fresher ways, technique-wise. Also, I have to prioritize my own aesthetic tastes; I love things that are beautiful, things that are bright, things that are fresh, things that take an idea such as abstraction or Eoin Duffy's minimalism and are able to execute it at such a sublime sort of level. Taking that initial germ of an idea and being able to decipher that in the work, what it is they're going for, and then being able to judge aesthetically how they have been able to achieve or not achieve it."

Across the board, it's fairly easy to identify the main recurring qualities of contemporary filmmaking that curators and programmers are after. Possessing any or all of these can still not be enough if your film makes a certain vital misstep. The pitfalls of a film that might otherwise have had potential warrant special consideration, especially when it comes to originality.

"Avoid cliché in any form, whether it's visual clichés or writing clichés; there was a point several years ago where the concept of every short seemed to revolve around a chase of some sort, whether it would make sense or not. You don't want a short that purely serves as opportunities to flex your skill if you have the inability to think of the overall structure and come up with a satisfying ending. I also look for polish—something that has great design but has poor, blocky motion, those kinds of things I'll judge as bothersome.

"As much as you want to try to intellectualize and create a consistent schema for your own evaluation, you do end up falling back repeatedly on intuition and feel. When something is fresh, it hits you in an emotional place, and you know it when you see it. When you don't see it, sometimes you find yourself having to talk yourself into positive qualities that may or may not be there, or making excuses, but then you have to take a step back and realize, *Oh, I'm trying to rationalize something that I am just not feeling.*"

Returning to the festival side, the major stumbling blocks can be a mix of practical limitations and overall work ethic, as Kieran Argo notes:

"Sometimes a film can tell a story well, but the sound mix—the effects or the dubbing—is so bad that you just couldn't contemplate adding it into the mix. Just because you think you've cracked a certain technique or ability to do something, whether its visual or audio, don't be too indulgent with it; be parsimonious; be disciplined. Discipline is absolutely critical. When a filmmaker cracks something, it's obvious when they work it to death; they'll just bash it until there's no life left in it. You've got to be very careful not to be overindulgent in aspects of technique and ability. It's the less-is-more approach; often, you can make a point by putting in more breathing space, more pauses, the whole nonverbal

ability to tell the story and to convince people to make it resonate emotionally; you can use discipline to great effect in those aspects. So be disciplined. Self-flagellate!”

Seven Crucial *Don'ts* for Animation Filmmakers as Observed by Tünde Vollenbroek

1. **Pace.**

“A *very* common mistake: the timing is too slow. Some films just go on and on for *way* too long. In some cases, I’ve been tempted to call the filmmakers and ask, “Could you please just speed up the film by about 50%? Then we’d really like to select it!”

“Other examples are if there’s one joke that goes on for way too long, or if the visual concept is really cool but there’s nothing more to it, it could have been explored more, and thus it goes on for too long.

“Sometimes a concept/story just doesn’t have enough meat on it for the length the film has—or for a film at all!

“A story/concept can be small; that’s absolutely fine. But if you have a small story/concept, please don’t make the film a second longer than it needs to be to convey that story/concept.

“When we’re selecting, longer films usually have a disadvantage to shorter films. For one really great 30-minute film, we could program three really great 10-minute films. This should be a good extra reason to keep your film as short as possible.”

2. **Dialog.**

“When there’s dialog, there’s often too much dialog. Other times, a film has no dialog at all but could really use it. I’ve come across many films that have annoyed me enormously with characters that either mumble too much or overact.”

3. **Logic.**

“Filmmakers need to communicate with their audience. The logic of the film, and with that, the expectations of the viewer, is set up in the very first seconds/shots of your film. If you break that logic, you’ll confuse the viewer. Sometimes, that’s a good thing, but more often, it’s not; the viewer will lose interest and won’t muster the effort to understand the rest of your story.

“Some films are so bizarre that they’re great; you can be fascinated by them. *Lesley the Pony Has an A+ Day!* (Dir. Christian Larrave, 2014) is not at all logical, but because it never tries to be, it works. Also, it does have a fascinating story underneath, whereas some films are so weird that the viewer simply stops caring.”

4. **Be clear, but not too clear.**

“Sometimes, a film is too vague and not clear enough; other times, it’s too literal, evident and predictable. It’s a tough balance to keep, and we see that in many of our entries.”

5. **The ending (credits).**

“Some films feel like the start of a story, not a story in itself. Too often, filmmakers think it’s experimental (in a good way) to have an open ending. If a good ending is too hard to think of, then they just “leave it up to the audience.”

Understandable—endings are hard to come up with—but definitely a common mistake.

“I could talk about credits for hours. Credits take *too long*, people! We’ve come across many short films that spend half of their screen time on the credits. Only if a 10-minute film is especially deep and you have to think about it after the story is finished will anything longer than 30 seconds of credits be necessary. But otherwise—just get them over with!

“Another issue concerning credits and endings: I like an extra joke after the credits. But the keyword here is *extra*—it should be an extra. The start of the credit sequence says to your audience, “This is the end of the film, guys!” So if you save your real ending for after the credits, it will leave your audience totally unfulfilled and confused during the credits, the moment they think the film ended. Sometimes that’s a good thing, to leave the audience unfulfilled and confused, but 99% of the time, it’s not. Just don’t have your story ending take place after the credits.

“Also, don’t spend 6 minutes of story only to twist it around after the credits. You’ll just leave the audience confused again (and not in a good way).

“Films that leave you with questions/thoughts you want to explore are great. Films that leave you with questions, and you don’t care enough to keep thinking about it, those are not good.”

6. Imitation.

“This is not especially common but definitely a big mistake: trying too hard to be something else—style mostly, or sense of humor—and failing at it. When this happens, the film just feels like an empty shell. Make sure if you decide to attempt cliché or imitation that you do it extremely well.”

7. Full-package deal.

“A lot of filmmakers focus too much on one aspect only. They have a really awesome story or design or atmosphere or animation or audio (lots of filmmakers think of the audio too late in the process) but not the combination. Animation is a full-package deal.

“Sometimes, the concept is really great, but the execution/storytelling is bad. Other times, the execution/storytelling is great, but the concept is bad. These mediocre films make up the largest part of our 1500-plus entries.

“The worst is when a film has great promise in the beginning (a great story or great visual concept, for example) but delivers nothing in the end and/or does not fully use the concept’s potential.

“So I basically look at all the aspects: Good story, good design, good animation, good audio, and so forth. Do all the aspects work, and do they work together?

“If the answer to that question is “yes,” then the next question is, Does the film stand out? Does it have an unusual narrative, or a unique visual concept? The answer to this question separates the great films from the merely acceptable ones.”



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14

Keeping Up

The number of platforms available to independent filmmakers of any medium and genre is bigger than ever before, and growing exponentially. Certainly, the days of physical home media could draw to a close soon, with dwindling retail outlets in keeping with consumer demand. The many high-definition (HD) streaming or digital download resources available in their absence more than compensates, with the perks of supplemental features intact and even improved upon.

The National Film Board of Canada (NFB), an institution who pride themselves certainly as a hotbed of innovative auteur filmmaking (although the unique funding circumstances afforded by an enviably arts friendly Canadian government sets their work outside of the independent spectrum), have taken tremendous initiative in their marriage of exciting new film ideas and how their audience experiences them. Parallel to an inclination toward interactive experimentation (explored further in [Chapter 17](#)), ground was broken with the development and release of *NFB Films*, a multiplatform app archiving over 2500 of the film board's titles, many of which represent their much-admired animation output. Another groundbreaking app released in 2013 is *McLaren's Workshop*, which effectively repurposed the most compelling content of what had

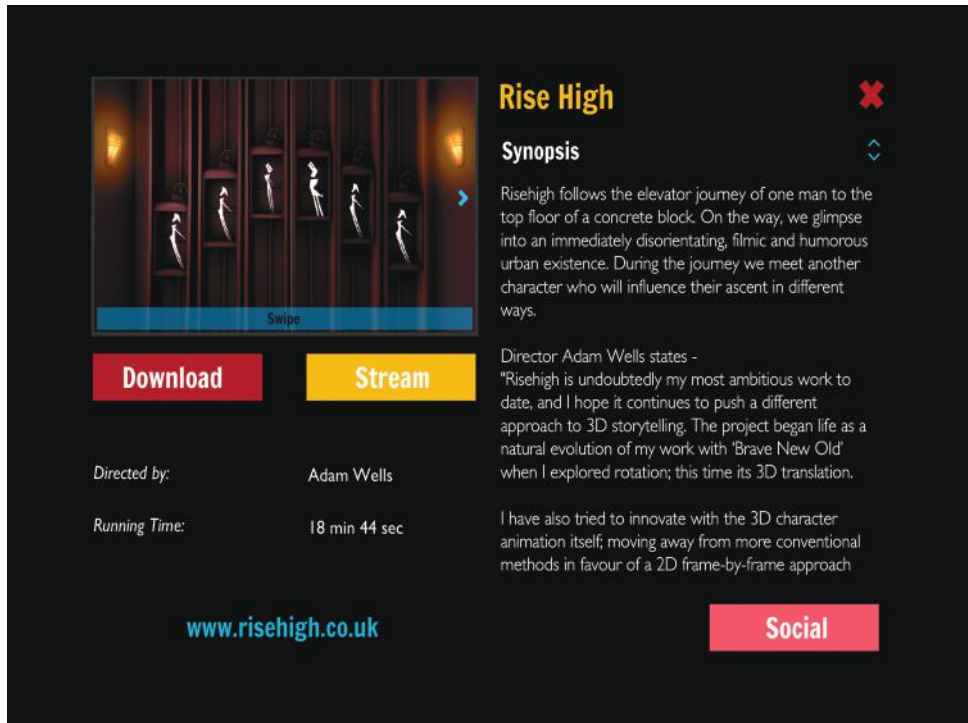


Figure 14.1

Show Me The Animation app screengrab featuring *Risehigh* (Dir. Adam Wells). (Courtesy of Show Me The Animation.)

previously existed as a large and costly—though nicely presented—DVD box set. The translation of the content to an audiovisual celebration that audiences can experience on their iPad (while boasting interactive elements, at its heart, it remains an anthologized celebration of pioneering experimental filmmaker Norman McLaren's work) serves as an early indicator of the direction home media is going and the shape it will take.

The ripple effect of these innovations is already visible. The UK-based organization Show Me the Animation,* which began life in 2006 as a semiregular series of informal independent film screenings in the South West, has grown to provide a valuable means for animators to showcase their work online. The organization is an offshoot of Wonky Films, an award-winning animation, illustration, and digital studio, the latter practice serving as an outlet for the Show Me the Animation app, a digital distribution platform for independent animated shorts (Figure 14.1).

The app itself was helmed by interactive developer Jake Hobbs, whose involvement with Wonky began as part of a doctoral project focusing on audience engagement and monetization in digital environments. His work at the studio included the broadening of the

* <http://showmetheanimation.com/>

Show Me the Animation community events into a consistent online presence with active social media engagement reflective of the spirit of the events themselves.

“[The doctorate] was looking at how you can support creatives by building audiences for their work and potentially earning revenue from their own intellectual properties in competitive, digital environments. So it was looking at the work that I was doing within Wonky itself and looking at how we can use that research knowledge to help the wider community, so helping them find audiences for their work. The motivation is to aid a community that we’re involved in, who love what they do.”

The various options available to aid the independent animation community include a number of platforms to showcase their work, such as collaborative Anijam sessions, thematic screenings both local and in association with nationwide festivals, and short-form competitions such as Do It in Ten, which invites filmmakers to submit 10-second microshorts with a monthly theme. With the development of the app, for which film submissions are solicited on a rolling basis, this even extends to possible monetization through a combination of ad revenue and direct purchase options, with an 85%–15% revenue split offered in the filmmakers’ favor.

“Previously, we had done apps for our own short films at Wonky. I was looking at ways in which we could deliver our own short films in new ways and extend those through interactive experiences, such as games and delivering the behind-the-scenes content as well. Around the time when we started doing that was when those platforms were becoming bigger. We’ve used Flash iOS publication in order to potentially create cross-platform apps as well, so there is potential to release all the apps we’ve created on Android. Initially, we were just looking at what was out there already and who was already doing this.”

While there are long-term developments in digital distribution ahead that are borderline impossible to predict, in the current climate, these are vital avenues worth exploring, if for no other reason than to get a clear idea of exactly what monetary worth the public place on animated shorts when it comes to the online arena. YouTube and Vimeo both have toes in the waters of paid distribution, yet the immeasurably greater percentage of their content remains available for free.

“Through my research, it was just an idea that I came up with based on insight about audience engagement, people’s willingness to pay for content, and understanding that there’s a higher willingness to pay by people who are immediately or directly involved in animation and that world, so an app that would target those people and bring independent animation content to them would hopefully generate a kind of willingness to help support their own scene.”

The licensing terms as outlined for the Show Me the Animation platform are not restricted to premieres or demanding of exclusivity or ownership. For consistency’s sake, there is a curation process in place to allow for a balanced selection of work.

“Initially, it’s quite subjective; it’s whether we enjoy it and think that it’s a good, engaging story; that’s kind of the immediate crux of it. We’re not precious on quality per se, so if there’s a good story and idea there and the quality isn’t necessary a high-level, polished piece, we do look past that because the story is the most important thing we look for. We have had a few student films in there that, if you’re looking on a purely professional, polished level, have aspects that could be redone, or would have been if the filmmakers had the resources to do so, but we will have chosen it because

the story's great. We're not here to go after a Pixar scale of short film, because they could find an audience anyway. We're looking for people we can help out, as long as it's a strong story and as long as the person doing it is independent. I find that shorter films do work better; it doesn't eliminate choosing longer ones, but length is a criteria. We tend to go for things that are over 3 minutes, but at the same time, stuff that is longer than 10, people struggle to engage with, just generally, whether it's an app or online.

"Most of the stuff that we pick is very narrative driven. I think there's one in there which probably goes against that grain, but if it is obviously abstract and experimental, we would probably avoid it only because audiences outside the realm of animation who are discovering the app and discovering these films are less likely to engage."

Another outcome that is hard to predict is whether or not audience engagement is likely to permanently gravitate away from the traditional outlets such as film festivals and short film anthologies toward mobile viewing. Indeed, as we'll explore later on in this chapter, the art of film in and of itself is becoming increasingly informed by how it is most likely to be eventually displayed, through online or interactive mediums such as this.

"There's a large Internet animation scene that is successful because it is very cartoon-humor focused, people can get it, and it's quicker to produce as well. The most important thing online, which is difficult for most animators, is being able to deliver with consistency, which makes being able to distribute and build an audience alone difficult, and then you become reliant on additional services.

"Say you're reliant on using the in-built audience on Vimeo or the distribution audience that someone like Future Shorts could provide. Comparatively, the stuff that goes up on YouTube lends itself to being quick to get, quick to produce, and—arguably, I guess—sometimes shallow in their nature. So you can engage with it quickly and immediately get it, and then maybe not think about it again, whereas other stuff that people send out to festivals might be more deep and meaningful, and you *would* think about it again."

Certainly, there is definite potential in online distribution. In some respects, it can be a more immediately effective means of garnering a reputation and visibility than the comparatively expensive and slower-burn process of film festival submission. In Jake's estimation, if anything is going to happen to provide a viable and effective way for films to be distributed, where the filmmaker gets true value out of it, it would need to be driven by the larger players of online distribution.

Remodeling

Undoubtedly, there will be issues with ego, competition, pride, and the odd splash of schadenfreude amongst any industry—we animators are *sort of* human beings, after all—though independent film has generated a sense of online community and solidarity that has helped to offset this. Certainly, thanks to the community spirit of platforms such as Vimeo, the potential for open lines of discussion, feedback, and collaboration is particularly great.

"It's what I like about it," enthuses curator Jason Sondhi. "Around 2009, it seemed Vimeo had arrived, which caused me to look back at the previous 2 or 3 months' worth

of archives for Short of the Week. I realized it had gotten to the point where 14 of the last 15 films that had been featured were on Vimeo, which was very much a sea change from 2007, when the majority of our films were hosted on YouTube or, frankly, still on QuickTime files hosted off of people's individual websites. I think the way that Vimeo achieved that strength is community and not just Staff Picks; we think of Staff Picks as the pinnacle of a curation pyramid at Vimeo, whereas the community input is incredibly important.

"I can't do my job without the power users and channel moderators who discover content that comes through my feed; I find things because I don't have time to watch things that I know nothing about. Aziz Kocanaogullari at Everything Animated* or Tim McCourt at Pegbar and Grill,† these are people who have an immense capacity to consume and are very dialed in to their communities. Getting featured on one of those big channels like Everything Animated is a very powerful platform for animation, regardless of whether or not they make it as Staff Picks or not. I think it's the dedication of curation at every single level of the site; it's not just the top-level curation of what goes onto the home page. The site really functions through following this novel organization of groups and channels."

There is certainly evidence that festivals have been adapting to this philosophy. An early embracer of the potential for web-based engagement, Encounters has incorporated the supplemental online strand DepicT!‡ since its 1999 edition. As its own competitive section within the larger festival, it challenges filmmakers to create exceptional work with a running time no longer than 90 seconds, a caveat to which Kieran Argo attributes its huge draw for international filmmakers.

"I think the length of 90 seconds for DepicT! is a good, doable length, especially for live action. It's a bit more of a challenge for animation, but again, it's down to discipline; to be able to do something that works in that maximum duration, to do that requires a lot of work. To do it *well* requires skill, requires a vision, requires discipline, and it usually requires an element of collaboration as well."

Animators of note who have been short-listed for the competition include Trevor Hardy (*Oops*), Felix Massie (*Can, Can, Can't*), Paul Hill (*Sun*), Joseph Pierce (*State of Nature, Big On Love*), and Nick Mackie (*Flimsies*), with prizewinning animators including Mole Hill (*The Fat Cat*), Matthew Walker (*Operator*), and Aidan McAteer (*The Gentleman's Guide to Villainy*; Figure 14.2), all of whom have gone on to further achieve notable industry success.

"A lot of people are motivated to rise to the challenge so they can set themselves the feasible goal of an achievable kind of duration they can envisage completing in a decent space of time. I don't think you'd get that many people rising to a 5-minute challenge, because it's a different ball game. With anything longer than that, you need to more seriously consider budget, how much you can realistically afford to do. Ingredients such as financial commitment, money, and time have to be carefully considered before you embark on any project."

* <http://everythinganimated.tv>

† <http://thepegbarandgrill.com/>

‡ <http://www.depict.org>



Figure 14.2

Still from *The Gentleman's Guide to Villainy* (Dir. Aidan McAteer). (Courtesy of Aidan McAteer, ©2010.)

One filmmaker who certainly embraced the challenge and, in turn, reaped the rewards of DepicT! is 2010 winner Aidan McAteer, who used the competition as an excuse to make his first independent animated short since his college years.

It was also an opportunity to create something that would provide a refreshing change from his day job, which, at the time, was as an animation revisionist on the hugely popular *My Little Pony* reboot *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*.

“To be fair, it’s a really good show, but it wasn’t the most creatively fulfilling; I was taking other people’s scenes and tweaking them, so if there was something the directors didn’t like in a shot, I would make changes. It was paying the bills, and I was happy to have it, but there were a lot of sparkles and pink fluffy clouds involved, which wasn’t really my thing.”

When that year’s edition of DepicT! came across his radar, the feasibility of a 90-second passion project without creative boundaries but a motivational deadline to work toward held great appeal to Aidan. On top of that, the idea of taking his own personal measures in broadening his filmmaking experience had long-term potential.

“People who are really good at stuff, who make strong first films, have inevitably been making ‘short films’ all their lives. I know that if you look at any good feature film director that you could name—Spielberg, del Toro, the Coen brothers, whoever—they’ve probably all been making films since they were 10 or 11 with Super 8 cameras. So when the time comes to direct a feature, it’s actually not the first film they’ll have made, which I think is how they turn out so well. That was something else that I got in my head as well, so even if it didn’t turn out to be the greatest thing in the world, I’d have made a film and built on my experience, and when I would move on, the next one would be even better.”

Not only did this investment of Aidan’s time and creative energies prove worthwhile when it came to winning the main DepicT! prize and subsequent exposure; it provided a

track record that would serve to benefit his career years down the line. Funding for his subsequent 2014 film *Deadly* was ultimately provided by the Irish Film Board's Frameworks scheme on the basis of his prior success.

Visually speaking, *The Gentleman's Guide to Villainy* is poles apart from the sunny climes and bright colors of the *Friendship is Magic* universe, and not by chance (Figure 14.3).

"The film is sort of a visual catharsis; it's all angular, whereas there are no angles in *My Little Pony*. The animation boils, and the backgrounds are really rough, charcoal textured, and messy. It's a black-and-white, 'silent' film, so I also put the old-timey iris around it. That kind of stuff was a kind of antidote, in a way, to the very cute, pink style of the show.

"There's something I really enjoy about supershort filmmaking, where you can just take out all the unnecessary elements and leave just the kernel of the idea. If that's only 1 or 2 minutes, then that's fine; it's still going to be a good film. I have that sensibility, I guess, from having worked in commercials for quite a while."

As it was produced over the 3 months that led up to that year's DepicT! deadline, the element of haste when it came to the film's production certainly played its own part when it came to the overall design style. On top of the grainy, silent-film aesthetic, the animation itself was simplified by having the characters appear entirely as cartoon modern-style silhouettes, with no extraneous details or elaborate facial animation beyond rudimentary mouth movements and dots for eyes. The sparseness of the film's backgrounds proved another labor-saving device, one that benefits the overall composition of each shot by not cluttering it or distracting from the main action. All told, each time or budgetary concession serves to support and enhance the "period-piece" tone of the film. Concessions or no, in Aidan's mind, it is likely that the film would not have existed at all without the incentivizing nature of the contest and its parameters.

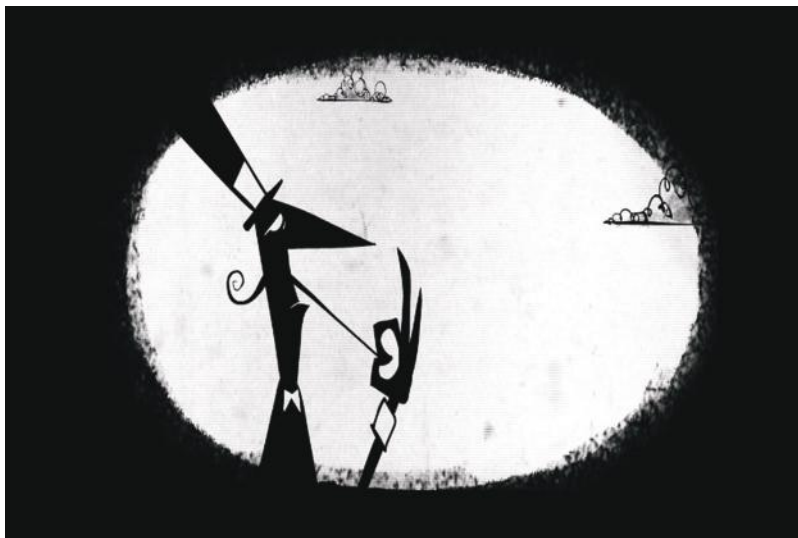


Figure 14.3

Still from *The Gentleman's Guide to Villainy* (Dir. Aidan McAteer). (Courtesy of Aidan McAteer, ©2010.)

“There’s lots of argument about this, but I’m one of those people who believes that limitations can create great art. I’m not saying *The Gentleman’s Guide to Villainy* is “great art,” but I do like having limitations, because I think it forces you to just direct your mind and focus. In animation, you can do anything, which is really daunting—“I can do *anything*? Well...then what the hell am I supposed to *do*?” I find that almost too much, an overload. It’s like entering something for an exhibition with no theme. In the case of my film, the limitations were good in two ways—first that they did inform the story I wanted to tell, knowing it had to be short, and second, that I felt like I could do it myself. So they definitely helped for me, I didn’t find them a hindrance at all.

“I think if that film had been 3 minutes long, then it wouldn’t have been as funny. It’s a gag, basically, so I think I would have been laboring the point. I think it’s a stronger film for being at 90 seconds.”

Since its initiation, the Internet has caught up to DepicT! and with the notion of online film competitions no longer unique, the present festival model needs to adapt and embrace the new opportunities available to filmmakers and audiences rather than combat it. While some argue that festivals are a dying breed, Kieran’s view is firmly the antithesis.

“Festivals are an absolutely unique opportunity to see films in their proper environment, which is up on a big screen with optimum visual and audio reproduction, with an audience. A festival does give you quite a unique experience, but there is such a wide variety of opportunity to see stuff. Those can be integrated with festivals; for example, we open up for the Online Audience Award, and the DepicT! competition is there to be seen online in advance of the actual festival. There are always opportunities to develop ways of expanding and developing those means of engagement, but as with all things, there are only so many projects that a very small dedicated core team of people can take on. I think DepicT! is a fantastic example of how it really has developed and gone from strength to strength; where in the first few years of running it, we had a small handful of entries, it literally runs into several hundred submissions now, a lot of those having been made specifically for the competition. You can never sit still; you’ve got to keep on looking at new ideas, new opportunities, new ways of doing things.”

Group Effort

There is constant scope for change, adaptation, and exploration in the world of animation. Films that might be considered conceptually avant-garde can remain fundamentally entertaining. In the following case studies, we’ll examine prominent independent shorts from out of left field that, in their inventiveness, have helped to revitalize short film as a medium, beginning with the contemporization of an old, established technique.

Jeff Chiba Stearns equates the process of an Anijam to the collaborative “Exquisite Corpse” games of the surrealists, in which words or imagery are contributed by multiple artists without knowledge of the preceding contribution, to create an unusual final result. Applying this approach to animated film for the first time of note was pioneering Canadian animator Marv Newland, who brought 22 animators together to work on his 1984 short film concept *Anijam*, ultimately coining the term. The film features a single character trapped in a hallucinatory world, each animator in turn granted reign over said character’s plight in his/her own style, with no knowledge of the events of the film outside

of their own section save for the final frame of animation of the sequence preceding theirs, so the action carries on throughout with interruption. Jeff's interest in taking his own work to a new level following the success of *Yellow Sticky Notes* (see [Chapter 7](#)) took inspiration from this endeavor in a way that brought the most significant names of modern Canadian animation together, in some instances out of retirement ([Figure 14.4](#)).

"Marv is a legend in the animation field," affirms Jeff, "especially independent animation—in Vancouver, he's really the reason why there's such a great animation community that exists, because a lot of people who worked at his company International Rocket Ship went off to start their own after it dissolved. I liked the idea of seeing how other people approached using sticky notes the way I had in 2007, basically just picking a day in their life and self-reflecting on it, through that documentary kind of process, documenting that one day in their life, so I thought it was time for an Anijam."

An extension of *Yellow Sticky Notes*, Jeff's proposal for *Yellow Sticky Notes: Canadian Anijam* was to invite the most prominent Canadian animators he could think of to contribute an animated instance of self-reflection, executed in the same manner as his own in the original 2007 short.

"Marv was the first guy who I sat down with, because his film brought that process of collaborative animation into the fold. I think he respected that I came to him and said it was what I wanted to do, and when I asked if *he* wanted to do a section of the film, he agreed! I had a list of Canadian animators who I wanted to work with, and as soon as I knew I had Marv, I knew I could get the majority of everyone else on board.

"At the beginning, I was hoping to have someone from every major country in the world that are independent animation hotbeds, but what ended up happening was the majority of our funding came from Bravo in Canada, which stated it had to have 100% Canadian content. I figured it was a good starting point, to stay within Canada and go international if I wanted to expand the concept later. He gave me the contacts for Paul Driessen, and I knew Alison Snowden and David Fine through my producer, so it was kind of easy to get them on board. Some people like Cordell Barker (director of the 1988 NFB classic *The Cat Came Back*) were really busy, but I didn't give anyone a time limit; nobody had to do 10 or 20 seconds of animation. They could do as much as they felt like, 5 seconds, 30 seconds. There wasn't any pressure to do a certain number of drawings. So I think a lot of people came on board because they thought it sounded like a fun, collaborative project ([Figures 14.5](#) and [14.6](#)).

"It wasn't a typical Anijam where one animator's last drawing becomes the first drawing for the next animator as with Marv's project; each section was bookended by a blank sticky note; that way, everyone was working around the same time, so I gave everyone about 3 months at some point to finish up their animation. When they were all sent back, I basically set it all down and organized it in chronological order. When you look at the upper-corner, there's always a date, so it starts with Paul Driessen's earliest reflection when he was a kid, and Janet Perlman's is in the future, so it makes sense that hers is the last sequence. Organizing it that way created a flow where just by chance or coincidence, it could be funny or serious. I just wanted to treat everybody equally, because even though some have won Oscars, it's more about each animator's own style."

The other animators brought on board were Jody Kramer, Chris Hinton, Howie Shia, Malcolm Sutherland, Lillian Chan, Joel Mackenzie, as well as Jeff's former *One Big Hapa Family* collaborators Louise Johnson and Jonathan Ng.

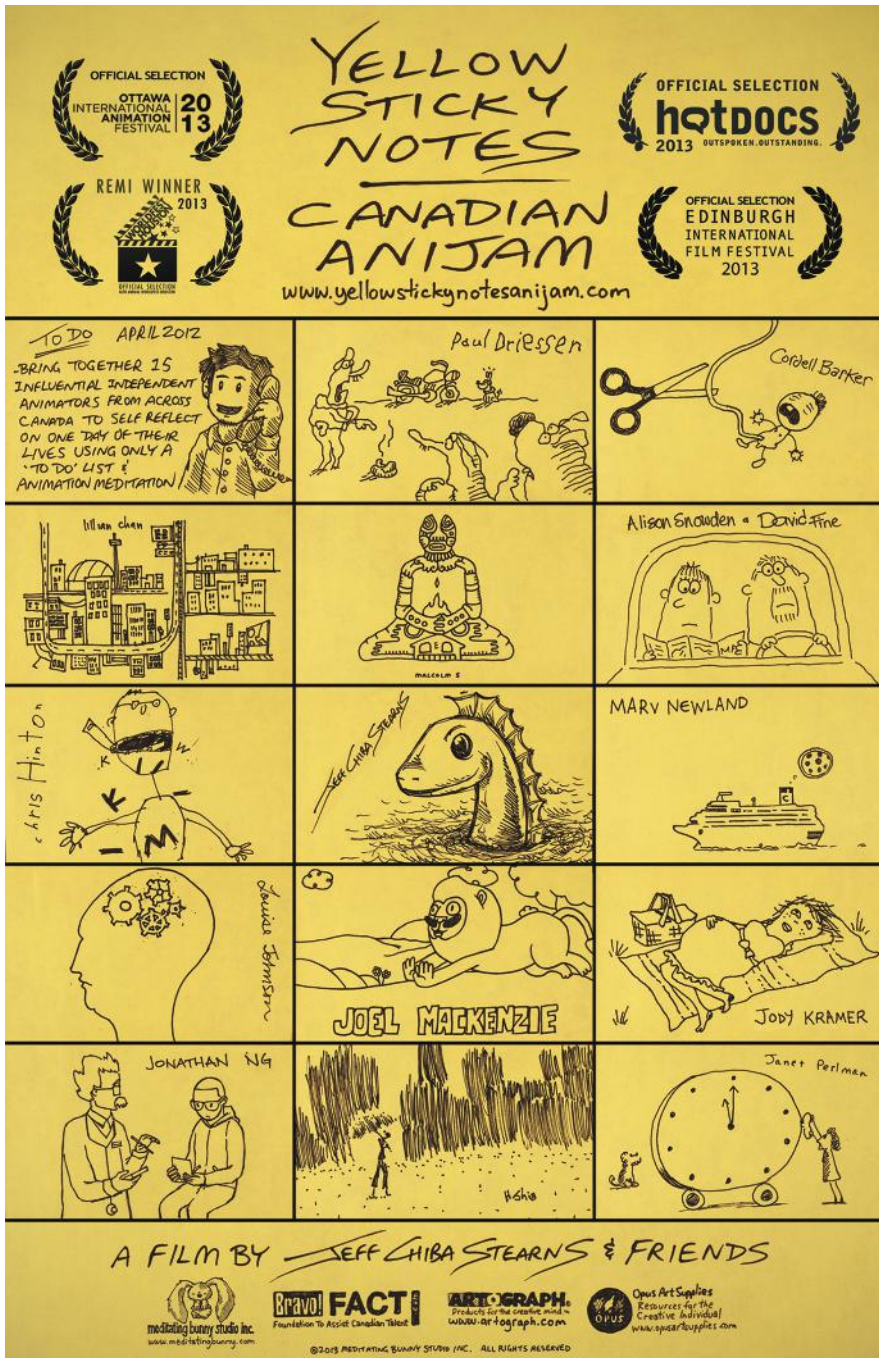


Figure 14.4

Yellow Sticky Notes: Canadian Anijam poster. (Courtesy of Jeff Chiba Stearns, ©2013.)



Figure 14.5

Cordell Barker works on *Yellow Sticky Notes: Canadian Anijam*. (Courtesy of April Barker.)



Figure 14.6

David Fine and Alison Snowden work on *Yellow Sticky Notes: Canadian Anijam*. (Courtesy of Lily Snowden-Fine.)

“Everyone had the same materials; I basically gave them a kit of around 500 sticky notes, a few black pens, and a LightPad to use. The only rule was there couldn’t be underlying pencil sketches; it had to be straight-up ink. Some people might’ve done roughs first and traced over the top, but for the most part, when I animate, it’s rough, it’s raw, it’s sketchy, and that’s what I like, so I was trying to get them to open up and be free with that too.

“The funding was split up equally between the 15 animators, the composer, and the sound designer, so everyone got paid exactly the same amount. Then everyone just went to it. I think Paul was the first guy to send his in; it was amazing to hold and flip through his drawings! A lot these animators were people who got me into animation, and the fact we got Chris Hinton blows my mind because he’s retired and lives on a farm in rural Quebec raising pigs now (Figure 14.7). Even though he had quit animation altogether, all I had to say was ‘Marv Newland’ and ‘hand-drawn animation on paper’ for him to come on board. It was really cool to get that caliber of animators together in one place, celebrating classical animation, drawing on paper.”

As with the original *Yellow Sticky Notes*, the Canadian Anijam proved to be a hit at animation and documentary festivals alike. While it shares a more or less identical production approach, to Jeff, it plays more as a showcase film than a documentary, one that captures an era of Canadian animation heritage.

A variant on the Anijam concept makes use of the swiftness of online collaboration and how established artists can directly work with their audience. In 2010, Bill Plympton set about the visual reinvention of one of his most popular shorts, 2004’s Academy Award-nominated *Guard Dog*, using an international pool of animators amongst his fan base (Figure 14.8). Following a call on his website and social media channels, response to the



Figure 14.7

Chris Hinton (with assistant) works on *Yellow Sticky Notes: Canadian Anijam*. (Courtesy of Katherine Reed.)

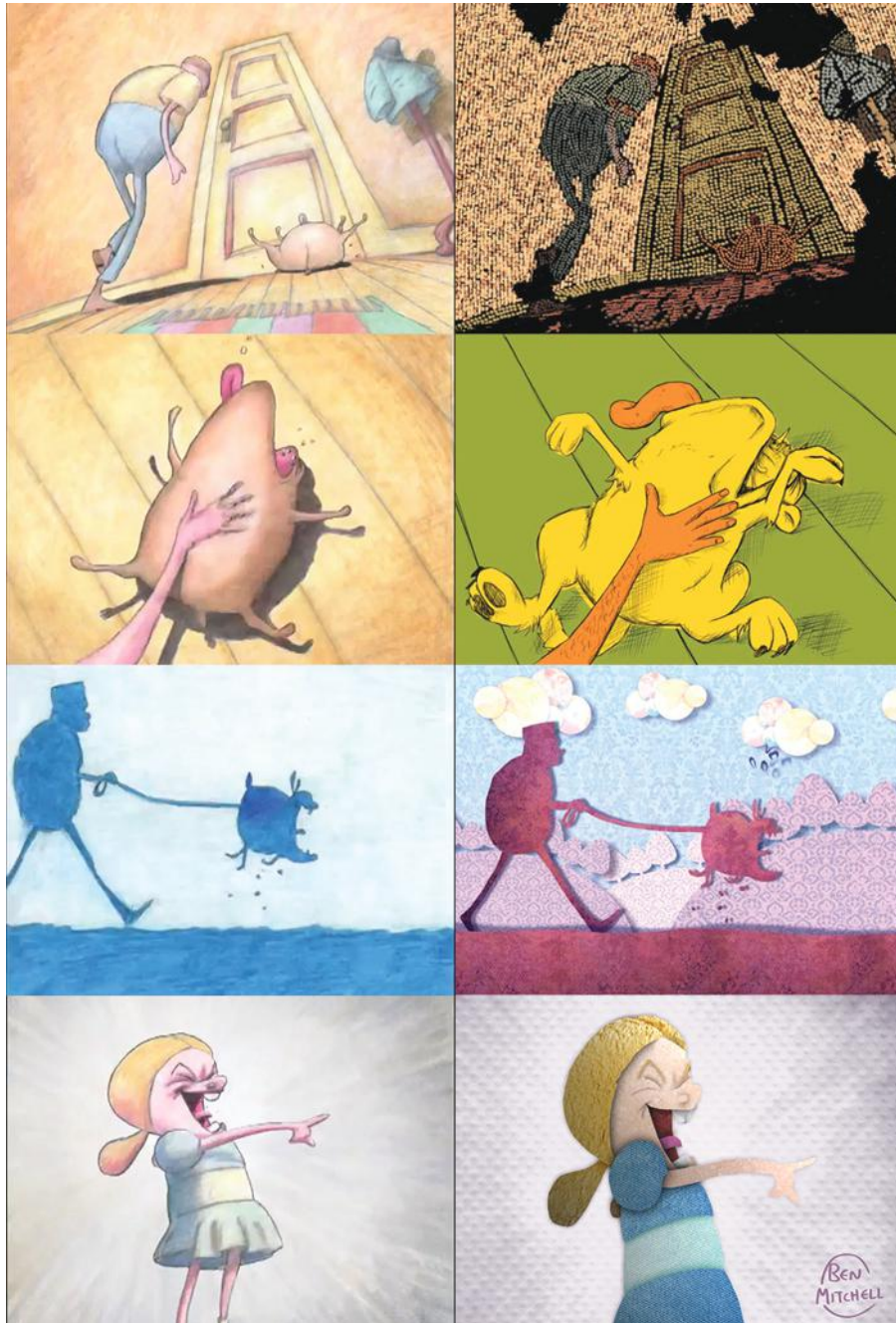


Figure 14.8

Shots from the original *Guard Dog* (Dir. Bill Plympton, left) and their re-imagined *Guard Dog Global Jam* counterparts (right). (Courtesy of Plymptoons, ©2004-2011.)

proposed idea (in which every shot of the film would be broken down and assigned to an animator to reinterpret in the style of their choosing) was immediate and largely positive. Initial criticism on online forums suggested that the project was exploitative crowdsourcing, as the animators were giving their time for free. While it certainly isn't unreasonable to maintain a guarded attitude toward online solicitations of free labor from animators at an early stage in their career, the fundamental differences were clear to most. In place of remuneration was the legitimate kudos of association with a high-profile artist, a high-profile project, and reasonable time demands, most assigned shots running for mere seconds. On top of this, each contributing animator was rewarded with a hand-drawn frame from the original version of the shot they were assigned, an honorarium not to be sniffed at.

Following the success of the *Guard Dog Global Jam*, Bill has been keen to explore other such progressive enterprises, including a similarly collaborative reworking of his breakout hit *Your Face* and his own reinvention of a semilost classic (Figure 14.9).

“As I travel around the world, I'll run into someone who was part of the *Guard Dog Global Jam*, which is very exciting. I think it really does open up possibilities for new kinds of art forms and new kinds of filmmaking that I love. I reworked Winsor McCay's last film—which was pretty obscure—called *The Flying House* (1921), and I took the original film, cleaned up the footage, got all the dirt, dust, and scratches off, added color, removed the intertitles and added voices by Matthew Modine and Patricia Clarkson. With sound and music on there, it just revitalized the film; I feel if Winsor McCay were alive today, this is the kind of film he would have liked to make. The purpose of it was not to make money



Figure 14.9

Original cel from Bill Plympton's *Guard Dog* (2004)—one of the unexpected perks of involvement in *Guard Dog Global Jam* was receiving a drawing from the original film. (Courtesy of Plymptoons. From the author's personal collection.)

but to show a new, young audience the brilliance and talent of Winsor McCay and what a genius he was. I like to do fun little crazy things with animation, like that.”

New Perspectives

Sam Taylor and Bjørn-Erik Aschim met while studying at Arts University Bournemouth. Immediately following their graduation, they began work together on Sylvain Chomet’s traditionally animated 2-D feature *The Illusionist*, which was being produced in Edinburgh. After 7 years of experience working alongside each other, the desire to make a film of their own began to take hold.

“Neither of us had actually done anything of our own,” Sam recalls. “I think we were sick of asking permission. Getting funding sounded like it would take forever, and doing a postgraduate course would have been expensive, so we just started. Not quite understanding what we were taking on was probably helpful. It took 2 years and a massive amount of help from some incredibly generous and talented people. We funded it ourselves through sporadic periods of freelance work.”

The greatest enemy of an independent production’s success is hesitation. Considering how many films exist only in the hypothetical limbo of would-be creators’ fantasies, very little is lost in taking the first steps to begin a film before the certainties of funding or production are set in stone. In the case of Sam and Bjørn’s short *Everything I Can See from Here*, finished and released in 2013, taking such a plunge proved to be the right move (Figure 14.10).

Though the end result is visually sophisticated and indicative of an elaborate production pipeline, the duo’s approach was relatively simple from the outset, sharing the load for the most part.

“Bjørn did all the painting and backgrounds in the film. Beyond that, I think we both did a bit of everything, from character design through to animation, storyboarding, compositing, promotion, and so on. We might not have achieved a perfect state of collective consciousness at all times—there were certainly disagreements—but I think the process of talking this stuff through was beneficial for a number of reasons.

“First, it forced us to justify our creative decisions quite specifically in each case. It also allowed us to get to know each other better and taught us about efficient methods of collaboration. I discovered, for example, that defining an illustrative style is something that is very difficult to collaborate on; it’s so intuitive that it’s difficult to talk about and always ends up coming back to questions of taste. In our recent work, we’ve generally assigned character design to one person in the team, which results in more of a distinctive and personal flair. It’s our taste, but hopefully, it also engages people.”

As is often the case with the animation world, Sam’s primary education came more from working on *The Illusionist* than from the university studies that preceded it. The pacing of *Everything I Can See from Here*, which boasts a number of protracted, drawn-out shots to build atmosphere, is particularly informed by Chomet’s film (Figure 14.11). For Bjørn, additional sources of inspiration came from his prior work for Aardman and Sony for the computer-generated (CG) animated feature *Arthur Christmas*.

“The presentation of ideas, the packaging of your drawing is something that becomes very important when you work on larger-scale productions. Directors and heads of departments just don’t have time to react to something that isn’t clear or doesn’t read properly



Figure 14.10

Everything I Can See from Here (Dir. Bjørn-Erik Aschim/Sam Taylor) character concept sketch to final design comparison. (Courtesy of The Line, ©2013.)

at first glance; they have dozens of meetings, and tons of decisions need to be made every day. Ideas need to be visualized quickly and efficiently; being ambiguous or unclear kills your drawings instantly! It's heartbreaking when you've got a lovely rendered painting to show but nobody reacts to it because they don't understand the idea behind it. It's definitely something that I'm more conscious of now that I'm pitching ideas to my colleagues or to clients. Also, making a film means you'll have to talk about it for a long while after its release. If the idea is in any way unclear to yourself when you make the film, you will be constantly reminded of this whenever someone asks you a question about it."

One unique quality of *Everything I Can See from Here* stands out to the audience immediately, that the film's aspect ratio has been purposefully subverted to 9:16 as opposed to the standard uniformity of 16:9. While the filmmakers wryly acknowledge the prevalence of many contemporary viral videos being filmed in this fashion (unknowingly, for the most part) using smartphones, what might initially come off as gimmickry proves to be an ingenious, contemporary spin on a viewing experience, which has been so adopted by mobile devices (Figure 14.12).

"The film is very specifically made for an audience of people who watch things online using their phones and tablets. This is reflected in the portrait aspect ratio and the fact we released the film online immediately," asserts Sam.



Figure 14.11

Still from *Everything I Can See from Here* (Dir. Bjørn-Erik Aschim/Sam Taylor). (Courtesy of The Line, ©2013.)

“We decided to make it portrait format halfway through the boarding of the film,” Bjørn adds. “We were both reluctant to redo the boards, but it was too good of an idea, so we went for it. It was a fairly straightforward process after that, actually, no major problems. Max James van der Merwe, our 3-D animator, flipped his monitor on the side and did the alien animation that way, which worked pretty well!”

“I had just gotten an iPad, and when we did our first test on the device, it felt right. It was a different experience than watching it on a normal screen, almost like a moving comic, which was something that we got very excited about. It felt like not a lot of people had explored this form of storytelling yet.”

The completion of the film was assured by corralling a team of 11 additional volunteer animators and a 13-person cleanup crew from a pool of creatives enthusiastic to see the project come together from the strength of its premise. A similar sense of enthusiasm for the end result pervaded the online community, earning the film the aforementioned coveted Vimeo Staff Pick and exposure to an audience of hundreds of thousands thanks



Figure 14.12

Still from *Everything I Can See from Here* (Dir. Bjørn-Erik Aschim/Sam Taylor). (Courtesy of The Line, ©2013.)

largely to word of mouth and social media. While this was hugely beneficial to the duo's visibility and reputation as artists, Bjørn's take on the future monetary potential of this form of exposure remains grounded (Figures 14.13 and 14.14).

"I think the sharing of videos online, in tweets, on people's timelines and Tumblrs has definitely opened up platforms for people who normally wouldn't have one, to get their vision across. I think that it's hardly a model that is sustainable for an artist though. The exposure is great, and there's value in building an audience, but there's practically no money to be made and very little incentive to keep making short-form content beyond the pat on the back and a 'like' on your video. There's been attempts at getting people to pay and donate money for short-form content online, like Vimeo's Tip Jar or PayPal's 'donate' button, but apart from crowdfunding, there seems to be no sustainable model that could even get close to financing something like a short animated film."

To Sam, the exposure's primary benefit is also the spectrum of feedback and encouragement first-time filmmakers are given access to. "It's interesting how different forums



Figure 14.13

Everything I Can See from Here "Barry" character sketches. (Courtesy of The Line, ©2013.)

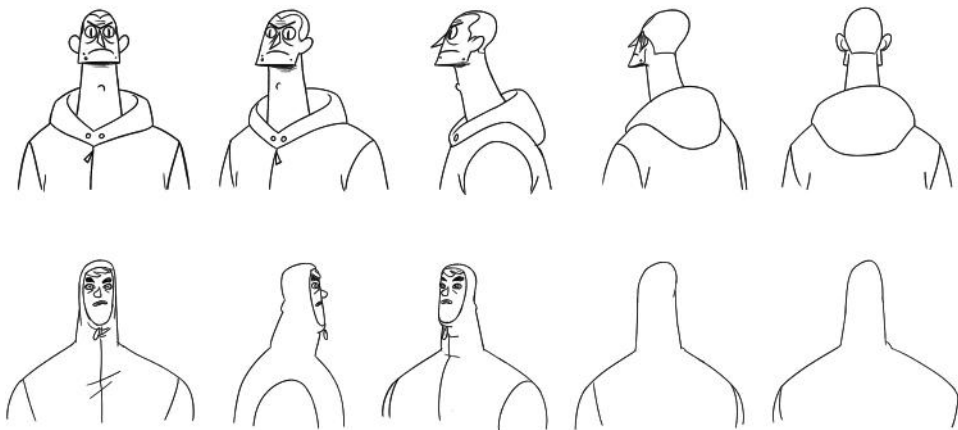


Figure 14.14

Everything I Can See from Here character turnarounds. (Courtesy of The Line, ©2013.)

have very different responses to the film. Vimeo is almost always extremely positive, which is partly a function of people wanting to self-promote. Some of the animation blogs had slightly more critical opinions, a lot of which was really insightful and instructive” (Figure 14.15).

“Social media is a great tool to get people interested in what you are working on,” Bjørn adds. “We’re experimenting more and more with journaling our process online and being completely transparent about the filmmaking as we go along. Animation takes a long time and can be an isolating process. You just want to share something, get some kind of feedback, and the Internet is great for that. But there’s value in keeping a bit of secrecy about your work as well; the magic can quickly fade if you’re sharing everything.”



Figure 14.15

Everything I Can See from Here shot list. (Courtesy of The Line, ©2013.)

Another established, UK-based animation duo is the Brothers McLeod. Made up of siblings Myles, typically the writer of the pair, and Greg, who is responsible for their well-known and distinctive style of 2-D animation and illustration, the pair have built up an impressive body of work spanning independent films, commissioned films, pilots, television series work, illustration projects, commercials, and idents. Their division of labor is, by and large, rather cut and dry, as Greg explains.

“It varies on project to project how much we collaborate. Myles works on a lot of scripts for TV that I don’t really have much input into unless he’s gotten stuck for an idea. I do a lot of illustration and ident work which doesn’t necessarily involve Myles, but for the big projects such as the short films, feature films, and some of the bigger TV series ideas, we’ll basically sit down in a room together and generate the ideas from spending time together. Then when the idea’s kind of gelled, he goes off and writes some stuff, and I go off and draw some stuff; then we get back in a room again, and so on, until eventually we end up with something. Even in production, he kind of codirects and does a lot of the music, while I do a lot of the sound; for postproduction, we work together, so there’s a collaborative back and forth that works really well.”

Although the notion of brothers working together has become something of a tradition in the world of film, the pair often field questions about the nature of their working relationship. Having invented stories with toys and playsets as most young siblings do, the pair naturally gravitated toward one another again in adulthood, shared influences and experiences building an intuitive sense of professional communication, not to mention ambition.

One such instance is the film *365*, an experimental piece that retains Greg’s loose, cartoonish style with a pointedly out-of-left-field concept, having been animated in disjointed, 1-second increments each day over the course of the year 2013 (Figure 14.16).



Figure 14.16

Still from 365 (Dir. Brothers McLeod). (Courtesy of The Brothers McLeod, ©2014.)

“I had started working on a film that wasn’t really going anywhere,” recalls Greg, “and wanted something that could be improvised. The idea of 365 just popped into my head one day, and I just kind of started it without really thinking about it. The idea was that I would post an image every day on Facebook so people could follow it that way” (Figure 14.17).

Once several of these images had been posted, Greg noted a visible interest that started to spread throughout social media. As with the primary motivation behind such work as



Figure 14.17

Still from 365 (Dir. Brothers McLeod). (Courtesy of The Brothers McLeod, ©2014.)

Andy Martin's *The Planets* (see [Chapter 19](#)), the public awareness served as enough of a push to emotionally invest and commit to following through.

“Not doing it would mean I’d lose face, and the more I got into it, the more of my face I would have lost if I would’ve stopped. I think also, if I’m honest, there’s an ego thing there, of ‘Look what I’m doing, aren’t I great for being able to do this?’ Without being arrogant, hopefully! It was a reward system—if you make a film, you want people to watch it and enjoy it, and by sharing with them a bit of it every day, you get a little bit of a buzz. Now, watching the finished film with an audience is a whole different buzz. Aside from a couple of moments right towards the end in December where I just wanted it to end, in general, I really enjoyed not having to stick to one character or one scenario; every day was just a new thing, which kind of suits my personality. It wasn’t easy, but it was enjoyable.”

The simple brilliance of the concept behind the film, which went on to win multiple awards and receive tremendous festival exposure, was the cornerstone of its feasibility. Very few animation projects could demand a daily commitment for an entire year, if for no other reason than the likelihood that an artist can guarantee they’ll be able to work from the same location. Greg’s solution was simple and is one that has proved increasingly viable for independents—the setup of a portable studio that could be taken wherever he went. The demands of *365*’s visuals, being little more than digital illustration, only required a laptop, animation software, and a drawing tablet and, as such, accompanied Greg on his various travels whenever he was away from his office studio ([Figure 14.18](#)).

“It was really freeing. The technique I used for *365* was really basic, just hand-drawn straight into the computer, colored, then onto the next day. I really enjoy working like that and will probably work like that more in the future.”

At the start of the book, we explored a range of storytelling approaches, from stream-of-consciousness experimentation to straight-ahead narrative. A project such as *365* certainly leans more toward the former, though as with such abstract fare as Robert Morgan’s *Bobby Yeah* or Don Hertzfeldt’s more avant-garde work, a structural backbone makes all the difference ([Figure 14.19](#)). Without even a small element of concession to audience



Figure 14.18

Still from *365* (Dir. Brothers McLeod). (Courtesy of The Brothers McLeod, ©2014.)

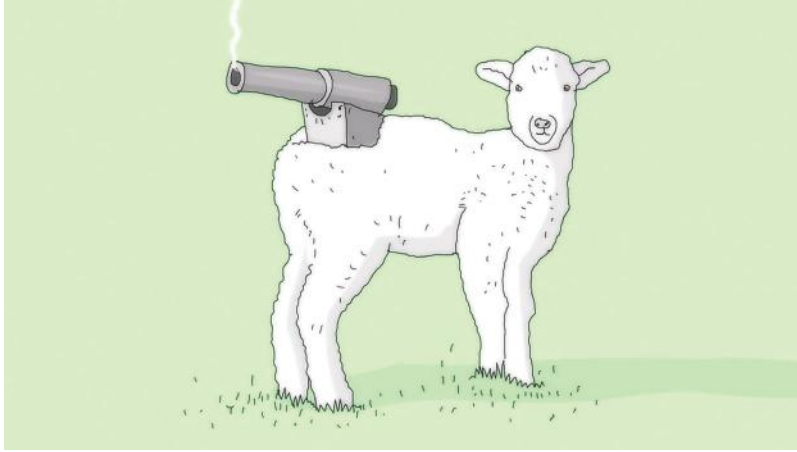


Figure 14.19

Still from *365* (Dir. Brothers McLeod). (Courtesy of The Brothers McLeod, ©2014.)

habits, a film made up of 365 random, 1-second sight gags could easily be unwatchable. Greg attributes his own sense of such concession to having worked alongside his brother for so long.

“Storytelling-wise, most of my short films have been nonnarrative in a traditional sense, and *365* isn’t at all. I think you naturally find rhythms, little tropes and little ideas. *Codswallop* had something of an emotional arc, as Myles works a lot in television, where you need to know story structure, so all the things he writes for have beats you have to hit. Myles really enjoys working with three- or four- or five-act structures; if you can get it right, it’s fantastic.

“We always do a talk about how you might have a subconscious idea that will just pop into your head, but to make it work in a film, you have to consciously twist it. So there are bits like that in *365* where, at the ends of a month, I would sometimes consciously slow it a bit, and at the very end, there’s definitely 4 seconds where I knew I had to give people that relief. So even though I do a lot of subconscious work, I still have to somehow organize it so it isn’t just a load of stuff on screen. The issue when you’re doing something that’s very heavily scripted is that it’s a different mindset, where you have to heavily storyboard, create an animatic, and know what it’s going to be before you’ve finished. With a film like *Phone Home*, that is absolutely the right thing to do, because the comic timing had to be perfect. If I had done just any old thing, it wouldn’t have worked. I like working either way; it keeps it fresh depending on what the project is.”

At this point in the book, it should be more than clear just how unfettered one’s approach to an independent animated film can be. Not only that; the platforms and avenues available for your work are constantly evolving to accommodate these leaps forward in both technology and artists’ progressive approach to their creative concepts. In the upcoming chapters, we will be further exploring just how conceptually broad an independent animation project can be and how recent advances in technology are making the experience of viewing them more immersive than ever before.



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15

Combining Your Efforts

Next we will explore the ways in which independent animation has embraced the mixed-media approach, something that has, over time, become a significantly more viable option for auteur production. Prior case studies have touched on this, such as Signe Baumann's tactile, handcrafted sets and stop-motion environments for *Rocks in my Pockets*, against which her signature 2-D character animation is juxtaposed. The longtime staple of combining live-action with computer-generated (CG) animation is also no longer the exclusive domain of mainstream cinema, as seen in Matthew Walker's *Little Face* and *The Outpost's Endtrip* (see [Chapter 16](#)) amongst others, not to mention the variety of stop-motion processes that define the work of PES. Here, however, we'll be looking at a handful of artists especially known for taking the combined approach throughout their respective bodies of work, showing just how adaptable and (at times) self-aware animation can be.

The first director whose work we'll look at is Daniel Greaves, whose 1991 short *Manipulation* would go on to win the Cartoon d'Or and an Academy Award the following year ([Figure 15.1](#)). Evocative (as many films have been, to varying degrees of success) of the 1953 Chuck Jones classic *Duck Amuck*, *Manipulation* is an early example of the artist-versus-creation concept going one dimension further into more metaphysical territory, as the abuses inflicted on Daniel's hand-drawn, 2-D animated figure grow considerably more complex, involving real materials animated using pixilation and stop-motion. Several sequences in the film (including its final moments, in which the animated victim seemingly breaks free of the confines of the page) foreshadow the visual premise of the



Figure 15.1

Still from *Mr. Plastimime* (Dir. Daniel Greaves). (Courtesy of Daniel Greaves, ©2014.)

director's later short *Flatworld* (1997), produced for the BBC with a grander budget and scope. In this film, the protagonist Matt Phlatt, his pet cat, and their fellow inhabitants of the strange titular universe are traditionally animated in 2-D, albeit as cutouts that stand upright in a stop-motion environment of handmade sets. Beginning with a series of wryly executed nods to the process itself (e.g., shaving with a pencil eraser, turning sideways on to negotiate narrow openings, etc.), the film becomes progressively more elaborate, with an electrical storm opening portals through which television characters (also traditionally animated but composited into the action to suggest more dimensionality) appear and wreak havoc, thanks to their own set of physical laws. To achieve the overall effect, all of the half-hour-long film's 2-D animation was first animated on paper before being photocopied and glued onto meticulously cut-out cardboard (with corresponding replacements required for each different frame of animation), to be then posed within the set and filmed as stop-motion.

"I suppose it's a kind of inherent restlessness in myself, that I keep wanting to try different things," Daniel reflects. "I quite like the challenge of doing something that's slightly out of my comfort zone and then learning from it. The bigger picture is to then accumulate all of these skills because they might spark something really special one day, when I've got all these techniques under my belt, as it were. That's why I jump from one thing to the other.

"I find that one film informs the next, so when it comes to an experience I've had making a film like *Flatworld*, which was incredibly labor-intensive work with cutouts involved, I know that I probably wouldn't do again! It looked good, and it was exciting at the time, but once I've done something once, I want to do something relatively different and learn something else."

The British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA)-nominated film is part of a strong legacy of work produced by Tandem Films, the production company

Daniel cofounded in 1986 that ran until 2014. The final project Daniel would produce as part of the company would be *Mr. Plastimime* (2014), a hybrid of stop-motion puppet animation and digital 2-D in which a floundering mime artist unknowingly lives beneath his biggest—and only—fan (Figure 15.2). We previously learned in Chapter 9 that the film’s successful completion was owed to crowdfunding, though the idea had existed for some time before the team at Tandem took the Kickstarter plunge.

“I had this image in my mind of a black-and-white, mime artist character, set in a particular era. I just wanted to do something that was quite moody. It was originally going to be a lot more slapstick in the beginning, but it changed into this romantic, atmospheric love story.”

Though the film was initially self-funded, the main impetus for crowdfunding a higher budget was Daniel’s propensity toward using mixed media to strong effect. In the case of *Mr. Plastimime*, the stop-motion puppets are imbued with an extra level of expression through the addition of hand-animated facial acting. Elsewhere in the film, the star-crossed neighbors find themselves indulging a mutual fantasy (while an accidental fire starts to spread in the woman’s apartment) conveyed through an entirely 2-D animated sequence where they dance the Tango, put together by Daniel himself with the use of live-action reference footage (Figure 15.3).

“As it was a fantasy sequence, there was a reason for it to be done in a different technique, for the two principal characters to be together. It also gave us enough time for the apartment to burst into flames, so when you come back to reality, it’s a shock, or a surprise at least.”

While Daniel directed the entire film, not being a stop-motion animator by trade saw him amongst those taking on the additional 2-D facial animation, using reference



Figure 15.2

Mr. Plastimime campaign page promo image. (Courtesy of Daniel Greaves, ©2014.)



Figure 15.3

Still from *Mr. Plastimime* (Dir. Daniel Greaves). (Courtesy of Daniel Greaves, ©2014.)

points built into the physical puppets as a guide, similar to the compositing approach of the National Film Board of Canada’s (NFB’s) 2007 stop-motion film *Madame Tutli-Putli* (directed by Chris Lavis and Maciek Szczerbowski), which would instead overlay live-action eyes to bring a more “human” performance out of the puppets. In the case of *Mr. Plastimime*, this hybrid approach was crucial to taking each character’s range of expression to a place that would not have been achievable using stop-motion on its own.

“The animators said it would have been really difficult to sculpt the eye blinks and subtle expressions with these squashy shapes. I was quite concerned that they would have looked a bit blank, so I think it was worth taking a chance, even though it cost more. The thing is, the characters are in the film pretty much 80% of the time, so you’ve got to take perspective into account. We didn’t use any technical, clever tracking devices; everybody just had to use their eyes and match it up, which was tricky because the eyes change depending on the angle of the camera.”

Using Flash, the eye and mouth animation was applied straight-ahead to the stop-motion footage, with the opacity level brought down a touch so as to not be solid colors (Figure 15.4). Being able to discern Plasticine textures through the 2-D overlays keeps the end result from being jarring or incongruous—for the most part, the facial animation comes across almost as having been physically painted onto the puppets themselves.

Harkening back to the days of *Manipulation* and *Flatworld*, *Mr. Plastimime* also indulges a certain degree of metaphysical humor in its references to the physicality of the animation itself, something of a Daniel Greaves trademark.

“I don’t do it consciously, but it has been pointed out—people say, ‘Your films really are about the process of animation.’ In *Mr. Plastimime*, you become aware of the technique when he walks into a lamppost and the Plasticine squashes, for example (Figure 15.5). You can’t pull the wool over the audience’s eye—they’re pretty clued up as to how these



Figure 15.4

Daniel Greaves using Flash to animate facial expressions in *Mr. Plastimime*. (Courtesy of Daniel Greaves, ©2014.)



Figure 15.5

Still from *Mr. Plastimime* (Dir. Daniel Greaves). (Courtesy of Daniel Greaves, ©2014.)

types of things are done—so I do like playing with the genre, but I don't want to be too heavy-handed with it. I don't want to make a big statement that this is a film about animation; it's just nice to occasionally remind the audience that this is what the film physically consists of. So occasionally, there's a little nod, almost like an in-joke, like the moments in *Flatworld* where the characters turn edge-on, but I try not to overdo it."

On reflection, Daniel cites his first short film outing, *Manipulation*, as perhaps the most harmonious coupling of animation approaches: "I had so much more control, because it was pretty much just me, so when it came to the point of combining the pixilated hands with the characters, I had an instinct of how far to move. As I was so familiar with the animation, having done it myself, I had an instinctive idea of how much to move my hand, per frame. Because this was the early 1990s, the days before computers, I didn't have video playback; I just had to sense how far to move my hands every frame. People have said it's remarkably smooth—it's actually quite jerky in places, but I think I got away with it, to a large degree."

Duality

Chris Shepherd, whose collaborative adaptation with David Shrigley *Who I Am and What I Want* (2005) we learned of in [Chapter 4](#), is another UK filmmaker who has frequently combined animation processes to remarkable effect. Two primary examples from his extensive filmography that come to mind are *Dad's Dead* (2003) and *The Ringer* (2013), both of which are rooted in live action and visually emboldened via an assortment of captivating animation and visual effects. Although these films have a distinct visual edge, they succeed for both being strongly told stories.

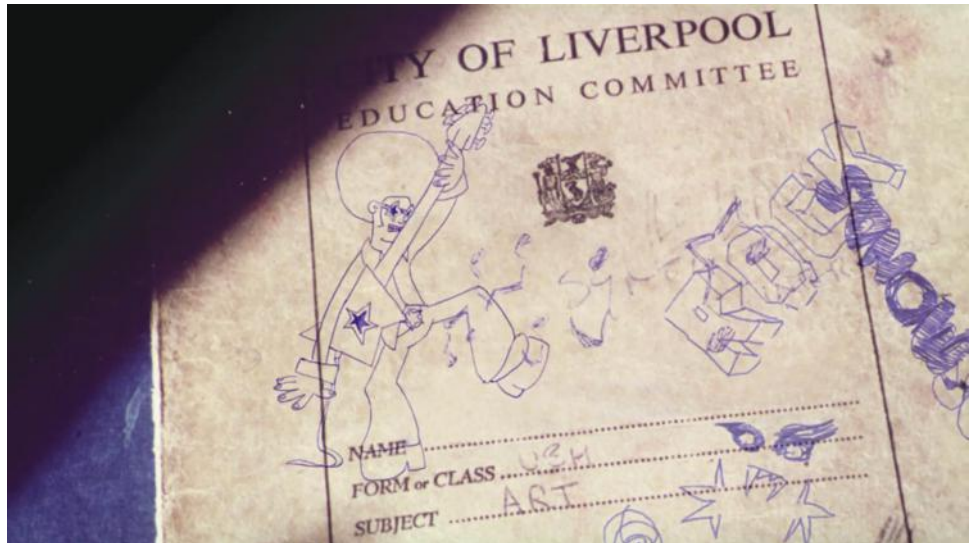


Figure 15.6

Still from *Dad's Dead* (Dir. Chris Shepherd). (Courtesy of Chris Shepherd, ©2003.)

“Story has always been my cornerstone,” enthuses Chris. “I always think of story first and then think of what style it would be, based on how that might affect the audience. I’m not crazy about technique just for the sake of it; I always think, *What’s my story?* And then, *How can I tell it?* Then I’ll think about what I want to do to the audience; do I want to scare them or make them laugh?”

Ticking both boxes, *Dad’s Dead* is laced with dry wit, while at the same time, the events are catastrophized by the increasingly nightmarish overlaid animation (Figure 15.6). The film is a memoir about the turning point in which an unnamed, Liverpoolian narrator (Ian Hart) comes to realize that his “best mate” Johnno (Chris Freeney) is not just an anti-social youth but an outright sociopath. The film is presented as a sequence of point-of-view (POV) memories with animated embellishments projected over them, beginning innocuously and becoming progressively more disturbing; with each new unveiling of Johnno’s real self, his depiction becomes ever more demonic and distorted (Figure 15.7).



Figure 15.7

The increasingly demonic “Johnno” of *Dad’s Dead*. (Courtesy of Chris Shepherd, ©2003.)

“I wanted to tell a story about my environment. My previous film was very cartoony, and I wanted to make something that felt real, more about memory.” The backbone of the film is Ian Hart’s narration, which had been recorded several years previously. Hearing Hart’s performance of his own writing struck enough of a nerve that Chris initially had no desire to put it out in the world in any form. “I stuck it in the cupboard and shut the door on it! I was scared of it because it was so dark and I’m not a very dark person. But it was a good story, and so when I got some funding to animate it, I brought this recording back out and then made the film.

“It wasn’t traditionally storyboarded. I did it very instinctively, five or six shoots over the year; I’d do some animation, then do another shoot, then edit, do some animation and do another shoot, and so on, building it up like a painting.”

Citing Francis Bacon as one of the film’s visual references, the incrementally-built-upon approach—some instances of footage having been shot 3 years beforehand in a tower block, with new footage subsequently composited in—makes for a film that manages to cultivate a natural flow to it. This can be attributed to two main consistencies—the narration that binds the action and the regular visual augmentation the animation brings to the film.

The latter is also a major component of *The Ringer*, an altogether different type of film yet still laced with a certain mix of comedy, darkness, and pathos. Inspired by real-life events, the film sees Christopher (Kieran Lynn), a young man working in web animation, reencounter his estranged father, Danny (John Henshaw). Unable to comprehend that his son’s job does not bring with it any show-business pull, Danny’s deluded hope and overbearing insistence that the two can work together on getting his mediocre screenplay *The Ringer* made into a film serve to dash any hopes of a clement reconciliation.

“It’s not a portrayal of reality; elements are real, but it is fiction, and it’s up to the audience to try and figure out what it’s all about. I suppose in a way, it’s about reconciliation, but it’s also, in my mind, a bit about dreams as well, the dream of wanting to go to Hollywood, the dream of wanting to make a big feature film.”

The substory within the main narrative is that of *The Ringer* itself, a cliché-ridden stab at the gangster heist genre as filtered through someone with no real grasp of film or story structure. Indulging his father out of a sense of obligation that quickly wanes, the son can only envision the events described as a cartoonish pastiche modeled on the overstated grandiosity and color palettes of 1970s movie posters.

“It was something that I never would have done in a million years, the car chase, prostitutes getting shot, gunfire—normally, I’d run a mile from that sort of stuff. So I did it out of irony, but in the process of making the film, I realized how fun it was to make cars blow up and shoot people in the head—I can see why other filmmakers do it now! Even though the parallel story is quite weak and meant to be ironic, I like it, because whenever you make a film, you care about all the characters: Big Tony, the kid, Amber (Figure 15.8)—even though they’re not based in reality and are more like cartoon characters, I care for them just as much.”

After their initial encounter, the interactions between Chris and his emotionally unstable father grow increasingly terse. The characters from *The Ringer* begin to bleed into Chris’s thoughts as he starts to connect with them, eventually coercing him to make at least some stab at inward reconciliation. The fantasy sequences for the film, which was produced in association with Autour de Minuit, were predicated on live-action footage



Figure 15.8

Still from *The Ringer* (Dir. Chris Shepherd). (Courtesy of Atour de Minuit/Polkadot Productions, ©2013.)

shot against green screen, later keyed, filtered, and composited into 3-D CG environments by a team of visual artists at ADV Studios in France. Last, a form of rotoscoping was applied, tracing line art over every frame of the characters—a process that took over half a year—resulting in a striking, “moving-poster” effect. While the film’s strictly live-action sequences are strong enough in terms of the writing, direction, and performances to be a compelling film, as with *Dad’s Dead*, the visual garnish allows for a very effective insight into the main character’s emotional conflicts and turmoil.

“Live action and animation are very different,” Chris reasons. “Something you show as being quite harsh in live action, you can put it into animation, and it can become funny or quite mild, so there are all those considerations. If it’s a dark comedy, you might not want it to become too heavy, so by showing it like a cartoon, it just deflates it and almost brings a sense of sarcasm to it (Figure 15.9).

“All the films are different, but when I wrote *Dad’s Dead*, it was as more of a straight play. Then when I did the animatic, I would think about parallel narratives and ways to subvert the main narrative, building it up over time. When it came to *The Ringer*, I would see the film as I wrote it, the idea of this parallel world that would be animated.”

Another shared trait with *Dad’s Dead*, though buried perhaps a little deeper, is *The Ringer’s* tragicomic sensibility (Figure 15.10). The humor, underplayed though it is, keeps the film from being maudlin melodrama. Danny’s attempts to bond or find common ground with Chris, for instance, are strangely endearing for being utterly devoid of logic. Toward the end, when the film’s main narrative (now intertwined with that of the fictional universe within) goes from threatening to poignant, the shift in tone is felt all the more.

“I feel that with comedy, you can convey something quite dark while keeping the audience on board. Even when I try to be serious, the films always end up being funny; it’s



Figure 15.9

Still from *The Ringer* (Dir. Chris Shepherd). (Courtesy of Autour de Minuit/Polkadot Productions, ©2013.)



Figure 15.10

Still from *The Ringer* (Dir. Chris Shepherd). (Courtesy of Autour de Minuit/Polkadot Productions, ©2013.)

become one of my things. I suppose the other thing I've always tacked on are themes around nostalgia and imagination, because you can use the animation and live-action combo to go to a higher sensory plane, by showing your fantasies in a way that you can't do with live action on its own.

"I do love live action because with that it's all about subtlety. I always say that in animation you can kill somebody by dropping an anvil on their head, that's totally acceptable, but in live action, you can kill somebody with something small, a *look*, even, and in the next scene, they're dead or gone. I've done purely live-action films as well, such as *Bad Night for the Blues* (2010), but the magic of live action and animation combined is that anything can happen. That's quite an exciting thing, to have that extra arsenal of tools to make something come to life."

Splintering Off

One particular series of independent, mixed-media projects from the Netherlands serves as a prime example of how storytelling and a multitude of art forms can come together to form entire creative universes. The work of Dutch artist Rosto is legendarily grand in spectacle and the talk of many a major festival, combining rich soundscapes; arresting musical compositions (from avant-garde to straight-ahead rock); a plethora of epic, sometimes metaphysical interwoven story strands; and unforgettable visuals. While Rosto's later projects boast bolstered production values through significant financial support from a variety of funding bodies, all of his work retains a crucial independent and artistic spirit at its core.

Animation has always been an important part of Rosto's process, going back to his childhood and a home studio setup involving his father's 8 mm camera and friends who would financially contribute to material costs so as to be involved. The technological limitations of the time put his animation inclinations temporarily on hold. "It took forever to do all the animation, shooting all these cels and then sending it off to a lab and having to wait 3 weeks for it to come back—only to discover that it was all out of focus and underlit! After a while, I gave up and started to shoot horror movies in my teenage years." With the advent of video briefly reigniting a predigital enthusiasm for filmmaking, it wasn't until the arrival of the Amiga ("a miracle machine!") that animation was permanently brought back into his life.

"I first started doing the drawn-animation thing again, then very slowly, the hybrid approach came in. By now, I was a more stubborn young man who decided that I don't *have* to choose to become a 2-D animator—or graphic designer, or musician; I can actually combine *all* these things!"

The mixed-media roots of Rosto's highly complex artistic universe can be traced, at least visually, to his online web series *Mind My Gap* (Figure 15.11), which takes the form of a multimedia "graphic novel" detailing the troubled journeys of Diddybob and Buddybob, best friends and presenters of the fictional television show *Living Interior*. The story begins in a 1998 Flash-animated webisode *Map1: Highway*, which sees Diddybob on a mysterious road journey, having left his life and Buddybob behind, for reasons unknown. Set to mostly still illustrations and rudimentary animated sequences, the narration and dialog are unforgiving, at times coyly self-aware of their impenetrability, yet the story is absorbing enough to entice the viewer into attempting to fathom its mysteries. The saga concludes 15



Figure 15.11

Artwork for Rosto's *Mind My Gap*. (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D.)

years later in 2013 with the two-part, full-blown live-action/CG metaphysical epic *Map13: XIII* and *Episode13: XIII* (episodes 25 and 26 of *Mind My Gap*, respectively). These two concluding chapters are best known on the animation festival circuit as the single piece *Lonely Bones*, itself the second part of a parallel series of short films (Figure 15.12).

Before exploring those, however, it's worth examining the long path to Rosto's status as one of Amsterdam's most successful and intriguing independent artists. Though *Mind My Gap* is where the story ultimately begins, the creative seeds were sewn some time before through music, not animation.

"The graphic novel was actually inspired by songs I had written in the mid-1990s," says Rosto, "although I didn't realize at the time that my entire career would spring from it! When I wrote the first songs around 1995 with the band The Wreckers—as we were called back then—it was all very intuitive. The only thing that I knew was that it was about landscapes, crossroads—there was no concept behind it other than those elements."



Figure 15.12

Still from *Lonely Bones* (Dir. Rosto). (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D./Autour de Minuit, ©2013.)

Several years later, as both the 1990s and *The Wreckers* as a real-life band were coming to an end, these compositions became the springboard for something altogether more complex. From the very first episode, it is clear that *Mind My Gap* does not follow any established patterns or frameworks that Flash-based web animations were known for at the time. Certainly, it makes use of the advantages of the medium—the addition of sound effects, music, and recorded performances helps tremendously in the adaptation from its original print incarnation, as does a certain level of interactivity, allowing the viewer to switch from one narrative strand to another. Though the official website self-effacingly refers to these early episodes as “obsolete,” the concept of this type of digital storytelling “a dinosaur” in an era where the Internet has “evolved into a dominating household commodity,” they are a valuable study when it comes to several areas of artistic development and approaches to storytelling. As Rosto recalls, “This was basically right after the birth of the Internet. I was pioneering, while not really understanding what I was doing. You have to understand, this was the 1990s—the Internet seemed like it *might* be here to stay, but we didn’t know at the time whether or not it was just hype.”

Though not “tech-savvy” by his own admission, Rosto’s motives for embracing the Internet’s potential in a manner far removed from the glut of web animators rising to popularity at the same time came from seeing a documentary on the subject. “I realized a couple of things. First, that this was probably going to be big, and the ‘big boys’ would probably try to hijack it and make it theirs. So we, the ‘little people,’ had to be there first—it was like the Wild West, basically; whoever gets there first claims their territory.

“The other thing I realized was that even as an independent artist or filmmaker, you’re never *truly* independent, because you need the money people on your side. Even if you don’t do it with big budgets, if you make your own small guerilla projects, you still need the blessing of curators, festival directors, or whoever else might own a platform where

you could put your work on display. They still have to be your friends, your fans, or supporters, so you depend on their tastes.”

Rosto’s sense of territorial obligation paired with the open-door potential of distributing his work on the Internet (nowadays a common practice) led to the breakthrough revelation that there were truly no limits—subversive, individual, or personal—on whatever form it might take. “That I could publish it online and have the world be my audience was amazing! Now we’re so used to it, but back then, literally all possible platforms and stages were owned by people whose help you’d need to get work published.”

That very evening, the efforts to adapt *Mind My Gap*—which had already started in print form as a running series in two sibling Dutch magazines—began, converting the artwork and dialog to an online Flash slideshow with music and sound, and teaching himself the fundamentals of http to be able to create and upload the first episode all in one night. Bound by the same technical limitations of the era, as previously mentioned in [Chapter 5](#), early episodes are bare-bones affairs less than a megabyte in size to allow the online audience of the time to be able to watch them uninterrupted. Though visually minimal, the uninhibited, auteur nature of the stories more than compensate for this. “The early days were fantastic in the sense that it literally felt like, on a more political or philosophical level, what I was doing as a *truly* independent artist mattered. It was great to discover that, as soon as *Mind My Gap* became more of a body of work, there actually was an audience out there, in the world. What I do is what you could call ‘boutique’; it’s a niche that is certainly not for everyone, but as soon as you have all these quirky individuals who are potentially interested in what *you* are interested in, suddenly you have a substantial audience.”

Learning, largely via e-mails, that this ongoing mixed-media project had some resonance and a growing fan base boosted Rosto’s confidence to progress the stories of *Mind My Gap* without compromise, regardless of their intricacies or inaccessibilities. The stories became as adventurous and unpredictable to Rosto himself as they were to their eventual audience, yet certain components ensured that the narratives did not go so far off the rails as to become tedious or off-putting. Chief among these was the musical foundation of the series.

“There was no master plan except for the songs. On a narrative level, I had no clue as to what would happen in the next episode. I wanted it to be as adventurous and as creatively challenging as possible, so I basically just took my time and, just like a musician would, followed the material and played with it and surprised myself. I deliberately did it like this because having everything sketched out and knowing what I’ll be doing for the next 15 years of my life sounds like a nightmare to me.”

As the free-form approach to telling Diddybob and Buddybob’s story continued to gain momentum, additional narrative strands branched out of *Mind My Gap* in the form of the short films *Beheaded* (1999), *(The Rise and Fall of the Legendary) Anglobilly Feverson* (2002), and *Jona/Tomberry* (2005). Rosto acknowledges this trilogy as representing more or less the start of his career as an independent filmmaker.

“The first little short “*Beheaded*” is a 3-minute musical piece about the Langeman, one of my characters, losing his head—I consider that my first successful film ([Figure 15.13](#)). I had been trying to make films all my life, basically messing around, trying to find my voice, trying to imitate others, all the stuff that you should do as a young person. *Beheaded* was my first film where I felt, *This is me; I did this for me; it’s as honest as possible; I’m not trying to please my mother or my girlfriend or any of these demons looking over my shoulder*



Figure 15.13

Still from *Beheaded* (Dir. Rosto). (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D., ©2005.)

whenever I'm creating something. It was a 3-minute little sweet nothing, but for me, it was a breakthrough.”

The film certainly succeeds as a natural progression of the graphic novel webisodes, combining the simple yet affecting visual of the Langeman’s disembodied CG head singing his lamentation against a backdrop of densely composited typographical elements, following an introductory scenario combining both asset-based and hand-drawn digital 2-D animation. While the film would not achieve the same success as those that came after, it laid an important foundation for the subsequent works to build on.

“After *Beheaded* was (*The Rise and Fall of the Legendary*) *Anglobilly Feverson*. In *Mind My Gap*, there is an episode where the ‘director’ character refers to a storyboard for his film. People thought I was just messing around, but it actually was a real storyboard for a real film that was, I suppose, my breakthrough. *Anglobilly* finally gave me a spot in the independent short filmmakers’ landscape.” Further cementing this spot was the concluding film, 2005’s *Jona/Tomberry*, which went on to win a major prize at the Cannes International Film Festival. This trilogy of films embraced the established characters and sense of structural lawlessness from the graphic novel universe while adding additional elements, such as a hallucinogenic reincarnation of Rosto’s 1990s musical outfit, later to be rechristened *Thee Wreckers*. Paying tribute to the band from whose music these stories had sprung, the animated counterparts of band members *Wrecker Walley*, *Wrecker Folley*, *Wrecker Rooney*, and *Wrecker Rosto* are shackled and chained demonic spectres who quickly become a key visual of *Mind My Gap*’s expanded universe. “I had now immortalized them by taking their ‘souls,’ making them into characters, and doing a studio project of all the songs that we wrote in the 1990s, this time recording them properly.”

The strength of this visual concept, paired with the crucial role the songs played as a catalyst for these adventurous film ideas, ultimately led to another supplemental story strand, a tetralogy of shorts in which *Thee Wreckers* ultimately take center stage. The first two of these films, *No Place Like Home* (2009), and the aforementioned *Lonely Bones* are

firmly a part of the *Mind My Gap* storyline, functioning as works of avant-garde film to be appreciated in their own right and/or as an elaborate coda to Diddybob and Buddybob’s journey (Figure 15.14). From the third short *Splintertime* (2015) onward, the films focus on the journey of The Wreckers themselves, chauffeured in an ambulance following the events of *Lonely Bones* through a vast, seemingly unending tundra by a dancing nurse, again a metanod to the band’s real-world origins (Figure 15.15).

“Often, there will already be a backstory or a legacy of some sort. The nurse was our ‘mascot’ when we were The Wreckers in the 1990s, because for the first demos that we recorded I designed the covers for our cassette tapes. I found this ‘kinky’ nurse in a 1960s magazine who was doing nothing special except for just sitting there and pulling on her clothes a little bit, which I found fantastic, in a way—what is kinky about that? I liked that visual a lot, so every time we put out a release on a cassette, there was a nurse. It always seemed to make sense, these guys in black—The Wreckers—wrecking stuff, and then a nurse in white comes in. That visual disappeared for a long time, and with Thee Wreckers, she doesn’t play a part until that ending of *Lonely Bones*, when suddenly, there she is again.”

Portrayed in live action by dancer/choreographer Nina Nestelaar, the CG-accentuated features and frenetic movements of the nurse serve as one of the most striking visuals of *Splintertime*, and as such, the character’s organic origins are notable when considering idea generation. Indeed, many of Rosto’s most affecting visual concepts have sprung from the real world, adapted in such a way as to occupy a limbo between documentary filmmaking and outright fiction (though it is certainly closer to the latter). The final sequence of *Lonely Bones*, for example, is laced with acknowledgments of the production process itself, in which the elaborate CG backdrop alternates and occasionally disappears completely to reveal the green-screen studio and crew (Figure 15.16). Other recurring visuals in the preceding films, such as the motif of various forms of a cross, inform the visuals of *Splintertime*, though whether these are conscious or subconscious decisions eludes even Rosto himself. “Did I create these things, or did they just fall into place? I never know how



Figure 15.14

Still from *No Place Like Home* (Dir. Rosto). (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D., ©2009.)



Figure 15.15

Splinterhead (Dir. Rosto). (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D./Autour de Minuit/S.O.I.L., ©2015.)



Figure 15.16

Still from *Lonely Bones* (Dir. Rosto). (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D./Autour de Minuit, ©2013.)

that works, but that’s why I call my work intuitive; it often feels like I just found these ideas somewhere. My own intuition is basically a repository of everything that has happened to me in my life. Did I find these things there? Did I borrow them? I don’t know, but at a certain point, these things click; they are all aligned, and then it’s as though the universe is telling me that they are ready to be used in my next project.”

These ideas generally manifest themselves as combinations of elements from preceding projects, oftentimes perfectly suited to the variety of combined approaches that has become something of a signature style. Though the tetralogy has, at the least, some elements of consistency, be they the musical foundations, the characters, or each film being able to identifiably lead into the one that follows, the lack of any hard-and-fast “rules” to the mythology of Rosto’s universe has been its most creatively freeing aspect.

“It’s interesting to me, because the graphic novel is now finished, and it sort of has its own internal logic, but everything grew organically, and there is still a lot of stuff in there which is contradictory and doesn’t add up or lead to anything. I see some things where I go, ‘Wow, I never realized at the time that this actually makes a lot of sense,’ because I had just done whatever pleased me, whatever I found interesting. There are also other leads that I see that are basically red herrings, things I found interesting at the same time, got bored with, and dropped.”

The actual visual execution of the films chronologically increases in sophistication, with the funding circumstances, as overviewed in [Chapter 8](#), playing an obvious part. However, from the rudimentary assortment of animation processes visible in *Beheaded* to the lavish high-definition (HD) spectacles of *Lonely Bones* and beyond, Rosto has always embraced the limitless potential of cross-media filmmaking, even eschewing such labor-saving approaches as motion capture (mocap) for comparatively complex pipelines of 3-D tracking



Figure 15.17

Still from *Lonely Bones* (Dir. Rosto). (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D./Autour de Minuit, ©2013.)

and rotoscoping overlaid on top of live-action performances, so as to preserve the unique look and nightmarish quality of hybrid animation he has established (Figure 15.17).

“It may be that how I do it is time-consuming, which could be a case for motion capture, but I don’t find that especially interesting. If I want the characters to look like real people, I don’t see why I can’t just shoot a real person. Sometimes I want them animated, because there’s always a difference in what an animator brings to a character; it’s never the same as live action unless you rotoscope it. An animator can bring an otherworldliness to a character, which you cannot do in live action. So I never really understood, except for time efficiency, why I would use motion capture.”

Although Rosto concedes that experimentation within certain areas of mocap, in particular, facial capture, can yield some interesting artistic results, his philosophy for incorporating new animation methods and approaches is far less about convenience than the potential for creative ingenuity. “I might go into those territories somewhere in the future. As soon as there is something that I don’t understand yet, or find fascinating—especially for all the things that it *wasn’t* designed for originally—then I often try to make it part of my next project. I hate to repeat stuff that I know too much about already—life is too short to be repeating yourself.”



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16

Your Film in Depth: Considering Stereoscopy



Still from *Luigi's Pizzaride* (Dir. Florian Werzinski). (Courtesy of Florian Werzinski, ©2011.)

Mainstream cinema's on-again, off-again relationship with stereoscopic projection has seemingly settled down, moving past the inevitable glut of gimmicky, postironic 3-D affairs to nowadays being largely focused on films that are grand enough in spectacle to

warrant being viewed with an added sense of immersion (many of these being animated features). At this point, producing your independent short stereoscopically is a relatively straightforward process, with software incorporating it as an option when compositing/rendering and stereoscopic camera rigs for stop-motion setups easily obtainable. The question remains: just because it *can* be done, *should* it be?

While some festivals are able to accommodate 3-D projection, it is far from standard practice, so the first major element to consider is just how focused your plan of action will need to be if you actually want a film to be *seen* stereoscopically, in a theatrical setting. With 3-D home viewing never having taken hold in a major way, outside of a festival or cinema environment, there are other viewing options that allow for 3-D shorts in a more portable sense, such as displaying films as moving stereograms, in which the two necessary images required to create the illusion of depth are simultaneously screened side by side. To achieve the stereoscopic effect, the viewer needs to physically cross or outwardly diverge (depending on which side is which) their eyes so as to blend the two images, though this is not an especially comfortable practice for many and becomes increasingly less advisable the larger the image. Also, who wants to sit watching a film cross-eyed?

This essential principle is easier facilitated by processes such as Google Cardboard,* a budget option for experiencing films and apps in 3-D on mobile devices. The loose and adaptable premise allows viewers to construct their own wearable goggles that direct each respective image from the 3-D project to the corresponding eye, essentially transforming the device into a makeshift virtual reality (VR) headset. The higher-end versions of this are professionally manufactured gaming headsets themselves, whose main applications are designed to be interactive experiences, though experimental film projects in which the wearer can passively observe the action without actively engaging with it do exist, such as the multiartist Oculus Mobile VR Jam project *Colosse* and Maarten Isaäk de Heer's *Februar*.† The world of immersive film is, however, a somewhat separate beast to (though perhaps a more viable future than) the application of stereoscopy to independent animation shorts. One area in which stereoscopy will most likely never fully take flight is 2-D character-based animation. Compositing in a 3-D environment is now a staple of most prominent software, from Toon Boom to After Effects, but if the graphics are actually rendered stereoscopically, the illusion of depth will only be applied to a series of flat planes for each layer, rendering the endeavor somewhat underwhelming and arbitrary. There have been some instances where the level of atmosphere and visual innovation has been well served by stereoscopic projection,‡ though these have proved rare exceptions. When applied to a more conceptually adventurous film, however, an assortment of 2-D elements can be reconfigured in a rather compelling manner.

Though it went on to perform spectacularly as an independent film in its own right, Thomas Stellmach and Maja Oschmann's 2013 Louis Spohr tribute *Virtuos Virtuell* ultimately began life as a commission for Kassel's Spohr Museum, one of its primary funders (Figure 16.1). One of the caveats of this arrangement was to create a piece that would

* <https://www.google.com/get/cardboard/>

† <http://www.maartenisaakdeheer.com/>

‡ Such as Claire Blanchet's 2013 NFB film *The End of Pinky*, whose flat, traditionally animated characters inhabit a misty, film-noir dream world that envelops the viewer.



Figure 16.1

Thomas Stellmach and Maja Oschmann at the *Virtuos Virtuell* exhibit. (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach.)

embrace newer technology, and the decision was made to produce the film stereoscopically so as to be displayed on an autostereoscopic monitor.*

“That was the main reason that we had this stereoscopic aspect to the project. During the early days of the project, however, we did some stereoscopic tests and were actually quite disappointed with the effect. As artists, we were so happy to do the 2-D version, as it seemed more interesting for the audience to *sense* the third dimension and not really *see* it. We recognized this aspect very early on and we knew that the 2-D version was our favorite.”

As the stereoscopic angle was one of the primary hooks of the film in the eyes of certain funders, the hope of proceeding with a 2-D-only version of the film was not an option. With the digital painting and live-action experimentation with ink (as outlined in [Chapter 11](#)) generated and filmed in standard 2-D, creation of the stereoscopic effect for the museum-friendly version came during the film’s compositing phase.

“The black ink stroke was drawn first on a graphics tablet in software that simulates that style of ink, and when it went to the third dimension, I changed the technique. I used an After Effects plug-in called Particular that also simulates this black ink stroke. With that, I could move the key frames in three dimensions using After Effects. This effect is especially visible when the camera moves away; even when watching the 2-D version of the film you can appreciate the sense of 3-D, more and more.”

As the film is composited on multiple layers, the 3-D capabilities of After Effects made the creation of elaborate stereoscopic sections of the film a relatively straightforward

* The type of screen that doesn’t require the use of glasses, using lenticular technology to present two (out of five or more) separate images to each eye, so as to be viewed from multiple angles.

affair. On top of this, having the footage comprised of multiple, separately-filmed segments allowed for it to be “bent” as it progressed, heightening the level of dimensionality beyond what would otherwise be a series of flat planes (Figure 16.2).

To generate a 3-D effect when it comes to film, at least two images are required, from two slightly different perspectives approximate to the distance between the eyes of the viewer. For live-action productions, this is achieved by two simultaneous cameras filming side by side, with a similar setup for stop-motion projects; given the immobility of a stop-motion puppet once posed, a variant on this setup can be achieved by a single camera “stepper” rig that can allow a single camera to shoot each frame twice, adjusting its position accordingly. When it comes to digital animation, this effect is relatively easy to replicate, whether through a self-made rig (as we’ll learn about shortly, in the case of Florian Werzinski), plug-ins, scripts, or built-in software functionality.

For the purposes of an autostereoscopic projection, however, at least five different renders of the film from incrementally different angles are required, as was the case for *Virtuos Virtuell*’s museum screening. Though the viewer will still only see one angle per eye, the broader range of perspectives allows the film to be more easily viewed from each side of the screen, rather than simply face-on.

Beyond the exhibition itself was the film’s broader festival appeal, although it’s interesting to note that, while festivals that specialized in 3-D projection would grant the film special consideration, the 2-D alternative was far from a limiting factor.

“I found that there were only a few festivals that show 3-D films (such as KLIK! Amsterdam International Animation Festival), so most festivals haven’t shown *Virtuos Virtuell* stereoscopically; they have shown the 2-D version (Figure 16.3). I’m not sure that all these festival directors even know that a stereoscopic version exists! When you enter a film into a festival, you have to choose 3-D or 2-D on the online entry form; in a lot of cases, it can only be one.”

With over 180 official selections under its belt, the greater percentage being 2-D projections, it’s clear that the film’s success would never have hinged on 3-D as a selling point.

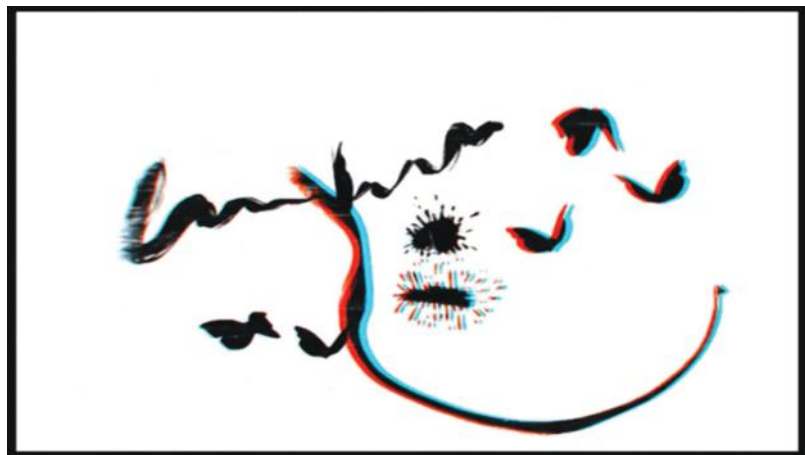


Figure 16.2

Virtuos Virtuell Stereoscopic test footage. (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach.)



Figure 16.3

Still from *Virtuos Virtuell* (Dir. Thomas Stellmach and Maja Oschmann). (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach, ©2013.)

Though having a stereoscopic version of the film arguably served to increase its visibility and appeal to a certain degree (amongst the film's major awards were Best 3D Animation at the Barcelona 3D Film and Music Fest), for Thomas and Maja, the 2-D incarnation of *Virtuos Virtuell* remains their preferred version.

“Of course, people are curious to see the stereoscopic version, but I like to say that I prefer the 2-D version because the audience *shouldn't* get the whole, clear picture. They should have questions about how the film was made.

“In my opinion, stereoscopy is not really necessary, because after 10 minutes or so, you forget that the 3-D effect is even there. In some cases, they use it very well for special effects, which can make sense, for the story—*The Walk* (Dir. Robert Zemeckis, 2015), for example, or *Gravity* (Dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2013). I used it very subtly in *Virtuos Virtuell*, which I think people prefer. It's not present at the beginning; it appears more and more throughout. For dramatic aspects of the film, it becomes more three-dimensional suddenly, and at the end, it goes back to the flat plane, to the ‘paper,’ you could say.”

An Interview with Filmmaking Collective The Outpost

The Outpost* is a collective of animation and visual effects artists based out of Utrecht in The Netherlands, consisting of Koen de Mol, Olivier Ballast, and Rick Franssen. Their sense of visual sophistication and strong work dynamic began when they first came together at Utrecht's HKU University of the Arts. Their first stereoscopically produced

* <http://theoutpost.nl>

collaborative project *Endtrip* (2013) boasts a spectacular degree of visual richness in its first-person portrayal of a young woman's drug overdose (Figure 16.4). Beginning in live-action point of view (POV), the woman's perspective gradually retreats inside her own body, where an array of hypnagogic computer-generated (CG) visuals are introduced. Combining photorealism (to depict organic forms such as organs, appendages, anatomical canals) with pure CG abstraction, *Endtrip* is a brief but powerful piece from which the group have forged an already strong career. The effectiveness of the film, carried through by the illusion of a constant backward motion, translates to standard 2-D viewing, but in its stereoscopic form, it truly shines. Here we will learn more about the film's origins, execution, and reception, along with some of the practical concerns that presented themselves along the way.

First, can you explain how the team came to work together and, by extension, how the project itself first came about?

“Before the actual production, we started with a bigger group in which everyone still had to orientate on what they actually wanted to do for their graduation piece. Even though we come from a CG background, some of us actually graduated as concept artists, not having to do anything with animation. There were multiple ideas for stories from everyone, and slowly but surely, some people figured out what they wanted to do, whether it be something completely different or to make a film all by themselves. The three of us wanted to do something surrealistic and confronting, something that would shock our audience. The next big question then became ‘how?’

“For several weeks, we started gathering different ideas, which we pitched to each other until finally we knew we had a subject that would get everyone going: a visualization of a drug trip that would turn into a bad trip. Even for people that have never done drugs, this seemed interesting, as it gives the audience our interpretation of what it might look like” (Figure 16.5).

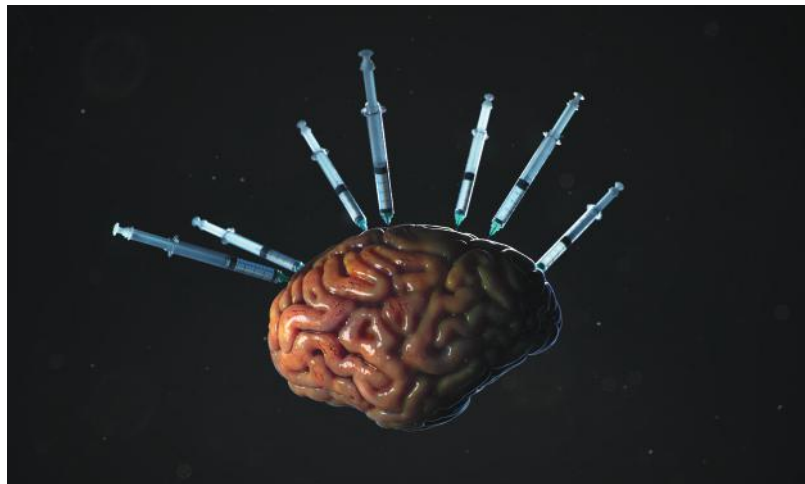


Figure 16.4

Concept visual for *Endtrip*. (Courtesy of The Outpost, ©2013.)

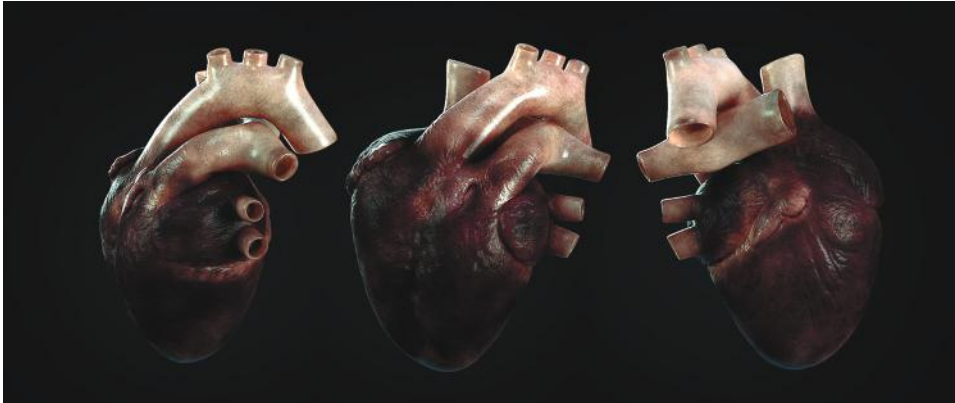


Figure 16.5
Concept visual for *Endtrip*. (Courtesy of The Outpost, ©2013.)

With your respective backgrounds, how did you communicate ideas back and forth during the film’s production?

“We all had different views on the subject, which meant having lots of discussions about it. We had multiple brainstorming sessions a week to come up with fresh ideas. That actually made both the process and the film quite dynamic, up to the point where we even changed the story in a pretty significant way during production. We knew the storyline would be multi-interpretable, but the three of us had to understand what we ourselves wanted to communicate in the film. How the audience interprets the film is up to them, which is what makes it interesting to have discussions about the subject.”

Can you break down the overall division of labor within the production—did any of the team have particular skill sets they brought to the project, for example?

“When we started with the project, there was no clear division; everyone did what needed to be done and what made them enthusiastic. As the project moved along, it became clearer what each of our strengths were. For example, we all took on the role of director, which sometimes made it difficult to make decisions. Of course, in every production, skill sets overlap and you help each other wherever you can. Next to that, we all had different roles in the production. Koen was mostly doing the compositing, stereoscopic setups, and solving technical problems. Rick was responsible for the animations and simulations. Olivier did art direction, modeling/sculpting/texturing, and lighting the scenes.”

How long did the production last, in total?

“Preproduction—which meant getting our concept, artwork, and storyline straight—lasted about 6 weeks. The production lasted for about 4–5 months, including postproduction. We always tried to get the postproduction of each scene done as soon as they were rendered, while in the meantime, the other members of the team would work on the next scenes. It’s fair to say the whole production lasted about 7 months” (Figure 16.6).

In terms of the visualization, can you break down the film’s planning/preproduction in so far as how you were able to later stay on top of such a visually complex series of images?

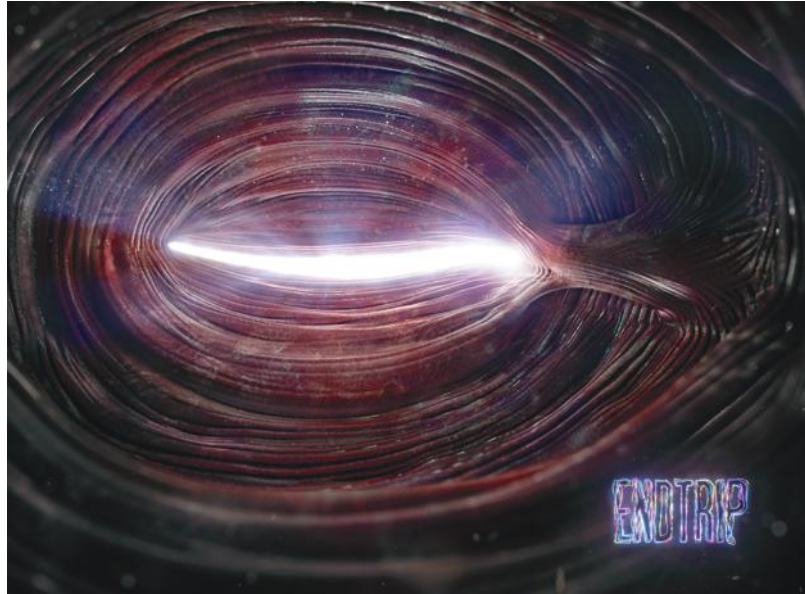


Figure 16.6

Endtrip poster. (Courtesy of The Outpost, ©2013.)

“The planning of the film would change frequently, which had to do with a few decisions we made during the project, one of which was the decision to make it stereoscopic. We made this choice a few months into the production, meaning we had to make a few changes visually and in the storyline, because the technique requires changes in the way we move throughout the scenes. After we got our first storyline straight, we started artwork to complement our concept. When we had our concept approved, we started the storyboard and animatic, which took quite some time to get the way we wanted. The single-camera movement made it pretty hard to connect and time the scenes in such a way the viewers could create any type of storyline for themselves. For every scene in the animatic we approved, there was concept art to complement it, so as to give us a way to visualize the trip. We constantly build on top of each other’s work, so there was always work to be done.”

On that point, how did you come up with the visual ideas themselves? Was there a lot of research into the mechanics of the mind when under the influence/near death and so forth?

“We actually researched a lot, from reading people experiences, watching lots of different films about life/death/drugs, and watching art created by people under the influence of different kinds of drugs. We filtered it down to what were, in our opinion, the most intriguing ways to look at the subject.”

The film begins in live action before the CG sequence comes in to play; why did you choose to have this mixed-media approach, and do you feel it makes the film more engaging?

“The live-action part was something in which we decided would make the experience more realistic for the audience. It gave us a status quo with which people can identify, after which they undergo the surrealistic experience of a trip, something most people have never gone through” (Figure 16.7).

What brought about the decision to have the film be stereoscopic?

“Our goal was to create a film that would be as immersive as possible—that explains the live-action opening and the single camera shot that moves backwards throughout. We learned that having a sense of depth would add a lot to this immersive experience. When a person undergoes a drug trip, they do not experience it as a two-dimensional film playing in front of their eyes. This way, the audience can actually partake in this newly created world. We hoped that the use of stereoscopy would bring the viewer closer to the film and make it a less passive experience.”

Did HKU as a university have any role in the decision to approach the film in this way?

“Our teachers advised that stereoscopic would be an interesting technique to use and a way of enhancing the immersive experience of the story. We feel it has done exactly that. The school gave us the opportunity to be put in touch with experienced people and equipment.”

Were there stereoscopic considerations in place during preproduction, idea generation, and shot planning, or was that largely down to the software itself?

“At first, it wasn’t part of our production at all. We decided quite a long way into the production to make the film stereoscopic. That also meant doing a lot of work again, revisiting shots and the storyline. We had to learn the technique in a short amount of time to keep our planning straight.

“We started out as complete newbies to stereoscopy, which meant we had to learn a lot of new techniques in a very short amount of time. We were very lucky to have an experienced stereographer who explained most of the dos and don’ts. At first, we did not have access to a 3-D TV or projector, so we went old school and used anaglyph glasses—this actually worked surprising well. The next step was to acquire a 3-D TV and test out the first couple of shots. At that moment, the limitation of the stereoscopy became clearer,



Figure 16.7

Still from *Endtrip* (Dir. The Outpost). (Courtesy of The Outpost, ©2013.)

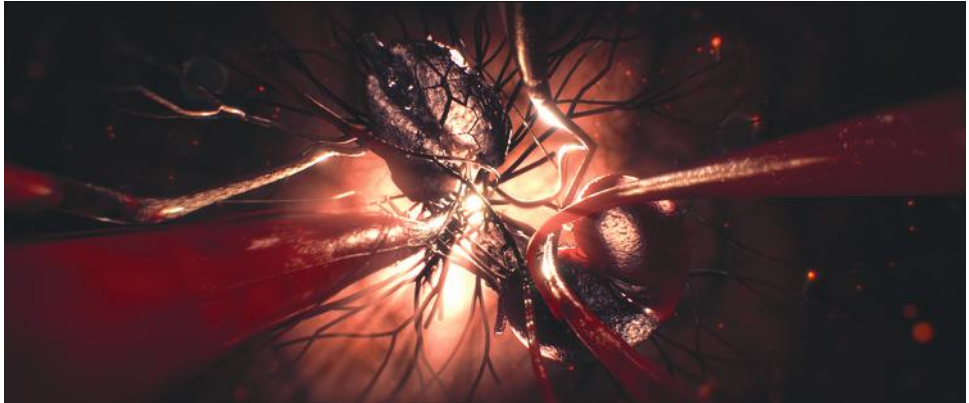


Figure 16.8

Still from *Endtrip* (Dir. The Outpost). (Courtesy of The Outpost, ©2013.)

with ghosting* becoming the biggest issue. We soon learned tricks to deal with these problems, and within no time, it became an integrated part of the pipeline. The final stage of stereoscopic postproduction consisted of several test screenings in a theater, and based on those, we made several final tweaks” (Figure 16.8).

How have you found audience’s reactions to the use of stereoscopy?

“People have reacted in a very positive way. We think it has to do with the fact that most people have never seen stereoscopy pushed to its limit. Most movies in cinemas don’t push the effect of stereoscopy very far, because some viewers are sensitive to the effects. It can result in headaches, which of course cinemas don’t want their audience to suffer from after watching a 90-minute movie. Because our film is relatively short, we can push the effect much further.”

From your perspectives, has there been any change in audience’s attitudes to 3-D films in the few years since the film was originally released?

“We think it has become a well-integrated part of today’s cinema experience, but not enough experimentation is being done. It has become quite a generic and bland addition which most movies could easily do without.”

Do any of you have any personal feelings about the use of stereoscopy, and are there any types of film in particular you feel it is best suited to (e.g., certain genres, animation over live action, experimental projects over narrative, etc.)?

“It’s probably best suited to short film experiences, which can be performances, theme park rides, and of course, short films. The technique definitely adds to the film but has to be pushed further to add to the storyline/experience of the film. For example, art-house movies with a slow-paced narrative would have no reason to use the technique” (Figure 16.9).

One assumes that the preferred viewing experience of the film is in 3-D; do you feel it is still successful as a film when viewed as a 2-D projection?

“The answer to that question is an easy one. After we finished the movie, we didn’t really know what to think of it. That’s probably not so weird when you know that if you work on

* An unintended side effect where one eye is able to pick up on visual material intended for the other.

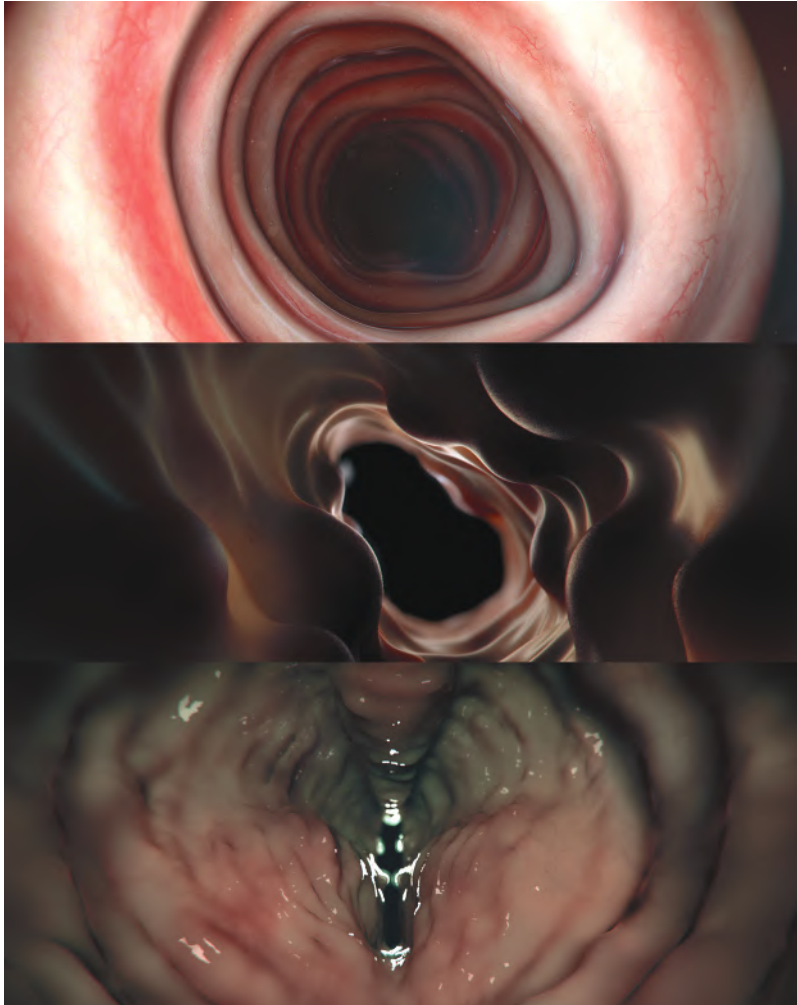


Figure 16.9

Stills from *Endtrip* (Dir. The Outpost)—photorealistic “tunnels” evocative of organic, anatomical canals significantly heighten the film’s surreal intensity. (Courtesy of The Outpost, ©2013.)

something for so long, you become blind to the qualities of your own work. Eventually, we decided to post it on Vimeo and make a list of websites to promote the film. After 2 days, the 2-D version of the film got 20,000 hits and became a Staff Pick, after which it went viral. Right now, the film has been viewed over 700,000 times, so it’s safe to say that the 2-D experience is definitely successful even though we think the 3-D stereo version is better.”

From critical and audience feedback you have experienced firsthand, what do you feel it is about the film that has resonated so positively with people?

“The vibe and confronting setting of the film. We start out by sort of confusing the viewer, letting them think about the situation so as to make it personal. The opening



Figure 16.10

Still from *Endtrip* (Dir. The Outpost). (Courtesy of The Outpost, ©2013.)

scenario is everyone’s nightmare and probably one of the reasons a lot of people don’t even want to think about taking drugs: losing control. Also, the backwards camera movement makes it scary as far as what to expect next. It is our visualization of a trip a lot of people have never experienced, yet it triggers everyone’s interest on what it might look like. Of course, the film is very subjective to our imagination, but isn’t that the case with every film ever created? It also leaves the viewer with a lot of questions that only they themselves can answer.”

Can you explain the ways in which the completion and reception of this film has been beneficial to your careers and visibility?

“I think it kick-started our teamwork. We know exactly what to expect from one another, which helps in building a team. Everyone has strong points and weaknesses that complement each other. After the film, we started freelancing and hiring one another whenever we could. A few months after graduating, it made us decide to get together and work alongside each other. Our cooperation has been successful enough to start a 3-D animation studio that we still run successfully today. The Outpost was born in 2014, and we have had the honor to work on great projects with a lot of talented people” (Figure 16.10).

Along for the Ride

There are, of course, instances where the use of stereoscopy can be an unashamed driving force of a film’s conception and execution. Once such film would be *Luigis’ Pizzaride 3D*, a 2011 “stereoscopic motionride movie” directed by Florian Werzinski and produced at Nuremburg university Technische Hochschule Nürnberg Georg Simon Ohm. Serving in many respects as a technical showcase, a trait more common in student film than independent animation as a whole, the short fully embraces stereoscopic immersiveness as the audience accompanies the pizza delivery driver of its title on a frantic journey to the customer’s location. The main impetus for making a film of this nature came, as Florian notes, from his occupation at the time.

“When I was a student, I worked in a 3-D cinema, the type where the seats move. My job involved giving out the glasses, showing around six films every shift, so I spent a lot of time in the projectionist’s room. That may have been the main thing that made me think about doing a motion-ride movie as my university diploma film. So *Luigis’ Pizzaride* was inspired by my job (Figure 16.11).

“When I finished school, I already knew that I wanted to make something with animation, but I was not clear how and what. Then I studied a design course where you also learned about photography, websites, typography—everything that’s related to design. There was just one animation course that was part of the bigger program.”

As part of the university process in Germany, a 6-month internship period was required to supplement Florian’s animation studies. This time was spent accruing valuable experience and skills at Munich-based visual effects company, Scanline VFX. With a solid foundation knowledge of CG processes under his belt, Florian endeavored to take on *Luigis’ Pizzaride* as a stereoscopic production from the start, encouraged in part by the university itself (Figure 16.12).

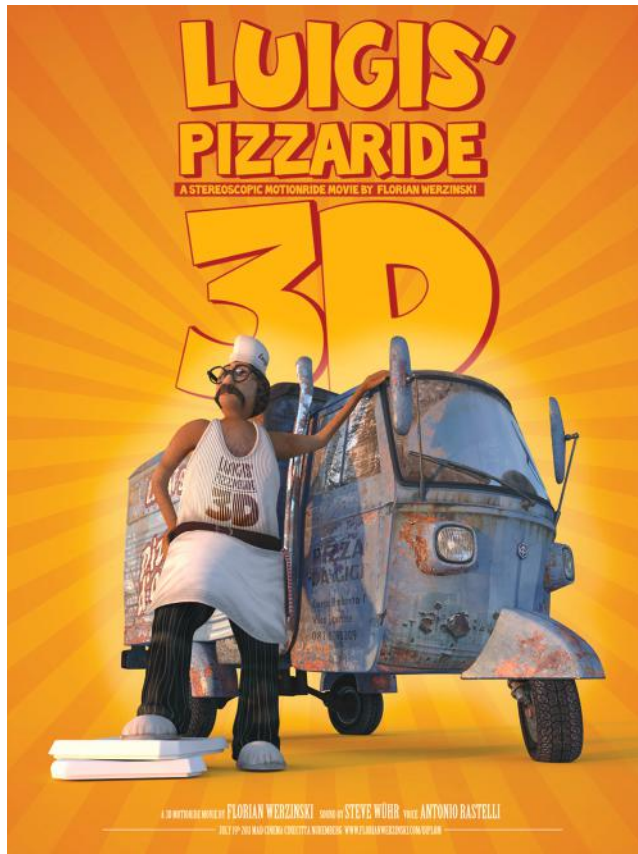


Figure 16.11

Luigis’ Pizzaride poster. (Courtesy of Florian Werzinski, ©2011.)



Figure 16.12

Still from *Luigi's Pizzaride* (Dir. Florian Werzinski)—visiting Italy in person would contribute to the authenticity of the film's eventual design and environment. (Courtesy of Florian Werzinski, ©2011.)

“There was one professor in particular who is also an art director at a famous German company; he encouraged me to do a 3-D movie. Most other people would say, ‘Oh no, don’t do it; it’s too much work; you need more render power and more time; everything is more difficult.’ But for me, it was interesting.”

Beginning with a series of tests, initially just through a combination of rudimentary CG sequences rendered out to be viewed with traditional red-and-green anaglyph glasses, the immersive potential of Florian’s film idea grew in appeal as something he was keen to explore in more detail. What elevates the film beyond the perceived gimmickry of 3-D is that, at its core, the animation, timing, and approach to cinematography are very well observed, paying tribute to all manner of cinematic chase sequences. Also, contributing to the film’s immersiveness, is the attention to detail when it comes to the environment itself, owed to Florian going the extra mile and visiting Italy, where the film is set, to establish a firsthand visual frame of reference.

“I’ve always liked the approach of going outside, not just sitting in front of a computer. You have to see the world to make your movies a little bit more interesting. There are many things that can generate new ideas for the film itself, all the small details that make the film a little bit more authentic, so I went to Italy for roughly 10 days and shot a lot of pictures. I used them to help with the design of the movie. Even if it doesn’t look *real*, it feels like Italy, a little bit, and that was the aim. So I think it’s a great thing to go somewhere new and experience it for a while.”

The approach to the stereoscopy itself was largely down to trial and error. As a result, Florian concedes that certain shots and visual approaches seen in *Luigi's Pizzaride* would not necessarily pass muster with a professional visual effects (VFX) studio production.

While these potential issues, largely regarding the human eye's tolerance for how far the illusion of depth can be pushed, were not especially obvious during production, when playback was only possible on monitors, an early screening in a 3-D cinema environment brought them to light.

“In the years since I made *Luigis' Pizzaride*, having already made another film, I know a bit more about the various perception problems of space and distance between the screen and the viewer. At that time, I didn't care too much about that. But I learned that you have to be more careful if you're making a film for the cinema screen rather than just a computer monitor; it tends to be too strong if you make the eye distance more than a certain number of pixels apart. So now, I would be more careful with that side of things.”

Planning out the production with the knowledge taken from his Scanline VFX internship, Florian put together *Luigis' Pizzaride* over the course of 1 year, with the first 6 months dedicated to research, preproduction, and the animatic. The remainder of the year, he devoted to the elaborate production of the film itself, working 8–10 hours every workday until its completion. The film was created entirely using 3D Studio Max, with all areas of production (save for voice acting and sound design) taken on by Florian, from character design, texturing, sets, and lighting to the animation itself (Figure 16.13).

“I like to work on my own, because then I'm independent; I can make decisions very fast and don't have to discuss too much about the whole technical pipeline. But it also tends to be very hard because you have to do everything on your own!”

Determining the best way to create successful stereoscopic renders of each shot also fell on Florian's shoulders. While stereoscopic workflows for 3D Studio Max would eventually come into effect, at the time of making the film, the director took his own approach to a



Figure 16.13

Luigis' Pizzaride stereoscopic animatic still. (Courtesy of Florian Werzinski, ©2011.)

simple yet robust 3-D camera rig, replicating what he had learned from literature on the subject.

“I built something that replicated a stereoscopic camera rig that I basically used in every shot—that was all, just a few cameras linked together. It’s pretty fail-safe because it’s so simple. Something more fancy can lead to problems afterwards, when it comes to the rendering, so the fact that I built it by myself meant it worked very well for my purposes” (Figure 16.14).

The use of stereoscopy in a film is also a major consideration when planning out each shot, ultimately determining the degree to which the camera work will play a part in the action. The interplay between camera movement and character animation is especially crucial for the POV sequences in which the audience is taken on the journey from inside the vehicles. By contrast, the composition of static camera shots needs to be well thought through so as to not disrupt the action.

“Basically, I just tried things out, whatever looked most interesting or impressive to me. I’m 100% sure there are a few shots which are wrong or would not be allowed in a real studio environment, but for me, it was just about trying out what looked best, more than the story or the dramaturgy.”

Considering these small issues, the response to the film was consistently positive, perhaps bolstered by the recent resurgence stereoscopic cinema had experienced at the time. Following a successful premiere at the very cinema that had inspired Florian to make the film, *Luigis’ Pizzaride* attracted some significant attention during its festival run (Figure 16.15).

“It was a really great response, and there was also a lot of interest from TV companies who wanted to use the film to demonstrate the 3-D capabilities of their product. There were also some cinemas and film distributors, but that side of things was always very difficult because it’s not an especially commercial project.”

On top of this visibility, the film would win several awards, including Best Stereo-3D Production at Germany’s high-profile animago conference in 2011, and Best Use of



Figure 16.14

Still from *Luigis’ Pizzaride* (Dir. Florian Werzinski). (Courtesy of Florian Werzinski, ©2011.)



Figure 16.15

Still from *Luigi's Pizzaride* (Dir. Florian Werzinski). (Courtesy of Florian Werzinski, ©2011.)

Stereoscopy at Amsterdam's KLIK! International animation Festival 2012. A contributing factor to this success, Florian attributes to the period of hype that surrounded 3-D cinema's aforementioned resurgence, though this has paved the way for a new and potentially exciting era of independent filmmaking.

"I think it's not so much stereoscopy; it's more about the immersion factor itself. Now there are new projects with virtual reality glasses, which is all very interesting for me, but also, I have to look at how I earn money, and I have to do all the normal work as a 3-D artist. I can't spend too much time in making new projects on my own or making a new movie, but sooner or later, I will have to do something new again. I'm curious how it will all develop, but as for stereoscopic films themselves, we will see. There are still a lot of mainstream movies out that use it, but when it comes to the home cinema sector, it doesn't seem to have worked out like the people expected."



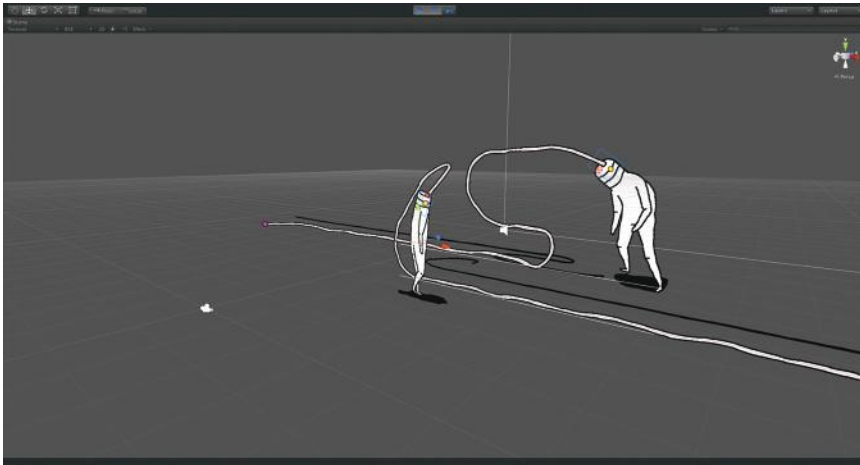
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17

Audience Interaction



Constructing the interactive *PLUG & PLAY* app in Unity. (Courtesy of Michael Frei.)

It's often been pointed out that Orwell's vision in his 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* of an interconnected society without privacy has indeed panned out, but the role of calculating governmental forces drumming a hive-mind mentality into us is not the cause, having taken a backseat to our newly developed need to be visible to the world. Mankind, as it

turns out, is far less collectively at ease when not being seen than when we're screaming, "Look at us!" Orwell evidently didn't predict the deep-seated emotional comfort that high numbers of vlog subscribers and social media followers would induce, the near-sighted fool.

This state of affairs has bled into how we engage with the world around us, to the point where entertainment sometimes just isn't entertaining enough. A night in watching television rarely goes without by a session of pithy, hashtag-accompanied editorializing over social media. As smokers might fidget in a conversational scenario where they're unable to light up, the rest of the world does likewise when it's socially indecorous to reach for their phone as it temptingly vibrates with news of how many "likes" their pithy editorial remark has received. Our brains—or simply our fingers—have been reconditioned, it seems, to be constantly occupied, and alongside the exponential rise of video games, from hyperreal, decade-spanning franchises to cutesy, faddish ephemera, is an interesting and relatively new trend within animation itself—interactive storytelling.

Interactive media may have hit a stride within most of our lifetimes—some of you readers may even have muddy, half-buried memories of the long-long-ago, a troubling era before every household had even a dial-up connection to the internet. Nowadays, however, digital interactivity has gone to the other extreme, becoming a component of pretty much every child's cognitive development; there's something vaguely eerie about seeing a drooling infant intuitively know exactly how to swipe at a tablet browser to get to the next *Morph* episode, but that appears to be where we're at. We may be witnessing the dawn of a new evolutionary stage, in which being attuned to technology in such a way advances our entire species; or it may be that our utter dependence on constant stimuli via our smartphones will in fact become a worldwide pandemic of crippling addiction that will lead to our utter annihilation as a species. Tomato, tom-ah-to, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. In the meantime, how do we take advantage of it as animators?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the world of independent game development has proved one of the most ideal bedfellows. In many respects, there is a sense of mutual intent, to creatively appeal to a niche (while potentially voluminous) audience and to serve as a platform to showcase ability, work ethic, and talent to potential employers.

Adventurous Spirit

One happy resurgence has been that of the point-and-click adventure game. Developing from entirely text-based, choose-your-own-adventure-esque journeys going as far back as the late 1970s, increasing graphics capabilities soon allowed for a visual element, initially just digital illustrations in games such as *Wizard and the Princess* (1980) and then, over time, becoming interactive computer environments, set apart from platformers or shoot-'em-ups in that the characters are less controlled than puppeteered—point to where you want your protagonist to go, or what object you want him/her to interact with; click to make it happen; and let the inevitable surge of godlike power go to your head as you watch events play out. In that respect, it's like a much faster and more instantly gratifying version of the animation process itself.

I'm sure that plenty of you are familiar with the type of game I mean. Having been established by video game pioneers Ken and Roberta Williams, development companies such as LucasArts powered the medium forward, from its blocky roots with games like

Maniac Mansion (1987) to something of an early-to-mid-1990s heyday with the less-blocky entries *Sam and Max Hit the Road*, *Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle* (1993), and the long-running *Monkey Island* series (1990–2010). These games, at the time, were incredibly sophisticated and the closest approximation gamers could get to a fully-interactive cartoon. That they had teams of highly skilled animators taking care to craft wonderful instances of classical, physical comedy instead of the standard, generic sprite animation one expected from games at the time helped sell the experience enormously, not to mention the first major inclusions of wittily scripted voice acting. Though 2-D animation soon fell by the wayside in favor of 3-D polygonal graphics, for a time, there was quite a significant ripple effect in game animation—Doug TenNapel’s *Earthworm Jim* (1995) and Michel Ansel’s *Rayman* (1995) applying similar degrees of visual brilliance to platformers. Indeed, even more recent entries in the video game world such as *World of Goo* (2008) the *Angry Birds* series (2009 onward) and recent *Rayman* titles *Rayman Origins* (2011) and *Rayman Legends* (2013) still prove how effective modern approaches to 2-D animation can be when combined with today’s high-definition (HD) gaming capabilities.

The independent scene has similarly been influenced by this era, with *Earthworm Jim* creator Doug TenNapel himself having taken advantage of its comparative freedoms. In 1995, shortly after the release of *Earthworm Jim 2*, his last professional involvement with the franchise, Doug collaborated with several *Jim* talents on a point-and-click adventure game for the now-defunct DreamWorks Interactive, then in its infancy. The result was *The Neverhood*, a critical success and cult classic that captured the same bizarre and inventive energy of *Earthworm Jim* in a Plasticine animated environment.

While Doug’s career has gone on to span all manner of creative outlets, including graphic novels for both young and general audiences, two *Neverhood* sequels, and television series such as *Catscratch* (Nickelodeon) and *VeggieTales in the House* (Netflix), his skills as an artist were largely self-taught, something he remains in two minds about.

“There’s a good side and a bad side to do it. The *bad* side of self-teaching was that I never learned the official principles that would really give me the tools and skills to get truly better and transcend my mediocrity. So I never got those skills, early on. The *good* side of it is I’m very much a self-starter; I never need someone else’s permission to do things; I’m very into just creating my own thing and going for it, even if I’m not that good at it. The ‘easy’ path of actually learning the official way to do it just seems so difficult to me, but I have the experience and the drive, and I usually get pretty far on that. Doing something poorly is better than having done something not at all, because you were waiting for perfection.”

In spite of this, *The Neverhood*, whose universe harkened back to Plasticine constructs of Doug’s as far back as the late 1980s, boasted a story and mythology dense enough to equate with that of film or series production. In the mid-1990s, the only means of producing such a project would be within a professional studio environment. With the recent changes to the landscape of funding alongside advances in animation and interactive production, however, the idea of a spiritual* *Neverhood* follow-up became increasingly tenable. As with its spiritual predecessor, inspiration came from an idea that had been marinating a good long while.

* As with *Earthworm Jim*, the rights to *The Neverhood* remain out of Doug’s hands, and so a direct follow-up would not be a legally viable proposition.

“I was working on *Armikrog* for 15 years. It wasn’t going to be a game; it was going to be a comic book or a movie or something weird (Figure 17.1). It didn’t even have Tommynaut as the lead character; it was a bunch of weird characters more like Beak-Beak, a whole civilization of blind birds and animals. You see some of those show up in *The Neverhood* too, so it’s kind of been my style to work with those shapes. Even when I draw them, they look like they’re made of clay. I never thought they’d have to be made of clay in the execution; they could have been drawings.”

Two of Doug’s *Neverhood* collaborators, Mike Dietz and Ed Schofield, had started Pencil Test Studios in 2009, branching out from their established careers as game designers and animators for major studios the likes of Heavy Iron. After several years of independent contracting, circumstances allowed for another opportunity to collaborate on a project with Doug before closing their doors. The world of *Armikrog* was presented to Mike and Ed through character write-ups and rough sketches. Even at the earliest stage, it was crucial to fully develop the universe of the game as one would a television show or film—even more so considering the immersive nature of the story as it would unfold. Without studio funding or creative limitations, the independent approach to *Armikrog* meant that the sky was the limit (Figure 17.2).

“*Armikrog* has a big mystery and a big backstory; it has a really deep, really funky mythology to it, because nobody was there to tell us ‘no,’ so it was kind of our opportunity to show games what creativity looks like. I think gaming should be a lot farther along than it is, certainly at least with independent games—I mean, why not? So I presented a few of the characters and the main ideas, I asked Mike and Ed what they thought of the palettes, and we went back and forth. To me, the biggest controversy was that Tommynaut’s eyes are black, solid spheres. We hadn’t seen that on any other character before, because usually, I would do the carved eyes in Klaymen (the protagonist of *The Neverhood*), and before that



Figure 17.1
Armikrog gameplay footage. (Courtesy of Armikrog, ©2015.)

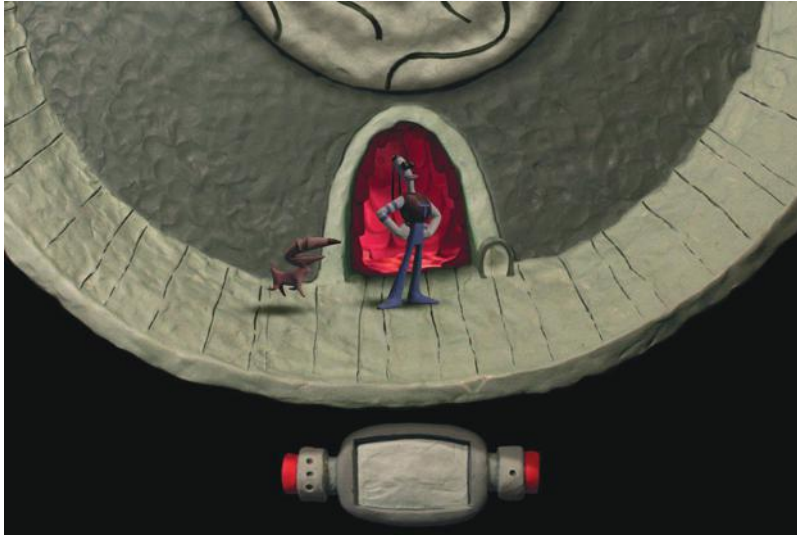


Figure 17.2

Armikrog gameplay footage. (Courtesy of Armikrog, ©2015.)

on *Earthworm Jim* with the big, bulging, Tex Avery eyes. I didn't know if we could pull that off, so I did a couple of drawings for Mike demonstrating how we'd mold the clay to look like he's looking right, looking left, surprised, eyes closed and stuff."

Next up was scripting the introductory movie the team would present to not just their intended audience but also potential funders. In terms of division of labor, Mike and Ed took the reins on the crowdfunding campaign itself, something Doug was happy to take a back seat on following his own *Sketchbook Archives* campaign a year previously. Instead, Doug focused his energies on the game design itself, the approach taken being a balance of new and old.

"We were loosely trying to fit it within the *Neverhood* game mechanic of point-and-click adventure, mostly because that was the easiest thing to do that would show off our animation. So we shot that intro movie over a period of about a month; I flew out to Colorado Springs for about 2 weeks to pencil test and build the sets and work on the ideas. We shot it, and it just looked crazy, but there was always just that nagging thing in all of our guts of *How much are we just gonna copy The Neverhood?* I really kept veering away from that, as I really wanted to create something new. I made *The Neverhood*, so I knew that the style was going to be similar to it, but I didn't want to get caught copying ourselves. Even when you use the same people, it would be easy to just copy *The Neverhood* and do a knockoff—that just is not in my vocabulary, if you know where I come from. That's just not how I do it."

Writing for a short film is hard enough, and writing for a feature is a tremendously ambitious undertaking. Writing for an interactive story, with all its potential variables and protracted length, is an entirely different kettle of fish.

"The story has to be way more editable. Mike and Ed did a lot of editing and a lot of the writing on their own. They don't need to call me to tell me a line's not working out if

they've changed the gameplay and need a different line instead; they'll just write that line up and go for it."

A far more open-ended approach is required when compared to conventional narrative storytelling, extending not just to elaborate game design bibles but also to physical mock-ups of the universe itself. Given the proposed mechanics of the game, the logistics of the story and the action required testing with construction aids built in cardboard on Doug's living room table.

"All those buildings that you see in the film had cardboard representations—and we were filming it all, so a really basic box would represent a room. In *Neverhood*, all the rooms were fixed, whereas in *Armikrog*, you can move some of the rooms around to change the way the puzzles connect, so it's like a puzzle in a puzzle, loosely. Then I wanted the rooms to feel real visual and big, so they needed to clunk about and move on the spot (Figure 17.3). We ended up cutting a lot of those features out, just for time, but that was what I was trying to pull off, on my living room table. Other stuff that we designed that was a little easier to pull off went in. But we always overdesign our games; in *Neverhood*, we designed at least another third or two-thirds that we cut out.

"So once the game structure's there in the design, I did watercolors of each room to show what the design might be and how it corresponds to the outside puzzle; there's a lot of inside–outside stuff, mostly inside."

The final stage was polishing off the story with consideration toward the vastness of the mythology Doug had established. While the game itself, for all its intricacies, still conforms to the intuitive three-act structure discussed in [Chapter 2](#), contained within is a deeply considered history that, when explored, makes greater sense of some of the more bizarre elements and character motivations the player is presented with.



Figure 17.3

Armikrog gameplay footage. (Courtesy of Armikrog, ©2015.)

One thing that differentiates an established creative who has made the move into the independent realm from those who've always operated within it is how willing the established fan base will be to follow. Although there are greatly diminished opportunities for funding and distribution, in a way, the comparative anonymity of those who have always been independent animators is a blessing in so much as it doesn't come with the baggage of fans mired in the past. Although the artistic style of *Armikrog* is similar enough to Doug's earlier projects, simply not replicating a tried and tested formula 100% can be enough to alienate the more entitled contingent of a fan base.

"Many of them are saying it doesn't seem like *The Neverhood*, so they don't like it. They just point out all the differences. I get their concern, because they were raised on *The Neverhood*, though I had experienced the same thing when making that game in that it was completely different to *Earthworm Jim*. Different genre, different everything, and a whole lot of people just wanted us to make them feel the way they did when they were younger, playing that game—but we didn't do that. So I get what they want, that sentimental value, but there's a whole generation of people who were raised on *The Neverhood* who would never have experienced that if we didn't break off from *Earthworm Jim*. Likewise, there'll be a generation raised on *Armikrog* who don't care about *The Neverhood* or *Earthworm Jim*; this will be their experience growing up, later saying, 'I wish you'd do another *Armikrog*!'—guess what's gonna happen next time? I'm gonna let you down!

"I don't want to lose them; I'm not trying to be clever or anything. I just think a new game with a blank slate is an opportunity to really come up with something that isn't just new—you have to give yourself permission to think way outside the box, to come up with something better."

Rumpus Animation, the Bristol-based animation studio whose independent music video work we looked at in [Chapter 5](#), took a similar initiative by drawing upon a property they had incrementally developed over the course of a decade. Bertram Fiddle began life as the titular explorer of Rumpus Creative Director Seb Burnett's MA film *The Films of Bertram Fiddle*, produced at the University of the West of England's Bristol School of Animation years before Rumpus was firmly established ([Figure 17.4](#)). The original film, predominantly serving as a character design and illustration showcase, did not take flight in and of itself, though the hopes of finding a fitting avenue for the character remained.

"I had an idea about making some kind of film based on a Victorian explorer, and over the course of that year, I developed Bertram as the main character. I made a short film where he gets lost on his way to Great Yarmouth and finds himself up in an obscure part of England that no one remembers."

After what Seb dubs the "amazing nonsuccess" of the film, the character was further developed over the course of several, equally unsuccessful ventures, the character kept alive through an online presence. "I'd carried on writing a blog; I think I had a MySpace page for Bertram, things like that, as a means of carrying on writing these snippets from him. So his personality was developing, but then one day, for whatever reason, there was an opportunity to make a web series for the BBC. Joe came round, and I opened up this big chest—my Bertram box—of scraps of paper with ideas on them. We spent ages going through this box of notes and managed to find some ideas we were able to write episodes from."

The BBC web series pitch, though not successful, gave the duo some perspective on who the property might and might not appeal to. With humor deemed "too old" for children, and



Figure 17.4

The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle cover art. (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2014.)

“not smutty enough” for most remaining online avenues catering to the 16- to 24-year-old male audience, it became clear that *Bertram Fiddle* would be a harder sell than anticipated.

“We then considered doing a Kickstarter to fund our own series. We estimated that we’d only need £800 to do a whole series—our budgeting has never been a strong point—so luckily, we didn’t do that. Afterwards, it kicked around for ages; we continued doing other work; I continued writing more *Bertram* stuff; my pile of different ideas and different characters continued to get bigger.”

The universe of *Bertram Fiddle* was further developed during Seb’s participation in *Animation Sans Frontières*, a course that allowed him to develop the project for production, a step that coincided with studio discussions of the possible merits of branching out into interactive work. The culture of self-published apps, books, and games as a way of selling

one's ideas without requiring the assistance or permission of a major broadcaster held significant appeal, especially to a studio with designs on getting a television or web series together. Upon returning from Animation Sans Frontieres, the studio took the initiative to pitch their idea to Starter for 10, a regional funding scheme that had been recently set up to support new creative businesses in the South West. After succeeding in receiving starter funds, Rumpus went on to pitch for additional financial support via Gameslab, a game development fund initiated by the UK-based investment scheme Creative England. After 8 years of the character's incremental development, *The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle* was created (Figures 17.5 and 17.6).

For a character to have survived 8 years of, in blunt terms, rejection only to persevere and finally break through in an interactive medium says something about the character's staying power. While the timing or circumstances were never right for Bertram Fiddle to have his day as a funded short, series, or comic book, certain qualities of the character and his world translated effectively to the independent game world.

"I think the Victorian thing seems to work better for games than animation," suggests Joe.

"There's more of a market," adds Seb. "And also because there's a resurgence in point-and-click games. Yes, when you compare it to *Call of Duty*, then obviously, there's a much bigger audience for games like that than there is for Bertram, but I think audiences enjoyed the humor. Also, because I had spent 8 years coming up with all these different ideas that hadn't quite seen the light of day, I had a whole world ready; we could show huge amounts of backstory and characters."



Figure 17.5

The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle gameplay footage. (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2014.)



Figure 17.6

The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle storyboard excerpts. (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2014.)

Despite being Seb's creation, by association, Bertram and Joe are also well acquainted. "You can answer any question about him because the information is already there. Even I can answer a lot of questions about Bertram. I feel like I know him just because he's been in the background for that long as well."

While the reception of the first game has led to the follow-up entry *A Bleaker Predicklement*, Rumpus have not altogether ruled out other avenues for the character, or even a return to the original proposed web series outings. The game is constructed as such, coded using the game engine Unity, though the assets and animation itself were largely put together in the same way they would be in series production. Naturally, for an animation studio's first time dipping their toe in unknown waters, the interactive component of the story presented plenty of challenges, as Seb attests.

"One was I didn't have a clue what I was doing! There were a lot of technical issues, and also, it was that when you're doing an animation, you have complete control over

the scene, you know exactly what will happen and when, and that's it; it won't change. Whereas when you're making a game, it's much more open-ended; you can set certain things up, but you can't completely control it. You're not making something for an audience; you're making something for someone to play, so that took a while to get my head around. Then games have things like bugs—when we ported it to PC some of the audio files, just vanished, for example; a little animation clip disappeared, so we had to re-set that up. When you've done an animated film, it's finished; you can't go wrong; you're done. But with a game, it never ends!”

As with all independent ventures, much by way of the promotion itself falls to the creators, who were able to ensure a launch on the game distribution platform Steam via an online campaign, as well as a spotlight focus on various online publications such as *Adventure Gamers*. With the increased coverage comes increased demand, though that in itself presents its own issue when considering how many platforms need to be accommodated.

“There's so many different variables—when it comes out on iOS, people ask if it's coming out on Android. Once it's out on Android, people ask when it will be out on PC. Then they'll still complain, because they have a Mac or use Linux. With animation, it tends to come out, and then you can just watch it; you don't put it up on YouTube only for somebody to demand you put it up on Vimeo, or Dailymotion, because they only visit those sites.”

Technical Realities: Trial and Error

Dan Emmerson, technical artist, *The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle*:

“I used to make little games when I was younger, so I could get my mind into that quite mechanical way of thinking, of knowing how to apply loose, arty ways of thinking to the rigid structure you need to make a game. On *The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle*, I learned a lot of things, mostly about the limits of what you can do, but it was fun to try new things (Figure 17.7).

“The title I was given was technical artist, which is generally a kind of catch-all term for bringing the art and the technical side together. We animated everything in Flash first, and then we'd export that into the sprite sheets, which we'd then bring into Unity. We'd then almost have to reanimate again to make sure the frames were in the right order, in the right place, which was quite tedious because, as we were doing everything twice, it took a long time. It was a terrible pipeline, but it more or less worked. We got into the flow of it eventually, but it did mean we had to keep the file sizes down and make everything as compact as possible. If there was a shot or action where Bertram had his arms out really wide, every sprite would be a square containing that image, so we'd have this massive space under his arms; we'd have to figure out a way to make that tie in with another set of sprite sheets, so everything kind of clustered together.

“If we would have animated directly in Unity, we wouldn't have had that problem, but since the studio and most of the freelance animators knew and used Flash, we decided to do it that way. If we'd have done it all in Unity, we wouldn't have gotten as much animation done, and every freelancer we brought in would have needed to be a specialist who knew Unity.

“One of the other problems we have had with doing sprite sheets is that we originally made sprites for the iPad, so when we were porting, we had to try to make things bigger,



Figure 17.7

Technical artist Dan Emmerson works on *The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle* in Unity. (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2014.)

and the artwork isn't as good as it could be. We had to consider memory and optimization, but if we had made them all in Unity, we could have rigged the characters at a larger size. That one bigger, rigged character would have been a lot smaller in file size than the 200 or so sprites we made for the animation itself.

"In terms of organization, interactive production is relatively similar to animation: you need to have folders, you need to know where everything is, because a lot of the game is referencing files where everything has to be in a certain hierarchy. We did spend a good week or two just figuring out how the folders should be laid out and stuff. It is important to be organized, especially if there are a lot of people working on the same project."

Reflection

Looking back on the ambition of taking a short film premise and applying it to the unknown territory of interactive media, Rumpus by and large have a good sense of which lessons they've learned are the most essential.

"Have a plan!" enthuses Dan. "It needs to be a flexible plan, but some kind of plan."

"I must admit, the planning is something I left to the last minute," confesses Seb. "It happens in animation, where you have your last couple of weeks when you get everything finished, address what needs changing, and you do it. With a game, you can't really leave it that long; you need to constantly keep testing and playing; deadlines need to be a lot closer than you might imagine."

"Everything you do, you'll have to learn to spend 2 weeks testing it and making sure it hasn't broken, testing what you've already done, whether it actually works, if it's fun

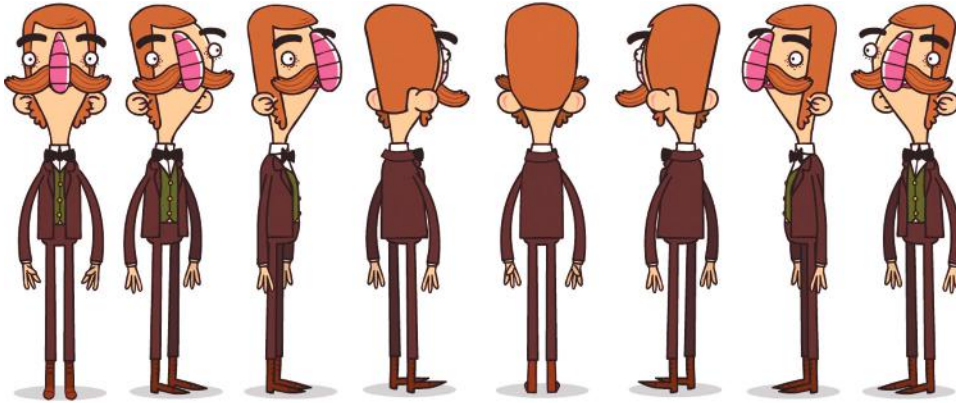


Figure 17.8

"Bertram" character turnaround assets for *The Adventures of Bertram Fiddle*. (Courtesy of Rumpus Animation, ©2014.)

to play, or if it makes sense. This is especially important in an adventure game that's all about puzzles; you have to make sure people can actually figure out how to solve them. A lot of adventure games have an internal logic that only makes sense if you're a developer—that if you combine a rope with a bit of bramble, it will make a pigeon—whereas you would never have thought that unless you already knew it. That's something that took a lot of time, making sure things are in a place where people can find them and you're not just going back and forth too much. But also, you want it to be difficult enough to be a challenge."

One potentially intimidating factor to bear in mind is the cause-and-effect nature of iteration-based storytelling. The type of playable system that *Bertram Fiddle* makes use of demands constant testing to accommodate all the possible story variants as the game is played, as Dan recalls (Figure 17.8). "One of the things we had problems with was accounting for everything the player does, so with animation, you know exactly where the cameras are going to be, what characters will speak at what point, in what order, whereas with this, you have to make sure that something a character said several chapters ago is going to be relevant when someone talks about them in the chapter you're in now, and it hasn't contradicted anything. Every choice you include exponentially doubles however many more options there are of things you have to deal with."

To Defy the Laws of Tradition

A native of Switzerland, Michael Frei's journey into the world of animation is an atypical one. Though not necessarily the most traditional route, it did begin with the skill of visualization when he started an apprenticeship as an architectural draftsman at the age of 15. After 4 years of appreciating the drawn side of that industry, the strict rigidity of straight lines and mathematical precision that construction plans entail, coupled with the complete lack of creative freedom, was ultimately not what he was looking for in a long-term career.

The world of animation existed as a relatively vague concept outside of Disney movies. Michael was exposed to little else at a young age. As his enthusiasm for draftsmanship waned and he began to take on a variety of more experimental projects that involved recording himself as he drew, eventually, a self-started desire to learn more about animation began to manifest itself. Following his apprenticeship, he took the advice of a friend and looked into what options there were to study animation, eventually starting a course at Switzerland's University of Lucerne. The traditional processes and fundamentals of animation, as it turned out, were something of a brick wall themselves (Figure 17.9).

"I was quite disappointed after the first year, because they have this classical approach to animation—start with an idea, do a storyboard, then a character sheet, then do your layout, then key frames, then in-betweens and maybe some color—so it's a very linear process. It appeared to me that it was training to work in the industry, a little bit, so I took a year off after that because I wanted to do my own stuff. Eventually, I had to do something serious, so I studied 1 year in Tallinn, Estonia, which was very different from Switzerland. In Switzerland, we don't really have an animation history; we have French-speaking artists inspired by French animation, we have German-speaking artists who are not influenced by anything in particular, so it's a bit scattered. In Estonia, they have some animation tradition; it's a very small country, but they have an animation scene that's quite big considering the size of the country, with some studios that are still producing quite original work. The people there really do their own thing; they don't care too much. That's where I started to make my very own films."

Michael's fundamental issues with the traditional approach to animation production should be familiar enough to some with an independent bent—being one link in a



Figure 17.9

Early *PLUG & PLAY* concept sketch. (Courtesy of Michael Frei.)

production chain. The idea of having to refine one's area of interest into specialist expertise rang too familiar to the architectural work he had left behind.

"It was clear what I had to do—and it was kind of boring. Although I really like it at some times and find it rewarding to watch when it's working, I'm not a born animator. When I animate something, I try to animate until it's finished, I scan it, and I watch it, and I just do that once. I really hate pencil tests because they ruin that."

The enthusiasm Michael did have toward animation was pretty much entirely limited to independent production and the possibility of creating his own film while being in control of every aspect of it. Investigating the wider independent scene led by proactive individuals and small teams, the idea of figuring out a process that worked best for him and on his own terms held far more appeal than figuring out what to do in the classical animation process.

"Because the process is very predefined in the industry—there's a department for story, a department for animation, and so on—there's too little interest in experimentation, I think. That was also how I got into this interactive approach to animation; it was just, for me, a logical addition to having a vocabulary to tell something through animation. I was not interested in gaming necessarily; it was just one more tool to work with."

Michael's first film, *Not about Us*, was produced as part of a yearlong exchange program at the Estonian Academy of Art, under the mentorship of lauded directorial duo Priit ("his feedback was mostly no feedback") and Olga Pärn. One area of guidance that benefited Michael during this time was the broadening of his scope of influence to include the work of numerous independent Japanese animations, something that helped the development of his own style along.

"I had problems drawing after my apprenticeship because I was so used to constructing everything I was drawing, so when I started animation, where there are character sheets, where every proportion has to be right and where everything has to be on model, I started to construct everything, boxes with a circle inside to make a head; it was ridiculous. In Estonia, with drawn animation, quite often, the drawings are loose and 'ugly.' I tried to just get away from constructing my drawings and just draw a character 50 times a day until I just had a feeling for it."

Even with the new exposure and experience, the imprint 4 years of architectural apprenticing had made on Michael frequently saw him gravitating toward geometry-based design work. While this had no adverse affect on *Not about Us* (the film's bold look and unique energy earned it a modest festival run, winning several awards and was capped off by a Vimeo Staff Pick upon its release, something of a holy trinity for independent films), for Michael's own sense of artistic direction, he was keen to try something new. When it came to his Lucerne graduation film *PLUG & PLAY*, he actively eschewed the formality and parallel lines of his earlier training by creating the entire film on a trackpad, which made any attempt to draw a completely straight line impossible (Figure 17.10). While *Not about Us* had performed well, *PLUG & PLAY*'s response was phenomenal, winning over 15 major awards and screening at over 60 international festivals in its first year of release (the eventual festival count would far exceed 100). A prime example of how abstract, experimental filmmaking can be not just entertaining but witty and subversive, *PLUG & PLAY* takes place in a universe of detached, arguing voices and a society of not-quite-androgynous (some have plug sockets for heads, others have plug pins) characters. What the film doesn't possess in terms of conventional narrative, it makes up for in spades with

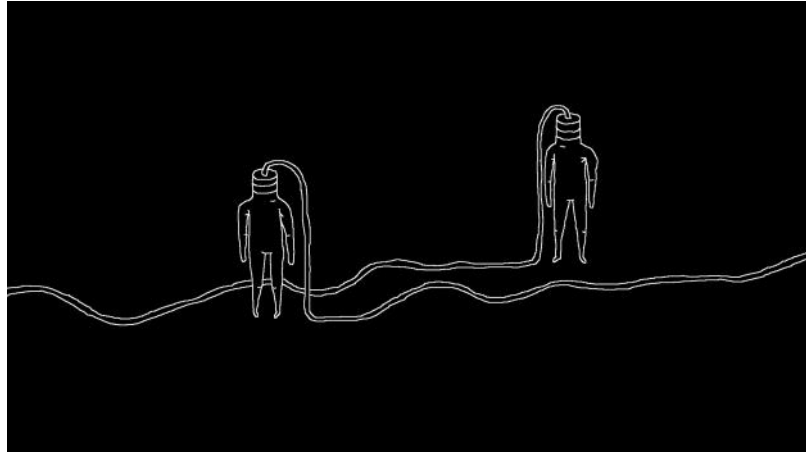


Figure 17.10

Still from *PLUG & PLAY* (Dir. Michael Frei). (Courtesy of Michael Frei, ©2013.)

curiously poignant dialog, well-considered timing, and—a particular rarity in abstract filmmaking—slapstick physical comedy. The interactive potential for *PLUG & PLAY* was on Michael’s mind since the early stages of the project, although initially just as a hypothetical option (Figure 17.11).

“I remembered afterwards that before I got into animation, I was also interested in interactive design and had applied for that as well, so I had to actually decide whether to go into interactive design or animation. To me, animation was just kind of my hobby, and I thought, *Okay, it’s probably impossible to earn a living like that, but if I do it in the beginning of my life, that’s okay.* If you study interactive design, then you most probably will have a job in the industry, you’ll make some money, and so on, but once you’re earning money, you’re stuck. That’s what I found out through many of my friends, that once they

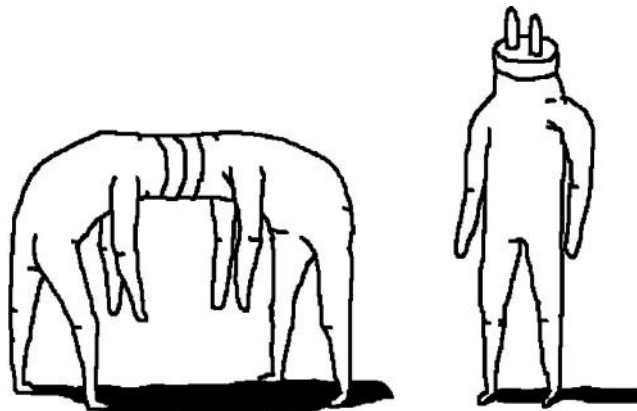


Figure 17.11

Still from *PLUG & PLAY* (Dir. Michael Frei). (Courtesy of Michael Frei, ©2013.)

start to work commercially and have a regular income, it's very difficult to go your own way, to say 'no' to money."

Amongst the various case studies we have already looked at in this book, we've seen a hefty variety of ways in which the storytelling process of a film can be approached—scripted, visual, non-fictional, metafictional, interpretational, abstract, and most recently, with interactive considerations. When it comes to Michael Frei's overall artistic process, along with his methods of idea generation, *storytelling* is not a word he is fond of. As he sees it, the term narrows down what a film in and of itself *is*, an issue that proves a particular concern when extended to transmedia projects.

"At that point, *nobody* gets what it means anymore. But I think I have a more open approach, by which I mean I call it *narrative* more than *story*. I try to develop a system that works, a world that works to certain rules like our own world, and if everything somehow works together, then I have a film. With *PLUG & PLAY*, I tried to have very few visual elements as well, to make it simpler to develop it further into this interactive experience. In general, that's what I think I'll try to do in the future, to make a narrative out of minimal visual elements. It's not that I start with an overall concept of what I want to tell and then I try to do that; it's more playing around with visual elements until I've found something that is meaningful to me.

"The filmmaker Royd Anderson has a not-so-very-different approach to filmmaking, but how he tells stories is just different enough to feel as though it is totally from another world. It's more like a theater play. I really like his approach; I think he also avoids the term *story*, and I think that's very interesting. His films were definitely an influence, in how they transport emotion. That's why I go to the cinema, not for the story but to relate to something."

The absence of "story," as many would define the term, does not hamper the effectiveness of the final film—as abstract as it is, the visuals are not so obtuse or ineffable that an audience cannot make their own interpretations as to their meaning. The interactive version of *PLUG & PLAY* took roughly 2 years to put together following the completion of the movie, made possible in large part by the positive festival reception and prize money it had picked up. These festival-enabled funds were also supplemented in part by Swiss Television.

"In Switzerland, there is some government funding for animated short films and for animation in general, because in Switzerland, the industry is so small that it wouldn't work without a funding system. So it turns out with *PLUG & PLAY* that there is a chance to get some revenue from doing such work. I was quite surprised; I didn't anticipate something like that, but I think it's possible to still make something for a niche audience that people are willing to pay for, even though it's hard" (Figure 17.12).

The terms of accepting the funding were that the developers themselves had to be Swiss. With Michael reaching out to Zurich University of the Arts, known for having a prominent game design course, it soon became apparent that the option of working with students would not be practicable on top of their course workloads. Eventually, Michael's search led him to recent graduate and independent game designer Mario von Rickenbach.

"I sent him the film when it was finished over e-mail; we met at the beginning of 2013 and just talked about what we like between these interactive, game-related worlds. I'm really not a gamer, but there were two games we both considered favorites, *Windowsill* by Vector Park and *BlaBla* from the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), so these were

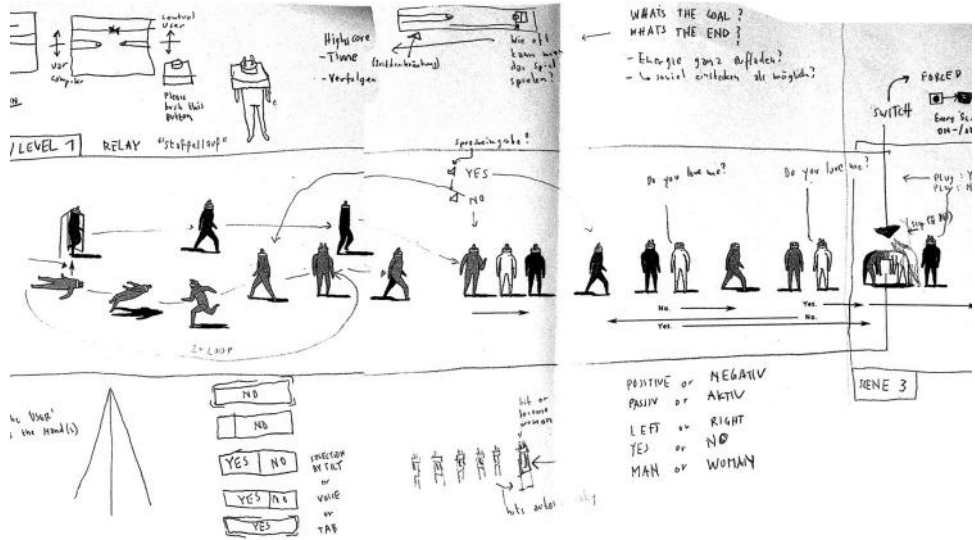


Figure 17.12

PLUG & PLAY app concept sketches. (Courtesy of Michael Frei.)

what we wanted to go for. We definitely didn't want to turn it into any particular game genre that was already out there; we just wanted to make an interactive experience that could really stay true to the film. We didn't really know how to do that; there was a lot of experimentation and prototyping, and it took an incredible amount of work in the end. It was only possible because of how much Mario committed to the project."

It was clear from the outset that the project would need to be done for the love of the medium rather than any financial gain. Following a series of working and prototype sessions, Michael ultimately found himself moving to Geneva to work on the final project with Mario full time from May 2014 to February 2015, when it was released to accompany the online premiere of the original film. The production of the game itself required a great deal of experimentation, Michael not having gone into the project with a clear and rigid concept of how it should turn out. This free form approach was pointedly different from how he had put together the original film (Figure 17.13).

"I try to figure out everything in my head before I start to animate because I'm a lazy animator and I just want to animate what I have to. With the game, it's completely different. With almost every scene that is in the movie, we made a prototype; we started just taking the animation that was the easiest to take out of the movie and tried to make something out of it. In the beginning, we only had this figure running left and right, trying to figure out how to interact with it. That turned out to be one of the most difficult scenes, in the end."

The interactive experience was gradually pieced together by each scene from the film, deconstructing them from how they were originally presented and reconstructing all the pieces together in Unity. Out of necessity, certain work arounds needed to be developed, such as modifying the frame rate from the original film's 12 per second (considered way too slow by today's standards for interactive media) to a more accommodating 60. As

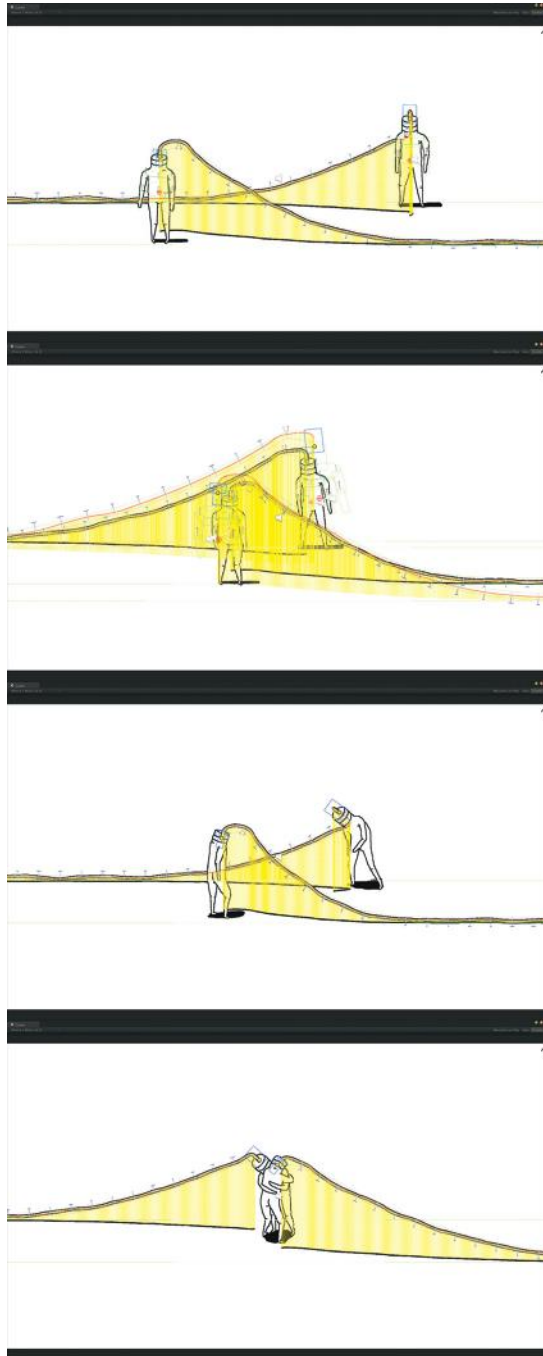


Figure 17.13

Constructing the interactive *PLUG & PLAY* app in Unity. (Courtesy of Michael Frei.)

well as the film's frame-by-frame animation, Mario and Michael also made use of Unity's digital puppet system, as well as certain elements such as the game's interactive cables rendered in 3-D computer-generated (CG) images using a 2-D shader.

"We also combined some of these techniques, so there are scenes where the legs are frame by frame and the upper body is a physical puppet. Where all these techniques are combined, we made this process of going from one step to another.

"You might have seen the finger simulator. It was an earlier test on how to interact like that, and the cables were coded by Mario. He worked on them for 1 month until they felt right, so it was a very slow process of making a scene, making a prototype, advancing to another one, going back to an earlier scene with new ideas or a new technique, until everything fit together. The difficulty was that we wanted to have clean cuts, like a film would have; this is something you see very rarely in games. We didn't want to have cutscenes instead, when we developed a whole new system, where you have to plug in cables to advance from one scene to another. So that was the only thing we actually added in the game that was not a component of the original film. That was to solve a lot of the problems that we had, because every path has to be motivated by something, in a game or interactive experience; otherwise, it feels awkward (Figure 17.14).

"With the game, the problem is it never really feels finished; you can always think of ways to make it better. After a certain number of updates you have to say, 'That's it'; otherwise, you could work on it forever, but we were very happy with the response we got."

Having the original film version of *PLUG & PLAY* to compare it with, Michael has had a direct insight into just how different each project's audience response has been. While the various online communities that support and showcase independent film tend to be positive and constructive, customers who have paid for a game will make no bones about airing any and all grievances they might have with the experience.

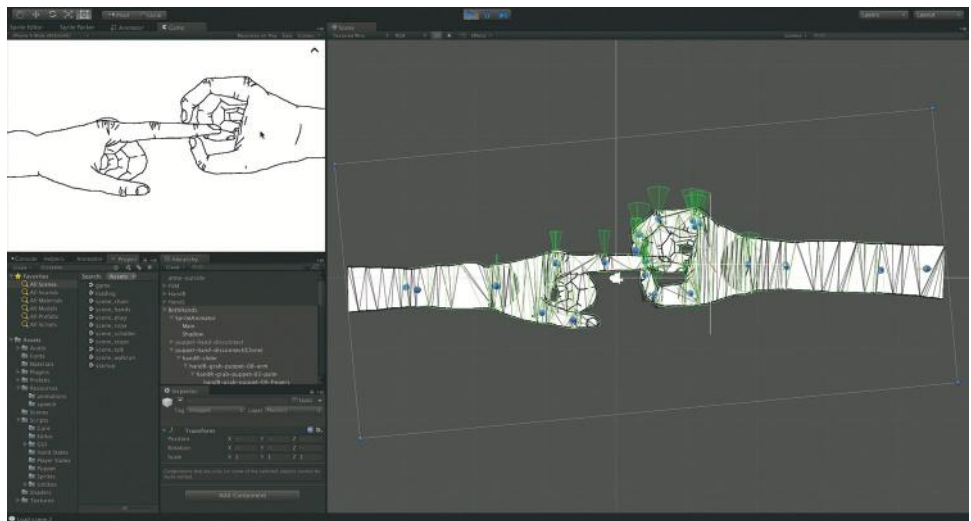


Figure 17.14

Constructing the interactive *PLUG & PLAY* app in Unity. (Courtesy of Michael Frei.)



Figure 17.15

Prototyping the interactive *PLUG & PLAY* app. (Courtesy of Michael Frei.)

“When I show the film at festivals and I get comments about a film, they are always filtered. Because you’re in a room with the audience, there’s a certain social dynamic that changes depending on which country you’re in. I find it very interesting to watch gameplay videos; there are a lot of videos of people playing through the whole *PLUG & PLAY* experience and they will just tell you what they think, unfiltered. It’s very funny to be in someone’s head as they play; it’s interesting how different it is to the reactions I had gotten before (Figure 17.15).

“I think there are some flaws maybe that we already know of, but it’s quite funny that people don’t really see them. Another critique we got which was surprising to me was there were people thinking I had just made a game to make money, that it is either too expensive or too short. These are the main complaints you get online.”

Cues from the world of corporate commissions are also identifiable. The viral sensation *Dumb Ways to Die*, a chucklesome, catchy public awareness film commissioned to promote railway safety, proved it had life beyond the original film with an interactive game series for handheld devices, basing an assortment of fast-paced minigames on the characters and premises of the original film. In this instance, the gaming element is more of a thrust, with the level of challenge continually increasing throughout, thus tempting its audience to break their prior records, a staple of gaming that goes back to the dawn of coin-slot machines and has remained to this day. Similarly, symbiotic relationships between independent shorts and accompanying games are on the rise, one defining example being London studio Animade’s *Ready Steady Bang* franchise.* With it starting life as a basic one- or two-player reflex-test app, the sprite design of the dueling cowboys each player commandeers is minimal yet fluidly animated, with 30 comically animated

* <http://animade.tv>

death sequences in rotation. The originality and perfect timing of these basic animations prove so appealing that merely compiling them in sequence makes for a satisfying micro-short—*Thirty Ways to Kill a Cowboy*—on its own. As more games—with more sprite elements—were introduced in the wider-ranging follow-up app *Ready Steady Play*, more short films in a similar vein, such as *More Than Just a Hobby* and *Queue the Cowboy*, were produced as in-studio offshoots, facilitated by the stark minimalism of their design while again animated with beat-perfect comic timing and smoothness. While serving as additional advertising for the games, their value as entertaining shorts is owed to their structural discipline and ability to get their point across clearly and quickly, a similar trait—though very different in terms of design approach—to fellow webisodic animation producer Ant Blades, as seen in [Chapter 6](#).

Further exploring what precisely makes an animated project interactive, Ant’s own *Singing Christmas Hedgehogs* from 2011 is also worth considering. Without having any traits that could see it considered a “game,” strictly speaking, it serves more as a cleverly updated spin on the now-antiquated Flash webtoons that would offer viewers prompts to determine the events or outcome of an animation (spoiler alert: whichever way you went, there was no happy ending for the frog in that blender). By 2011, YouTube had become more of an automatic go-to as far as the general public were concerned, though only offering a platform to host videos without any built-in interactive buttons. Instead, Ant makes ingenious use of the website’s captioning and annotation options that allow viewers to skip to either a certain time in the video being watched or a new video altogether ([Figure 17.16](#)).

“When you’re working, you’re always trying to think of new approaches,” Ant explains. “Every advertiser comes to you and says they need something new that hasn’t been done



Figure 17.16

Diagram indicating one possible outcome for *Singing Christmas Hedgehogs*. (Courtesy of Ant Blades/Birdbox Studio, ©2011.)

before, and there are a limited amount of things in your toolbox to try and make use of. In this case, it was something that not many people had done, that whole kind of annotation journey, taking you through different stories. I was mostly thinking about that from playing with these annotations when I worked at YouTube.”

The interactive experience of *Singing Christmas Hedgehogs* is facilitated by 11 separate video uploads, seven of which being the alternate final outcomes. The first is a “character selection” menu, where the audience is presented with three hedgehogs in a snowy field. Depending on your choice, one of three subsequent videos will play, presenting three options (that occur as the timeline progresses or can be skipped to using YouTube’s annotations—labeled within the body of the video itself—in lieu of buttons) as to either how you want your hedgehog dressed, or what you want it to sing. Each of these choices leads to a final punch-line video promising a song from your hedgehog, after which any viewer would be hard-pressed not to wish to return to the start and explore the alternatives.

“The actual initial idea was that there would be three hedgehogs—I think they were called *Adventure Hedgehogs*—that you could dress how you wanted, as superheroes. You’d see there would be, for example, a princess or someone who needed rescuing and how you needed to get there; it would look like there was going to be this massive journey ahead of you. You then chose what superpowers you were going to have, whether you’d be a knight, or perhaps a ninja, but then when you started your quest, you’d take one step and get run over by a car, however you dressed your hedgehog or whichever one you chose. That was going to be the gag behind it.

“When it came to doing a Christmas idea, I think I was all out of any good ideas; that was when I thought I could maybe just repurpose that one. It did well in terms of clicks, people clicking around again and again, to try all of the outcomes, so that was a good kickoff for the first year of the studio.”



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Reinventing the Wheel

Here we will look some contemporary examples of independent films that stand out for having a particular visual edge, whether through dynamic use of color; contemporary design sensibilities; or inventive approaches to shot composition, cinematography, and dramaturgy. Granted, virtually every film that has been discussed is visually striking, to some degree, and in truth, I could dedicate some words toward each on the matter in the instances where I haven't done so already. In the interests of simplification, I will limit my indulgence in this regard, beginning with one of our earliest case studies, Adam Elliot.

The instantly identifiable nature of Adam's sculpture work also goes hand in hand with a particular sensibility when it comes to his use of color. When used at all, in fact, color is sparse and often heavily desaturated. This resistance against a "chirpier" visual approach began with what Adam refers to as a "purist ideal" during film school that he would only make black-and-white films ("I was a minimalist at 25—I was *full* of ideals!"). This determination was followed through with his first trilogy of shorts *Uncle*, *Cousin*, and *Brother*, though when the opportunity to tell a broader story came about, he found that matter not entirely in his hands.

"By the time I got to *Harvie Krumpet*, I was convinced by the government funding bodies that I couldn't keep going with black and white, that if the film was going to have any commercial potential, it had to be color. So I gave in."

It's hard to say whether or not sticking to his guns would have made a better or worse film. Despite its tragic side, when compared to the quiet, bleak universe of his first three

darkly comic offerings, there is a far sunnier disposition to *Harvie Krumpet*, with more outright comedic beats and a notably feel-good ending. That the world of the film is one of color—albeit desaturated to the point of being near-monochrome—does not feel like a negative thing, or one that goes against the film’s artistic intent. Certainly, the presumed commercial potential paid off, the film winning an Oscar for Best Animated Short Film in 2004.

The domino effect of this success ultimately led to 2009’s *Mary and Max*, a film that boasted its own unique color palette (Figure 18.1). Set alternately in New York and Australia, the look of the film shifts from black and white (with occasional instances of spot-coloring for effect) to a sea of beiges and browns, respectively.

“With *Mary and Max*, I put up a battle again; I wanted it to be completely black and white, and they said no. So I suggested that maybe Max’s world could be black and white using color as a device, that we could create these two different color palettes, and one can be grayscale, as New York in the 1970s was a very concrete environment, and the other can be brown, as Australia at that time was very brown. Everyone had brown carpet; *Mission Brown* was the most popular color at the time.

“With *Ernie Biscuit*, I wanted the film to have a nostalgic, photographic (as in an old photo album) feel. I wanted it to have a heavy vignette round the edge; I was even going to add scratches and more dust to the final grade, but in the end, I resisted that. Then also,

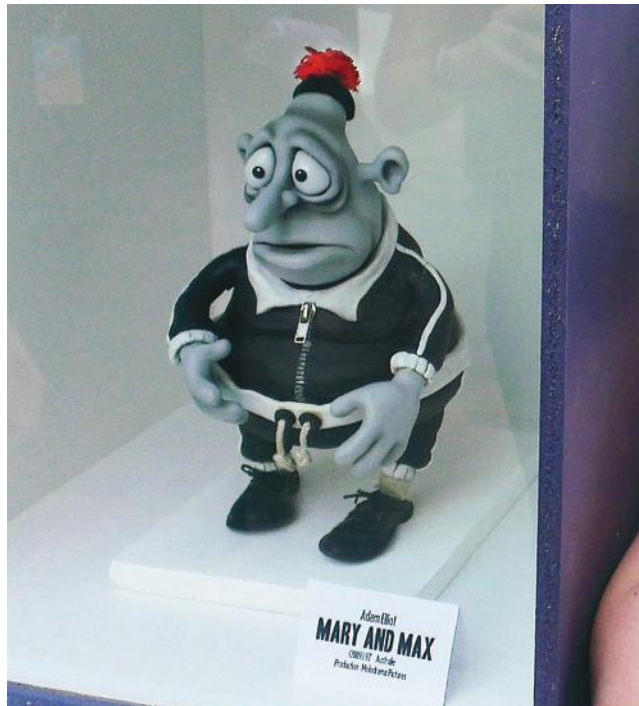


Figure 18.1

Original “Max” puppet demonstrating use of spot coloring in *Mary & Max* (Dir. Adam Elliot) on display in Annecy, 2014.



Figure 18.2

“Ernie” character sculpt for Adam Elliot’s *Ernie Biscuit*. (Courtesy of Adam Elliot, ©2015.)

because I wanted to clear my head of color, I wanted to go back to black and white. The film is set in 1966, which was precolor television in Australia anyway.”

Though *Ernie Biscuit* wound up a companion film to *Harvie Krumpet* rather than *Mary and Max*, the black-and-white world Ernie occupies is at odds with the muted color world of Harvie’s. Yet more than anything, the story itself is what binds the two, as similar tales of migrants adapting to life in Australia. More importantly, to have produced *Ernie Biscuit* in color simply to be consistent with its cinematic sibling would go against Adam’s fondness for his chosen aesthetic (Figure 18.2).

“I love high-contrast-looking films; I love black. I see watching a film as a multisensory experience; there’s the aesthetic, but there’s also the poetic nature of the dialog, but also, I want people to almost ‘smell’ and ‘taste’ certain scenes. Of course, they’re not actually doing those things, but I want it to be a full sensory experience. I love films where one of the elements is taken away, so you have to rely on your other senses. Another thing about black and white that’s very honest in a way is that you can’t hide as much. Every film I make, I would prefer it to be black and white, but just because I love black-and-white films and I love narrated films, though for purely selfish, indulgent reasons.”

Rising High

Now let’s switch focus to an artist with an altogether different slant on design, not to mention story and visual execution. Adam Wells has, in recent years, taken on a series of self-started, auteur projects with his own visual edge owed largely to his background in computer-generated (CG) motion graphics (mograph). A champion of Cinema 4D, a software package with its feet firmly planted in both the animation and mograph world, Adam gravitated toward it for its array of advantageous character animation solutions.

“I actually didn’t want to do any character animation really at all, because it was really hard to do, so my solution was to mainly do little loops with simple characters and see if I could tell a story using looping images. I enjoyed working in motion, and Cinema 4D,

back in 2010, definitely seemed to have its own aesthetic. I think that the fact that I was still learning the software comes across in my early work. It's not something that many people do, and I've moved away from it a little bit as I've gotten more comfortable with actual animation, which is a shame because I think it's interesting to blend the two."

Adam's first film that established his style to the independent community was 2012's *Brave New Old*, in which an assortment of simply designed, cuboid characters inhabit their own insulated, compartmentalized worlds that the audience is alternately given glimpses of through the side panels of a cube that perpetually rotates (Figure 18.3). Each tableau we witness explores a variety of topics, on one end impenetrable (yet aesthetically satisfying) abstraction, on the other, more accessible themes of travel, technology, and relationships. The prevailing themes of compartmentalization and our ambivalence toward the rise of technology (along with its potential for societal alienation) are recurring themes in Adam's subsequent work, which includes 2013's *Risehigh* and *The Circle Line* followed by 2014's *Fake Expectations* (Figure 18.4). Though it is a subject ripe for criticism and satire, Adam has a largely fond attitude toward said technologies, contributing as they do to the films' creation, distribution, and reception.

"I personally quite like technology. It's kind of fun, isn't it? There's not much you can do to change it; the genie's already out of the bottle, so everything's much more fragmented and will continue to be so. I'm constantly excited by my iPhone, so I'm probably not going to martyr myself. I can try as much as I can to be conscious of it, but I've been very fortunate because I have a skill set that can work for me commercially and can also make my own animations, so I'm quite satisfied as well. Being this fortunate means I'm not really in the best position to judge the wider picture."

This grounded sense of balance in Adam's attitude benefits his work in several ways, chief amongst them the absence of sanctimony; there is no hypocritical condemnation of the technologies that have reshaped human habits, merely a series of well-observed and good-natured visual gags around the habits themselves. In 2014's *Fake Expectations*, one of the main subjects of exploration is the validity of art, something Adam has seen to be conflictive when it comes to how his medium is regarded in the independent animation world (Figure 18.5).

"On social media, I've seen some independent 2-D animators being very snifty and sneery about CG animation, asserting that 2-D is not dead. From my point of view, it's been a little bit left behind because it's the mainstream, so people who are kind of drawn to creating fringe work always want to work on the fringes and are slightly dismissive of CG animation. It's hard to say if they're dismissive of it as an aesthetic because it's so established or because it can be quite technical and they feel cut out of it.

"There are a few different factors: Technically it's different from drawing frame by frame, sure, but a lot of animators use After Effects in a similarly technical way to create rigs, for example. I've looked at festival selections, and it seems a very small percentage of selected films are CG. Considering it's supposedly the dominant production method, it's clearly seen as 'for cinema,' while other methods are for the independent artists.

"Because it's a newer medium as well, there's so much potential to experiment and try new things. The stuff I'm working on at the moment is poly cel stuff, trying to retain that CG aesthetic while animating in a much more close-to-the-bone fashion. But ultimately, I feel as though the independent sector's very derisive of CG animation and dismisses it as



Figure 18.3

Stills from *Brave New Old* (Dir. Adam Wells). (Courtesy of Adam Wells, ©2012.)



Figure 18.4

Still from *The Circle Line* (Dir. Adam Wells). (Courtesy of Adam Wells, ©2013.)

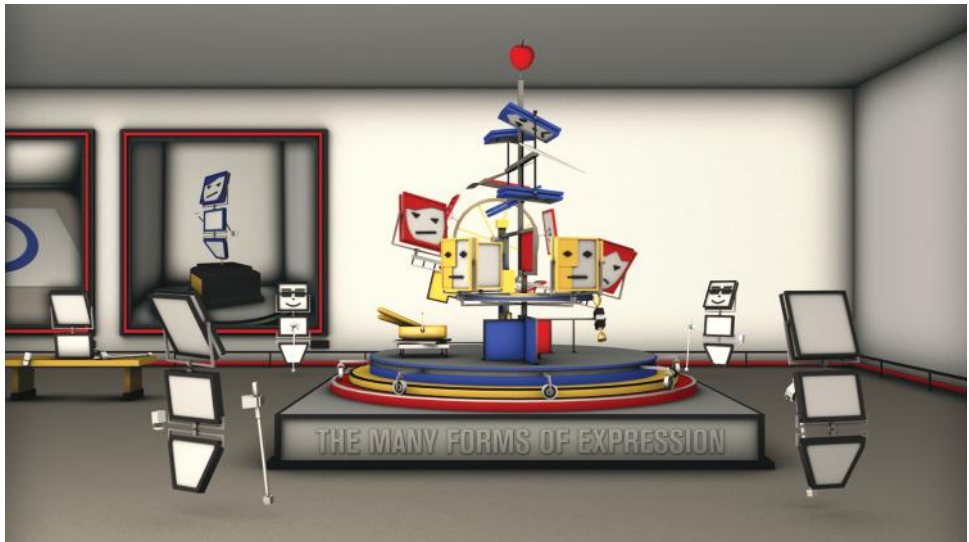


Figure 18.5

Still from *Fake Expectations* (Dir. Adam Wells). (Courtesy of Adam Wells, ©2014.)

children's stuff. People who are into independent film and animation tend to be, I always feel, drawn to more traditional aesthetics because it meshes more with the personality of independent animation."

The complexity of Adam's work is owed in many respects to multiple sources of inspiration beyond just animation and design. The physical impossibilities of *Brave New Old's* key visual motif, made possible through a combination of CG modeling and extensive



Figure 18.6

Brave New Old (Dir. Adam Wells) shot render. (Courtesy of Adam Wells, ©2012.)

masking and compositing in After Effects, took inspiration from the high-concept physical manipulation of the video game *Portal* (Figure 18.6). Adam's 2013 film *Risehigh*, a 20-minute miniepic where the audience travels up a tall building, glimpsing the goings-on inside each apartment along the way, was informed in part by Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*. Predominantly, Adam's key visual concepts and approaches to production are born out of a passion for theater and set design. The progressive work of troupes such as Punchdrunk* and You Me Bum Bum Train,† who take pains to further the art of immersive theater by combining interactive environments and installations with traditional performance, is of particular resonance. Oftentimes, it is the visual concept for a film's environment that serves as the first germ of Adam's creative process (Figure 18.7).

* <http://punchdrunk.com/>

† <http://bumbumtrain.com/>



Figure 18.7

Brave New Old (Dir. Adam Wells) press shot. (Courtesy of Adam Wells, ©2012.)

“Whenever I have an idea for a set piece, I’ll generally end up designing films, stories, and ideas around that set piece, which is probably a naughty way of doing it. It may be why some things hang together differently to how they would in other people’s films, but I like it. There’s a good core to build off of, and set pieces always help me with that.

“I’ve tried different things on different films, just because I’m trying to figure out what works really well. In *Brave New Old*, I went through it in a very linear way; I just kept storyboarding the plot with rough setup ideas of things I had been brooding about for a long time. There were also visual remnants from commercial pitches that never went anywhere that I thought were great mysterious ideas, people pulling levers and stuff like that. The cube-headed characters were designed for simplicity’s sake, trying to determine what I could technically achieve at that stage, to make them as simple as possible so I could animate and manipulate them in many ways. I kind of got stuck at the end and decided to make it a quandary everyone in the audience could stroke their beards to.”

Were it not for the themes introduced throughout the film and the visual sophistication of the closing shot, the perceived absence of an ending would most likely not be successful; even when dealing with conceptual abstraction, a film needs structure, something Adam gave extra consideration toward with his follow-up film.

“*Risehigh* was a bit different. I kind of arced that out a little bit more, came up with a beginning, middle, and end, and drew what were almost flow diagrams for the characters (Figure 18.8). I knew where I wanted them to go, where I wanted them to start, and how I wanted it to look. I then filled in all the blanks in a spreadsheet, which went from bottom to top as with the building in the film, so every floor of the building was represented by a rung on the spreadsheet that had a description of what would happen on that floor. The other stuff is made up as I go along, slightly. Generally, I’ll see little visual ideas that I’m keen on and try to think about how I can integrate them into a plot.”

The structural nature of CG animation brings with it several creative benefits. The freedom to tinker with the film’s environment before, during, and after the animation itself

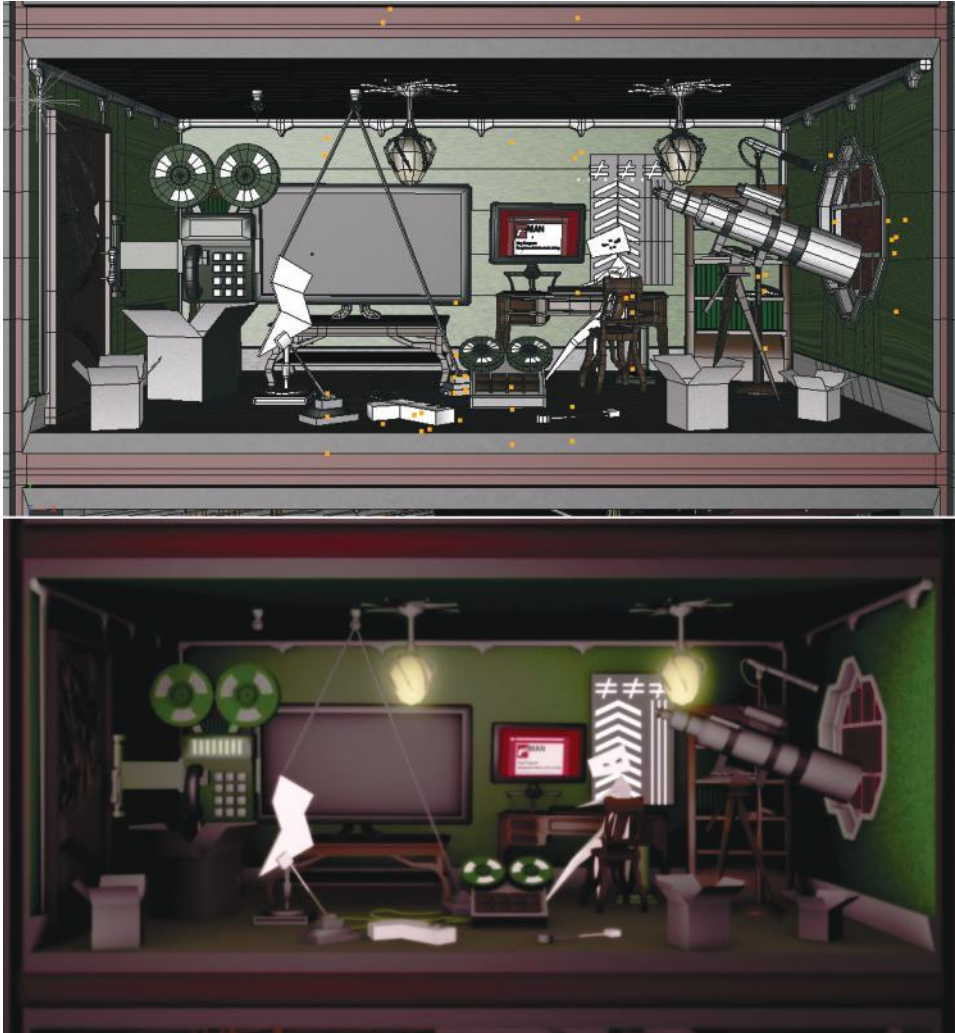


Figure 18.8

Risehigh (Dir. Adam Wells) shot render. (Courtesy of Adam Wells, ©2013.)

brings with it significantly more options than composited 2-D animation and especially stop-motion, where there's very little opportunity to return to the film, so to speak. Adam's process has proven conducive to embellishments and experimentation, creating densely populated and detailed environments that invite repeat viewing. "Generally, before I start building, there's not much room for improvisation, but most of the films I've made up until now, I've built as physical spaces. *The Circle Line*, I had built as a giant shopping mall, and when I built that, there was a lot of 'real estate' that I hadn't quite worked out yet that wasn't super important for the plot. It's almost like leaving a page out of a book; I go back and fill those bits in, which can be really hard, although I think that may be one

of the things you can do in CG animation you can't do as well elsewhere. It's like writing; you don't know fully until you've actually written something how it might feel; ideas lead to ideas.

"For practicality reasons, it can't be one project file, because it slows the computer down, but it will be designed as one file. So if you pasted all the elements together, it would all be in place, but I can't actually render that, because it's impractical. *Brave New Old* required so much compositing to make the rotating cube that there's a different file for almost every shot. I *could* do the compositing in the Cinema 4D project file, but again, it would slow things down unnecessarily, so *Brave New Old* was wholly composited, whereas *Risehigh*, I managed to make use of lots of in-software compositing by using Boole expressions. Doing compositing can be a real head-scratcher; it just requires lots of planning to make it work" (Figure 18.9).

There are two prevailing approaches to character animation evident in Adam's work, the first being shape-based geometric constructs with rotatable pivot points as opposed to traditional, inverse kinematic rigging. This approach is seen in *Brave New Old* and the quasi-robotic occupants of the world of *Fake Expectations*. Adam's alternate approach applied to *Risehigh* and its shorter follow-up *The Circle Line* sees the characters rendered as flat, two-dimensional entities devoid of any detail save for their polygonal, Cartoon Modern-esque outlines. This approach gives the films more of a mixed-media feel, although the process is achieved within the same software.

"It's animated on flat planes, which is a weird cheat, as I like the idea of being able to do it frame by frame in the software, but I really like the idea of 'drawing' in the 3-D environment. Using geometry is so much quicker, so *Brave New Old* and *Fake Expectations* had much easier character animation than *Risehigh* or *Circle Line*. For those, I wanted to try and keep the polygonal aesthetics while taking advantage of stuff like those weird smears and blurs you get with old animation but don't really see as much of in CG; you tend to see motion blur instead (Figure 18.10).

"In my new work, I'm now designing characters to be much more naturalistic looking, because what I find with those characters is I like them and they're fun to do, but they're not very empathetic. They leave people a bit cold, I think, because they're quite abstract. I do like that, but if you're trying to inspire people into feeling an emotion, you need something that people can grip onto a bit more."

The major risk Adam has taken with his work is just how much it amounts to. With *Brave New Old* and *Fake Expectations* averaging out at around the 10-minute mark and *Risehigh* nearing 20, these projects are clearly enormous undertakings for one person (outside of music and sound, the films are, by and large, put together entirely on his own). Ordinarily, longer animated shorts can backfire by losing their audience's attention along the way, a pitfall Adam has effectively sidestepped by keeping the action so consistent and varied. The remaining concern is the drain on one's personal time such an undertaking demands, an aspect that Adam is fairly levelheaded about (Figure 18.11).

"I've managed to trick my brain: When I do commercial work, which is how I make my living, there are often really strict deadlines. I was looking at these crazy deadlines and thinking, *I just made a minute's worth of animation...in a week! And it's pretty good stuff. Why can't I do that for myself?* So I just forcibly did it, working really fast and not getting too bogged down sometimes, because it's really easy to get really bogged down in ideas. If I get stuck on something for too long, I'll try to move on; otherwise, staying focused for so long

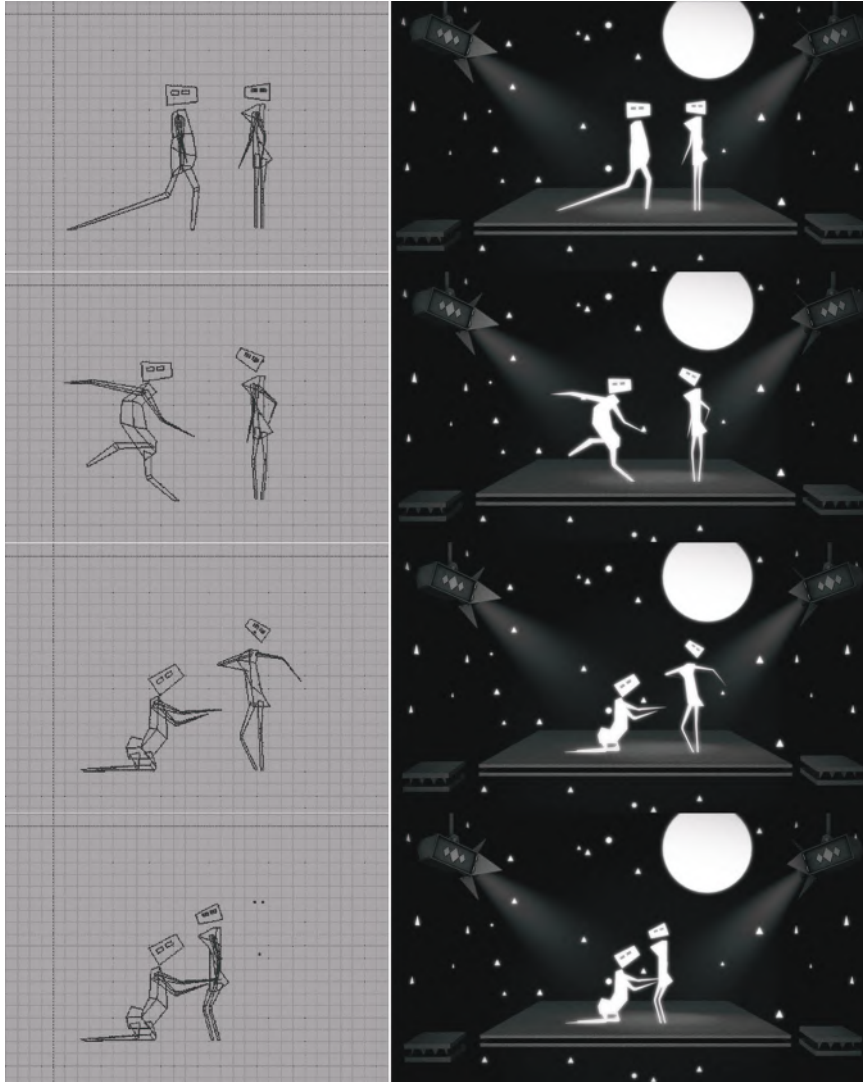


Figure 18.9

Character animation using flat planes in Cinema 4D for *The Circle Line* (Dir. Adam Wells). (Courtesy of Adam Wells, ©2013.)

can be pretty difficult. I really enjoy modeling with music on, which is controversial because lots of animators don't, but I get more done because I can just relax and do the work, then go back and fix things without music on if I need to. But if I didn't have the music or the podcasts, I wouldn't get it done, because I wouldn't be entertained while I was doing it."

We all may find ourselves in a better position when freelancing, as we can allocate, as Adam does, a certain amount of time to our film work. If a work lull appears every once in a while, it's a good use of one's time and keeps the creative muscles relatively flexed.



Figure 18.10

CG sets constructed in Cinema 4D for *Risehigh*. (Courtesy of Adam Wells.)

“It’s tough work on days when you just want to sit around and play video games, but once you’ve done it enough, you develop this mentality where you feel like you’re failing if you’re *not* doing it.”

The need to work does not necessarily have to be constant either. It’s far more advisable to let your personal work benefit you when the time is right, rather than force it and risk burnout. As long as our creative impulse remains, it’s a good idea to take the odd break and absorb what’s around us every once in a while. As Adam points out, “You have to fill up your brain with stuff before you can spit more stuff out.”

Retro Vertigo

While Adam’s work features the odd nod to the past, his filmography is rooted in its contemporary sensibilities. Yet great things can also be achieved when marrying the tropes and conventions of animation’s golden age with the edgier, more frenetic pacing of our current film landscape. Montreal-based Benjamin Arcand’s *Wackatdoo* grew from a series of animation experiments made during his work breaks, centered around a traditionally styled, 2-D animated dancing cat created for the fun of it. Pleased



Figure 18.11

Still from *Risehigh* (Dir. Adam Wells). (Courtesy of Adam Wells, ©2013.)

with the outcome, it occurred to Benjamin that an entire animated, musically driven short “about a cat going crazy and dancing around” could be a very real possibility (Figure 18.12).

“I had tried to make a short film before and had to stop at a certain point, because it was pretty hard. So *Wackatdoo* was a challenge I set for myself, whether or not I could do a film on my own, with no production company or money whatsoever.”

Having not followed through on the earlier attempt at a completed short, Benjamin credits his intervening industry experience as the guaranteeing factor of *Wackatdoo*’s success, as well as a clearer knowledge of how one’s ambition for a project can be more realistically achieved. Although the finished film holds together perfectly, the preproduction process was something of a staggered affair.

“I started to storyboard it, but mostly just as rough story panels on pieces of paper. I was just getting the heavy ideas out, still working on it when I had breaks, until the point where I decided, *Okay, let’s do this*—I think around February 2012. I started to do the boards, going with my thumbnails I had done and building the story straight-ahead in the animation software, not using storyboard software, just the animation timeline.”

The freeform, unrestrained mania of the film is influenced by such early animation pioneers as Ub Iwerks and the Fleischer brothers, with the sight gags and overall visual quality serving as an ode to Warner Bros. animation stalwarts Tex Avery, Bob Clampett, and Chuck Jones, not to mention the contemporary filter applied to their approach by *The Ren & Stimpy Show* creator John Kricfalusi (“After seeing the episode ‘*Stimpy’s Invention*,’ I knew that animation was what I wanted to do for a living”) in the early 1990s. This is perhaps most notable toward the end of the main musical segment, where the frantic nature of the fantasy world becomes an increasingly overwhelming nightmare (Figure 18.13).

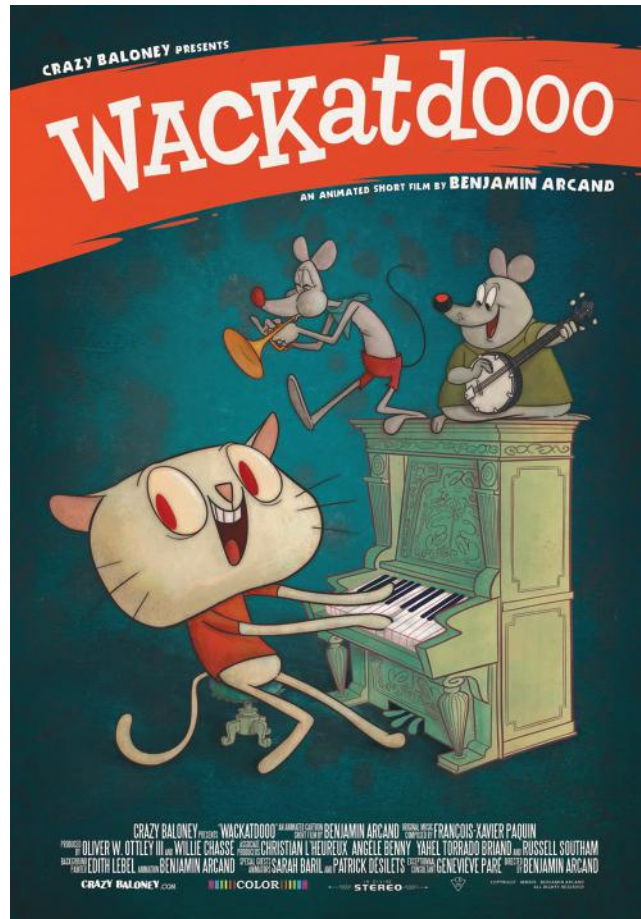


Figure 18.12

Wackatdoo poster. (Courtesy of Benjamin Arcand, ©2014.)

While the production of *Wackatdoo* would be assisted in many respects by the music at its core (see [Chapter 20](#)), another major contributor to its visual appeal is the bold and inventive approach to its use of color ([Figure 18.14](#)). As the piece increasingly gives way to fantasy elements, color palettes alternate between highly saturated analogous schemes and more understated complementary schemes, with occasional monochrome backgrounds jumping from one point of the color wheel to the next with each shot—sometimes even within the same shot as the fantasy gives way to manic hysteria. What gives these freer, more playful instances of color use more impact are the comparatively restrained and disciplined palettes of the bookending “real-world” scenes, an area assisted in by fellow artist Edith Lebel.*

* <http://edithlebel.blogspot.com/>

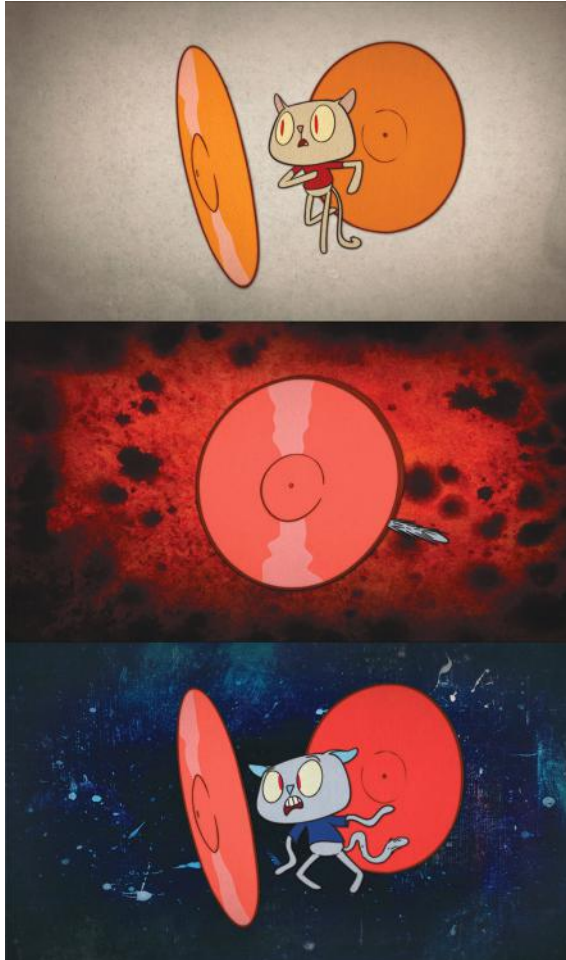


Figure 18.13

Demonstrating the impactful use of color during a sequence in Benjamin Arcand's *Wackatdoo*. (Courtesy of Benjamin Arcand, ©2014.)

“Sometimes I like to do everything because every aspect is fun, but also I think it gives a film a nice touch to bring a different vision to it. I went and looked for the strongest people, and Edith is very strong with color, and she wanted to do it, so I was happy. Another reason would be that it helps with the workload—I mean, just painting the city background would have taken me forever—but I do think the film is better with an outsider vision.”

Maintaining the spirit of the original test sequences from which the film developed, *Wackatdoo* was animated straight-ahead in Toon Boom (with textural and film grain overlays to enhance the richness and retro vibe of the film), flying in the face of the conventions of animation where previs and meticulous planning are considered crucial. This manner of tackling the visuals pairs well with the overall vibe of the production and the events being depicted—the film begins as a cathartic, postworkday dance session, the lines

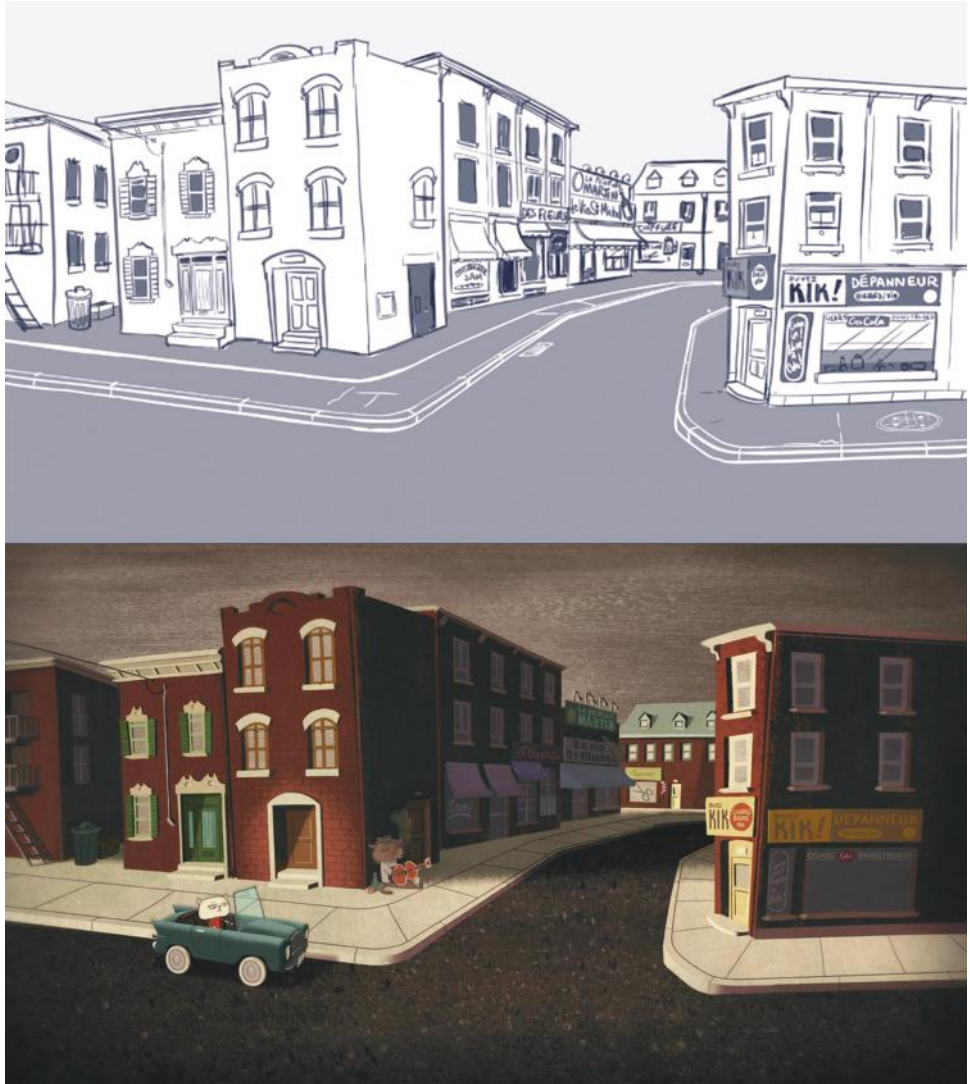


Figure 18.14

Wackadoodoo background layout by Benjamin Arcand; background painted by Edith Lebel. (Courtesy of Benjamin Arcand, ©2014.)

between reality, fantasy, and dreams are blurred to the point of nonexistence, until the main character's morning alarm brings him back to the real world. As such, the absence of a need for continuity allowed for Benjamin's approach to each shot to be more or less unfettered, save for a certain degree of visual continuity to keep the film anchored on a subliminal level (Figure 18.15).

"Animating straight-ahead doesn't suit every kind of film story, but mine was pretty simple. I think the main advantage to the animation was that sometimes, scenes were

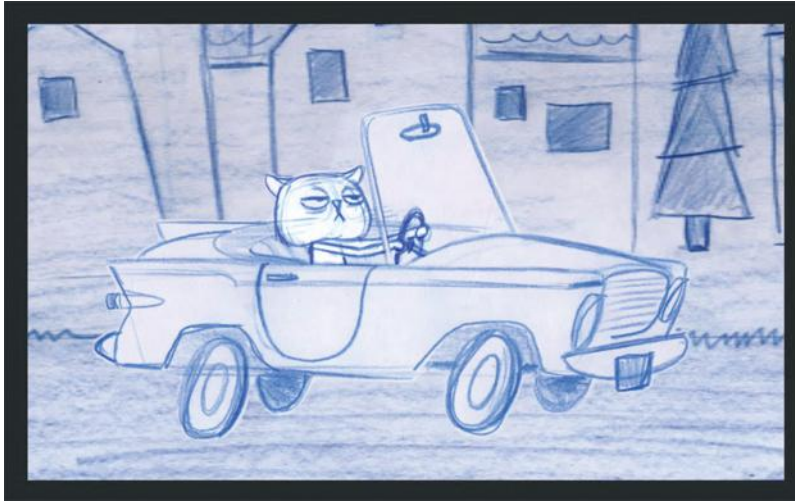


Figure 18.15

Wackatdooo animatic sketch. (Courtesy of Benjamin Arcand, ©2014.)

created purely out of ideas for transitions—‘let’s see what we’re going to do next’—from shot to shot. So I like the straight-ahead approach, although it can create some continuity problems in a way, and of course, you need to wrap it up at the end. I had some trouble working out how the film was going to finish—all I knew was that I wanted him to wake up, so at the animatic stage, I left the ending a bit open, when the alarm clock is ringing.”

The coda of the film manages to tie everything together with a cleverly paced, three-punch ending that frees the musical-enthusiast cat from the hell of his job by sending him instead to the hell of his fantasies, to his eternal delight. Bookending the main musical number of the film with two “real-world” scenarios that are playfully subverted by the time the credits roll proves an effective means of lending the project more substance from a story perspective; though the bulk of *Wackatdooo* is a wordless dance number, the overall piece works structurally as a film (Figures 18.16 and 18.17).

“I think that sometimes, when there aren’t enough limitations, you find yourself going in all directions without enough structure, but in this film, at least I had a small setup. It wasn’t a crazy story with thousands of characters, so since it was pretty simple, it worked.”

As with many of these case studies, the time and effort spent on the film have been advantageous to Benjamin’s career and future prospects, as well as his own personal artistic development.

“I’ve been contacted for a couple of projects and job opportunities, and there are possibilities to maybe pitch for short programs at major networks. The main benefit was that I came away from the project with more skills; by making the film, I’ve improved much faster than if I had been just working on some TV show. I decided to not take on any work for a period of time while working on the film, and at first, I was a bit scared about losing opportunities, that maybe it was going to be hard after the film was done, but now, things are even better than before.”

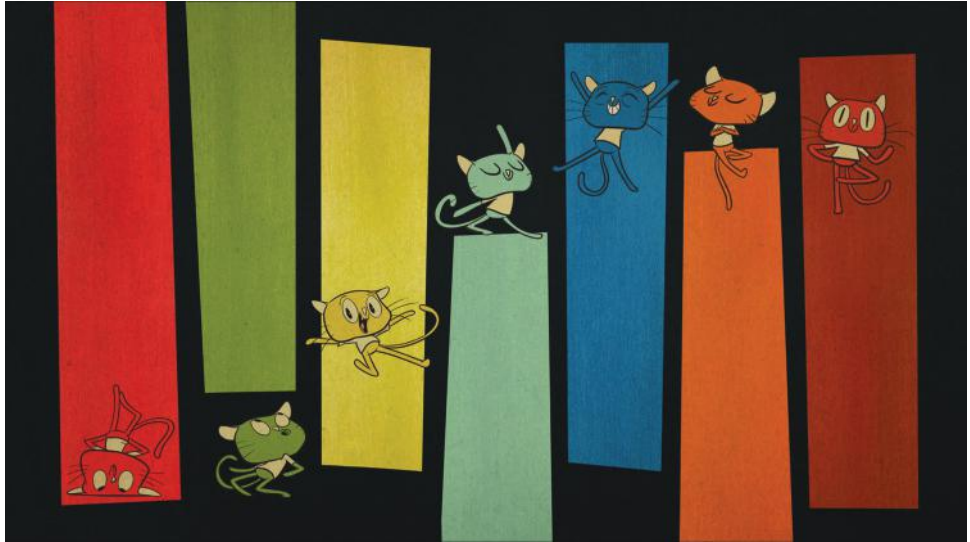


Figure 18.16

Still from *Wackatdoo* (Dir. Benjamin Arcand). (Courtesy of Benjamin Arcand, ©2014.)

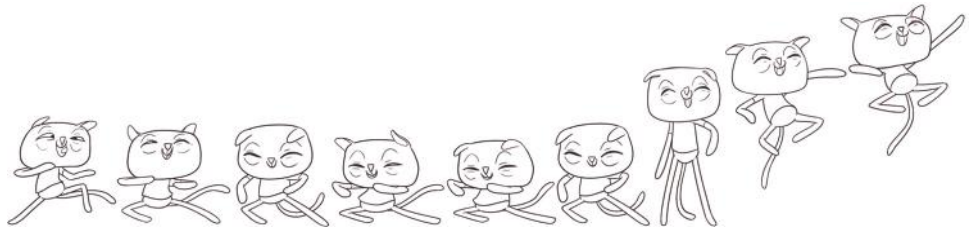


Figure 18.17

Wackatdoo jump sequence. (Courtesy of Benjamin Arcand, ©2014.)

Late Nights

Few collaborative projects so encapsulate the spirit of independent animation while confirming the creative possibilities this book celebrates like *Ghost Stories*, a multiartist anthology quietly worked on between January and September 2013. The film's genesis was the coming together of 15 like-minded animators based around the globe, corralled by illustrator/ animator Scott Benson to form a loose collective known as the Late Night Work Club.* As contributing director Alex Grigg recalls, "The first seeds of the idea began with, appropriately enough, a series of late-night conversations over social media" (Figure 18.18).

* <http://latenightworkclub.com>



Figure 18.18

Alex Grigg. (Courtesy of the artist.)

“Scott had put up this tweet that just said, ‘What if there was a Nobrow^{*} for animation?’ I thought that was an amazing idea, so I just replied to him that he should definitely do it. I still don’t know if that affected him at all, but I had done some LoopdeLoops[†] he had seen (almost all of my professional work that someone sought me out for specifically had a nucleation point with LoopdeLoop, for some reason), so he sent me an e-mail saying, ‘We’ve got some of these people involved; do you want to be part of it?’ I saw the list of people, and it sounded amazing.”

Alex had been working in animation for roughly 4 years, and his experience had largely been limited to commercials, feature work, and assisting on other people’s shorts. As he had reached a point where he was able to take time off from paid work, the opportunity to direct a film entirely of his own was met with tremendous enthusiasm.

“I had just moved to London, which was a huge influence on me, getting out and doing my own stuff, finishing my own work for the first time. Having been in Australia previously, the only people who made and finished personal work were people who got funded by funding bodies. That seemed to be the only way to do things, and then I got to London, and everyone I met was in the same position as me; they’d all be freelance animating by day, but they’d all have finished films or interesting projects to their name, without having to wait for permission from anyone. So it was kind of a perfect storm of timing, for me:

^{*} The publishing company Nobrow Press began life in 2008 as a collective of contemporary artists who specialize in design-oriented graphic literature.

[†] <http://www.loopdeloop.org/>—a popular animation challenge based in Melbourne, Australia, where animators the world over are invited each month to create and submit looping animations with the possibility of valuable online exposure should their work be selected as the winner of that month.

lots of energy, London, LoopdeLoop, and Scott starting this thing with Charles (Huettner) and Eamonn (O'Neill).”

Alex’s first job out of school had been as an animator on the short film *The Cat Piano* (Dir. Eddie White and Ari Gibson) in Adelaide. It was on this job that he cut his teeth animating in Photoshop, a software he continued to gravitate toward throughout his subsequent work and involvement with the Late Night Work Club. Bouncing around the Australian industry saw Alex take on work as varied as commercial CG animation and motion capture for video games before eventually landing a job at Nexus in London. This last move proved something of a culture shock in terms of his perception of what constitutes an independent animation director.

“That is something that doesn’t happen in Australia at all. There aren’t really freelance directors here—you own a company and then you’re a director; that’s what *director* generally means now, in Australia. So I worked everywhere just generally as an animator, and about the time I moved to London, I was sort of losing interest in just animating; I felt a little bit like I was watching someone else work all day. So I broke out, got my own studio space, turned down work, started making my own, and then spent maybe 4 or 5 months on my film.”

Said film was *Phantom Limb*, Alex’s contribution to the Late Night Work Club’s *Ghost Stories* anthology, in which a man finds himself plagued by guilt manifested as the haunting apparition of his girlfriend’s arm, which had been detached in a road accident (Figure 18.19). From the outset, Alex knew that the opportunity and motivation to direct his first short was not to be taken lightly, and made the potentially risky decision of taking an extended period of time off from freelance work. For some independent filmmakers,

PHANTOM LIMB

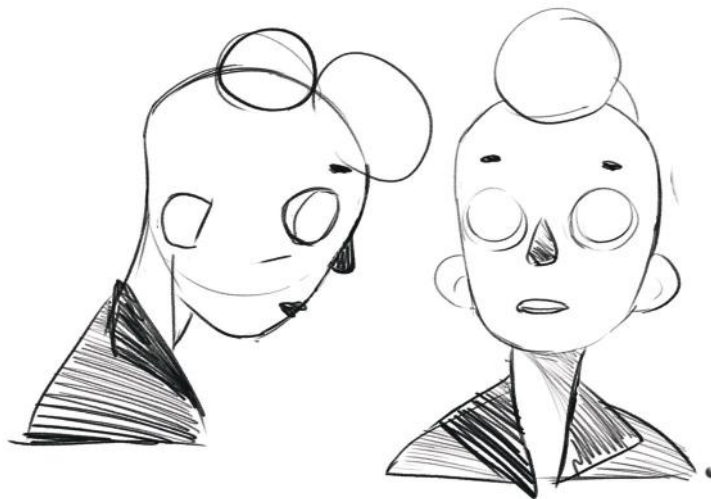


Figure 18.19

Phantom Limb character sketch. (Courtesy of Alex Grigg, ©2013.)

this level of dedication can be the only guarantee that a project will receive the proper attention it deserves to come together successfully.

“It’s weird to talk about money, but it’s obviously a reality of making personal projects. I think that at a certain point, I stopped being afraid of not getting freelance work. Eventually, you know that when you finish a job, you get another one relatively quickly, within a week or two, and after that happens a bunch of times, you just lose the fear. There is always a hustle, but it is really liberating, not having to worry. Also, I’m pretty frugal generally, so that I can take time out to do this sort of stuff. I’ll save a lot of money when I work, then live on those savings while I do other stuff, which is cool.”

Alex is the first to concede that this way of life is not for everyone. Whether one’s circumstances require constant work and constant frugality or the notion of losing the stability and quality of life we’re accustomed to is frightening (or perhaps just impractical) is something we can only determine individually. Aside from the occasional monetary award at festivals, *Phantom Limb* did not wind up generating much by way of revenue; as is so often the case with independent shorts, any perceivable monetary value is far more likely to be measured by the increased visibility and career prospects a successful short can put in motion. With a career already established, for Alex, the venture was more worthwhile for the artistic growth and development of new skills it brought about (Figure 18.20).

“If it had turned out that everyone hated it, I might not feel the same way, but people were into it, so it’s a relief! Even if they didn’t like it, I wouldn’t have regrets about it. That’s one of the things people don’t talk about, because they have this idea that there’s this gift, ‘natural talent’ or something, and I think it’s a really dangerous point of view. It’s as though there’s this narrative that they give people, and if you struggle at all, if you fail or you’re not seen as gifted from a young age, then people think you’re not as good. I find that really damaging. I have this view that the things that differentiate me from somebody on



Figure 18.20

Still from *Phantom Limb*. (Courtesy of Alex Grigg, ©2013.)

the street are not my ideas so much as my discipline in learning a craft to make them happen and having an interest in actually making something out of those ideas. I think that everyone has interesting, cool thoughts about stuff, so I sort of hate that myth of the artist. It comes down to the concept of failure—people will tell you failure is important, but they don't like seeing it. They think less of you.”

All 15 contributing Late Night Work Club artists were given the same theme of “ghost stories,” but unlike other group collaborations (such as the varieties of Anijam discussed previously), there were no parameters when it came to style, materials, or execution, nor was any film required to transition from or to either film that bookended it. The end result is an anthology of completely individual stories, despite a binding premise of sorts.

“I'm lucky that they gave us a theme. ‘Ghost stories’ sounded sort of spooky and cheesy, as in ‘campfire tales’ or whatever, so I actively tried to do something that wasn't that, but *Phantom Limb* did turn out to be a pretty literal ghost story, I guess. I think we all had a similar reaction, to be honest; we were all on a similar wavelength except for one or two of the films (Figure 18.21).

“I think that something that saved me a lot in the process was having a really understandable premise. I tried to set up the premise really quickly and early on, and then you just kind of play with it at that point. I don't know if I wanted it to be more *complex* originally; I think I just wanted less of a straight narrative. I wanted it to be a little more dreamlike, but I think that my mind just works in ordering things into an understandable package, so inevitably, it became a pretty straight narrative. That was important to this film.”

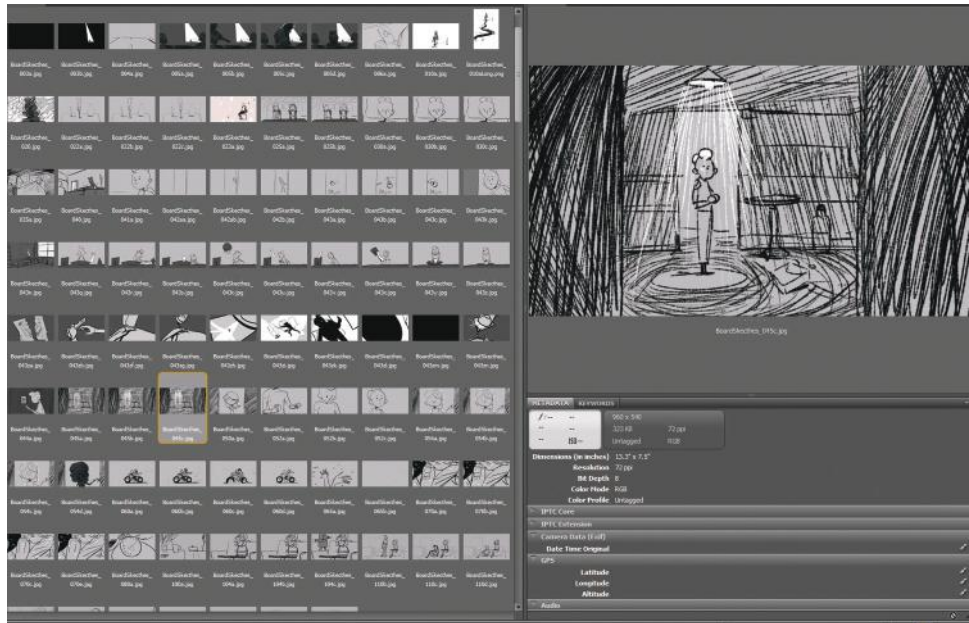


Figure 18.21

Excerpts from the *Phantom Limb* storyboard. (Courtesy of Alex Grigg, ©2013.)

The dialog in the film is scarce, though effective in its scarcity. Dialog did not fall within Alex's comfort zone as a storyteller, which saw the visuals taking the lead.

"I really respect people who can do dialog well, but they tend to be people that write words. Maybe it's a cheat to just use visuals, because I spend all day practicing that specific craft, so it becomes more natural. Films that I have made since *Phantom Limb* have been completely visual. I start by going into it with designs and fully finished storyboards so as to present a story I am interested in exploring. I want to be more playful visually rather than lock myself in with storyboards and a really tight animatic. I don't have any preference when I watch films; I tend to think either way can be a crutch, whether using a lot of dialog or not. I don't particularly like narration unless it's really well done; if the film itself isn't balanced, then it feels like a bit of a wasted opportunity. Mikey Please's *The Eagleman Stag* is a great use of it because it's almost like the narration is 'unreliable' or something? And so it adds this extra layer; it's not just exposition. It's the same with Tom Brown's film *Teeth*."

While consistent with the overriding theme of its fellow *Ghost Stories* segments, *Phantom Limb* would go on to much success and visibility as a stand-alone film, both online and at festivals. In spite of it not being narratively or stylistically beholden to the other shorts involved, Alex was initially hesitant to split it off from *Ghost Stories*, maintaining that the ideal way to experience it is as a chapter within the overall anthology.

"I think *Ghost Stories* is more than the sum of its parts, plus the reason any of us got any attention at all is because it felt really aspirational and new. I think that we were all keen to keep it as part of the anthology for as long as possible, especially on the Internet, so we kept it like that for about a year. That way, we weren't competing against each other; we were always supporting each other.

"If we had all individually released our shorts, it would have been more of a flash in the pan and whizzed by, like all Internet shorts seem to do. Just being part of a big group felt like it gave it a lot more weight. I was really grateful to be a part of that. Then, on top of that, it was my first film. I was a really big fan of all of the other people's previous films, and knowing that I would be up next to them made me push myself a lot harder, because I didn't want to show myself up. I can't speak for the others, but it was very important to me personally, and I'm really glad I was part of it."



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19

Perseverance



Filming stop-motion animation for *Planet Six*. (Courtesy of Andy Martin, ©2013.)

The tenacity of self-producing an animated film—especially when one is also taking on the roles of director, lead animator, both, or more—should be more than evident at this point. A declaration of commitment is pretty much meaningless if you don't stick around

to actually commit, and as we've seen and will continue to see, follow-through is more vital to a film's success than any funding scenario or distribution plan.

One project that truly demonstrates how independent work can be truly comparable in quality to that of studios is Andy Martin's *The Planets*. An exception to the earlier-touched upon philosophy that an animation career can hinge entirely on a smash-hit student film right out of the gate, Andy came into his own a fair while after his graduation, working within the freelance sector until his skills and ability eventually led him to be taken on by Strange Beast, a division of London-based Passion Pictures.

Andy incrementally segued into animation from studying motion graphics (mograph), itself branched off from graphic design. Growing up with an enthusiasm for the character-driven children's fare of Peter Firmin and Oliver Postgate such as *Bagpuss* and *The Clangers*, it's no surprise that his 12-part anthology film *The Planets* is notably character-driven with supremely palatable visuals and a light, general audience-accessible sense of the absurd. It began life in January 2013 as an illustration project in which he made a point of drawing something new in his sketchbook every day, cleaning it up in Photoshop, and posting the results on Tumblr; several weeks in, it was suggested by one intrigued follower that the visuals he was coming up with would look impressive in motion (Figure 19.1).

"I had a week where I wasn't doing anything, so I animated the first planet and thought it would just be its own little special thing. Then I changed the whole style for February because I knew that to stay interested, I would need to mix it up. After I animated the second one, I figured I had something here, that it could be a series, something that would provide a deadline at the end of each month. By putting up something new every month, people might start getting interested, and by changing the look every month, then I'd stay interested in what I was doing and have a big catalog of styles that I'd done and different directions of animation I'd explored."

This method also pushed Andy to hone his skills as a storyteller, working on the fly to write achievable stories in the limited time (working alongside a day job as well as real-life



Figure 19.1

Character sketches for *Planet Two*. (Courtesy of Andy Martin, ©2013.)

obligations) he had allowed himself. “It was a challenge that, at the end of it all, seemed to come together quite nicely and had a feel of one whole thing.”

Each monthly film focuses on the life forms and general activity of a previously-undiscovered planet, each one unique in tone and animation style, though bound by a strong comedic thread. Planet Eleven, for example, is inhabited by frantic alien cyclopes, animated using cardboard cutouts; Planet Nine is occupied by destructive, childlike superheroes rendered in pixel-art (Figure 19.2); Planet Six is under threat from its own warring, Claymation society; and so on. The final film, edited together from the 12 microshorts that preceded it, not only serves as a design portfolio and artistic showcase in its own right but also, most importantly, succeeds enormously as a film. To preserve the journey’s sense of development, the anthologized edit shows all the planets chronologically.

“It seemed logical to do it like that, although given there’s no running narrative between them, I could have mixed them up, except for the last planet, which needs to go at the end. Planet Nine, with the digital, 8-bit superhero characters, that was the one that really hit people and turned a corner; it was towards the end of the project that it got Staff Picked, and then people really started noticing what I was doing. I could have started off with that one, but I didn’t want to put that at the front, just because it felt nice the way that they ran



Figure 19.2

Character concepts for *Planet Nine*. (Courtesy of Andy Martin, ©2013.)

together, in the order they were. This way, you start and end with the musical ones, Planet One and Planet Twelve.

“So from the start of not knowing where it went, the project eventually came to a point where I knew what I wanted to do with it, and then once I’d finished the 12 individual ones, I just needed to package them all, and I did the space in-between bits where I got all the planets together and we moved from one to another, which seemed like quite a nice device.”

Another benefit of having an anthology film is just how much wider its exposure has the potential to be. While of the 12 microshorts that it consists of, some certainly work better than others as stand-alone films (Andy cites Planets Six, Nine, and also Four, in which a society of robots who have taken over “find harmony and discuss philosophical matters of enlightenment, beauty, and magnificence,” as being particularly resonant with audiences), all of them possess a uniquely identifying strength. Planet Seven, in which sheeplike creatures ponder the banality of their existence, is, while minimally animated, notable for its dialog; the entirely musical Planet Two is a character-based mograph extravaganza reminiscent of the best that onedotzero and Pictoplasma have been known to showcase.

“I think if you come into some of them on their own, they come across more as sketches than narratives. The ones that are narrative, that have dialog and voices in them, stand alone better than the ones that don’t. Some festivals have just chosen individual ones to show. They were all made to be individual parts of a series, so I’d assume that if you saw one of them on their own, or found it in the middle of the project, you would see that a film titled Planet Seven indicates there are at least six more of these. That’s what I hoped would happen.”

Despite the high professional standard of the film’s overall look and feel, *The Planets* serves as another example of a film created without adopting a methodical, studio approach. Preproduction consisted of little more than sketches and doodles, dialog more often than not scribbled in notebooks or recorded into a phone while out walking the dog rather than scripted. Andy equates his creative process more to that of writing stand-up material (Figure 19.3).

“Sometimes I’ll just speak into the microphone, acting out stuff to see what works. I listen to a comedy podcast where comedians interview other comedians about their writing process, how they came to do what they do and how they technically write the material. Very rarely is it that people just sit down at a desk on a computer, typing stuff out. Some of them do that; I think people who specialize in one-liners will have a topic and write a load of things that work with it—that’s a sit-down thing. I think a lot of them go onstage and try stuff out; they start with a nub of an idea as a bullet point and then start talking round it and seeing what works and what doesn’t. I don’t have the kind of audience that I stand in front of, but I do try to take a bit of that on, where I’ll act it out so that I can see that it works. When you write stuff down, it can turn out more like literature, rather than the way people talk or the way a character would interact. You write more words than you need, whereas I think if you just try it out and say stuff, then you will get the natural rhythms of speech.”

A quality of Andy Martin’s work that is clearly evident in *The Planets*, and works significantly to its advantage, is its broad appeal, something generally synonymous with simply “playing it safe.” In Andy’s case, the fact that his film plays just as well as part of a late-night screening as it does at an early morning children’s program (I can personally attest to this, having witnessed both circumstances during its 2014 festival run) is a testament to

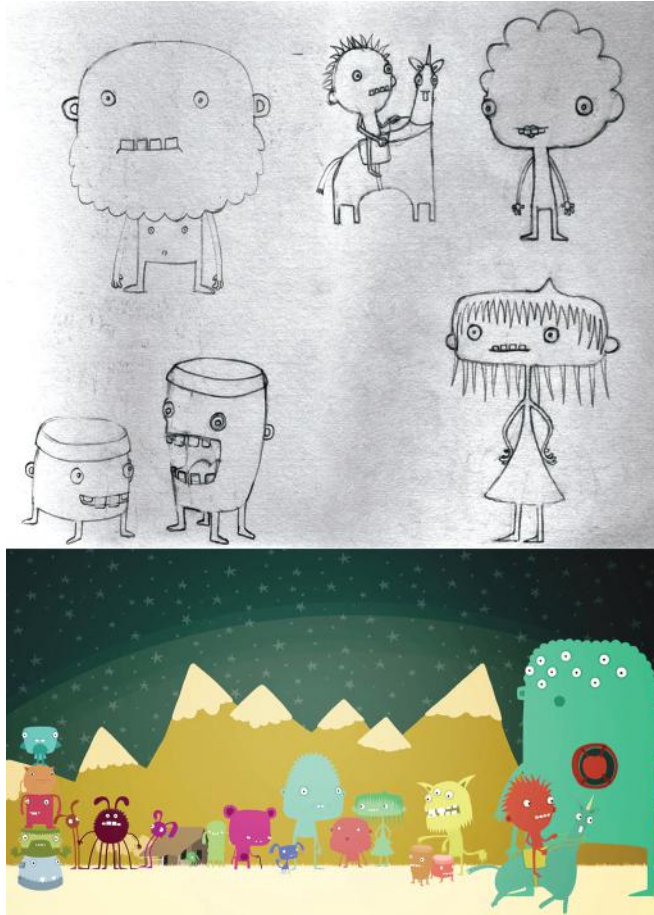


Figure 19.3
Character sketches and still from *Planet One*. (Courtesy of Andy Martin, ©2013.)

his authenticity as a filmmaker. The film doesn't contrive to be child friendly, nor fashionably design oriented or edgy; it simply is what it is, from sketchbook to the screen (Figure 19.4).

"I usually just make stuff that isn't that offensive!" Andy muses. "In my own work, stuff with lots of swearing or sex and violence doesn't naturally come out of me. I like it in other people's work, but I think if I tried to do something like that, it would feel forced and would be awful, because it wouldn't represent who I am and the kind of thing that I would want to make. I really love films like David O'Reilly's *The External World*, but I could never make a film like that; I could never push it as far as he could, so mine tend to become quite family friendly. *The Planets* seems to appeal to adults as well as kids, which I think is good because I don't really aim them for kids, but kids seem to like my sense of humor."

The accessibility of a film like *The Planets* to younger audiences highlights what generally separates the wheat from the chaff when it comes to effective children's programming.



Figure 19.4

Planet Five cover image. (Courtesy of Andy Martin, ©2013.)

It is easy to pander and condescend to children (perhaps even difficult not to) if they are your intended audience. Yet the films, shorts, and television shows that stand out are the ones that invariably make a point of not doing so. Oftentimes, it is merely the absence of sex, violence, and other adult themes that deems content to be engaging to children. From the uncompromising verbosity of Oliver Postgate's writing in the 1960s and 1970s to the unabashedly vanguard premises of more modern shows such as Sarah Gomes Harris's *Sarah and Duck* or Grant Orchard's *Hey Duggee*, children evidently respect not being talked down to.

"If I tried to do *The Planets* as a film for kids, trying to think of stories that would appeal to boys aged 7 and 8, I would probably start patronizing, and it wouldn't appeal to them; it would be all wrong. I'll more likely do something that I think is a funny idea, stories reflective of aspects of life such as war, reluctance, regret, belief, all these starting points; they then become really simple ideas and jokes that appeal when I show other people. If I thought, *Okay, this is going to be targeted at this specific age group*, I would just fail miserably! Whereas if I do something that does appeal to them, then that's a happy accident" (Figure 19.5).



Figure 19.5

RUNNING! Character cutouts and still from *Planet Eleven*. (Courtesy of Andy Martin, ©2013.)

Staying Power

While there is laudable perseverance when it comes to filmmakers like Andy Martin, to set themselves an unshakable goal that ensures their commitment for an entire year (such as Greg McLeod's 365 project discussed earlier in the book), a short film idea can be just as well served with a slower-burn approach. As Rumpus Animation's belief in their own Bertram Fiddle's strength as a character eventually bore fruit (though, in its interactive form, not in a way they had anticipated), Emma Birch and Peter Williamson's short film script *Being Bradford Dillman* also took nearly a decade to successfully adapt into an animated short (Figure 19.6).

Emma, whose creative partnership with Peter began when she joined the Soho-based, independent stop-motion studio Loose Moose, used writing as an exercise to keep her creative juices flowing, having found herself largely settled in the admin side of animation



Figure 19.6

Being Bradford Dillman (Dir. Emma Burch) poster. (Courtesy of Emma Burch/Loose Moose Ltd, ©2011.)

production. Peter, largely working on character design commissions and commercial briefs, had a similar itch to scratch, and so the two paired up for what was originally planned out as a 3-minute short. Similar again to the journey of Bertram Fiddle, a series of ultimately unsuccessful funding applications proved invaluable in terms of addressing areas of the film that could be strengthened.

“It was after being short-listed for a couple of funding schemes that the team at Loose Moose thought maybe there was something a bit more to our idea,” Emma recalls. “They encouraged us to continue to develop it during times when the studio was quiet.”

Though the film slowly marinated, progressing to the point of fully developed characters and story, circumstances led to the project being shelved for 3 years. As her time at Loose Moose drew to a close, the planets eventually aligned nearly 10 years after the project’s initial conception. The catalyst came from the arrival of the showreel of recent graduate Daniella Orsini (later of Catfish Collective), which showcased her unique approach to stop-motion, cutout animation.

“We really liked Daniella’s animation style and thought it would fit the story perfectly, so it was one of those happy coincidences. We called Daniella in, and she agreed to help, so we wound up completing the film before I left Loose Moose.”

What made Daniella’s contribution so essential was the laborious style journey the film had gone on throughout its development. The story is of Molly, a young girl who becomes obsessed over her Mother’s drunken admission that, at birth, she had been a boy. Her alternate self is manifested as Bradford Dillman, an imaginary friend with whom she forms an uneasy sibling bond. Over the years, no visual approach to telling the story had seemed like a fit, or least not one that could be constrained within the limited available resources as an independent project (Figure 19.7).

“We had looked at lots of different styles of animation. We’d even gone through the process of having people build Molly as a 3-D computer-generated (CG) puppet. Obviously, I would have loved to have done stop-motion, but from years of experience watching Loose Moose, I knew that was way out of our budget. I think I had even tried to turn my hand to Flash at one point to try and get it made, using Pete’s designs, but everything that we tried lost the charm of Pete’s original ink illustrations. He used to do them with ink and cartridge paper, so they’d also have a nice texture to them, and something was just lost.”

Daniella’s approach served to succeed where Flash had failed, retaining the textural feel of the designs and animated from multiple printouts. Given the narrative thrust of the short, mainstream television shows such as *Family Guy* proved helpful research when evaluating the economics of the character animation and approach to set construction. The film sets were built with sitcom production in mind, the cinematography combining theater views with characters typically set at three-fourths angles, creating a tactile environment with the depth of a 3-D stop-motion production in which the 2-D printed characters could perform.

“It’s a quite naive, simplistic style, but it works graphically for the piece. There are always a couple of shots you think you’d do differently, and there are a couple of mistakes in there that I don’t think anyone else spots, but every time I watch it, I always only see those details. But



Figure 19.7

Still from *Being Bradford Dillman* (Dir. Emma Burch). (Courtesy of Emma Burch/Loose Moose Ltd, ©2011.)



Figure 19.8

Still from *Being Bradford Dillman* (Dir. Emma Burch). (Courtesy of Emma Burch/Loose Moose Ltd, ©2011.)

generally, I'm very proud of it, as a first film, and because it took so long to get into production, I'm just glad that we completed it! It ended up being a little bit rushed towards the end as time and money ran out, but I figured that it's better to have a finished film people will enjoy than an unfinished masterpiece that nobody's going to see. Something I've always carried with me that Pete once said is not to dwell and just make sure any lessons learned you apply to your next project. You just have to keep moving on and keep learning from your experiences."

As aggravating as spotting mistakes can be—especially if it isn't until after the film is done and out there—a strong story will make great strides in masking them as far as the general public is concerned. We are all, as Emma reasons, only human at the end of the day. On reflection, the protracted production of *Being Bradford Dillman* was the best thing for it, and as a back-burner project, it had the opportunity to mature creatively as Emma and Peter themselves did, as well as resulting in a more considered, fleshed-out story (Figure 19.8). The experience of the studio environment itself also played an important part in the film's maturity, Emma cutting her teeth by osmosis through observation of directorial talents such as Ken Lidster and Ange Palethorpe.

"I don't think you jump on your first idea and then be impatient to make it," Emma reasons in summation. "Development is essential, I think, to make strong and compelling work."

A similarly protracted development process also served to benefit Daniel Gray and Tom Brown's 2015 film *Teeth*, the first pass at the story being written nearly 8 years previously during a train journey returning from the Annecy festival. In the interim, Dan and Tom, collectively Holbrooks, would largely work on commercials, though as the years went by, they would see the expectations of advertisers transition from short, simple messages to elaborate, sometimes quite lengthy endeavors with parallels to short film production. Projects such as *Parcel** for Red Cross New Zealand and *Safe in Your Hands*† for Allstate's

* <http://www.holbrooksfilms.com/red-cross-parcel>

† <http://www.holbrooksfilms.com/allstate>

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) campaign *Out Holding Hands* kept the pair practised and helped refine their own working dynamic as filmmakers.

“Our working process sort of naturally comes from working on the commercials together,” explains Dan, “so if there’s a commercial which suits Tom’s way of working more, he tends to do more of the art direction, and I’ll stay back and do more storyboards; if it’s something that suits my art direction, then I’ll do that.

“I guess we have a certain conflict about the way we work, not in an argumentative way, but in the sense that my natural aesthetic is completely different from Tom’s. Where they meet is always quite interesting, because they *shouldn’t* really meet. We basically try not to overanalyze it!”

Though there were some initial funding prospects to help get *Teeth* off the ground, these would ultimately not take flight, leaving the pair to rely on their own resourcefulness. The eventual coming together of the film was the result of simply dedicating time, enthusiasm, and effort to a project they believed had legs. Knowing they had the skills to cover the visuals themselves meant that the only real consideration in lieu of a budget was cracking on with it. Where bringing on other talent was concerned, such as background artist Leland Goodman and sound designers Antfood, the directors were able to offer incentives such as festival attendance and a more artistically varied showreel in lieu of remuneration (the old line of free work being “great for exposure” can actually be quite appealing in the rare instances such as this where it happens to be true).

This approach largely epitomizes the spirit of many other case studies we’ve explored in the book—as so many people have shown, devoting a regular portion of your free time to such projects will incrementally bring it to fruition. In terms of being psychologically committed to following through on a passion project, working toward a self-set deadline will always help. Major festival call-for-entries deadlines are often a strong motivator, especially if you have a particular hope for your film to get its premiere at a specific event. When it came to ensuring that *Teeth* would reach its finish line, Tom and Dan made the decision to seal their fate by sending a rough, work-in-progress cut of the film to the Sundance Film Festival, so as to set an unshakeable deadline for the finished product should it be accepted—which, as it turned out, it was (Figure 19.9).

Even if you need to work a day job, there is always time in the evenings and weekends for our hobbies and passions. As Dan breaks it down, “Do as much in your own skill set as possible towards the completion of the film until you reach a point where there’s something you can’t do. For example, with us, we can storyboard everything, we can do the animatic, so we did everything slowly until we got to the point where the next step was just to *make* the film—which, again, we could do. So we started making the film, and then it was finished by accident, really. Once you’ve started, it all tumbles into place, and you enjoy it! If you’re a writer, you write every day; if you’re not a writer, you don’t—it’s the same with filmmakers.

“The classic Kickstarter scenario you see these days is, some guy will have some character designs and a story, and he’s asking for money to make a film. He’s a filmmaker, he can do everything—the storyboards, animatic, everything—yet goes to Kickstarter. It almost looks like they want it as a job, and making short films shouldn’t be a job. They’re not going to get you a house or anything like that. It’s something you put yourself through, because you enjoy it. Then, once you release it into the world, it’s great to just sit back a bit and see whether other people like it or hate it, if they’ve interpreted it completely wrong or gotten it spot on. It’s a fun little world!”



Figure 19.9

Still from *Teeth* (Dir. Tom Brown/Daniel Gray). (Courtesy of Holbrooks/Blacklist, ©2015.)

Hurdles to Overcome

Whether alone or as part of a team, there will always be factors at play that can sap the joy out of a production. Returning to our first case study, *The Dam Keeper*, even the directorial duo Robert Kondo and Dice Tsutsumi's shared experience at a company as high profile as Pixar did not completely steel them for what lay ahead when they embarked on the film. What kept *The Dam Keeper* afloat and has since ensured the formation of the duo's studio Tonko House was the realization that their creative affinity could withstand the test of a film production's hardships (Figure 19.10). As Robert candidly explains, "We learned how to be honest with each other at the core level of the filmmaking; it wasn't just two art directors agreeing with each other. When we were making our personal project together, we fought a lot; we agreed; we disagreed and went through a lot of things together. I realized this is the kind of stuff that you need to start something with a partner who you can trust. I realized, 'If Robert agrees, I think I'm ready.'"

When the two found themselves working together as art directors during their time at Pixar, they often found themselves unified on most fronts, sharing very similar aesthetic tastes. Once they stepped outside of the studio environment and into their own first personal project, the scenario shifted quickly.

"I always explain it as two artists trying to make one drawing, but both of them have one hand on the pencil. It was really a difficult thing to figure out how to collaborate in the beginning, given that neither of us were writers and hadn't written really anything; this was a first foray for both of us into writing something of this nature, so we had to learn how to write at the same time we were trying to figure out how to work together. That brought out a lot of insecurity in both of us, I think."



Figure 19.10

Still from *The Dam Keeper* (Dir. Robert Kondo/Dice Tsutsumi). (Courtesy of Tonko House LLC, ©2014.)

Considering that Robert and Dice began *The Dam Keeper* at a point in their careers where they both felt fairly comfortable and that they were in a place where they could experiment creatively, to suddenly find themselves in new territory both unfamiliar and demanding took some acclimation (Figure 19.11).

“There was a lot of back and forth of trying to figure that out, a lot of arguments, disagreements, and insecurity, which always creates a specific temperature that is not always comfortable. A lot of the doubt came from the fact that we’d had such a good relationship up until that point, then all of a sudden, we were pushed into this other paradigm of our relationship, every minute of it questioning, *Are we going to finish this thing?*”

“It almost became a daily thing: *If we can make it through today, if we can be better today than we were yesterday, then that’s good enough.* Ever since then, it has been about either making our relationship or ourselves as individuals stronger. That’s why I continue to enjoy working together. Every day can be its own challenge, in its own way, but we figure things out as we move forward.”

We’ve seen examples of independent production that have put aside a traditional pipeline. Doing so has, in many instances, proved beneficial to an auteur project given that it carries with it a new set of disciplines that, depending on circumstances, might only serve to get in the way of the progress of the animation itself. In the case of *The Dam Keeper*, however, Robert and Dice were already familiar with the hierarchies and processes of feature film production, and as such, replicating a similar environment for their own project (which, while remaining strictly independent, amassed over the course of its production a crew of over 70 contributing talents) proved to be the best way forward (Figure 19.12).

“I think it definitely helped us, understanding the 3-D CG animated feature pipeline. Because of being employed at Pixar and having familiarity with it, we actually did involve 3-D with our process, because we had access to people who were very eager to help. Animation was a world that we were unfamiliar with, that we wanted to build as much time for as possible, so anything we were able to do to speed up that process was essential. We actually did do previs



Figure 19.11

The Dam Keeper sculpts. (Courtesy of Tonko House LLC, ©2014.)



Figure 19.12

Director Dice Tsutsumi reviews animation during the production of *The Dam Keeper*. (Courtesy of Tonko House LLC, ©2014.)

where we figured out camera and scale; we built all of our sets in very rough, rudimentary 3-D, but we would do all our camerawork there. All the layout was done in Maya, and then from there, we would draw and paint over it, and animate over that, so it made the camera layout process go as quickly as possible between approval of story and the animation itself.”

The size of the crew eventually equated to that of a major production, extended beyond animators and painters to coordinators, sound, music, and a full orchestra. The project carried with it the type of buzz that made pooling their contacts and studio resources relatively simple, as Dice explains. “The crew size was so big mainly because nobody worked full time on this project; pretty much everybody had a full-time job during the daytime, so we could only take so much time from each individual. We had to work very smartly; we had a very skilled, capable, talented producer who came up with very creative ways to utilize the number of people and get the most productivity out of them without killing himself or killing all those people who had to work during the daytime.”

Having never experienced the editing process firsthand, Robert and Dice were able to bring on Bradley Furniss, an assistant editor on Pixar’s *Toy Story 3* and *Brave*, who, as such, had a clearer understanding of how best to build an editorial pipeline.

“Whether it was from storyboards into editorial, music into editorial, or sound into editorial, all the way through from the rough animation to the final animation, all of that timing getting methodically figured out by our editor were all things that, coming from a CG animation studio, really helped us to move quickly and efficiently.”

To summarize on a motivational note, I’ll hand it over to Andy Martin, director of *The Planets*, for a nugget of crucial advice:

“Set yourself a deadline that you can’t get out of! That’s a really good motivator. For *The Planets*, I had a start-of-month deadline that I couldn’t avoid; otherwise, everything would just fall apart (Figure 19.13). I could have just stopped, but I think if you’re going to do



Figure 19.13

Still from *Planet Eight*. (Courtesy of Andy Martin, ©2013.)

something like an animated film, then it's got to be in your nature to *want* to do it, so you either will or you won't. I think self-motivation is something that you have or you don't; if you don't have it, you probably don't enjoy your job and should maybe try something else.

“If you've got an inescapable deadline you have to finish by a certain date, it can't be bent because you have a client—so the way that I did it with *The Planets* was assume that millions of people were waiting for the films to go online, even though they weren't, but that gave me pressure to make sure I got something done. Again, what helped was changing the style every month so I had a whole new cast of characters to play with. That made it a lot more fun for me and helped me stay interested in it.”

20

Your Two Most Important Characters

It's said that an animated film's music and sound make up the greater percentage of its effectiveness. This proclamation may irk some of you who have bled, sweated, and cried through countless hours of animation production, only for some noisemaking outsider to swoop in and be granted more than half of the credit in what may take a fraction of the time you've put in. In spite of this, the statement remains painfully accurate, and possibly even understated. As many an auteur, independent, student, and even studio film has proven over the years, whether your animation consists of virtually-inanimate stickmen or rivals the production quality of a Disney feature, a botched sound mix or music score can make it unwatchable.

Outsourcing

When it comes to finding a composer for your film, be discerning, if possible. When turning to friends, students, young professionals, or those who've even carved a career in sound or music for themselves, there remains the same potential for lack of talent or ability you'll have doubtless witnessed in your own industry. You want to find yourself engaged in a creative partnership that will benefit the production, not just pad out one another's curriculum vitae (CVs).

Referring to an earlier case study, a strong example of this principle is the constructive relationship between Melissa Johnson, writer and codirector of the autobiographical film *Love*

in the *Time of March Madness*, and the film’s composer and sound recordist, Albert Behar (Figure 20.1).

“Albert converted his bedroom into a hip sound studio with a really beautiful, old-fashioned microphone, and I got into this makeshift booth (his mattress and boxspring propped up on their sides—with red velour curtains draped over them to ‘make it sound better’) on the hottest day of the summer. It was just brutally hot, so swampy that we would have to take breaks where we would put on the air-conditioning unit in his wall and crowd around it to cool down so we wouldn’t pass out. I’d practice my lines and then turn it off and do 5 or 6 minutes of recording. Then we’d turn the air conditioning back on and cool down again.”

Having frequently collaborated on projects that preceded *Love in the Time of March Madness*, Melissa cites their rapport and mutual respect for one another’s craft as being conducive to their creative process.

“I love working with Albert—we have a long history of collaborating together. I know his music very well; when I heard what he came up with for *March Madness*, it got me fired up: ‘Yep, that’s exactly right!’ Sometimes when we were stuck in production, I’d go off and play the music by myself to get back into the right headspace.

“Those moments, those are the true moments where you connect with your artist friends, where it’s not about the money; it’s not about awards or anything external. If I’m going to entrust the story of my love life and a range of funny and painful and awkward moments growing up, who do I really trust to represent me in a way I’m really comfortable with? Without question, I put myself in exactly the right hands, with Robertino and Albert.”



Figure 20.1

Still from *Love in the Time of March Madness* (Dir. Melissa Johnson/Robertino Zambrano). (Courtesy of High Hip Productions/KAPWA Studioworks, ©2014.)

As with animation or, frankly, any of the creative arts, those who have taught themselves in their bedrooms—or even simply hobbyists—can prove to be just as gifted and able as accredited professionals. A degree or list of credits is no guarantee of competence or work ethic. Nor should either of these be disregarded, as there are many dueling factors to consider. To begin with, more than anything, you need to make sure that whomever you work with has a reciprocal respect and understanding of what you wish to achieve with the project and how you both can benefit from the experience, financially and/or artistically.

- Get to know them personally; build up an understanding of their background and a clear sense of their working methods to help determine where any creative affinities might lie.
- Research their body of work thoroughly. When self-promoting, what projects of theirs are front and center? Are these projects similar to yours, as far as story, style, or even production conditions go? What projects of theirs seem weakest, and why? Being keenly aware of one another's limitations as well as your skills will help keep expectations reasonable on both ends.
- Respect the artistry and skill of their craft and keep your expectations reasonable. It's aggravating to us when, as animators, a client makes farcical, unreasonable demands on what is possible or acceptable within an established budget. A client you'll want to work for time and again will be clear, communicative, and understanding, so extend that same courtesy to other artists (this applies to all of your crew, to be perfectly honest).

A Composer's Perspective

Generally speaking, this book has focused more on auteur film work produced outside of a school or university environment, with some exceptions (notably in [Chapter 16](#)). While student films have significant parallels with independent films, and are often up there amongst the best work doing the rounds any given year, I've largely veered toward nonstudent films with this book so as to paint a clearer picture of what independent filmmaking circumstances are like once "out in the world." When considering music, one recent exception where the creative union of directors and musician is particularly harmonious would be Anna Mantzaris and Eirik Grønmo Bjørnsen's Volda University College graduation film *But Milk Is Important* ([Figure 20.2](#)). The film's composer, Phil Brookes, first met Eirik Grønmo Bjørnsen during the latter's Erasmus exchange period at the University of Glamorgan in Wales. Their creative partnership began with Phil scoring Eirik's student film *The Crow Who Wore a Suit and Worked in an Office* in 2011, with *But Milk Is Important* to follow in 2012. The film is a 10-minute tale of a man stricken with social phobia, exacerbated when the building caretaker who helps with his errands dies of a heart attack. Left to fend for himself, the man finds a strange, otherworldly creature constantly appearing by his side. Though initially comedic in the scenarios that follow, where the creature attempts to force the man into social situations, this progressively gives way to a sense of trepidation as the man's attempts to evade this pursuer grow increasingly more frantic. While wonderfully animated and constructed, the musical score stands out as being particularly strong and contributes tremendously to the reconfiguration of the film's overall mood. The following interview with Phil Brookes gives us some valuable insight into this side of the production ([Figure 20.3](#)).

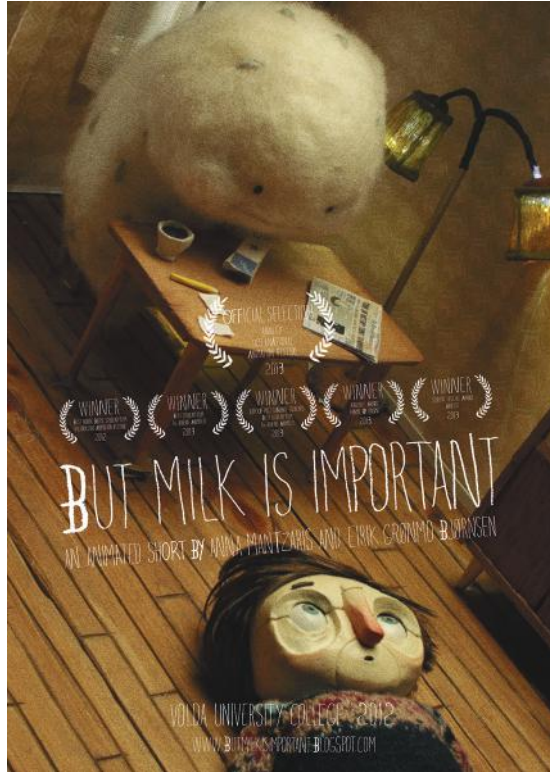


Figure 20.2

But Milk Is Important (Dir. Eirik Grønmo Bjørnsen/Anna Mantzaris) poster. (Courtesy of But Milk Is Important, ©2012.)

Have you found that being an independent musician has been a good fit when working with independent animators?

“I’ve found so many parallels, which is why I’ve loved falling into this line of work so much. Most of my projects have been animation, which just feels like a natural fit for me because animators seem to work from the ground up; they’re pretty much responsible for their whole creative vision. Especially the stop-motion animation I’ve been working on—they can completely create their own sets and build their own models. I completely relate to that because we’re both coming from the same place, so it’s almost like it leaves more room for the creative part, which I love.”

What is your musical background?

“I basically grew up teaching myself everything I know. I didn’t really get on in an academic environment, so I didn’t take music for GCSEs, for example; I just picked up my brother’s guitar one day and started playing it. Then eventually, I did go to university to study, and that’s where I met Eirik.

“There was an animator’s pitch evening where hardly any other musicians went along. I hadn’t looked much into animation before or even into making music for film, because it was something that seemed so out of my grasp. When you think of film



Figure 20.3

Phil Brookes composing for *But Milk Is Important*. (Courtesy of Leanne Brookes.)

music, you think of John Williams and Danny Elfman, big budget, huge scores—I never thought that was for me. When I watched Eirik go through his storyboard on this big screen, I really related to him, and so I got in touch with him and started making music.

“I worked with him on *The Crow Who Wore a Suit and Worked in an Office*. Then eventually, he went back to Norway to start working on his graduation film with Anna and recommended me, so that was really cool.”

In the case of either film, were you involved at all during the production, or only once the final animation had been completed?

“Obviously, stop-motion animation takes a long time, so if they had finished it before giving it to me to work on, that would have added more time to their process. So basically, I started working with the storyboard, which was just sketches. Then eventually, I would get drip-feeds of scenes that they’d finished so that I would be able to pick up on the actual, final timing. If I needed to match anything musically with the visuals, then eventually, I’d do it with the final piece, but I started composing pretty much when they started working.”

What would you say are the main advantages to working in this manner?

“I do feel like sometimes, music can be the last thing on a filmmaker’s mind. Because it’s postproduction, sometimes it can be a last-minute thing, but the way that it worked with Anna and Eirik (and then after that, a film I worked on called *Three’s a Crowd* with Trevor Hardy, another stop-motion animator) was they let me in at such an early level, I felt like I could do a much better job. I became a part of the furniture, a part of the atmosphere of their story, which was an amazing feeling.”

As well as complementing the animation itself, your score brilliantly interweaves with the film’s sound design, especially as the film progresses and gradually becomes more

threatening and claustrophobic. What sort of part did you play in this, and how was the atmosphere they were aiming for communicated to you?

“I do some of the sound design, musically, so when you hear lots of backmasking and reversed instruments, those parts are me; that’s something I love doing. The main sound mix itself was done by André Parklind, so he had a lot to do with the way that the atmosphere eventually turns, if not sinister, then certainly anxious.

“I could relate to the protagonist in the film a lot, actually, because if you’re an artist or a musician and you’re constantly working on something in the same room a lot, it gets to that point you might feel anxious and a bit claustrophobic. So that was how it was explained to me, that he finds it difficult to leave his room. I was also given reference material to give me some ideas, especially for the scene where the creature is following the main character down the hall. It’s almost like a horror scene, which was really fun.”

Did you have any interaction with the sound engineer?

“No, not at all. It was a really interesting process actually—I sent him my music, and he pieced it together with some of the sound work he had created, then sent it back. It was like almost a little European collective over the Internet. It was really interesting.”

As a composer, what would you say are the main appealing factors of working on an animation project?

“For me, when working with short or independent films—and especially animated films—it’s that I can express myself with such free reign. Obviously, I’m working to fulfill a director’s vision, so that’s my main objective, but they give me freedoms in a way that wouldn’t be the case on more commercial projects, or nonanimated films. There’s a sense of imagery and fantasy when it comes to the films I’ve worked on, where I can make music that just comes naturally to me. I’m not particularly into scores with big symphonies—not that they’re bad; I would just prefer to make smaller-level, interesting, experimental music, which seems to go hand in hand with a lot of the animation I’ve worked on.”

How else does it compare to composing for live action?

“In a lot of the animations I’ve worked on, I feel almost like I’m playing a part through my music, whereas in the live-action work I’ve done, it feels more like I’m the background guy, which is what a lot of composing is. That’s what I’ve found the difference to be so far. I find it fascinating, the different roles a composer can play” (Figure 20.4).

Can you talk a bit more about your involvement with *Three’s a Crowd*?

“I had loads of fun doing that. It’s a darker film than *But Milk Is Important*, but it had similar elements to it. I think that’s why Trevor came to me, because he’d seen *Milk* and really liked the part music played in the film. I think he similarly wanted the music to be another character in the film. With Anna and Eirik, even though they eventually pretty much let me create my own sound, they had a good idea of what they wanted, whereas Trevor had a different approach. He had completely finished his film and sent it to me to do pretty much whatever I wanted with it. That was a pretty interesting experience, and I used some similar approaches to those I had with *But Milk Is Important*, such as backmasking, lots of piano, and interesting percussion, while also emphasizing the movement of the models, with lots of different noises. It was amazing to work on; I loved it.”

For the benefit of animators who want to work with outside musicians for their independent project, can you offer some advice as to what to consider for a strong working relationship?



Figure 20.4

Phil Brookes composing for *But Milk Is Important*. (Courtesy of Leanne Brookes.)

“First and foremost, I like to establish a friendship with people—that’s how I work anyway. Generally, animations—like Trevor, Eirik, and Anna—are just really nice people, so that really helped. They were always so open minded to anything that I did, and if I sometimes went overboard and added too much—or came up with something that was a bit underwhelming—they’d really explain themselves in such a way that I could understand. We’d created our own dialect, that always helps, because musicians, animators, and directors can have different ways of speaking that probably don’t mesh all the time. I eventually learned about the animation process but to begin with involving any technical terms I wouldn’t have known. Similarly to them, if I started going on about BPM or other music-specific terms, it would have been confusing. So it was establishing a relationship in terms of what both parties were comfortable with. Being respectful of one another’s vision and creative process usually goes a long way.”

By contrast, what type of attitudes or behaviors have you encountered that have complicated the process?

“Unreal expectations and devaluation of the musical process has been a problem sometimes, especially when you’re starting out and you’re working with people who are also on the same level. I’m not quite sure if all universities or film schools teach this sort of thing, but most of the film students I’ve worked with are amazing, while some of them haven’t

necessarily been told about the musical process, so they think that it's a last port of call and don't give it as much thought or value. A lot of the time, people expect me to work for free, or they'll expect me to create a huge orchestral piece in a short period of time. I think it's just a case of understanding; I don't think anyone's purposefully disrespectful or completely thinks of music as nonimportant. It's just perhaps some people haven't understood—much like I wouldn't have understood the filmmaking process when I started.”

To get a clearer understanding of this crucial stage of production, we can look back at some of the films we've previously explored.

Being Selective

As pivotal a role as music can play in a film, in some instances, it achieves more in its absence. Adam Elliot's student short *Uncle*, along with the companion films *Cousin* and *Brother* that followed in swift succession, is notable for being almost entirely without any music whatsoever. Rather than a preplanned artistic choice, the reasoning behind this was largely the same as that which determined the minimal look of the films.

“As a student filmmaker, you have to be very economical, so with *Uncle*, my aesthetic was purely based on lack of money. None of the characters walked, and they talked very little, and similarly, I just knew that I wouldn't have money to purchase music rights. I could have gotten some friends to compose something, but I've never been a fan of composed music, because I like to know what I'm going to have well in advance.”

The absence of music in Adam's original trilogy does not come across as a budgetary choice, however. Allowing William McInnes's understated performance as the films' narrator to sit in the sound mix on its own, accompanied infrequently by minimal Foley work, on top of the ever-present audible film hiss (another artifact of the time period in which the films were made, again perhaps an unintended result of the small budget but responsible for an atmosphere that would be near impossible to recreate authentically with a digital sound mix), adds tremendously to the solemn tone of the film. Although certain limitations remain, the added resource makes for a sudden contrast when it comes to Adam's lengthier 2003 short *Harvie Krumpet*. In a way similar to how the increased budget affected the visual production values and color palette, the soundtrack also comes across as more ambitious in its scope.

“I think it wasn't until *Harvie Krumpet* that I was brave enough to start using music, and in that film, the music came first. I knew that I wanted Pachelbel's *Canon in D Major* in it somewhere because it's such a cliché, and Respighi's *Ancient Airs and Dancers* as credit music, but I also knew I wanted the song *God is Better than Football, God is Better than Beer* because that was such a ridiculous song I used to sing at Sunday school when I was forced to go to church. So all of that music ended up in there. Then with *Mary and Max* I've always been a big fan of Penguin Café Orchestra. It's such nourishing music, universal and timeless and all those things that I love. I know it had been used a lot in advertising and documentaries, but to my knowledge, nobody had ever used it in animation.”

In a rare instance of true filmmaker indulgence, a significant chunk—\$300,000—of the film's budget went toward the music rights for *Mary and Max*. It was undoubtedly a worthwhile investment, as the aforementioned nourishment of iconic Penguin Café Orchestra tunes *Perpetuum Mobile* and *Prelude and Yodel* became a huge part of the

film's identity during its marketing as well as within the movie itself. Also rounding out the music picks are Bert Kaempfert's *Swinging Safari* and Pink Martini's haunting rendition of *Que Sera, Sera*, all used to maximum effect at crucial points in the story, alongside a number of original cues composed by Dale Cornelius. Adam's shift from mainstream production to independent filmmaking when it came to *Ernie Biscuit* ultimately meant that the luxury of music licensing was not nearly as available as it had been before.

"The only piece of music I really paid a significant amount of money for is the music at the beginning and end of *Ernie Biscuit*, which is a very cheesy number one hit from the 1970s, from a Dutch detective series called *Eye Level*, by an English orchestra. The rest of the music in *Ernie Biscuit* was purely off the Internet, where I think it cost me \$100, but not of any high sound quality. I think that's one of the things that lets *Ernie Biscuit* down, is because I was experimenting with new materials with a really limited postproduction budget, so I think not just the music but the sound overall is pretty average."

A film whose storytelling approach is some distance removed from Adam's is *Sausage* by Robert Grievés (Figure 20.5). Without dialog or narration, the story's timing is hugely dependent on the character animation and visuals. One work around when taking this approach is to start with a piece of music that will facilitate the timing along the way. As Robert had such a clear concept of how the story would pace itself (having made the entire film twice), the entire film's animation was produced without any sound whatsoever, and attempts to score it with a temp track of found music during production only served to complicate the process. As all the sourced music that fit thematically came with its own structure, it proved impossible to find a way to match up cues to the visuals being created. The final film, however, is presented a glorious, rich score by Dan Radclyffe that matches the film in tone and playfulness and syncs up perfectly to each action beat.

"What you're enjoying is the genius of the composer," Robert assures. "It wasn't an easy journey; I went through a few different people, but I found the right guy, who was someone who could just riff off of things in a really spontaneous way. I had a wonderful experience as well with the music where I had sat with the composer for about 3 days in his studio and we just worked through everything together, so I just shadowed him. I *hope* I gave him



Figure 20.5

Still from *Sausage* (Dir. Robert Grievés). (Courtesy of Robert Grievés, ©2013.)

enough space that he felt he was making his thing; I'm pretty sure he did, as it is definitely his soundtrack. I was just there making sure things stayed narratively on track.”

Doug TenNapel, the creative driving force behind *Armikrog*, has a similarly strong opinion of his project's composer Terry Taylor, with whom he had previously collaborated on many projects spanning his career in both games and television. Due to their consistent working history, which included the score to *Armikrog*'s spiritual predecessor *The Neverhood*, Terry was a natural, intuitive fit for the project.

“Being a writer, when it comes to all my creative guys, like Ed and Mike as game designers, animators, or voice talent, I come from the art form as an artist and not as an executive. This is probably why I part ways with almost every executive I've met in Hollywood who hasn't worked in the arts. I think you get the best art from artists by pushing the responsibility on them to entertain and figure it out. I can tell them what the problem is, but I will not give them the solution. There are a lot of executives who go, ‘Never give a note without a suggestion’—I do not give a suggestion; I just give a note and say, ‘I don't like this.’”

The effectiveness of this approach is only assured by Doug maintaining a hands-on presence throughout the project, as the risk factor of having a composer go off on his/her own with notes—especially ones that are purposefully vague—is too high. It's unreasonable to assume that your composer will telepathically know exactly what will work; that is an unfair expectation to place on him/her. As talented as any composer is, it's an outright impossibility to get into your head as a director. Robert Grieves' own attitude on the matter is more or less the same.

“With *Sausage*, I really needed to be there; he'd put some mood in there, and I'd say, ‘It sounds cool, but it really doesn't reflect the motivation of the character at that moment,’ and it's stuff that you don't necessarily know until you hear it” (Figure 20.6).

The latter point is worth considering—a director without a musical background is, in fact, quite likely to not have a preexisting idea for the film's score that will tangibly exist. This makes the burden of a composer even greater if they are flying blind with no frame of reference for what you're hoping to achieve or evoke. In Doug TenNapel's experience, the solution—or, at the very least, the springboard that will bring a solution closer—is to consider what is already out there.*

“When I did *The Neverhood*, I introduced Terry to blues artists like Leon Redbone and The Squirrel Nut Zippers, and on *Armikrog*, I gave him a bunch of early Flaming Lips and Talking Heads, things like that—my favorite kind of art major music! It's a giant space epic, but it's not literal space. This is not an alien; this is a parallel universe where it's almost like an art world, so he has to be artistic. It shook him in this direction, where it's not that I forced him to do anything; *he* found his own way. He's always a brilliant musician who can write anything really; he's done country, he's done space, he's done rock, and he can do folk and all these different kinds of music. I'm not a musician at all, so I just want him to surprise me, and I want *Armikrog* to have this unique presence. I know that music's supposed to tell an emotional story and can keep you in a

* For clarification, the last thing you actually want to do is merely present a composer with a bunch of preexisting songs to plagiarize. It should go without saying, but it's alarming how many clients and fellow auteurs have had so shaky a knowledge of the world of music licensing and copyright as to potentially land them in trouble.



Figure 20.6

Still from *Sausage* (Dir. Robert Grievous). (Courtesy of Robert Grievous, ©2013.)

place that the narrative just can't hit. It's almost like I want Terry to be in charge of the psychology of *Armikrog*, so I just need to tell him what the psychology is, and he figures it out. It's angsty; it's moody; it's heroic, so there are anthems; it deals with a baby, so there are lullabies. So he came back with bizarre, layered themes that weren't what I expected, but he got it!"

Other options available to filmmakers in need of a musical accompaniment to their film, if not a meticulously composed score, can be relatively affordable, if not outright free, though this can be perilous too. Grabbing a piece of music you like from a website that lists it as "free to use" is not exactly a binding legal contract, so it's always best to do that extra bit of homework to make sure that slotting a piece of production music into your film is in fact legal to do. If you have some spending money, purchasing tracks to use from online production libraries won't break the bank necessarily, though there are a fair few formalities that can eat up a lot of time if you are working without a dedicated production manager to handle that side of things. For the sake of argument, the most advisable low- to no-budget approach is to canvas online royalty-free music libraries that will often-times charge a single fee for either a single piece of music or library collection. Another alternative is to eliminate the middleman and go straight to the source, as Aidan McAteer found himself doing when on the hunt for the perfect piano accompaniment to his silent movie-era tribute *A Gentleman's Guide to Villainy*.

"I've never met Kevin!" Aidan says of the film's music scribe Kevin MacLeod, "but he's a fantastic man." Via his online outlet Incompetech,* the composer licenses his own music, a practice among composers that is becoming more and more common. In instances such as short films with credits sections and online video descriptions that allow for him to be

* <http://incompetech.com>

actively credited, the use of a free Creative Commons license to use the music is a possibility. “It’s an incredibly generous thing to do.”

“I was looking for music, knowing I didn’t want dialog—which also helped inform the silent-movie aesthetic—because if I recorded dialog, I most likely wouldn’t do it very well. As far as music goes, I kind of noodle a bit on the guitar, but I can’t *play* anything. So I was looking for royalty-free music when I came across Kevin’s site, which had a silent-movie section. I found this track which was the appropriate length (another thing where DepicT!’s 90-second limit helps*); it was a great exercise in so far as what I could use and what I could make out of it, with the resources available.”

As per the conditions of the license, MacLeod is given due credit as the film’s composer, Aidan later getting in touch to show him the final result. “He may not have even known that I was even doing it until he’d seen the final thing, but he was very happy with it.”

Self-Sufficiency

The aforementioned serves as another example of the ever-rising benefits of intercontinental collaboration and how independent creatives the world over can support one another. Of course, it’s entirely possible that you happen to have your own clear understanding of sound design, score composition, or both. In my auteur film work, I’ve often found that having a sideline career in music and sound production has facilitated the easiest path to a finished film. Taking on these roles on top of directing the film is a time-saver in the sense of eliminating lengthy discussions on what you aim to evoke. Now, I’m not suggesting that everyone go out and train themselves to be composers or sound artists, and truth be told, it may be the best thing for your film for you to step aside and let someone else take on the role rather than spread yourself thin. If a film of mine, for example, called for country music, folk songs, or an elaborate, classical score, I would not think twice about bringing in a composer more suited to these genres, as I know they are not my strengths. Sometimes, going it alone is the most suitable route for your film’s identity.

Andy Martin, himself a musician as well as an animation director, was able to apply his own ability when closing out his anthology film *The Planets*, by rounding off his year-long endeavor in traditional film fashion, with a musical number.

“None of *The Planets* was particularly well planned except for the last month, Planet Twelve in December, where I knew exactly what I wanted to do: I knew I wanted it to be a song (Figure 20.7); I needed it to tie everything up, to include what we’d seen and it have some finality to it so you knew this was the end, a full-stop.”

After a first pass at a song in July, deemed unlistenable when played to his family, his second attempt proved a lot more fitting and thematically in-line with the rest of the film.

“It has a bit of pathos and melancholia as well as being quite funny, which is what I wanted it to be. I gave myself a little bit longer to animate that planet as well, because I didn’t have another one starting afterwards.”

Supporting the notion that relinquishing control even with a musical background of one’s own can be the most advisable option, Benjamin Arcand’s *Wackatdooo* benefited

* See Chapter 14.

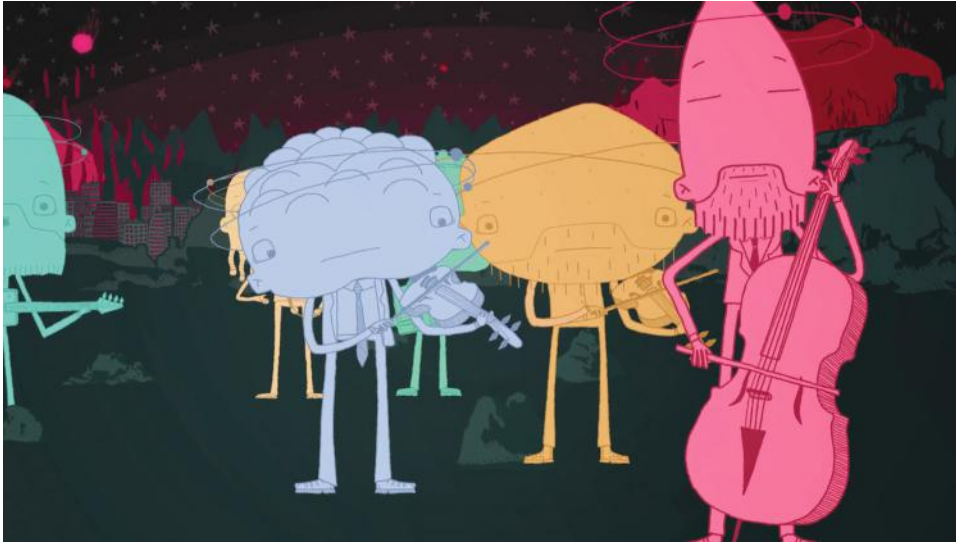


Figure 20.7

Still from *Planet Twelve*. (Courtesy of Andy Martin, ©2013.)

from handing over the reins to a composer he instinctively knew would do a better job. With music ever-present throughout the film, Benjamin originally timed the animation-in-progress to a placeholder soundtrack in the form of jazz standards from the early twentieth century, knowing that the final accompaniment would be in the same stylistic vein and tempo. Using this as a springboard to help inspire how the beats were timed out, this straight-ahead storyboard organically morphed into an animatic (Figure 20.8).

“I did a couple of the scenes using the placeholder music. There’s a double-bounce walk at one point where I knew I wanted that tempo, so I stuck to it. Let’s say it was an eight-frame beat; I would write it down, and when it came time to record the real song, I asked the composer to keep the music to the tempo, using a metronome.”

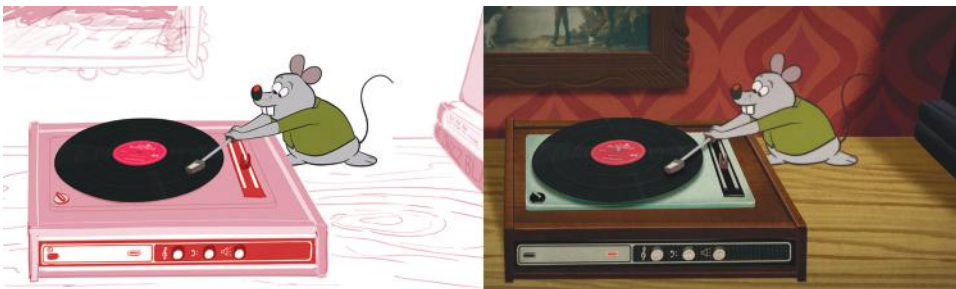


Figure 20.8

Wackatdoo character animation. (Courtesy of Benjamin Arcand, ©2014.)

Taking on music and sound duties was composer and drummer François-Xavier Paquin, a longtime friend and bandmate of Benjamin's over the years. With a musical background of his own, Benjamin's reasons for reaching out to an outside composer are simple—"He's better than me at music! He has a master's degree in composition and jazz performance. He also likes cartoons a lot, and cartoon music, so with me going into cartoons, it worked well.

"I could not have done what he did. I don't know about jazz; as a musician, I play rock-and-roll guitars. So he went ahead and composed all the parts for it, then we hired some jazz musician friends of his. We had a very low budget; I mean it was like 50 bucks and a few beers! They were kind enough to make it because it was short and sweet, and since they're all pros, they came in and only needed 1 day for each session. In the first session, we had the rhythm section—just banjo, upright bass, and drums. After that, we went with the trombone, saxophone, trumpet, and that was it! It only took a couple of takes for us to have everything we needed."

Once the final music was composed and recorded, Benjamin used the new musical backdrop to tighten up the timing of the animatic, remedy any story or continuity issues, and, once the proper flow of the film was firmly established, begin work proper on the animation. As anyone who has seen the film will attest, François-Xavier's considered work on the music absolutely brings out the best in the film's equally dynamic visuals, something that may not have been achieved otherwise (Figures 20.9 and 20.10).

Back to *The Planets*, the primary advantage of having an awareness of music composition and performance as far as director Andy Martin is concerned is just how much it can assist with timing, something crucial to all animation production. Being your own film's composer can feed into the creative process from both ends. Animation on a scene, for example, can begin with a set tempo and tone, which can then be compositionally embellished to complement the visuals once they have come together.



Figure 20.9

Still from *Wackatdoo* (Dir. Benjamin Arcand). (Courtesy of Benjamin Arcand, ©2014.)

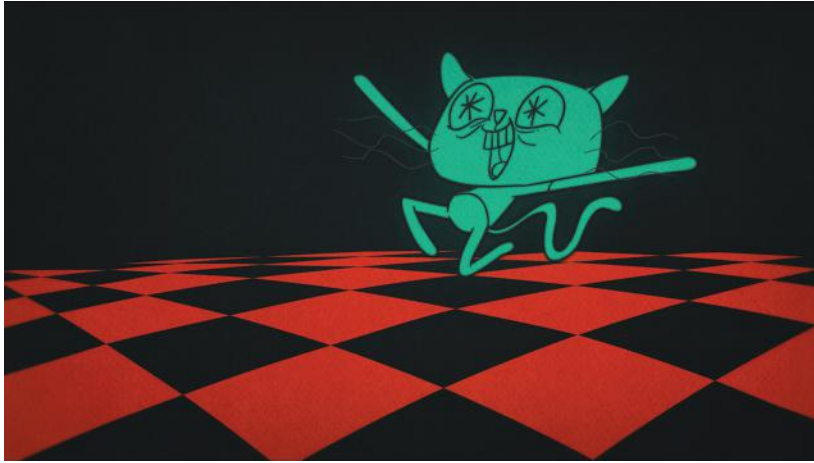


Figure 20.10

Still from *Wackatdoo* (Dir. Benjamin Arcand). (Courtesy of Benjamin Arcand, ©2014.)

“Generally, I do the music first and then animate to it, but I can switch between the two. The animation might kick off an idea that I think would be nice to add punch to in the music; then I can go back to the music and do them in tandem with each other. I try and do funny stuff, and I think having a sense of musical timing helps with comedy timing. I think they usually work hand in hand: you’ve got a buildup and then a release with music; it’s the same with a joke. Also with storytelling, when you want something that feels plaintive and emotional, there’s a way of doing that with music (switch it to a minor key and it feels sad; a major key, you’re upbeat). Similarly, with design and storytelling, you can take these basic elements and fundamentals and apply them to both things.

“I think having different disciplines helps give your work an individual tone to it. The music side for me gives my films just a little touch that’s very much my thing. If I used an outside sound designer, I’d probably have a beautiful soundtrack, probably better than what I can do, but I think it would lose that feel of what I have when I do it myself. How you want something to look and sound is not necessarily how it will come out, but in striving to do that, you can achieve your own unique style.”

This philosophy is especially relevant to the film work of PES, in keeping with the careful approach taken with his animation, which we explored in [Chapter 13](#). While the choice of bric-a-brac and household objects used to represent, amongst other things, food preparation certainly goes a long way in terms of selling the film as believably surreal, the true suspender of disbelief is the diligence when it comes to his sound design. It is a process that appeals to both him and his audience.

“I think there’s a particular degree of fascination with the sound design that I do that brings it together. It takes one thing and makes it believable. Very realistic sound design is something of an unsung hero that makes the images come to life, and it *really* makes the jokes come alive. It makes something happen in the viewer’s brain that I think is interesting, which is that you’re seeing one thing—a grenade, for example, with someone cutting into it—but *hearing* an avocado.”

The combination heightens the authenticity of the scene tremendously—if heard on its own, the sound would strike a listener as nothing more exceptional than standard kitchen ambiance; similarly, if viewed while the audio is muted, the transformative quality of the animation remains but doesn't carry with it nearly as much impact. It speaks volumes about the compensatory power of sound and just how much of a role it plays in how our brains process our environment. We clearly see a grenade being sliced, but the sound of an avocado instantly transfigures the reality of the film and makes it seem like the most natural thing in the world.

“That’s an interesting thing. There’s a sort of mystery about it that is one of the beauties of stop-motion, that everything is visually 100% realistic because it’s a photographic medium, and the sound can be very realistic, yet the concept is completely fanciful, so there’s a collision of the hyperreal and the surreal.”

One of the common audience reactions to work such as PES’s is an inherent degree of satisfaction that comes with them (Figure 20.11). For reasons similar to the inexplicable neurochemical responses that induce satisfaction when we pop bubble wrap, certain visual and auditory combinations can prompt a certain sense of gratification. More often than not, this works against us when we experience the opposite reaction triggered by bad sound design (something we’ll explore later in this chapter), but in the films of PES, the execution makes for a very fulfilling watch.*

“I don’t think about this while I’m shooting or creating sound; I only try to create the most satisfying sounds to match the picture that please me. I was curious to see that there was this whole community of people who study and look at my work, focusing on that one element of the ‘satisfying’ sounds, such as the snapback of a slinky, the crinkling of this, the crunching of that...I don’t really profess to do any more than match the picture with the sound, but it’s funny to see the responses.”

Another example of a bold, visually driven film whose success ultimately hinges on the sound would be Greg McLeod’s 365 project. As with Andy Martin and PES, sound is an area of production Greg chooses to take on himself (Figure 20.12).

“I did the sound in general, every day, because I’ve always loved it. I’ve always been in recording studios and have always enjoyed sound.”

Given the free-form nature of the project, and that literally each second of sound design was isolated from whichever preceded or followed, a certain degree of international collaboration came into play. Sound designers Tom Angell, David Kamp, and a host of others donated an assortment of one-off noises that found their way into the mix, including vocal contributions.

“We had people like David Tennant and Adam Buxton who we were doing other work with; we would just ask them to give us a word to use. I recorded things out and about, so there were also some found sounds. I think the really important thing was that each mini 1-second movie had its own 1-second soundtrack that was very specific, because if there’d just been music over it all, I don’t think it would have had the same impact. If you try to watch it without the sound on it, it’s almost impossible; your brain almost needs the sound there to anchor the timing. With sound, you can actually make a second feel longer than it is, which is quite interesting, so I had a lot of fun with that.”

* I could wax hypothetical about the possible neurochemical reasoning behind this, but I am no neurochemist, for many reasons including that I’m fairly certain “neurochemist” is not a profession, or even a word at all.



Figure 20.11

Still from *Western Spaghetti* (Dir. PES). (Courtesy of PES, ©2008.)



Figure 20.12

Still from *365* (Dir. Brothers McLeod). (Courtesy of The Brothers McLeod, ©2014.)

Another director who will actively seek to get her hands dirty when it comes to the sound mix is *Bottle* and *Move Mountain* director Kirsten Lepore, whose films all boast arresting soundscapes. In a similar manner to the work of PES, *Bottle*'s expertly crafted foley work absolutely infuses the impossible sand and snow beings with life, not through auditory anthropomorphization (such as adding humanistic sounds or voices) but by retaining their material qualities. Despite the slight time-lapse judder of filming the animation outside, the sound is authentic enough to sell the characters as “alive” instantly. Similarly, *Move Mountain* embraces a highly considered approach to the exterior ambiance, though with the addition of musical elements such as its acapella score and party sequence.

“I don’t know the exact quote,* but someone once said that sound is 70% of an animation—which I think is true. It’s so disappointing when a good animation has a lackluster soundtrack, or sound that was thrown in as an afterthought. You can describe a space and situation with sound the way visuals cannot. Because of this, I always take great care with my soundtracks and have always done all the sound design myself. I usually have a professional check my final mixes and create my 5.1, but I do all the design and the rough mix alone, for the most part.

“I did, however, collaborate with my friend and former CalArts classmate Paul Fraser on my first sound pass of *Move Mountain* and on several client projects. He always does an amazing job and brings some really interesting sound work to the table (Figure 20.13).

“In terms of music, I also like to collaborate with my sisters—my sister Chelsea is a really talented composer—mainly because they totally get and share my musical tastes. Our mother is a music teacher, and we each grew up playing several instruments, so it seemed to make sense to collaborate. I also have a hard time trusting other musicians since I usually have a super specific idea of what I’m looking for musically. If you haven’t already noticed, I’m a bit of a control-freak.”

Relinquishing control is hard for many, though if it is to someone you trust and have built up a rapport with (as discussed earlier), sometimes it can be the best thing to prevent burnout. Though Kirsten’s commitment is admirable—and clearly a successful approach—having others take on some of the load does not automatically mean the film has to lose your stamp as its director. With some variable experience under his belt, filmmaker Matt Walker has found that having a certain focus when directing is no bad thing.

“With sound, it’s always really important, but that’s not my strength, so unless I have a very clear idea of how I want the sound to be, I’m usually happy to trust in whoever is doing the sound or music, and usually, they’ve done a fine job of it, so I’ve been happy. *Operator* is the only film of mine that I did the sound myself. With *Astronauts*, I was very fortunate to have two guys from the film course offer to do the sound. But then, *John and Karen*, *Little Face*, and all of my commercial work has been working with sound people (Figure 20.14).

“I always pay *attention* to the sound, but until I’m actually *doing* it, I don’t really think about it as much. I think *Astronauts* is the only film where the sound has been as important, outside of just creating the right atmosphere. In that film, there are a lot of moments that played with the sound, whether it’s the air being sucked out of the spaceship and it going silent, or the timing of the beeping of when a button’s pressed. With the other films, the sound was important, but not as critical to the humor, I guess.”

* “A truth whispered among animators is that 70% of a show’s impact comes from the soundtrack.” —Michael Dougherty, *The Animation Book* (Ed. Kit Laybourne, 1998)



Figure 20.13

Still from *Move Mountain* (Dir. Kirsten Lepore). (Courtesy of Kirsten Lepore, ©2013.)



Figure 20.14

Still from *John and Karen* (Dir. Matthew Walker). (Courtesy of ArthurCox Ltd, ©2007.)

Approaches to Sound Construction

I shall not pretend for a moment that a comprehensive breakdown of how to tackle your sound mix can be put across in a few paragraphs. As with other areas of this book that refer to the hard craft of production itself, with sound, there is a great deal of territory to cover for which further reading and research is highly advisable. That being said, as sound design is something of a personal passion—and bad sound design something of a personal

bugbear—there are certain key areas worth discussing as a springboard for further education on the subject.

Think about the use of sound in wildlife documentaries, where you are witnessing animal activity such as lions engaged in a territorial scuffle that would necessitate filming from much further away than normal. Beyond a certain distance, it becomes impossible to record audio with even the most high-end equipment, yet in the documentary, the sound of the fight can clearly be heard. So what happened there?

This will usually be the result of a clever combination of sound design and Foley artistry. The Foley artist's role is to invent or replicate the landscape of sound, sometimes in real time and with the aid of props (the name of the practise originates from its inventor, Jack Foley, whose approach to sound production for film set a precedent as far back as the 1920s). For example, literally dragging objects or even oneself through a sandbox brought into a recording studio would be timed to match the video of a lion being pulled across the ground by its opponent. All sorts of different approaches can be used to create sound that works on film, even if its source is wildly different than what is being seen onscreen. Also worth mentioning, alongside the multitude of short documentary vignettes one can easily search for online to observe the process, is Peter Strickland's 2012 feature *Berberian Sound Studio*, a wonderfully dark work of live-action fiction in which Toby Jones plays a beleaguered Foley artist who reluctantly spends his days smashing up produce to create sounds for a barbaric Italian slasher film. One moment of my own Foley work I'll afford some personal pride toward is, after much trial and error, happening upon the sound of torn, cooked chicken flesh timed to a character getting out of a leather couch his bare skin is stuck to. Just for the record, it doesn't always have to be gross, but if it works, it works (Figure 20.15).

In animation, there is always this potential to combine conventional approaches with cartoonish embellishment, as there's a little extra artistic license granted than when dealing with live action. To illustrate this spectrum, take two obvious examples from popular culture: On one end, *The Simpsons* uses, for the most part, genuinely authentic sound



Figure 20.15

Still from *House Guest* (Dir. Ben Mitchell). (Courtesy of Ben Mitchell, ©2008.)

design to ground it in a certain reality; when a character such as Homer is hurt, the thud of his fall or the crunch of his bones is realistic enough to give you a very real idea of his pain. On the other end, when a character from a classic *Looney Tunes* short is squashed, blown up, or propelled in whatever manner deemed fit, the sounds chosen more often than not have no grounding in reality, coming from props, instruments, or vocal performances, sometimes with additional modifications such as being sped up, slowed down, or reversed. If dealing with narrative, the approach you'll wish to take with your film will most likely be somewhere between these two camps, contemporary animation for older audiences generally tending to lean more toward the former, more realistic end of the spectrum, with children's and preschool animation more the latter.

Out in the Field

Gathering your sounds online may not be the best route for your film, especially if you are after specific audio that cannot be categorized by metadata alone. You can sift through hundreds of footsteps, splashes, crunches, or creaks, and all the while, the exact sound you're after may prove elusive. The other complicating factor of gathering sound from multiple sources is the likelihood that they will have been captured under fluctuating conditions with equipment of varying quality. If your characters sound like they're in an open field one moment and a coffee can the next, audiences will notice instantly. It's a very identifiable instance of lazy inconsistency yet remains a pitfall of indie animation to this day.

When dealing with a typical narrative short, good sound—as with good editing and most of the postproduction process—carries with it the burden of being pretty much thankless. The best response an authentic sound mix can get is none at all. Our brains are wired to always take in the elaborate array of incidental sounds constantly around us, so if the sound mix has been successful to the point of suspension of disbelief, your audience shouldn't even notice it. Yet the slightest mistake when it comes to quality or timing will stick out like a sore thumb. The dices are not loaded in the sound designer's favor, but that's the way it's gotta be, I'm afraid.

While there is a great deal of nuance and artistry that separates competent sound design from expert sound design, the mainstays of *in*competent sound design are far more blatant. With that in mind, I'll wrap up this chapter with three major hazards that should be easy enough to sidestep from the get-go.

The Hiss Factor

All recording equipment will pick up a certain degree of hiss, which is usually a combination of ambient noise or even the internal mechanism of the microphone itself. In a professional studio environment, this will be negligible, but if combining professionally recorded dialog with an assortment of field-recorded or externally sourced sound effects, the varying degrees of hiss accompanying each effect can be jarring. Ideally, you should just toss a low-quality sound for one recorded under better conditions, but if that's absolutely not an option, there are some workarounds ([Figure 20.16](#)).

Noise reduction is an advisable first port of call and a function of most audio editing software. The process essentially examines the waveform of the ambient hiss of selected audio on its own when no sounds or dialog are present, and then, once identified, eliminates it, leaving only the dialog or sound effects remaining. The drawback of this process

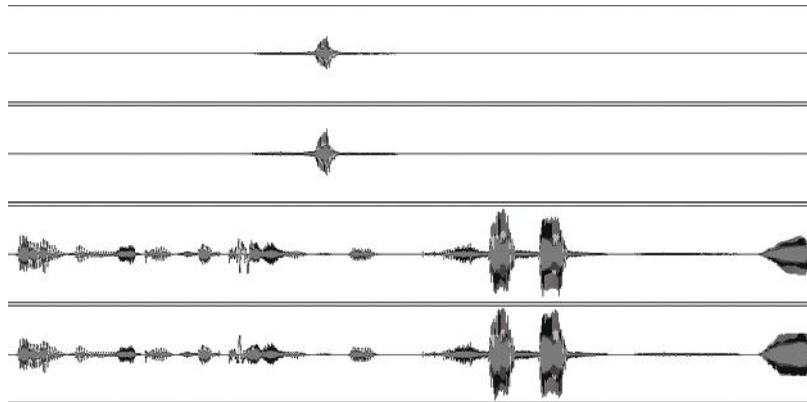


Figure 20.16

The top audio track features an externally-sourced sound effect being added to the mix. Note the visible auditory hiss that surrounds it—removing this will make the sound effect far less jarring.

is that the remaining sound can be distorted as a consequence; if the hiss is quiet, the difference won't be too noticeable, but if filtering out loud ambiance, your end result will wind up sounding horribly muffled or underwater. A combination of software capability and the recording itself will be at play here, so it's worth evaluating whether or not this is the best solution on a case-by-case basis.

For very short sound effects, you may not need to filter out the hiss for its minimal duration, but it's crucial to take out any before or after hiss so your sound effect isn't essentially screaming out to the audience, "Oh, hi guys! I'm not from around here! What's shaking?" The hiss will be easily identifiable as part of the waveform itself and, as such, easy enough to isolate and silence. To eliminate the risk of a pop effect (more on this next), you may need to bookend the effect with a very brief fade-in and fade-out.

The Pop Factor

Another sound issue that will furrow your audience's brows comes from splicing in audio haphazardly. This, along with the aforementioned hiss factor, is a common issue for those who create their soundtrack within the animation software itself, by just dropping effects and dialog onto a timeline. I implore you, *don't do that*.

This makes sense as far as getting your timing right, but if you don't want to undermine the hard work that's gone into the visuals of your film, you'll really want to export the timed audio and give it proper mixing attention (Figure 20.17). One area is getting rid of clicks and pops. So what are these, and what causes them?

They're essentially the result of a waveform that has been hastily cut or edited, so the sound will begin at a point when the waveform is not on the central amplitude line. The point at which the waveform jumps in the preceding illustration will create a click; the further apart the jump, the more aggravatingly noticeable.

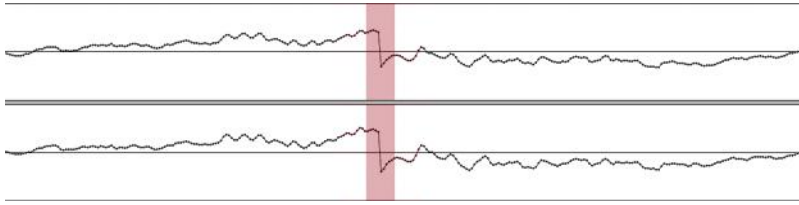


Figure 20.17

The highlighted dip between points of a waveform denotes a hasty edit. If left as-is, this will create a “pop” in the soundtrack.

This largely explains why the audio on a vinyl record will start to crackle and pop over time—the frequent running of the needle over the groove of the record, whose shape has been etched in based on the waveform of the recorded audio, will eventually cause physical wear and produce tiny gouges, which have the same auditory effect as the jumps illustrated in the previous figure. Okay, we get it—I’m old.

What’s most infuriating about this issue when left in is just how much of an easy fix it is. Even if the sound required is sudden and abrupt, applying the smallest fade or even manually editing the points of your waveform will take no time at all and have no auditory effect save for eliminating the pop itself. Some software even has an automatic means of detecting these pops and clicks and will do it all for you in one pass, so there’s really nil excuse. Smooth out your pops, people!

The “Oh God, My Ears” Factor

Dynamic range. It’s a very gentle art, my friends. This is basically the difference between your film’s quietest and loudest moments, and when done right, it can massively improve the authenticity of your film’s soundscape (Figure 20.18). When done wrong, your film will have the comfort level of an Internet screamer video. There are two main offenders in this arena. The first is nonambient sound effects, especially when gathered from multiple sources, whose volume levels have no bearing on reality. When taking on your own mix, really take the time to consider how prominent or obscured each instance of sound should be and whether it carries across when viewed with the animation.

The second major slip-up frequently comes with dialog. The volume difference between a quiet, thoughtful rumination and an emphatically projected speech of passion will be substantial, and you will most likely want to curb it depending on the quality of mic or recording conditions. Applying compression to dialog is perhaps the best way to keep these discrepancies curtailed so as to not be jarring (important point—compression and normalization are not the same thing). In both instances, be sure to test that your dynamic range translates to different listening scenarios, from the tinny speaker of your smartphone or laptop to the loudest studio/stereo equipment you can get your hands on. Most crucially, don’t purely mix your sound with or without headphones—be sure to test it thoroughly under both conditions throughout.

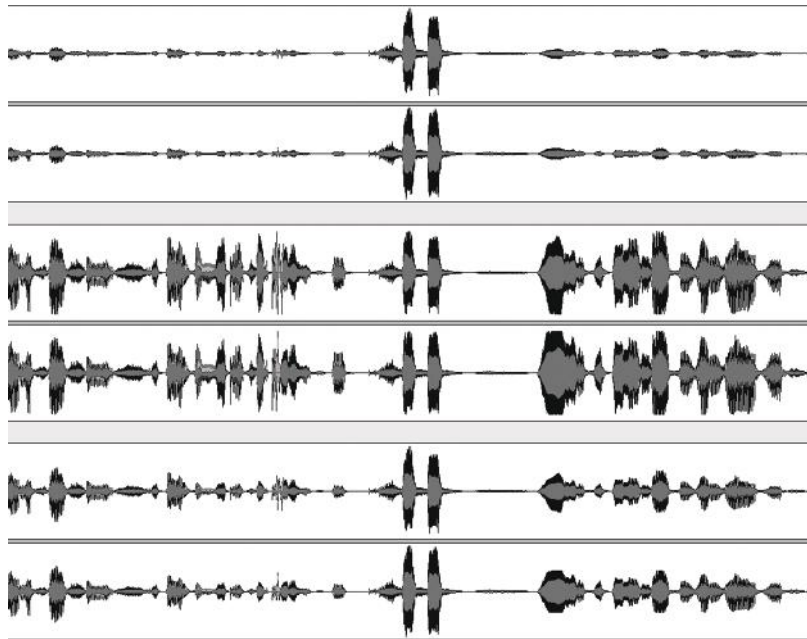


Figure 20.18

The top audio track shows recorded dialog with a high dynamic range where the two instances of louder noise will stand out too much. The middle track shows the same audio after being highly compressed, giving the entire dialog track consistent volume. The bottom track shows a medium level of compression, where a change in volume remains if the impact of it is desirable, while not being so vastly different in volume as to give the audience a heart attack.

21

Putting Yourself Out There

After weeks, months, perhaps even years of blood, sweat, tears, and whatever other bodily fluids you may have sacrificed along the way, it finally happens. After every shot has slotted into the project timeline; after every hair-pulling liaison with various members of your postproduction crew has borne fruit; after the absolute, final, this-is-it, no-more-tweaking, definitive render announces its conclusion with its life-affirming “ding”—you’ve done it. You have yourself a film, my friend.

Bask in it. Give it a watch and revel in its completion. Show it to your folks, your friends, that barista you fancy; prove that all this time, you haven’t just been making up that you’re a filmmaker to appear bohemian. Or do none of the above and just catch up on what’s sure to be a long stretch of much-needed and well-deserved sleep. Contented, blissful sleep.

Now wake up and get going, because it’s not over yet, not by a long shot. Thought you’d make a film and the rest would all slot into place, did you? Ah, sweet delusion. Allow me to bring you back to crushing reality.

Much as a curmudgeon like myself enjoys delivering bad news, in truth, this reality is not especially crushing, nor does having a finished animation shackle you with obligation. It is, after all, your film, and you can do with it what you wish. You may want to just gift it to the world as a video upload literally minutes after its completion, which is certainly a route many have taken and gone on to receive acclaim from. There are even advantages to this, as touched upon in [Chapters 13](#) and [14](#) and will be delved into further in the next chapter from a distribution standpoint. Beyond the concept of distribution, however, is something

that many consider to be equally important (if not more so, creatively speaking). For many contemporary filmmakers, their work may solely belong in browser windows or tablet and smartphone screens, but to many others—yourself possibly included—the mileage a film can have, not to mention the life it can lead once out of your hands and in the world, is something you may wish to be present for. Seeing firsthand how the public receives your art is one of the most beneficial experiences one can have when it comes to artistic growth.

I'll ground myself before I start to overromanticize the notion, as my point is simple—get your film in front of people and be there to see how they react.

Why Submit Your Film to Festivals?

In this day and age, the only response to this question is a predictable, “Why not?” In the digital age, the festival landscape is ever changing, and with each iteration, the process of film submission gets increasingly simpler and more streamlined. From a personal frame of reference that goes back to the long, long-ago days of the late-noughties, submitting to festivals still proved something of a hassle. More often than not, it was a requirement to deliver films on physical media, which involved a case-by-case grappling with shipping costs and international customs parameters, not to mention handwriting/signing entry forms and statements, labeling DVDs and CDs, and multiple trips to the post office. Then, with a film having been accepted, screening formats were usually again limited to the physical—a progressive festival would maybe play DVDs, while others were still piecing together program from MiniDV tapes or the wonderful world of DigiBeta. Going back less than a decade further, some festivals were still dealing with VHS. Bearing all this in mind, the ease of filling in online forms, transferring high-definition (HD) content, and the variety of organizations set up specifically to simplify the process make festival submission something of a no-brainer today (Figure 21.1).

One such organization is Animation Festivals,* a website set up by Slurpy Studios producer and managing director Aaron Wood in 2009. The site serves as a festival directory for filmmakers to browse events in order of name, event dates, submission deadlines, territories, and entry fees. While similar such directories that group film festivals exist, Animation Festivals prioritizes those that are exclusively animation or have animation as a major category.

“Although you can submit your animated film to most festivals, we preferred the idea of meeting like-minded people,” Aaron reasons. “Animators will most likely want to meet other animators more than live-action filmmakers. So we put this list together, not just for people to submit their film, but so they could actually look up festivals, even if they just wanted to visit them.”

The directory began life as a database made up of information collated by Slurpy's creative director Katie Steed during the festival run of her multi-award-winning student film *Death by Scrabble* (2007) (Figure 21.2). Keeping tabs on the performance and progress of the film, Katie took the advisable approach of keeping an Excel spreadsheet documenting every festival the film was sent to, with each event's respective URLs, contact information, and decision as to whether or not the film had been accepted. As films are generally considered eligible for most festivals during the first 2 years of

* <http://www.animation-festivals.com/>



Figure 21.1

A bygone era; various screeners for my films produced between 2008 and 2010, before festivals mercifully switched to digital projection.

completion, this approach is recommended so as to avoid resubmitting to the same event 2 years in a row.

“At the end of the film’s festival run, Katie had an Excel spreadsheet of around 200 festivals. At the time, we considered just putting it on the company blog, as a useful list of festivals for animators. We later realized that we could turn this into a more substantial website and keep it updated, specifying that it was just for animation festivals.”

While daily maintenance of a 200-plus festival database would have proved unfeasible, Aaron’s prior background in website design enabled him to build an open-to-all interface so that anyone with a festival to add might register and submit it. With notifications in place to let Aaron know if any contributors were abusing the system, the directory was able to grow and stay up-to-date relatively simply. This system also ensured that festival directors could edit and reedit details of their events should circumstances change from year to year.

“That’s probably why it’s still going today, because of that feature. Otherwise, there’s no way that it would not have become outdated very quickly.”

As somebody who has personally been submitting films to festivals semiregularly for nearly a decade, I can say that one sad fact is that not all festivals are everlasting.



Figure 21.2

Still from *Death by Scrabble* (Dir. Katie Steed), the film whose festival run put animation-festivals.com in motion. (Courtesy of Katie Steed/Slurpy Studios, ©2007.)

Sometimes, due to a lack of popularity or lack of governmental backing, events need to become biannual or shut down altogether. Even some of the major festivals have been known to take the odd year off when circumstances have been particularly tough. Though it's near impossible to implement an automated system that would track which festivals go extinct or get put on hiatus, Aaron has a three-pronged approach to making sure Animation Festivals stays on top of things and keeps its listings as relevant as possible.

“First of all, it can come from having a good rapport with festival directors, who will get in touch personally and explain that a festival is no longer running and the reasons why. The second way is similar in that festival directors can also go in and simply press a ‘delete’ button that will send an e-mail to me with their reason for removing it. Then there are those types of festivals that do just disappear and nobody knows what’s happened to them, and that’s a manual consideration. Once a year, I will go through and check the links for each website to see if the festival is still running, and then it’s a matter of me just taking it down manually if not. It’s a shame that some of them come to an end—it’s especially a shame when it’s a purely animation festival that has closed its doors.”

As well as websites of festival listings such as Animation Festivals, online submission options have steadily increased, with virtually all major festivals presently accepting digital submissions, either through their website or through submission portals they have partnered with. Sites such as Shortfilmdepot, reelport, FilmFreeway, Festival Focus, Withoutabox, FilmFestivalLife, and Festhome, among others, are specifically set up to streamline the submission process, in most (but not all) cases charging small fees per submission that roughly approximate the postage costs of physically sending materials (Figure 21.3). Not all of these platforms will be the right fit for you, your project, or your budget, so use your best judgment when it comes to taking this route, should you decide to. Either way, it is definitely worth investigating all available options, as the more festivals



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About animation-festivals.com

WHO WE ARE

animation-festivals.com is a hybrid of Wikipedia and the Yellow Pages, but for animation festivals!

We are a small, but dedicated team, who aim to provide the International animation community with a constantly updated directory of festival listings. The website is completely free to use; our only request is that if you see a listing that is either out of date or incorrect, you edit it. That way the community constantly benefits.

NO ONE ELSE LIKE US

animation-festivals.com was born out of the need for a comprehensive directory of animation festivals around the world. Unless you have been in the animation industry for a number of years and built up your own database of festivals, there are very few places, if any, where you can find up to date festival listings all year round.

Whereas there are many film festivals out there, and it is not difficult to obtain a listing of *these*, it is a time consuming task finding out which ones accept animation. Students, producers, directors and others do not have the time or resources to search for the relevant festivals amongst all the others.

animation-festivals is a very specific online resource which aims to take this headache away. But we can't do it without your help...

WHY WE CHOSE TO OPEN IT UP

Animation and film festivals the world over come and go in relatively short spaces of time. Some festivals are fortunate enough to run annually year after year, while some only have a life span of a year or two. animation-festivals.com wants each and every festival (that showcases animation) to be listed, regardless of its regularity. Festivals that run only once or twice can chose to be removed after the festival ends at the click of a button.

As this kind of resource could not be managed by a few individuals, we created a site which works very much like Wikipedia, and allows listings to be update by festival directors and employees, students, animators, producers, studios, local event coordinators, production house, and YOU!

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NEXT 5 DEADLINES

- 1 Big Muddy Film Festival
28 Nov 2015
- 2 4th Mumbai Shorts International Film Festival-2015
30 Nov 2015
- 3 Chicago Underground Film Festival
1 Dec 2015
- 4 Holland Animation Film Festival (HAFF)
1 Dec 2015
- 5 Cine-court anime
5 Dec 2015

[MORE FESTIVALS](#) ▶

Figure 21.3

animation-festivals.com site interface. (Courtesy of animation-festivals.com.)

you initially approach will increase the likelihood of an official selection early in your film's 2-year "life span."

I'm also not suggesting that the perceivably old-fashioned festival route should be the only one you adopt out of some Luddite principle, just that it should not be ruled out. The response you may get from somebody you meet at a festival who had seen your film earlier that evening may be able to provide uniquely candid feedback at the bar afterward, especially after a drink or several. Such interpersonal benefits of festival attendance are among the main draws for Aaron Wood: "Part of my role at Slurpy is, if we have a film submitted, to go and promote the film in person. Of course, you can do that online, but I don't think you

can beat festivals and events for being able to talk to people in person about your projects. So I'm a massive fan of festivals."

For Aaron, it isn't even a matter of an event's prominence or high standing so much as what opportunities to make these new connections are available.

"I really like any event where I can meet other filmmakers in an easy environment. I think you definitely get that with smaller festivals or local meetups, and it helps when that's an animation group as well because you've already got something in common. You *can* get that at a major festival like Annecy or Encounters, if you're going to a party with animators, but I would say that a big benefit of smaller festivals and events is the ease of networking. That, for me, is a major part of it—meeting new talent or meeting new filmmakers. So I am always happy to go to a smaller event if there is an opportunity to network there."

Discussions with festival programmers themselves can also prove enlightening. An early indicator of just how disparate one festival's identity can be from another's occurred during the festival run of my second film, *Ground Running*, a microshort that began life as a series of animation exercises so as to cover ground I'd not managed to cover in my preceding thesis film (Figure 21.4). Though it never took flight on the festival circuit in the same way as my other films had done, it did get screened across the world and would receive, for the most part, a positive audience response (think polite chuckles rather than carrying me out on their shoulders chanting my name). While chatting with programmers of two UK-based animation festivals that took place a month apart from one another, I was told by both that it had a very retro, cartoony feel. In the former instance, this was intended as a compliment, though in the latter, it was, interestingly, presented as criticism paired with an apology. In terms of one festival's identity, the idea of a retro and cartoony animated short was a refreshing harkening back to an era they wished to celebrate as an effective juxtaposition to the avant-garde contingent of their official selection; to the other, *retro* was synonymous with archaic and somehow less artistically relevant.

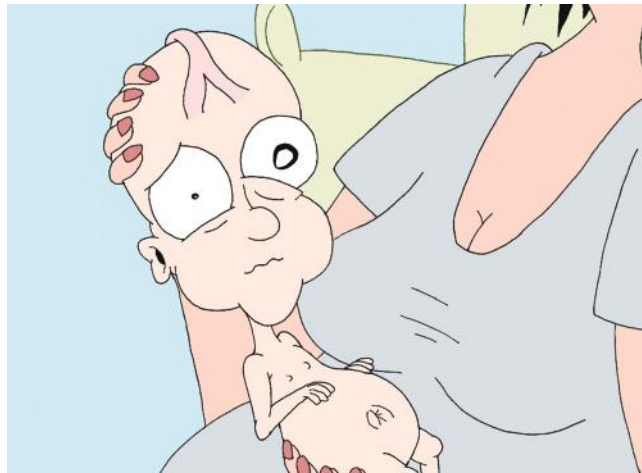


Figure 21.4

Still from *Ground Running* (Dir. Ben Mitchell)—the troublesome second film. (Courtesy of Ben Mitchell, ©2009.)

Granted, the selection committee saw enough in it to include it, but the impression I got was that my film stood out as far more of an oddity in the latter festival's program than the former. Of all the criticisms I would level at the film myself—and, trust me, they are multitudinous—my personal artistic sensibilities will always see me defend the cartoony side of animated film as something that has no reason to not sit alongside work deemed more sociopolitically or culturally valuable.

If every festival shared this personal ideology, then the landscape would be a fairly dull one; a sense of identity is important. Festivals that focus on films with a certain tone, or have a clear idea of what they want to evoke when compiling a program of multigenre films, are ultimately stronger and more memorable for their conviction.

It is sometimes the case that a festival's definition of what your film is to an audience might not necessarily line up with your own. When it came to the festival exposure of *Love in the Time of March Madness* (first explored in [Chapter 4](#)), codirector Robertino Zambrano would come to learn of a wider categorization than anticipated: "I'd always just thought that we'd enter this into the animation category, and then people were telling us to enter it into documentary categories. That made me think a little bit about, *Okay, why, and why animation?*"

To refer back to points made in [Chapter 7](#), the power of animation as a storytelling tool, especially when dealing with nonfiction as its source material, is exemplified by the visual approaches taken in *Love in the Time of March Madness*, not least down to Robertino's flair for conveying nonliteral and intangible concepts that writer and codirector Melissa Johnson's narration intimates ([Figure 21.5](#)).

"I feel like animation is almost more honest than a live-action storytelling approach," explains Robertino. "You're not choosing the perfect depiction of this story; rather, you're providing some sort of medium for the viewer to bounce off what the narrator is trying to tell. It leaves it open, like reading a book, but not as far as watching a movie of a book; it's somewhere in between. When a live-action movie of a book is made, it almost goes

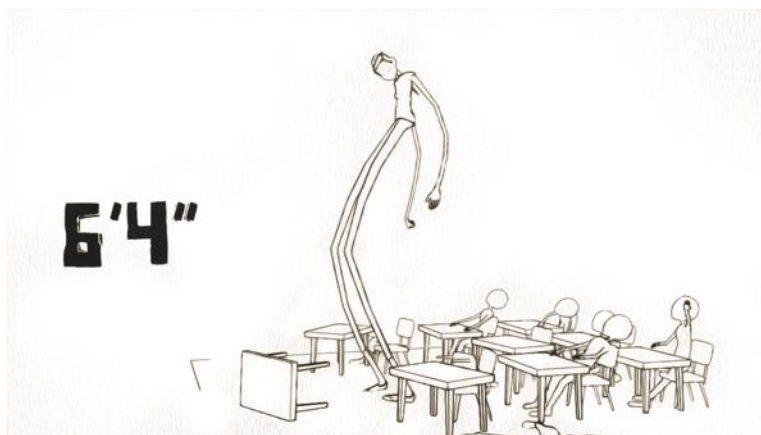


Figure 21.5

Still from *Love in the Time of March Madness* (Dir. Melissa Johnson/Robertino Zambrano). (Courtesy of High Hip Productions/KAPWA Studioworks, ©2014.)

too far in its manifestation of a story, by trying to convince the viewer that this is how it looked and happened. In opposition to that, an animation is honest about itself being a pure depiction of an idea or event.”

The film itself definitely works on multiple levels that broaden its appeal—the drily witty observations and musings present in the script delivered by Melissa’s narration give it a great deal of comedic value, yet at the same time, its honesty about her very personal struggles infuses it with subtle pathos. Given the fluidity of the animation and its lack of boundaries, in some programmers’ eyes, it could even be considered experimental. Certainly, that it has toured the States, played at major international festivals, and won major international awards is indicative of a wider appeal, regardless of how the film itself is categorized.

“A lot of people initially wondered how to program us and we didn’t really care.” Melissa says, “We were happy to be included however the programmers saw fit for their showcases. It’s definitely not just animation; we know that—but is it narrative; is it documentary? For me, it’s like the filmic equivalent of creative nonfiction; it’s a true story told in a narrative style, and the animation just amps that up. I love the gray areas between scripted and documentary—I could talk about this stuff all day long.

“It’s kind of emblematic of the metaphor of the film itself; I may be pushing it here a little bit, but what you see in our film is what you see in yourself, whatever you want to bring to it. We’re quite open to however you want to categorize us; I’m not hung up on that at all. But the perspective the audience brings to the film says, I think, a lot more about them.”

Of course, it’s fine to propose a whirlwind festival tour in which you charm peers, contemporaries, and industry bigwigs alike with your talent and assortment of personable bon mots as your ticket to visibility, but as with so many areas of discussion presented in this book, some pragmatism is required. Realistically speaking, it probably won’t be the case that every festival will cover your travel and accommodation, and even if they do, there are likely to be expenses accrued alongside the probability that, while you’re away from your home turf, you won’t be working.

How you fine-tune your outgoings to best suit your circumstances depends on your own judgment. If, after all, animation is the industry you’re enthusiastic to commit to for the remainder of your professional career, then animation festivals, conferences and markets should definitely be given consideration from a professional standpoint. There’s even cause to justify money spent on or at said events as business expenses, though it’s best if you go ahead and run that sort of thing by your accountant first. If you get in trouble for trying to pass off a weekend of cheeky pedalo racing in Annecy as a business trip, then waving this book in an auditor’s face and saying “Ben told me it was okay!” probably won’t help you out much as an excuse.

Rejection: How to Deal

Everybody who takes a shot at something that runs the risk of rejection will agree that it is never fun. You’re being told, in essence, that your film is bad and that you as a filmmaker should pack it in, right? Wrong.

Not to condescend, but I have found myself aghast at the number of sincerely talented filmmakers who gave up not only on getting their project seen but on filmmaking altogether, simply from having been rejected by the first handful of festivals they

submitted to. I cannot stress enough how important it is to *not be discouraged* by an initially slow response. Even flat-out frostiness or hostility only defines the tastes of whomever it's coming from; it needn't be taken as a fair and rounded assessment of the quality of your work. Context is all, so bear in mind that while sifting through submissions, programmers will have a very limited context for the circumstances and directorial intent behind your film. Trash to some is treasure to others, as the saying goes, though in the world of subjective film appreciation, we could say that amateurishness to some is playfulness to others, maudlin sentiment to some is heartfelt poignancy to others, caustic juvenilia to some is refreshing edginess to others, and so on and so forth (Figure 21.6).



Figure 21.6

House Guest poster—though off-rejected, with perseverance it eventually accrued enough official selections to fancy up the layout a tad. (Courtesy of Ben Mitchell, ©2008.)

As outlined in [Chapter 1](#), the primary intention of this book is for filmmakers to be able to take the lessons learned from the case studies and apply them to their ongoing/future projects, so as to stand out in the crowd. As such, you, the reader, may be wondering why the notion of rejection is even being brought up. The fact of the matter is, as strong as your film is, it's statistically impossible to achieve 100% success,* even for established veterans of the animation world. Films that have been rejected from the most prestigious of competitive film festivals have gone on to win Academy Awards and cement the future careers of their directors—but that can only happen with persistence and not being dissuaded by the first bumps in the road. Even for those who seem to have the world handed to them on the proverbial platter have, in all likelihood, been put through the ringer a fair few times. The fact is that we are all of us far more inclined to share our successes than our failures and setbacks, so for every festival inclusion you see attached to a film, it is entirely possible that there have been the same number of—or even more—rejections.

Even when considering the earlier point about the gamut of festival identities, when putting factors such as personal taste and artistic misalignment to one side, we are still left dealing with a numbers game. One important discovery I made during the early days of both my freelance animation and indie-director careers was that a studio I briefly interned at had somebody on staff whose duties included researching and submitting films to international festivals on a daily basis. This demystified the process tremendously—while the studio's in-house films were performing well on the festival circuit and winning awards, when weighed against the sheer volume of submissions, their success rate would have been somewhere between 30% and 50%.

Film as Discourse

The festival environment can prompt not just new filmmaking but also active discussion on the topic. Many festivalgoers will walk away from a film screening or presentation feeling inspired in the moment, and the hope remains that there will always at least be a small percentage of those who will act on it and follow through with new work of their own. Steven Woloshen, whose output would already be considered prolific, was moved to create an abstract film in the vein of his established style as a reaction to *Spiral*, a parody of the abstract film genre directed by Bill Plympton in 2005. *Spiral* was allegedly inspired by a screening at the Stuttgart Animated Film Festival of *Film-Wipe-Film* (1984), a near-half-hour abstract short by Paul Glabicki, in which the audience grew visibly impatient. In Bill's film, the artistic expression of the animated shapes is met with hostility by an unseen cinema audience, who eventually resort to violence despite the pleas of the shapes themselves, who insist that they only wish to entertain.

Though the film serves as light satire on a subsection of festival culture rather than any kind of malicious condemnation of the abstract film genre, Bill initially used the moniker

* In truth, *success* is such a subjective term that it would be disingenuous to present it as a realistic goal by everybody's definition. I define the success of my own work as films that have made people laugh, been sold for broadcast, and been a tremendous boon to my freelance career; to some, however, the fact that they've not won major awards from certain institutions or achieved online viral success would, by their definition of success, make them failures. But why you gotta hate?

W. P. Murton* so as to not upset experimental filmmakers he knew and respected. Steven elected to counter *Spiral* with a piece of his own, using similarly good-natured chicanery.

“Us experimental filmmakers are kind of at the bottom of the heap; we don’t have a lot of people standing up for us. So what I did was I created a fictitious film archive and contacted Bill Plympton for a copy of his film *Your Face* to be part of it. So I paid for the film; he mailed it to me; and I took a pair of scissors, cut it into little bits, glued it onto film, and made an abstract film out of it.”

The end result, titled *Rebuttal*, was later screened at the Ottawa Animation Festival, under the pseudonym Luther Cartier (“Luther being the name of our cat and Cartier the street we lived on”).

“I open up the floor to anybody who wants to talk about the subject. I think there are a lot of people like myself who work in an experimental way, who don’t want to be ridiculed for trying something new. He takes it in good stride because he knows the debate’s more important than what side you take. So sometimes, his film *Spiral plays with my film Rebuttal*, so the audience can get a sense of what both sides of the story are. It’s a way to open up a debate so we can talk about these things (Figure 21.7).

“Does experimental film *belong* in a competition setting? So many festivals recognize that you can’t judge an experimental film in the same way you can a narrative film; there are all these issues that have cropped up. We should look at things a little bit differently, we should let people explore in workshops, let people talk about these things, let debate happen. So maybe it’s going on, slowly. Annecy now has an award for nonnarrative, experimental work, so that means it’s opening up. Already, there are so many festivals around the world that already recognize that there are so many different types of filmmaking. Thank goodness!”

Show Me the Animation’s Jake Hobbs, himself heavily involved in both online curation and screening events, has a similarly positive outlook on festival culture: “They’re great for the community itself, bringing the people who work in that community together and providing knowledge and inspiration to people within the industry. If you’re working in animation, then it’s great to be able to see other people’s films; it’s great to be able to see the big keynote names that festivals tend to bring in, who tell you about the amazing stuff they’ve worked on; and it’s nice to be able to get your stuff on the big screen.”

When it comes to the notion of *exclusivity*, Jake finds himself casting a more critical eye on the festival experience, however. “I think the way festivals are set up, some of the process—such as the limits that some of them place on films being available online—I don’t think is fair on the filmmaker; it’s quite limiting. If you put your film online, anyone can see it, and while obviously, anyone can go to a film festival, it is restrictive because you’ve got to be able to afford to get there. There’s a tendency that the people who’ll see your films at a film festival will be other filmmakers, which is good, but if you’re wanting to engage with wider audiences, then online is the only place to do it.”

While several major festivals still have this regulation in place, by and large, it is becoming less and less of an essential caveat as the years go by. Some festivals have recognized that online hosting is indeed the best means of generating buzz for a film in this present

* This pseudonym was also used in the independent documentary *Adventures in Plymptoons* (Dir. Alexia Anastasio, 2011) as the name of a film critic—played by Plympton, who also appeared as himself in interviews, enthusiastic to condemn the work of Plymptoons.

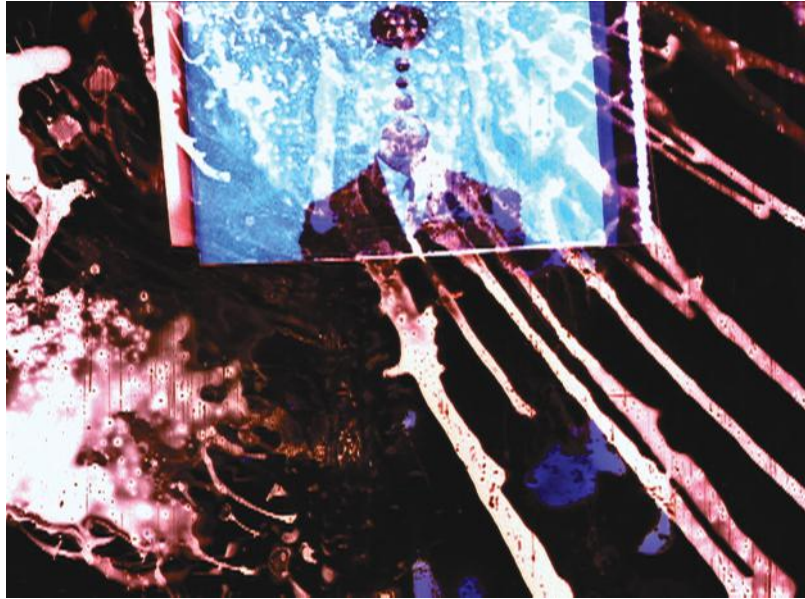


Figure 21.7

Still from *Rebuttal* (Dir. Steven Woloshen), featuring manipulated footage from Bill Plympton's 1987 classic *Your Face*. (Courtesy of Steven Woloshen, ©2005.)

climate of audience engagement and word of mouth via social media. Even if an audience is familiar with a film already online in full that has achieved a measure of viral success or significant media attention, that does not automatically mean that the opportunity to see it in a theatrical setting won't be a draw (every screening I have seen of the long-online *Don't Hug Me I'm Scared* films, for example, has never failed to get a strong reaction from a festival audience). Bringing it around again to a positive note, *Story from North America* codirector Garrett Michael Davis has a reassuring take on the long-term ramifications of a solid festival run and its associated exposure.

"When I was in school, an artist I was acquainted with gave me some really great advice: Spend your last year of school making something you can 'take around' for a while. In terms of animation, that's pretty clear—just make a good animation. There are so many animation festivals that are not as competitive as full-blown film festivals where people are showing projects that cost thousands or millions of dollars. People should know that it's not hard to get your films screened, even if it's only 5 seconds long. Festivals and events are always looking for things to screen, and if you make something good, it will continue to work for you for a long time."

22

Distribution: A Brave New World

As we near the end of our examination of the independent animation scene and the multitude of lessons that can be learned from its artists, our last stop will be the matter of distribution itself. Throughout the book, a number of options have already come up, such as online platforms to showcase and potentially monetize your films. For some, that is a realistic option, as indie legend Don Hertzfeldt has found through the online release of recent projects such as *It's Such a Beautiful Day* (the 2012 indie masterpiece that accompanied the launch of Vimeo On Demand) and his 2015 short *World of Tomorrow*. Speaking with *Skwigly** (in all lowercase, as he is wont to do) in 2015, Don weighs up the primary digital distribution options available to independent filmmakers thusly:

“i think vimeo genuinely cares about quality of presentation, and their 90% revenue share to the filmmakers was unprecedented. independent filmmaking is in a constant state of ‘evolve or die.’ which is good, it probably keeps us from getting too comfortable. a question that everyone in the industry will constantly be asking from now on is, ‘how do people want to watch movies these days?’ there are so many different methods to see something now and they will always be changing with new technology. *it's such a beautiful day* had a long and healthy life in theaters, we did the DVD, it's on netflix, vimeo, itunes and, in some countries, television. as long as the quality stays high i want to give people every possible option.”

* <http://www.skwigly.co.uk/hertzfeldt-world-of-tomorrow/>

Don Hertzfeldt's vantage point is from perhaps the most conceivably popular end of the independent animation spectrum, so while it is healthy to aspire to be as accomplished a filmmaker as he, in terms of an early project paying immediate dividends, one should keep expectations grounded when approaching such a distribution platform. Observationally speaking, the pattern a majority of independent animators and filmmakers alike have fallen into goes roughly along the following lines:

1. Finishing a film (kind of crucial)
2. Aiming to premiere it at a major festival
3. Submitting it to festivals en masse (a process made easier should stage 2 have proved successful and your film been received well) to increase its award prospects and international visibility
4. Releasing the film online, for free, following its 2-year festival-eligible period and pending any contractual obligations to distributors et al. who may have purchased rights in the interim
5. Next project!

It's not exactly red carpets and champagne, but it can be immeasurably valuable to your reputation, career prospects, and likelihood of producing more work down the line with a wider array of resources, so as to drive your art and passion even further forward.

Mind My Gap creator Rosto is a perfect example of how one's self-funded roots in independent animation can, with perseverance and genuine creativity, translate over time to becoming a valuable commodity in the eyes of funders and distributors alike. He benefitted from a decade-plus of personal work and auteur projects that made a name for him with online audiences, a string of bizarrely compelling and successful animated films bringing him to the attention of the festival circuit and France-based film production company Autour de Minuit, an organization founded by Nicolas Schmerkin with a keen eye for visual innovation and mixed-media projects.



Still from *Splintertime* (Dir. Rosto). (Courtesy of Studio Rosto A.D./Autour de Minuit/S.O.I.L., ©2015.)

“My film (*The Rise and Fall of the Legendary*) *Anglobilly Feverson* [2002] gave me a lot of new contacts, and I met a lot of people,” Rosto recalls. “It was the first film where I started to travel the world, and that’s how you meet kindred spirits. So around the time of *Anglobilly* and certainly the next film *Jona/Tomberry* [2005], I met with Autour de Minuit. They were doing very interesting things, and we immediately liked each other and started a brotherhood. So right after *Jona/Tomberry* played at Cannes, Nicolas and I started to collaborate on projects. They also distribute all my work and take care of me as an artist, and ever since *The Monster of Nix*, they’ve been involved in all of my projects.”

As well as taking on distribution of his films, from 2011’s *The Monster of Nix* on, Autour de Minuit has maintained an active involvement in Rosto’s output, ambitious films that tick all the boxes of the company’s mission statement and plenty more. The logic of the pairing should be considered. When approaching—or being approached by—a company that can help facilitate funding and distribution, the most important scrutinizing factor is whether or not you are both an artistic or ideological fit. In many respects, this should be easy enough to determine—a production company known for its success in producing for preschool audiences will most likely have no interest in a film project with adult themes, and so forth—though it is always worth researching a company’s overall remit. Even if, on a surface level, producers and distributors boast a broad canvas of projects, as Autour de Minuit could be seen to at first glance, a thorough examination of their project portfolio will reveal enough recurring elements and give you a sense of their overall standard of quality. A little bit of research can ultimately save you a lot of time in the long run if you are in the market for a serious partnership.

Unexpected Developments

You’ll recall that Aidan McAteer’s first attempt at making a short film since college, *A Gentleman’s Guide to Villainy*, was a success as far as its immediate purpose of winning the annual DepicT! online microshort contest was concerned. This also brought with it a number of additional perks that afforded him an entirely new perspective on the life of a short film once it’s in the world.

“I was suddenly a ‘director,’ which I hadn’t really been before! I mean, there was my graduation film, but everyone has one of those, and I hadn’t really done any real directing since, just bits and pieces. So that was the first thing, and then it won awards, so I became an ‘award-winning director’—happy days!”

Thus began a snowball effect that saw the film being selected for a number of high-profile festivals, such as Annecy. In contemplation of the film being awarded right out of the gate, the question has at times played on Aidan’s mind whether things would have ever been able to pan out the same way but in a different order.

“In theory, one shouldn’t have a bearing on the other, but you do wonder whether other festivals take a film more seriously if it has won awards at a previous festival, if you know what I mean? I don’t know the answer to that question, but I was thrilled for it to be in Annecy.”

Realistically speaking, it’s highly unlikely a film will be looked at with complete impartiality by every single festival selection committee it reaches, especially if it

comes with a degree of buzz attached. As with everything, popularity and word of mouth will have a role to play in whether or not a film stands out—in many respects, the entire function of the book you are holding now is to assist in your own film being exactly that kind of film. Although there are no hard-and-fast rules decreed by the gods of independent filmmaking on the matter, some festivals are even known to take the opposite approach, favoring films that have not had a premiere elsewhere so they can be associated with a promising offering's debut. Also, while options for distribution are not completely out of reach for anyone tenacious enough to pursue them, the process is certainly made a lot easier if your film is the talk of a major festival, while potential distributors, curators, and prospective funders for future projects are milling about the Bonlieu* with their ears pricked up.

Returning to Aidan McAteer—acknowledging he had a hot property on his hands saw him enter *The Gentleman's Guide to Villainy* into other similarly structured online contests as DepicT!, one being Atom.com (now CC Studios), for which it was selected by Bill Plympton to win another cash prize and accolade.

“Another Bill Plympton story is from a talk he gave at Annecy where people were asking how he made money out of his films, to which he explained that he sold them to different TV stations,” recalls Aidan. “I was sitting there in the audience thinking, *Well, maybe if you're Bill Plympton, you do, but who's gonna come to my door?* The idea of selling was so crazy to me. Then 3 days after Annecy, I got an email from Swiss television saying they wanted to buy my short film to show on TV!”

This seemingly surreal turn of events is, if not readily available to everyone who has ever made a film, not as uncommon as you might think. Festivals partnered up with film markets would not exist were there not accredited buyers in attendance, and even if independent films don't seem to be a valuable commodity where you live, chances are they might be to some other parts of the world. Depending on your territory, there may also be short film distributors and sales agents that actively solicit precisely the type of independent short you have made. Though bear in mind that such businesses won't appreciate having their time wasted, i.e., if they state in their remit that they are on the hunt for documentary shorts, nobody will benefit if you slide an animated music video under their noses. Also, you should keep your wits about you as regards anything involving a contract—it may seem like an old cliché, but relinquishing ownership of your intellectual property is not something to be entered into hastily. Even “nonexclusive” agreements that have caveats that, while reasonable and most likely beneficial to your project's overall exposure, may be easy to overlook and accidentally breach. Remember that no matter how laid-back (obviously, when it comes to animation, there's really no such thing, but you know what I mean) an independent animation project's production might have been, things will become exponentially more formal the moment that distribution deals are in place.

In Aidan McAteer's case, once *The Gentleman's Guide to Villainy's* TV contract and festival exposure had run its course, it joined its animated short film brethren online, its most valuable upshot being clear to the director: “It just gave me confidence to say, ‘Now I'm a filmmaker!’”

* The main venue of the Annecy festival—for the record, other major festivals can provide equally valuable exposure; I just enjoyed typing the phrase “milling about the Bonlieu.”

Bill Plympton, whose words of seemingly out-of-reach advice proved true to Aidan, has his own thoughts on the matter of distribution in the wake of his 2013 feature *Cheatin'* (Figure 22.1):

“I’m a little old school on this, but I’ve come to the realization that digital distribution is a much more democratic and profitable way to make money. In the past, you always had a theatrical release, then a DVD release, then—way down the line—video on demand or a digital release. Now people are just going straight to the digital release stage, and they make their money that way, through YouTube, Vimeo, or Netflix. It’s really changed for the better for younger people, or people who are independently minded. They don’t have to deal with Hollywood, which is a godsend because Hollywood is such a rapacious place that they will take your film, distribute, it and make lots of money you will never get to see. It’s really a very scary position to be in, to spend 4 years of your life and all your money on a film that becomes a success but then you don’t get any of the funds from the movie theaters or TV sales.

“With *Cheatin'*, if we would have gotten a million-dollar—or even half a million-dollar—advance, then we probably would have made a deal, taken the money, and ran—forget about royalties! Since we never did get a really big advance, we decided to do what’s called a *service deal*, in other words, paying a distributor to get it out to theaters, to get publicity, the chance for some good reviews and some good word of mouth. Then we take the film back and do the DVD and the Internet sales ourselves—that’s where we hopefully cash in and make a profit. It’s all theoretical, and it depends on if it’s a good film, if you get good distribution on the Internet, find the right home for it. That’s the important part to make money, is to get a good home for it.”



Figure 22.1

Still from *Cheatin'* (Dir. Bill Plympton). (Courtesy of Plymptoons, ©2014.)

Similarly, Bill's protégé-turned-independent feature director in her own right, Signe Baumane, learned some hard truths when it came to getting *Rocks in my Pockets* out into the world:

"Looking back, I could say that making the film was the easy part! When you're making a film, you're doing something that you are good at; you know what you're doing; you have experience; you have ideas; it's a creative process. It's challenging, and there are hard days and easy days and all that, but when you come to the stage of distribution and marketing, that is something I'm not good at—and I found myself having to do it, day in and day out, for a year and a half, when I should have been making another film.

"We have different distributors for different territories, so strictly speaking, we don't have to do anything, because there is a publicist for when we had a theatrical run, and the distributor takes care of the business side."

What was most important to Signe and the *Rocks in my Pockets* team was the opportunity to use the project to connect with people, person-to-person. As indicated by the film's social media following, there was a sizable interest from people who were willing to come out and see the film theatrically (Figure 22.2).

"These are people who wouldn't know that the film exists if it wasn't for social media. So we felt compelled to try to reach out to those who might be interested, and it turned out to be a very effective marketing strategy. Even if the *New York Times* gives a film the kind of big approval that a lot of people see, they won't necessarily go to a movie after they read it, because the next day, it's about another movie. When you go home, open Facebook, and see a friend saying, 'I'm going to see *Rocks in my Pockets*,' it becomes more personal, so that was our strategy. No distributor can do this type of person-to-person marketing."

Bill Plympton frequently insists that the most advisable way of profiting from a short film is to keep production costs at a minimum. From firsthand experience, I can confirm



Figure 22.2

Still from *Rocks in my Pockets* (Dir. Signe Baumane). (Courtesy of Signe Baumane, ©2014.)

that you needn't be as established and internationally revered as the Bill Plymptons of the world for this to be true. My 2010 short *The Naughty List*, produced over a quiet, 2-month period when commissioned projects were sparse, received some negligible financial support to assist with the postproduction and coloring, but could largely be considered an unpaid, entirely auteur affair (Figure 22.3). Though the process of getting it out in the world was a slow-burn one, eventually, it sold to enough territories for broadcast to make back more than what my income would have been during the time it was made, as well as the various postage, submission, and transfer fees incurred. If I had devoted, say, 6 months or more to the production and subcontracted a crew to make it a slicker, more polished affair, it's certainly *possible* that the more professional production values would have increased its salability, but the risk would have been far greater. Looking at your film as an investment in this way and from the get-go can be a very helpful determining factor when it comes to the budgeting phase, not to mention your approach to the production itself. Assuming you as the director or main contributor to an independent film or passion project will not be paid, the time and skill you put into it still has value, and it's completely reasonable to want to recoup this investment.

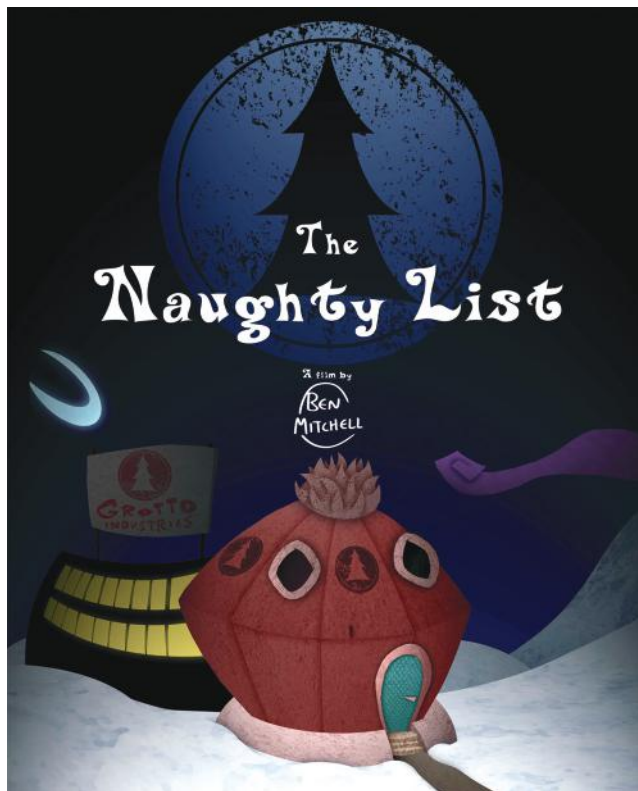


Figure 22.3

The Naughty List poster. (Courtesy of Ben Mitchell, ©2010.)

Pixar have more than proved that a short animated skit can be a success when made with a big budget, while many an independent animator has equally proved that it can function just as well when scribbled on a napkin if the premise, timing, and execution are properly thought through. Admittedly, the low-budget approach to filmmaking is not for every artist, and definitely not for every film. In the case of Thomas Stellmach and Maja Oschmann's filmic tribute to Louis Spohr's *Virtuos Virtuell*, a level of visual sophistication was required, not to give it a superficial glossiness, but to treat its subject with respect and fully immerse the audience into its illusory world (Figure 22.4). As a consequence, the project required significant financial backing (as discussed in Chapter 9), which in turn was a significant motivating factor when it came to approaching distribution. With over 25 streams of financial support in total, Thomas could determine in hindsight that approximately half of the film's budget had been covered.

"When producing this film, I counted every hour, and at the end, I knew exactly how many hours I worked on the project. I counted from this the cost, which was €114,000. We



Figure 22.4

Cover art for the *Virtuos Virtuell* (Dir. Thomas Stellmach/Maja Oschmann) DVD/BluRay, sold via the film's website virtuosvirtuell.com. (Courtesy of Thomas Stellmach, ©2013.)

had managed to get half of that from funders; the other half came from the time I spent working on the film.”

Given the film’s experimental qualities, higher budget, and the ever-changing landscape of short film sales, a more targeted and traditional approach was warranted to achieve significant financial success. On the heels of the first leg of *Virtuos Virtuell*’s festival run, Thomas released the film on DVD and Blu-ray, purchasable online via the project’s official website.*

“I sold 1400 DVDs, which was a successful outcome. I also took the time to send it to 350 festivals, out of which 180 chose the film for competition. Doing that was also a huge job, and a major reason for the film’s success was because of the time—over 2 years—that I put into the process. It seems to me that usually, filmmakers won’t invest quite so much time for that side of things. Of course, there are companies that can take on the work of sending the film to festivals as a service, but I didn’t use that option; I chose to do it by myself. It might seem to be bit crazy, to take so much time to do this, but I’m an enthusiast! I love my products, I love my films, and I try to send them out so that people can see them.”

Thomas Stellmach’s sentiment is one that I certainly hope all of you reading can relate to. Whether or not your film proves to be profitable or propels you to international stardom, that you followed through on creating a piece of art is a success story in itself. Hopefully, through the array of case studies, personal stories, master classes, and tips this book has gathered together, you will have come away with a film that is something even more—a standout animation project that makes a significant mark on the ever-inspirational independent scene and leads to the exciting first step of your next creative journey.

* <http://www.virtuosvirtuell.com>



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Recommended Further Reading

Every animator can benefit from having a personal library of reference material, whether to brush up on the fundamentals, to further familiarize ourselves with specific software processes, or as a means of exploring entirely new avenues. Assuming most will have started off with such obligatory tomes as *The Illusion of Life* (Frank Thomas/Ollie Johnson) and *The Animator's Survival Kit* (Richard Williams), here are a few personal recommendations that deal with the practice of animation itself. Obviously, when it comes to building up your own resources, you'll wish to consider which animation role (writer? director? producer?) you're best suited to, which medium (stop-motion? 2-D? computer-generated [CG]?) you dabble in most, what type of project (short? feature? interactive?) you wish to pursue, and which software (I'll stop asking one-word questions now) you gravitate toward. While I could put together a book's worth of book recommendations—from cultural histories and critical analyses to specific software walkthroughs—when it comes to the territories this book has covered, the following should further assist you on your journey, whichever direction you wish to go:

Animation: The Mechanics of Motion

Author: Chris Webster

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240516660

Timing for Animation

Authors: John Halas and Harold Whitaker

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240521602

Action Analysis for Animators

Author: Chris Webster

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240812182

Action and Performance for Animation

Authors: Derek Hayes and Chris Webster

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240812397

Acting for Animators

Author: Ed Hooks

Routledge

ISBN: 978-0415580243

Stop-Motion: Craft Skills for Model Animation

Author: Susannah Shaw

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240520551

Prepare to Board! Creating Story and Characters for Animated Features and Shorts

Author: Nancy Beiman

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240818788

Dream Worlds: Production Design for Animation

Author: Hans Bacher

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240520933

Ideas for the Animated Short

Authors: Karen Sullivan, Kate Alexander, Aubry Mintz, and Ellen Besen

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240818726

Make Toons That Sell (Without Selling Out)

Author: Bill Plympton

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240817798

Directing for Animation

Author: Tony Bancroft

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240818023

The Game Narrative Toolbox

Authors: Tobias Heussner, Toiya Kristen Finley, Jennifer Brandes Hepler, and Ann Lemay

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-1138787087

Digital Storytelling

Author: Carolyn Handler Miller

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0415836944

Hybrid Animation

Author: Tina O'Hailey

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0415718707

The Foley Grail

Author: Vanessa Theme Ament

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0415840859

Designing Sound for Animation

Author: Robin Beauchamp

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240824987

Voice-Over for Animation

Authors: Jean Ann Wright and M. J. Lallo

Focal Press

ISBN: 978-0240812182



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