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From Script To Screen

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From Script To Screen

By

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A culminating experience capstone presented to

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Abstract

For my capstone project, I made a short animated film. In this film, we follow the journey of a young writer facing the pressures of a project deadline. As she sits in her home office, the character struggles to concentrate on her work amid some distractions. From the outside noises filtering through the window to the persistent drip of water in the bathroom and a bug buzzing around her face, a series of obstacles disrupt her focus. The writer wants to eliminate each obstacle, actively working to create an ideal environment conducive to productivity. As she successfully tackles each issue, she gets a sense of accomplishment. However, just when it seems like victory is within reach, an unforeseen challenge emerges.

The story invites us to reflect on the unpredictable nature of life and the importance of adapting to unforeseen circumstances.

In this paper, I document my journey of creating my short animation, discussing the process and workflow I used, highlighting the challenges, and difficulties that I encountered along the way. And I will also talk about why I wanted to make a short film and what inspired me.

Keywords: Animation, Film, Story, production

Background

For my capstone project, the decision to create an animated film stemmed from a lifelong passion for making films. Ever since childhood, the desire to craft narratives and produce my films stayed in the corners of my mind. The catalyst for this aspiration can be traced back to my early exposure to the Persian movie, Turtles Can Fly (2004) directed by Bahman Ghobadi, an Iranian filmmaker. This war-drama film deeply resonated with me, sparking an enduring fascination with the art of filmmaking.

As I grew, I recognized that filmmaking is essentially the art of storytelling through visual elements. While initially envisioning myself as a traditional filmmaker, my pathway shifted when I discovered the area of animation, particularly 3D animation, during my academic journey. The prospect of bringing characters to life and endowing them with personality and emotion was a transformative moment for me. The beauty of animation gradually eclipsed my initial focus on filmmaking.

I devoted years to improve my skills in 3D animation, proudly adopting the title of a 3D animator. Nevertheless, my interest in filmmaking persisted, reminding me of my initial dream to create films and tell stories. My passion for filmmaking resurfaced, compelling me to seek an opportunity to blend my passion and expertise in animation with my passion for filmmaking.

Motivated by this desire, I started on the ambitious endeavor of creating a short film for my capstone project.

This project, therefore, became a platform for me to not only showcase and enhance my animation abilities and interest, but also to experiment with and broaden my understanding of

other critical components of filmmaking. The combination of my knowledge of animation with a broader exploration of filmmaking aspects allowed me to manifest my long standing dream of crafting a unique and compelling short film.

This capstone project serves as an intersection of my passion for animation and my interest in filmmaking; through this undertaking, I aim to showcase my proficiency as a 3D animator and demonstrate a multifaceted skill set that encompasses the diverse elements of filmmaking.

Concept and Story Development

The concept of my animated film and its idea, originates from my own experiences, delving into the challenges wrought by physical distance from home and family. The protagonist, a reflection of my struggles, navigates the distractions inherent in this separation. I should also mention that the protagonist is not struggling with separation, rather it is what inspired me for the story. Inspired by these personal dynamics, the storyline progressively amplifies disruptions, mirroring the character's journey from minor to substantial distractions. The film aims to convey a universal truth – that external forces beyond our control inevitably shape our endeavors. The central message resonates with resilience, urging individuals not to wait for an ideal setting to pursue their goals, emphasizing the importance of perseverance amid life's unpredictable distractions. This animated film is a personal narrative turned universal, offering a comedic exploration of determination in the face of disruptive external influences.

Research and Influences

The journey began with an insightful exploration of pacing and rhythm in animation, specifically studying the impact of beats and silence on narrative flow. This examination laid the groundwork for understanding how nuanced timing contributes to audience engagement and storytelling dynamics.

For example, in "Spirited Away" directed by Hayao Miyazaki, In several pivotal scenes, such as Chihiro's encounter with No-Face in the bathhouse, the careful manipulation of beats and pauses heightens the tension and emotional resonance of the moment. By studying such masterful use of timing in animation, I discovered how even brief moments of silence can amplify the significance of visual storytelling, deepening the viewer's connection to the narrative.

A significant aspect of the research journey focused on the Appeal in animation; Appeal, as one of the fundamental animation principles, plays a pivotal role in making animation stand out. The infusion of appeal elicits a sense of realism that not only captivates the viewer but also intensifies their interest in the animation. A character, when endowed with appeal, possesses the ability to draw the audience in, creating a magnetic effect. This charisma is key to ensuring that the character leaves a lasting and compelling impression.

The most interesting thing I found about appeal is asymmetry and imperfection in character. The two elements that render your character more human and relatable. Asymmetry entails disrupting the balance or symmetry in your character's design, pose, or expression, such as incorporating variations like one eye larger than the other, or having a line of action in the face, one arm higher than the other, or one side of the mouth curved more than the other. Imperfection involves incorporating flaws or errors into your character's design, movement, or voice, such as a scar, a

limp, or a stutter. Including asymmetry and imperfection contributes to a heightened sense of realism and intrigue, making your character more captivating.

Appeal can be also in other things like lighting. Lighting in animation can serve as a guiding force, directing the audience's gaze towards focal points and enhancing appeal. The application of bright and saturated lighting on characters effectively distinguishes them from intricate backgrounds. Employing side lighting contributes to the nuanced modeling of a character's form. Techniques such as silhouetting and rim lighting further accentuate characters, allowing them to visually emerge prominently from their backgrounds.

I also learned about recycling in animation, so I tried to recycle some shots and use an animation layer; I just added some minor layers on top of that and used them for different shots.

Facial expression and acting in animation are complicated processes requiring a nuanced understanding of character dynamics. One fundamental principle involves blocking the entire body, even in close-up shots, to maintain the natural flow of movement. This approach ensures that the animation remains coherent and real, preserving the integrity of character behavior.

A pivotal aspect of character portrayal lies in facial expressions, serving as a primary conduit for revealing the character's thought process. Timing facial expression's changes in advance of body motions and dialogue can help to show anticipation and thought process. The strategic timing of facial expression changes, contributes to a more immersive and thoughtful animation.

Scripting what characters think in a given shot, rather than solely focusing on actions or spoken words, allows animators to convey a deeper layer of emotional complexity.

Eye masks are the most important part of expression. Eyes provide a focal point for the audience and convey the character's focus.

The incorporation of established artistic principles, such as the line of action and contrapposto, in facial animation is explored, showcasing their impact on conveying emotion and character dynamics. Eye movement is a primary catalyst for expression, with a focus on the sequential coordination of eyes, eyebrows, hands, spine movement, and breathing to breathe life into animated characters. Attention to detail, such as incorporating squash and stretch during blinking, adds dynamism to facial animations, contributing to a more lifelike representation.

It's better to set eye direction and blinks during the blocking stage, emphasizing on placing them strategically between major attitude changes to enhance narrative coherence.

Furthermore, there is a connection between brow movement and the shape of the upper lids, illustrating how these subtle details contribute to the expressiveness of animated characters. The study concludes by underscoring the importance of a diagonal movement pattern of brows towards and away from the bridge of the nose, a key element in conveying a character's emotional state.

This exploration consolidates a wealth of insights and techniques in creating compelling and real facial expressions and acting in animation, providing a comprehensive foundation for elevating the artistry of character portrayal in the animated medium.

Research extended to cinematography, cut scenes, and previsualization and exploring their significance in creating a visually coherent and engaging film. This multifaceted study aimed to elevate the film's visual narrative through well-executed cinematic elements.

An exploration of storytelling and script writing followed, delving into narrative structures and techniques to construct a compelling and coherent story. This research informed the overarching narrative arc and thematic progression.

For example, there are essential guidelines that must be followed when writing a story. Some of these principles that have been also highlighted by Pixar are several fundamental rules that are critical to creating a successful story for a film. When I was structuring my story, I tried to follow these rules. Some of them are:

- In storytelling, we admire a character for trying more than for their success.

- It is essential to remember that you should see what's interesting to you as an audience, not what's fun to do as a writer.

- Simplify the story and Focus. Hop over detours. This may make you feel like you're losing valuable stuff but it sets you free

- To create a compelling character arc, it's essential to identify your character's strengths and limitations, and then craft challenges that will test and push them beyond their comfort zone. By exploring how your character navigates and overcomes these obstacles, you can create a more engaging and dynamic storyline.

- What are the stakes? Give a reason to root for the character. What happens if they don't succeed? Stack the odds against.

- Coincidences to get characters into trouble are great; coincidences to get them out of it are cheating.

- You gotta identify with your situation/characters; can't just write "cool." What would make *you* act that way?

Production

Efficiency in workflow was a critical consideration. The study extended to establishing an optimized animation workflow – from conceptualizing the script to bringing it to life on screen. This approach aimed at ensuring a seamless and organized progression throughout the production process.

In the-pre production stage, I clearly defined the Concept and Storyboard, and 3d previsualization to plan out shots.

For the animation process, I used Maya. But before I started each shot and took them to Maya, I recorded a video of myself as a primary reference. I tried to get the timing, and see how long it would take for that shot. Then I planned out that shot on paper with a very rough sketch to time out the scene and draw key poses. This just gave me a brief idea of the shot and key poses. And besides this I uploaded all my video references in Syncsketch.

After having my video reference uploaded in Syncsketch, I analyzed my references frame by frame there and I took as many notes as possible. So, after analyzing my references then I started animating. Now I knew where to start and where to put my key frames, breakdown, and everything. I could have my music on and start posing. I knew where to put each keyframe without thinking about it. In general, having all the shots planned out before taking them to Maya helped a lot in terms of a clear and smooth workflow. After finishing production, I did the post production in Adobe premiere pro and imported all the scenes in there and worked on composing.

So throughout the entire project, I used Maya and Premiere Pro for pre-production,production, and post-production. In my role as an animator, I directed my primary focus towards animation, and avoided extensive involvement in the complexities of modeling and rigging. To expedite the workflow, I made this choice to procure a pre-rigged 3D character from Characterrigs and accessed 3D environmental models from CGTrader. This decision not only resulted in time savings but also afforded me the opportunity to focus effectively towards the animation components of the project.

Challenges and Solutions

Acting choices were very challenging for me. Based on my script, I tried to act on all of the scenes and shoot a video reference to get an exact sense of the scene and live the character. Having video references for all the animation was a big help for me. Since I wanted to explore more exaggerated facial expressions, I found that video references were insufficient. Therefore, I used pictures, internet resources, and books to enhance my facial animation skills.

I also used the studio library which was a new tool for me. It's not new in the industry, but this is the first time I have used that tool but I wanted to learn it and use it because it increased the speed of creating different poses.

Studio library is a tool that you can use to archive lots of poses, so during animating you can use those pre-build poses or blend between different poses during animating. This saved some of my time and my challenge with switching between different facial poses.

I also used the Anim bot, which is a tool that installs in Maya and can help to speed up the animation process. It helps alot with in-betweens, easing in and out, copy and pasting keyframes

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and animation, moving keyframes, and changing tangents easily, and alot more to help to increase an efficient workflow.

Cinematography posed another substantial challenge, given my limited expertise. To overcome this hurdle, I initially created a rough 2D storyboard to conceptualize how the story would unfold and to have an idea of how I was going to show my story.

With just using a 2d storyboard I didn't have much chance to explore more camera angles, and I also did not have enough knowledge of perspective and a very expert in drawing , so based on my chair's recommendation, Marty Fitzgerarld, I made a 3d previsualization in Maya.

This involved constructing a scene with simple 3D models and placing a basic character within it, aligning with the script and 2D storyboard. This strategic shift allowed me to explore multiple camera angles without requiring extensive drawing skills.

Utilizing numerous cameras in the scene, I timed shots and created play blasts from various perspectives. I also added some basic sound effects and music on the Previs to enable me to pre-visualize everything.

The previsualization process emerged as a game-changer in terms of cinematography. With multiple iterations, incorporating feedback from my committee and chair, I refined and finalized the previsualization. This served as my primary reference for shots and camera angles, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent stages of the project. Having a clear vision established through the previsualization became instrumental in delineating the shots needed, streamlining the production process and enhancing overall project efficiency.

Reflection on the Outcome

Having successfully concluded this project, I am confident that I am well-prepared to begin producing my second animated film. This endeavor has proven to be a substantial learning experience, elucidating my capabilities and demonstrating notable advancements in my proficiency within the domain of animation. The diverse range of animated shots and expressive elements undertaken throughout this project offered a valuable platform for artistic exploration.

Beyond the refinement of technical skills, engagement in this project has catalyzed personal development. A thorough immersion in the entire process of animating for the film has equipped me with a comprehensive understanding of production pipelines and intricate nuances inherent in the craft. This encompasses the conception, initiation, development, and eventual animation of a narrative, affording me a complete perspective on the multifaceted nature of animation.

These experiences transcend the confines of technical expertise, significantly contributing to both my personal and professional growth. The acquired knowledge and honed skills derived from this project represent invaluable assets, strategically positioning me to pursue and attain future objectives within the animation field.

Conclusion

This paper was about my journey from the inception of an idea to the completion of my first animated film.

The fusion of my passion for animation with a lifelong dream of filmmaking became the driving force behind this capstone project.

The lessons learned and skills honed during this project are all assets for my future in animation.

My future plan is to work in the animation industry, particularly in film animation, where I seek to further my expertise in both animation and film direction. My long-term objectives involve venturing into independent filmmaking and developing my skills in this field.

After getting more industry experience and working with different animation studios. I would like to transition into the academic environment and concurrently impart my knowledge to aspiring animators at the academic level.

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