

An Exploration of the Pre-Production Stage of Animated Films

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Initial Thoughts

Originally, I wanted to focus my final project on the fine art skills that I have learned throughout my time in the Digital Arts program. More specifically, I was set on incorporating my ceramics skills into my final project. I really enjoy hand building with clay and was interested in having much of my project revolve around hand building and sculpting. Initially, I wanted to come up with a short story with interesting characters and build the characters and scenes out of clay. However, after brainstorming I noticed that I was becoming much more engaged in creating the story and characters than the clay component of my proposal.

After deciding that I wanted to focus on storytelling, I had to give some thought as to what medium I would like to work in. I have always been interested in using animation as a means of storytelling. Having the ability to tell a story visually, using any effects imaginable is intriguing. There are many studios who exemplify story telling through their animation. For example, Pixar focuses on the story of their animations before the art or graphics. Andrew Stanton, Director and Producer of several Pixar films, in this Ted Talk “The Clues to a Great Story”, states that we all love stories, that we are born for them and that “...nothing does a greater affirmation than when we connect through stories.” (Stanton). Animation for Pixar is more of a medium, the magic of those films really lies in the story telling. I admire animation and the amount of technique and skill that goes into creating the artwork for it. However, I too see it as a medium for expressing a concept or story. Therefore, I decided to focus my project on the detailed process of creating a story and its characters. Those that work in film might call this the pre-production stage.

Pre-Production

Pre-production is an essential stage when turning a concept into a cohesive project. I personally think that this stage is overlooked when we think of our favorite works of art. We often focus on the final product but not so much on where the idea might have been derived from or all the iterations needed to create something that is as refined.

Companies such as Pixar have a pipeline that their animations go through. The pipeline begins with a pre-production stage that consists of; having an idea, story development, writing a script, story boards and character development and design all before any animating begins. Each of these steps plays a pivotal role in the creation of the films, shows, comics and other art we love. The pre-production stage is where the story lines and character design that we really connect with come to fruition. For my project, I decided to explore each of these steps by coming up with my own idea and then following each step until I have completed pre-production for my animation. I will then be creating a short animation to test if these steps were necessary or helpful.

Creating a Compelling Story

My first task for this project was to create a compelling story. My initial idea was derived from my interest in the feminist plots of popular media. Especially after watching the 2019 adaptations of “Little Women” and “Anne with an E”, both of which have very strong female leads. I also have a fascination with horror stories, I find them to have very compelling backgrounds, settings and interesting characters, although they can sometimes fall into very formulaic plots. I decided to combine these two subjects to create my story. The general plot of the story is as follows: A mother, father and daughter live on a farm. The father is clearly old and

is showing signs of weariness while working on their farm. The mother is unable to have a boy but feels obligated to have one and give the father someone to help with the farm work. The mother does a ritual that is supposed to bring them a boy. It does, but the boy is evil in nature. He feigns helpfulness but, in the end, he kills the mother and attempts to kill the father. However, the daughter kills the boy before he can kill both parents. The daughter then goes on to help the father with the farm work.

I created this story in an attempt express the disparity between gender roles and what we are capable of when we are not constrained by those roles. The mother at the beginning feels an obligation she should not have to, even when the father is not complaining or asking for another offspring. The attempt to conform to these norms' manifests into something inherently evil, and she is killed in the process. When I wrote that the mother dies here, I was thinking a lot about how women died attempting to have children because they were trying to have a son for purposes like working a farm. In the past it was important to have a son that could help take care of the family or the family's source of income. So, I decided to have the mother die in a similar way in this story. I then show the father about to be killed, completely oblivious and unexpected, in fact he is sleeping here. I wanted this to be an example of a man that is oblivious to the burden that is carried by his partner. This example is stereotypical and solidifies that the father is following gender norms.

Finally, I have the daughter act as the one who defeated the evil. I really wanted the daughter to save the day to express her breaking her assigned role. She is the one that senses the evil, she is also the one that is ready to defend herself and her family and she is prepared with a weapon. This is an action I think most would expect the father to take, but I instead have him remain oblivious and sleeping. I also show her working in the field with her father at the end of

the story to express that she could have been filling this role all along, without ever having to welcome evil into their home or losing a family member.

While I was writing this story, I tried to stick to some guidelines that I thought would create a good story. Here in the Mediums “6 Great Rules of Storytelling (as told by Pixar)” they list some good guidelines that Pixar artists have discussed using. I chose some more specific ones to aid me in writing this story. For example: The first rule that they list is “Great Stories are Universal.” Pete Doctor, a Director for Pixar states:

“What you are trying to do, when you tell a story, is to write about an event in your life that made you feel some particular way. And what you are trying to do, when you tell a story, is to get the audience to have that same feeling.” (qtd. in Peter 1).

The reason I connect so much with the feminist themes of movies like “Little Women” is because I go through the same struggles as the women in them. Similarly, other feminist art helps me to better understand myself and why I must navigate my life and society in such a careful and convoluted way. I also wanted to tell the story of trying to break from your assigned roles in a new and interesting way. This is a story that I think at its core, many people can connect with.

Another rule that is stated in this article is that “Great Stories Have Clear Structure and Purpose.” The article states that many writers for Pixar try to follow “The Story Spine”, a formula created by professional playwright and improviser Kenn Adams. Adams states that “The Story Spine” is “...both a practice technique for learning how to tell a well-constructed story as well as an outlining tool to help construct a story” (qtd. in Aerogramme 1). The formula itself goes like this:

“Once upon a time [blank]. Every day, [blank]. But, one day [blank]. Because of that, [blank]. Because of that, [blank]. Because of that, [blank]. Until finally [bank]. And, ever since then [blank].” (qtd. in Aerogramme 1).

Occasionally, while writing this story I would try to fit my plot into this formula. After completing the story, my plot fit into this formula something like this: “Once upon a time there was a small, rural family of a mother, father and daughter. Every day, the father would work on their farm. But one day, the mother noticed the toll the work was taking on the father. Because of that, she tries to have a boy to help him but is unable to. Because of that, she summons an evil boy that walks among them freely. Until finally, the boy tries to kill the family, only to be thwarted by the young girl. And, ever since then the girl helps the father on the farm.” My story does not fit perfectly into this formula, but I am not attempting to follow Pixar’s style to a tee. However, I do think this is a good way to shave down a story and make sure you are following a concise plot that has a clear beginning, middle and end. I think using this formula helped me do just that.

Character Creation and Design

Creating the characters for this project was another step that I really wanted to focus on. I think that another reason we become such big fans of animated movies like “Toy Story” or “Finding Nemo” is because the characters are so well developed. These characters that are just toys and fish are made to feel human-like, this is because their animators do a great job at anthropomorphizing their expressions and actions. However, the work that goes into crafting their personalities, motives and backstories happens before they even have a finalized design.

The story consists of five characters: a mother, a father, a young girl, a young boy and a monster. For their designs, I tried to keep each character simple. I took inspiration for Cartoon

Networks “Over the Garden Wall”, who’s animation is simple and pleasing until the darker themes of the story are unveiled, then they become more detailed to reflect their evil nature. This formula is something I tried to follow as I was creating the artwork for my characters. Each character is conservative looking, I wanted to have them play into some very stereotypical gender roles to connect with the storyline. I also set a goal for myself to make sure the characters and story remained relatable or at least help the viewer understand that the themes I am expressing can apply to anyone. For the daughter I tried to keep her stereotypically “girlish” so that it is more apparent that she is breaking her gender role later in the story. I did give the mother some more distinct physical traits that mimic that of a classic “old witch” design such as a mole, bigger chin and pointed nose. I did this to help solidify the fact that she actively practices magic and not that she just happened to pick up this craft to summon the boy. I made the father have more masculine traits to make sure he played into his gender role more as it was his choice to do so. For the boy I also added some more distinct features, I thought that a good way to make him both seem unsettling and that he isn’t like the others was to give him some more humanistic features so I shaped his eyes and nose to be more anthropomorphic. Finally, I needed to design a monster that looked scary as this is a horror story as well. However, I also wanted him to represent a manifestation of the mothers’ guilt. So, I took some inspiration for other characters like Stephen King’s Pennywise that also becomes manifestations of emotions and based the monster on this.

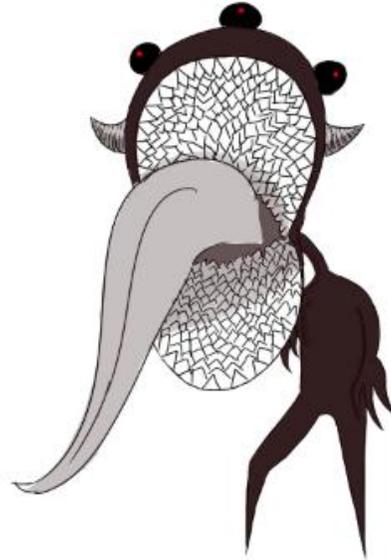


Figure 1 Monster Final Design

Story Boarding

Story boarding is a process that acts as a means of communication between ideas and the actualization of a story. As Rick Walker states in his publication “Story Boarding for Visual Analytics”, story boarding is used in films as a “previsualization technique”, in order to help the director, plan the film. He also states that “They represent a sequence of (usually) sketched drawings, each on an individual sheet (or panel...)” (Walker et al. 28). Finally, Walker also states; “What is required is a visual layout strategy that summarizes specific events and allows users to layout the story in a structured way” (Walker et al. 29).

I believe story boarding to be one of the most important parts of transitioning a story and designs into an actual animation. While I may know and understand the entire story, expressing the plot and its nuances is very difficult to do only through words. Creating a storyboard gives me the opportunity to express exactly how the story will be visualized through each frame. As well as act as a tool for the final animation.

Story boarding is just an organized way of presenting the frame by frame break down of how a plot unfolds. While the panels in my story board do not depict every movement of each character, they do highlight the actions of each character and the progression of the story. I

divided each panel into different sections so that the viewer could get a better understanding of exactly what is happening in each scene. These sections include, what is happening in frame, what is happening outside of the frame, arrows indicating movement, a description of what is

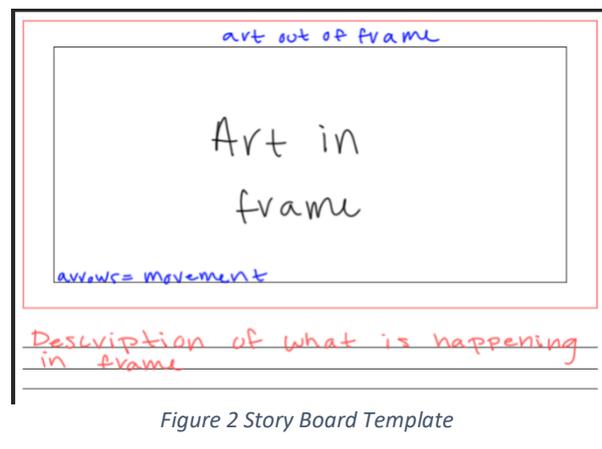


Figure 2 Story Board Template

happening, a panel number and scene number. Creating this story board also helped me work out the kinks in my story, understand the important themes and highlight the scenes and actions that I thought were the most compelling.

Creative Brief

I also wanted to include a way to present each portion of this project in a cohesive format. The formatting for the brief will be as follows: Presenting the story in its fully written form, providing information on its underlying themes, laying out the entire story board, providing depictions of each character and the progression of their creation, as well short descriptions for each of them, and a section on the animation and how each step aided in the final animation.

Having all your information and material in one linear and organized space is important. It helps the viewer recognize that what you are trying to pitch or sell is cohesive, understandable, well thought out and executable. David Barker in his article; “How to Write an Inspiring Creative Brief” makes an interesting point: “...creatives live with fear and terror of the blank space. But there is a lot you, as supplier of the brief, can do about that.” (Barker 4). I think that

this idea of filling the blank space in important. An idea often mimics what your final product should be. It was my job to decipher exactly how to reach that product. I came up

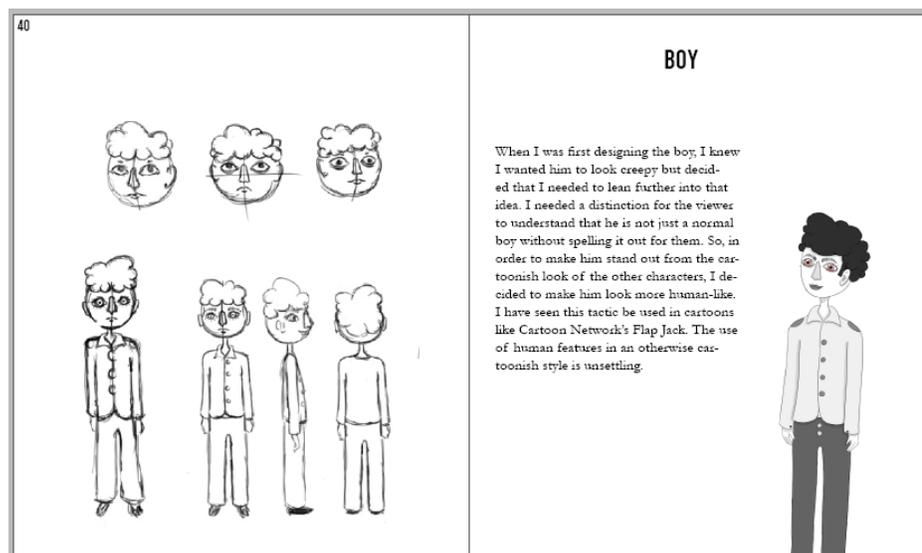


Figure 3 Pages 40-41 of Creative Brief

with an idea of wanting to have an animation that deals with feminism. This is the product, then I had to ask myself, ‘how do I get there?’ This is the question that I was most interested in answering and why I chose to focus on the pre-production stage. Filling in that blank space can certainly be overwhelming but as Barker states that is what the creative brief is for. And why I think that including a brief for my project is imperative.

Animation

I originally did not set out to create the animation for this project. As I stated earlier, I see animation as a medium and am much more interested in creating the story and characters which is the basis of this project. However, after speaking some with my advisors and working on the animation I decided it was a good idea to include one. I created a trailer for



Figure 4 Animation at 00:16

what would be the full-length animation. I think that having this trailer acts as a proof of concept. It shows that my vague idea, when brought through the steps of pre-production, could be made into an animation. Further proving that the pre-production stage is an important part of any film making.

Challenges

My first challenge with this project was pairing down my ideas so that they were more manageable. Initially, the story consisted of two girls and there were about two more scenes where I had planned to kill them both off and have the father work and live alone. Eventually I

rewrote the story and I believe shortening it made it much more manageable and it made my theme clearer. Another challenge I had was deciding exactly what the steps of preproduction were. In the beginning stages I was thinking about including 3D models of both the scenes and the characters. I also wanted to include an animatic as a rough draft for the final animation. It was only after I saw the Pixar Animation Pipeline that I took inspiration from it and decided on the steps I would take.

My last big challenge was the animation, I had only worked with After Effects for a short time when I started the animation. As I stated previously, I had not planned on creating the animation at all. However, After Effects was a great tool for adding interesting effects and movement without having to do much frame by frame animation. This would have taken a lot more time and I think my final trailer does a good job of expressing what the final animation should look like.

Final Thoughts

I believe I did reach my goal of completing the pre-production stage of this project. In the future, I could probably find a skilled animator who would be able to complete a short animation based on the material provided. However, if I were to pitch this to a more developed studio there are a few things I would add. For example, I would add more finalized art for the characters. I might create a character model sheet for each character that includes art for every small detail such as the hands, shoes, and every angle of the head and body. I would have included some artwork for some of the settings for the story such as the basement and the farm so that the animator could get a feel for the general ambiance of the world this is taking place in. I also would have fleshed out the story boards more and shown more movement and the actions of the

characters. However, I believe that over this semester, I was able to show just how important and helpful utilizing the pre-production stage can be.

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