

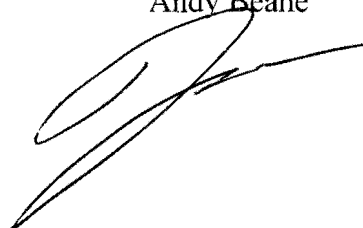
**Escape, a Short Film in Progress**

**An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)**

**By**

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## Abstract

Animation is an oft misunderstood form of art; many casual observers think it to be nothing more than pretty colors and funny characters. In a time where computer animation and video games are at the forefront of entertainment, it is grossly inappropriate to hold onto this misconception. By delving into the creation of an animated short throughout its evolution, I hope to illuminate the elaborate process that goes into a piece of animation.

## Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank Patrick Shaw and Jonathan Strong for helping create the various assets of the short film, lending their expertise in areas unfamiliar to myself, and giving the first inklings of life to a digital hamster.

I would like to thank my wife Catherine Roberts for the initial idea for the short film and the unwavering support throughout trials and tribulations throughout this project and all other endeavors.

## Artist Statement

I am a character animator, working primarily in the program Maya by Autodesk. As an animator, it is my goal to portray characters in a manner that both entertains an audience as well as clearly conveys thoughts and emotions. One of the most rewarding experiences is when a character goes from a lifeless model on a computer screen to a living, breathing being. In my short film, *Escape*, as well as my other endeavors, I strive to make the audience empathetic with my characters; I want those watching my pieces to smile when the character is happy and to feel their heartstrings reverberate when the character is hurting inside.

When the average person sits down to watch an animated feature-length film, most think it to be a simple process. The traditional 2D animation artists surely pulled hundreds of perfectly rendered images straight from their mind's eye; the contemporary 3D animators undoubtedly press a few buttons on their state of the art animation wonder-machines. Sitting in a room with the animation-illiterate is enough to make an animator nauseous from overexposure to misconceptions. To tell them that a feature-length animator is considered successful if they accomplish five minutes of animation a year would be to completely overwhelm them in disbelief. Showing them a short film of a mere thirty seconds that took well over two weeks to produce garners nothing more than blank stares and disbelief that it took that much time for such little product.

To make a short film tends to be a daunting task to any filmmaker, regardless of their medium. In the field of 3D or computer animation, that fact does not change. The very beginning of any film starts with an idea for a story and eventually a full script; from there, concept artists start crafting the overall look of the film while storyboard artists turn the script into a visual experience. Once the concept designs are completed, modelers begin creating the various assets that range from simple props and objects to complete characters and environments. After the storyboards are done, they are cut to time with early audio (an animatic) in order to get an overall sense of the flow of the entire story; for the most part, the majority of edits and cuts in a computer animated film take place in this stage. Before the real animation starts, layout artists begin converting the 2D animatic into 3D layout which gives the animators a better idea of camera angles and moves as well as where the characters live within a scene.

Over the past two years, I have been working and collaborating with several colleagues to create, produce, animate and direct an animated short film, *Escape*. I have personally moved

through the aforementioned stages of pre-production through to my current state of the film in order to better understand what it is like to work in a production pipeline, from beginning to end. As a student of animation wanting to break into the industry, I find it to be of the utmost importance to truly comprehend what every stage of producing a film warrants and how the workflow is arranged. In addition to gaining a more in-depth appreciation for the various aspects, I also wanted to have a heavy hand in the full creation of this film in order to make sure that the story of this short is told.

To be brief, my short film, *Escape*, is about an agoraphobic man named Marvin and his anthropomorphic hamster, Boris. Marvin dreams of world travel but has extreme trepidation over simply retrieving the newspaper. One day with the help from Boris, Marvin comes across a seemingly viable solution to his problems: an HDTV with a travel channel package and free home delivery. Upon watching the TV, Marvin becomes entirely engrossed in the programs and begins fantasizing that he and Boris are really traveling to these exotic locations. Returning from his reverie, Marvin notices something amiss; Boris is not in his cage and is nowhere to be found. He catches a glimpse of his beloved pet and friend about to slip out through the front door, and Marvin begins begging him to come back. With a smirk and a farewell wave, the hamster jumps through the mail-slot and is gone. Horrified, Marvin bolts for the door, whips it open and is outside before he knows what has even happened. This is a story that I feel deserves to be told. While it hopefully is found to be entertaining, I also hope to stress the ideas of friendship, camaraderie, and the notion of overcoming one's obstacles with the power of friendship.

In contemporary society, entertainment is always a factor in everyday life. One of the main forms of dependable entertainment is movies or, more specifically, animated movies. By focusing my talents into creating a short film, I am making the effort to epitomize what it means

to work in this particular industry; my job is to share an experience, a story, or a lesson and do so in an entertaining manner. Just as Aesop taught life lessons through comical or at least interesting short stories, I also hope to instill some minor truth or lesson in my short film as well as any animated endeavor I undertake in the future.

One might think that a short film about a man and his hamster does not carry much emotional or inspirational weight, but that is exactly what I am trying to bring to the story. While it is intended to be largely comical, *Escape* is also meant to illustrate the ability to overcome fear and anxiety with the help of a friend. The main character is simply not strong enough to accomplish his goal by himself and is only truly able to leave his home with the help of his furry friend. Just as Gandalf the Grey prodded poor Bilbo out of his comfortable little hole, so does Boris the Hamster force Marvin out of his shuttered existence.

Although this particular motif of friendship has been repeated throughout various stories, it remains to be just as pertinent, if not more so now. In a time where Facebook, Twitter, and texting isolate us from direct contact from one other, it is incredibly easy to lose sight of the importance of maintaining a physical friendship with another being. That outside friendship helps to remind us that we are still human; we have feelings and social needs that must be met in order to overcome the great despair that is loneliness. We do feel pain and fear but we need not do it alone.

It is no great surprise that when the majority of people think of animation, the first thoughts that come to mind concern Pixar and the wonderful tales they tell. I do agree that they have exquisite stories concerning the importance of friendship, the power of a child's laughter, and the pains of growing up; however, I would also like to bring to attention the fact that Pixar as well as other firms such as Dreamworks are not the only ones trying to accomplish this. The

gaming industry is striving for much of the same attention for their stories and character-driven tales. The great significance of becoming a stronger animator is to bring out even stronger character performances in both the film and gaming industries, to give these digital puppets more than a passing semblance of humanity.

Over the course of my time spent on this project, I have pulled inspiration from multiple films, experiences, books, conversations, and artists. A couple years ago, I was trying to decide what to do for my thesis when I remembered a short story my wife had written for a class; in this story, an agoraphobic man dreamt of world travel but was only able to do so through his television. She and I began talking about the story and how we might be able to flesh it out a bit more into an animated short. That's when the hamster was born. Not long after that, I gathered a group of my colleagues over a spaghetti dinner in the fall of 2010 in order to organize ourselves into a small production group. We had everything we needed: a screenwriter, a director, a couple of animators, a technical director, and a modeler or two.

Throughout the dinner, our ragtag group began hashing out various ideas and researching different animated shorts in order to find a suitable art style. Some of the films we found included *Café Serre* by Denis Bouyer and *Alma* by Rodrigo Blaas. From a visual standpoint, both films feature a strong mix of near-photorealistic environments and more cartoon-like characters as well as solid character animation. The animators on both films also provided very lifelike and entertaining visuals, strongly conveying the characters with which they were working.

Since that night in 2010, I have continued to search on my own for various sources of inspiration. One source that has been nearly invaluable is Richard William's book *The Animator's Survival Kit*.



*Alma* by Rodrigo Blaas

Considered to be the de facto bible of animation, I have pulled countless pieces of information and technique concerning the timing and execution of overall character animation. I have also been lucky enough to have met and talked in length with acting coach and author of *Acting for Animators*, Ed Hooks. Somewhat of an acting guru, Ed hosts talks for schools, organizations, and animation studios in which he discusses ideas and theories that help to pull more human elements into our digital puppets. More recently, I have been in contact with a handful of professional animators in the industry, receiving feedback and valuable critiques on my animation.

As an animator, my creative process starts much like any other type of artist. Everything starts with an idea. Whether it is a ten-second short, a five-minute short film, or even a full feature-length movie, it all comes down to that initial idea. In the animation community, artists from around the world at various skill levels compete monthly in the "11 Second Club" competition in which the community moderators select a random clip of dialogue, music, or sound effects to use in an animated short. When I personally start a challenge similar to this, I listen to the audio clip as closely as possible in an effort to glean any detail hidden within it that

might aid in the formulation of an idea (what kind of ambient noise is there, how do the characters sound, are they happy, are they upset, do they have an accent, how quickly or how slowly are they speaking, do they sound like they are worried about money, how old are they, etc.).

With the short film project, everything began somewhat similarly with a rather simple idea. As mentioned before, everything stemmed from a short story my wife had written back in the fall of 2010. Once she, my colleagues, and I fleshed out the story a bit more, it was my job to begin giving the film its visual identity. In spring semester of 2011, I was enrolled in a Conceptual Art/Pre-Production class with Sam Ellis in which I started playing with various ideas on how Marvin the Agoraphobic and Boris the Hamster would look. In addition to the characters, I also started conceptualizing the environments and settings that the duo would populate; it included everything from Marvin's living room to a Japanese sushi bar.

After finishing the Conceptual Art class, I started up in a Post-Production class with John Ludwick in which he helped me begin to polish my animation techniques as well as start the storyboarding process. The class was setup more or less as a forum in which my colleagues and I openly discussed the projects we were working on and offered various critiques and suggestions in order to better each other as digital artists. Over the course of the semester, I worked closely with John to create an entertaining, meaningful, and cohesive storyline.

When the storyboards were finished, I spent a few weeks working on layout, which is basically a three-dimensional representation of the storyboards but cut to proper timing and with scratch audio for a better sense of how the film will flow from beginning to end. At its final layout cut, the film runs for approximately four minutes and consists more or less of forty individual scenes. As of the writing of this paper, the film will not necessarily be completed by



the end of the semester but rather be well on its way to completion in the near future. The overall goal of this thesis is not necessarily to have an entirely finished film but rather to learn first-hand the tribulations of creating an independent short film in a real-world environment.