

SECOND BEST

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY

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MUNCIE, INDIANA

DECEMBER, 2018

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

When presented with the idea of creating an animated short film three major questions came to mind: how can I create a compelling story which conveys a moral lesson, grow not only an artist but as a project manager and collaborator, and provide an outlet for both myself and my collaborators to effectively showcase our skill sets to the utmost of our abilities?

The first of these was the initiative to create a story that delivers a heartfelt message in a compelling manner. This included the obstacles of creating a story an audience could relate to, presenting a clear, concise moral conflict and devising a manner in which the main character of the film could overcome this obstacle, while delivering each of these key points in a format that adhered to the standards of visual storytelling and screenplay writing.

Secondly came the obstacle of creating a large-scale project with which I was able to collaborate with other artists. Collaboration has been something I have only briefly been exposed to through my previous experiences both in my studies as well as in my professional work, but within the animation and education industries is of the utmost importance. The focus of collaboration on this project has granted me not only the opportunity to work with several incredible artists I may otherwise have never had the opportunity to do so with but has also given me an excellent outlet through which to exhibit my abilities as a project manager and technical artist myself.

The final of these major objectives stemmed from the artist's perspective of the film creation process. How can I create a film that is presented in a manner the audience may not have seen before and will properly showcase my abilities, as well as the abilities of my collaborators, as artists? Through the generation of a unique visual style and by working with several artists with varying skills I have been able to create a film that is not only engaging in the

realm of storytelling but also through the visual elements. These include the overall theme and setting of the film, the visual style, and the use of character animation. In devising the visual style for my film I drew on many personal influences as well as attempted to develop an intriguing feel to the project that hasn't necessarily been prevalent in the animation program at Ball State University in past projects.

Throughout the creation of my film, *Second Best*, I feel as though I have effectively achieved each of these three major project goals. A compelling story has been conveyed accordingly with the standards of screenplay writing. A professional pipeline that allows the collaboration of artists as well as presents an outlet for each of us to showcase our talents and managerial skills has also been developed from the ground up. The completion of each of these objectives has culminated in a visually stimulating manner showcasing a unique art style that adheres to my personal standards and influences while effectively showcasing a style of filmmaking unique to the Ball State Animation program.

REVIEW OF INFLUENCES AND LITERATURE

As with all forms of art, Animation would not continue to exist, let alone thrive as an industry, without the continued influence of those who paved the way. The works of several larger companies and their respective artists, such as Disney, Pixar, Industrial Light and Magic, and Blizzard Entertainment have always played an important role in my decisions as an animator, both visually and conceptually. Each of these companies' works focus on varying aspects of our field, ranging from interactive live environments in video games, to visual effects, to traditional storytelling. These three key elements are the driving force behind my motivation to excel as a digital artist and filmmaker.

From the beginning of animation's history Disney has been leading the way in this incredible industry. Walt Disney and his teams of artists and storytellers were the first to be able to truly bring the magic of imagination to life through animation. The techniques and technologies they developed have grown and evolved over the years but they continue to hold true to the foundations created when one team decided to do the impossible. They also continue to thrive and excel through the use of 3D animation as the industry evolves around them, which is prominently seen in the success of *Frozen*. In this respect Disney is one of the most inspirational studios to me. Their art works are a perfect example of the fact that nothing is more important than the story being conveyed through animation. They have shown that the magic of a film does not come from 3D glasses or high definition monitors, but instead through the realization of fantasy and imagination.

3D Animation, at one point, was thought to be impractical. The idea of using computers to create a new style of animation was enticing, but initially there were concerns about the

methods. The work took longer, and the materials and technology cost much more than traditional animation. Pixar was the first company to attempt to create a full length 3D animated film when they created *Toy Story*, which showed the world that not only could this be done but also opened an entirely new medium for storytellers. John Lassiter, an animator, director, and Chief Creative Officer at Pixar once said that, “art challenges the technology, and the technology inspires the art.” Coming from a computer science background I have always been able to relate to this. One of the most fascinating aspects of creating *Second Best* is the idea of starting with an empty hard drive and a software package and creating an entire film digitally. With these tools one can apply the principles of traditional sculpting, painting, animation, film, photography, and special effects digitally to create every element of a work of art. The standards in both storytelling and filmmaking aside, this is one of the strongest influences Pixar has had on me. Looking back at what they have created, and the inferior technology they began with, has truly brought to light the reality that any story can be told through 3D animation.

It is also important to note that not all studios create every element of their films. Special effects, for example, are more often than not outsourced to a company that specializes in that field. Much as Pixar has set the standard in the field of animation, Industrial Light and Magic has done the equivalent in visual effects. ILM has been the driving force behind the visual effects of countless motion pictures, some of the most popular being *Star Wars*, *Iron Man*, and *Transformers*. ILM’s most recent hit was actually a completely new undertaking in and of itself. *Rango* was the first fully animated movie the studio produced in-house, and went on to win an Oscar. Industrial Light and Magic brings to the film industry something truly unique. Their ability to seamlessly merge computer generated visual effects and live action film elements presents an entirely new dimension of reality, allowing viewers to believe that the impossible could take place in the real world. Their ability to do so has always motivated me throughout my

opportunities to further explore the visual effects workflow in some small capacity. Within *Second Best* several shots were designed specifically to facilitate this desire, including the wind and rain simulations.

Working in the film industry has always the goal I hope to achieve. The other side of the spectrum, the game industry, has also played a major role in my decision to be an animator. Video games allow players to experience the art of storytelling in an entirely different manner. Users are actually able to immerse themselves in the universe of the stories, becoming a part of that world by sharing in the experiences of characters they play. One company in particular, Blizzard Entertainment, employs a visual style I have chosen to emulate in *Second Best*. While I deviated from any universe created for a Blizzard franchise I have chosen an art style loosely relevant to that seen in many of the games they produce. This is prevalent in the proportions of my characters and the environments and props with which they interact, as well as the methods of texturing utilized throughout the film.

Two written works have also played an important role in the conceptual development of *Second Best*. The first is Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*. In this text Vogler breaks down the stages and elements of Joseph Campbell's Monomyth, or the Hero's Journey, a pattern of storytelling that is arguably present in all notable works since the times of ancient Greece. He also discusses the basic guidelines used in storytelling and points out its uses in many popular works, including *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Fight Club*. Vogler also notes the use of character archetypes and their relations to the hero along his journey. The second is *Save the Cat*, a screenwriting manual by Blake Snyder. This book focuses on the different beats that compose a story, describes several methods in which the writer can deliver something to an audience that they did not expect, and outlines the varying genres of stories.

This is a book unlike any other in the sense that it essentially exposes all of the secrets of screenwriting to its readers in a modern, practical manner and, as Vogler puts it, “tells it like it is” (Vogler 2005). These books present new ideas based on the foundations of storytelling, both visually and narratively. Prior to encountering these books my experience in the animation industry had been purely technical and commercial. I had only worked on projects others had conceived. While this work was stimulating, engaging, and educational, the time came to bring to life a story of my own and I would not have been able to do so without these authors’ inspiration.

My works prior to *Second Best* varied drastically in many ways. I have created still images that strive to depict photorealism through a digital medium. I have also worked on short films to help realize the visions of other artists and storytellers. I have created virtual worlds that allow users to visit famous historical sites and immersively experience them both as they were in their prime as well as how they stand today. Each of my prior projects has either been a practical or technical exploration into the methods used in either the film or game industries. These two worlds have each influenced my work in so many ways, and my goal for *Second Best* became finding a way to visually merge the two. In doing so I have chosen to present a film which adheres to the foundations of traditional storytelling with a visual style more relevant to that seen in video games through the use of digitally created assets. Through the creation of *Second Best* I have taken influence from several fields of digital art and was able to merge them into a style that I believe depicts a personal artwork.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTWORKS

The creation of an animated short film involves three major stages. The first of these is preproduction, which encompasses the processes of writing the story, designing the characters, and storyboarding. The second of these is the primary stage of production, during which time all of the 3D assets are created for the film, the characters are animated, and each scene is lit. The third stage is postproduction. This includes rendering, visual effects, and compositing.

The first step in creating a short film is to come up with a story. Week after week, I pitched ideas to my professors and classmates until the story that has since become *Second Best* was realized. This process involved creating hundreds and hundreds of panels of beatboards to translate the key points of a story pitch into a visual medium. Once the basic premise of a story struck my critics as interesting, compelling, and original I began storyboarding and adding each scene of the proposed film. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of storyboard panels and several moderately developed stories were thrown out before the film was flushed out. In fact, the entire premise for *Second Best* stemmed from another idea that segued into what it has since become. Each week I would present a series of storyboard panels for critique to ensure that the story followed basic storytelling guidelines, related to an audience, and conveyed the desired meanings and emotions in each individual shot.

Once an idea was set in stone the next step was to design the characters, both visually as well as contextually. To do so, back-stories were written for each character which defined their histories and experiences. Once these were established, I worked in collaboration with another artist who specifically focuses on character design to create Fizz Gearsprocket, the main character of *Second Best*. I later designed other supporting characters myself. Once each of these tasks were completed, the film moved into the production stage.



Fig. 1 The establishment of a strong back-story for each of the characters of *Second Best* ensured that the responses and emotions portrayed throughout the film were correctly interpreted its audience.

The first step in the actual production stage *Second Best* entailed digitally sculpt the characters. This process, much like physical sculpting in the real world, involves building the characters piece by piece. Afterwards the 3D mesh is rigged for animation, a process which involves attaching a complex series of controls to an object which essentially creates a digital puppet. This character rig is what animators use to bring the characters to life. Throughout the animation process I have had the opportunity to work in collaboration with several very talented artists without whom this film would never have come to fruition. While animation was underway utilizing low resolution layout geometry I was able to simultaneously model and texture the environments and various assets. Additionally, as animation was completed on the shots that required 3D simulated visual effects I began the simulations as soon as possible. The last step in the production stage was to light each individual shot of the film, much like filmmakers and photographers light their subjects in the real world.

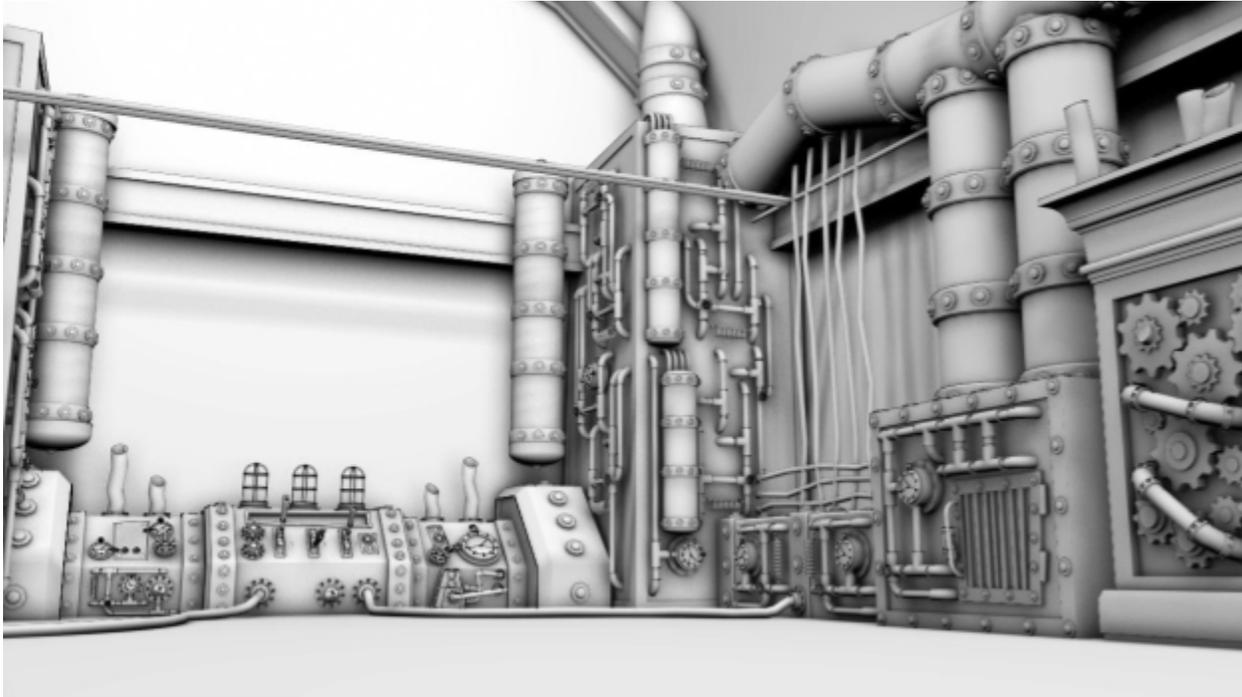


Fig. 2 The design process for *Second Best* entailed more than that of the characters themselves. The environments of the film, which also served to aid in the development of the back-story of the universe in which the film takes place, was of equal importance.

Once the production of the film was complete I began rendering. Rendering is the process of creating a still image of every individual frame of animation. This is later composited together in a program such as After Effects where postproduction begins. Within After Effects each shot is color corrected, depth of field and minor visual effects are added, and everything is exported and ready to have the soundtrack composed over it.

Each stage of the production pipeline presents many challenges, most of which I had experienced on past projects in some way or another. The creation of this film, however, is the first opportunity that I have had to fully explore every aspect of the pipeline from start to finish.

CONCLUSION AND EXHIBITION STATEMENT

The creation of a short film in its entirety is one of the most ambitious challenges I have ever undertaken, both in my artwork and elsewhere in life. In the past, while working on several other short films, my role and responsibilities on each of them varied greatly. Going into this project I certainly felt as though I had the experience required to complete it, but was also very aware of the ways in which it would challenge me as an artist and storyteller.

One of the main things I have learned from this project is how to step away from an artistic comfort zone. Prior to graduate school I had never taken a single class on any of the varying aspects of pre-production. I had never learned how to design a character, how to write an engaging story, or what the different types of camera cuts were and how they were utilized in filmmaking. I had always assumed that many of those things were outsourced to different departments. Shortly after beginning work on this creative project I realized how far from reality that assumption really was. I have since both researched and experienced the processes of bringing an idea to fruition and transitioning from the planning and design stages into fully-fledged production.

Another key field I gained experience in by creating this film is project management. I had worked as a visual effects artist before this project on a short film, where I was expected to assign shots to and review the work of several other artists. I have also gained some relevant management experience through my position at the Institute of Digital Intermedia Arts. Before this project, however, I had never had the opportunity to manage a small team of artists on a project that was specifically mine. This role included several responsibilities, such as creating a pipeline that allowed artists from all over the country to work seamlessly with each other and

organizing and managing the scheduling and production of each asset for the film. Not only did I gain valuable experience managing the project but I also learned an extensive amount through collaboration. The collaboration and input of my advisors, colleagues, classmates, and friends

Fizz Gearsprocket

Concept sketch & rigged character model comparison



Fig. 2 From conceptual sketches to the final production character rigs, collaboration among artists with varying skill sets was imperative in the creation of *Second Best*.

allowed me to create *Second Best*.

I have devoted much of the past several years to this project. Before I began I had never really envisioned myself creating a short film; I did not come into it with a goal or a dream I was aiming to realize. This resulted in spending several months brainstorming the story I wanted to tell. Once I had decided on something close to what *Second Best* has developed into, several additional months were spent fine tuning every single detail of the film, down to each individual frame. From this point production began, which is where most of the time was spent. While I had varying experience in each stage of the production pipeline there were very few points where I

truly knew what I was doing. I can model, texture, and composite at a comfortably competent level but when it came to rigging the character for example, something I had very little experience with, I hit many snags. Several of these actually brought production to a halt multiple times.

Creating *Second Best* has been an experience unlike any other. The long hours, late nights, unpredictable circumstances, and every other obstacle encountered throughout its production have all been worth it in the end. This project has facilitated a level of collaboration I have never experienced with other artists. It has also taught me an immeasurable amount about storytelling, project management, and each individual process involved in the production of a film. I hope that through my efforts I have created a story that presents a clear moral message that its audience can relate to, that is visually appealing, and that is ultimately enjoyable to watch. At the end of the day, animation exists to engage audiences through the realization of their dreams and imaginations and I can only hope that through the creation of *Second Best* I have been able to do just that.

REFERENCES

1. John Lassiter, *Inside Pixar*, film documentary, Bloomberg Television, 2013.
2. Blake Snyder, *Save the Cat!* (California: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005), xiii.
3. Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey* (California: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007)

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Format: Film

Title: Second Best

Length: 3:58

Resolution: 1920x1080

Software used in production: Autodesk Maya, Autodesk Mudbox, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Premiere, Adobe Audition