The Tale of the firefly

Weerana Talodsuk

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The Tale of the Firefly
The Tale of the Firefly

By Weerana Talodsuk

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Imaging Arts / Computer Animation

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York

Maria Schwepppe, Chairperson
Associate Professor
Film / Video / Animation Department

Skip Battaglia, Advisor
Professor
Film / Video / Animation Department

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Professor
Information Technology Department
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11/29/00
Date

Signature of Author
Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express my appreciation to my thesis advisors, Marla Schwepppe, Skip Battaglia and Elouise Oyzon, who have encouraged and given their ideas and experience that together formed the production of this thesis animation from the beginning until the end.

For three years at RIT, I have gained a lot of knowledge from great professors and learned valuable lessons both in class and in real life.

Special thanks also goes to Prphas Chonsaranontha for his beautiful song of the firefly which has been the most significant part of my inspiration and imagination.

I would like to express my respect to my family for their love, care and support. In addition, my appreciation goes to Chaiwat Chanruang, who has given me courage to reach my dream and has always been with me in all situations since the first step of my life in USA.

Without the support of these people, this study could not be completed.
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**Development of the Story**

**Beginning of the Story**

After I finished my winter movie in February 1999, I started thinking about my thesis animation. I had a thought that the story should be somehow related to Thailand, my beloved country, and Thai culture. In Thailand, there are a few Thai stories that had been done in animation because it was not popular as a form of production as compared with film production.

Even though, Computer Animation has become a new popular media in Thailand, nobody seems to be interested in producing an animation from original Thai stories, so I decided to use my last opportunity at RIT to make a Thai-based animation. There are many stories from Thai literature, folk tales, and poems in my mind, but they seemed too long and difficult for people in different cultures to understand. Suddenly, I recalled an old story that I heard when I was young about a firefly. The old people always told children that the firefly is a magical bug. It would appear only at night. If someone could catch a firefly and make a wish, the wish will come true in another day. For this reason, the firefly is used as a symbol of a nice dream, happiness, hope, and luck.

I was one who believed in that story. I used to see many fireflies flying around the tree at night. Its small glittering lights looked like shining stars above the sky. It was an amazing moment and it became an unforgettable memory for a little girl like me. Many years have passed by. I have never seen many fireflies like that again. After that, I heard a Thai song written about the firefly named "Ni-Tan-Hing-Hoy" which means "The Tale of the Firefly" in English. The theme of the song picked up the same story I heard before.
I found the lyric of this song impressed me immensely not just because of the beautiful lyrics but also the moral inside. It also reminded me of my childhood memory. Finally, I decided to adapt the story from this song to be my thesis treatment. (See Appendix A)

The main characters

In most Asian cultures, people always live in big families and have many generations in their houses. Generally, in Thai culture, the oldest generation like a grandmother or grandfather is the kindest person and closest to the youngest generation in family. They always tell good stories and tales which instill morality and provide lessons to children. I would like to show the Thai way of living and the relationship between two generations in my movie, so there are two characters, the boy and the grandmother. This little thing might not be noticeable by people from other cultures, but it was obviously noticed by my Thai friends who saw the movie. It reflects the way we live and the persons we respect.

The Moral

Marla Schwegge, my chairperson always says when you make movie, it should deliver a message to your audience. The audience should get or learn something from your story. I always remembered that and I knew what message would be implied in my thesis movie. The firefly in my movie represents two meanings, the innocent beautiful imagination of the little boy and the true beauty of the firefly itself in nature. The boy wants to catch a firefly because he
believes in the magic of the firefly. He is curious to know if a firefly could make his wish come true. The grandma acts as an observer because she wants the boy to learn the truth by himself. At the end, the boy discovers the truth that a firefly is just a little bug which shines its magical light only in nature.

"You will see the true beauty only if you let it shine naturally. Do not trap the truth. Do not capture the beauty."
**Development of the Animation**

**Aesthetics**

I chose to make my thesis in 2D animation because I like 2D better than 3D and I felt confident in my drawing and painting skills; although, I was concerned that I was not a great artist. 2D is considered a more artistic form of animation compared to 3D animation program, such as Alias, Maya that only can select shapes from the program and change them into objects, so 3D is considered more of a mechanized form of animation. With 2D programs such as PhotoShop and Painter, I was able to use my drawing and painting skills freely. My animation mainly focused upon facial features and gestures of the main characters. There is no dialogue between characters, thus the visual motion becomes most significant because it clearly implies the dialogue. Since character animation is important, I kept my both characters simple and focused more in facial expressions, details on the faces, and secondary motion. Their costume is in the traditional Thai style, which is very simplistic.

The other considerable task I had to achieve was to make the firefly look natural. I made several experiments until I found the best solution was by using the tools in Painter. Painter is a 2D program which has a lot of tools for painting such as watercolor, charcoal, crayon, artistic brushes, etc. and it could create a natural look as if we use real painting tools.
The Soundtrack

As I adapted my story from a Thai song, I had primarily thought to incorporate the song with other music for the soundtrack. Once, I realized in copyright permission would be problematic, I gave up that idea. Moreover, I had the intent to make my movie a professional animation, so I should have a composer to produce an original piece of music for me. Skip Battaglia, one of my thesis committee members, suggested I go to the Eastman School of Music to put advertising flyers around the school because there were a lot of talented music students who wanted to produce and publish their pieces of music as well. About 2 weeks later, I was contacted by a guy named Payton MacDonald. I gave him the treatment along with the storyboard and we talked about how the style of the music would be like. He suggested my story could be divided into 3 parts as if in composing words, The Overture; the music would be soft and slow, The Climax; the rhythm would be developed much stronger, faster, and more complex, and the last part, The Finale; music would come back to soft tone similar to the beginning.

Some vocabulary I used in my story, for example, glittering, sparkling, twinkling, helped Payton get an idea about the instruments. He looked at my storyboard and came up with the idea to write the piece for String Trio (Violin, Viola, Cello) incorporated with Vibraphone, Celeste, and Harp. He thought these instruments would naturally provide an appropriate aural imagery for my work. With his talent in composing, the soundtrack was done beautifully. Payton is a wonderful composer. Currently, he is pursuing the Ph.D. in Music Composing at the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York.
The Software Tools

During my years studying Computer Animation at RIT, I have learned and used several kinds of software such as Macromedia Director, Adobe After Effects, Adobe PhotoShop, Adobe Premiere, AVID, Fractal Design Painter. As a result, I have acquired a huge knowledge in animation production, digital image & sound editing, and so on. With all those software, I was able to make my imagination come to life.
The Timeline of Making Animation

The Tale of the Firefly took three quarters to complete. Although, I was not able to follow my original timeline as I wrote in my thesis proposal, the whole work was done in the right time for me. I made a schedule to separate the three parts of this animation and expected each part to be done in each quarter respectively:

- Fall quarter: the motion of the characters and firefly
- Winter quarter: coloring all animation
- Spring quarter: composition and editing

Part I: Fall Quarter

Originally, I planned to start my thesis during Summer, but I had to go back home for an operation. When I came back to school on Fall, I set up a weekly meeting with my committee in order to force myself to make progress every week. After reviewing the storyboard, I started to make an "Animatic". Surely, I believe every animation student knows this word very well.

"Animatic" is a sequence of images from a storyboard which is put into Director to help measure the time and the length of the animation. I showed the Animatic to my committee, everything looked fine except the total time was quite long, but this could be worked out when editing. I started drawing the boy, the main character. I worked on close-up and medium shots first because I wanted to see how his facial expressions would be.
Basically, I drew all of the keyframes by hand and scanned them, and drew in-between in PhotoShop in different layers, then saved individual drawings as a pict files and brought the entire sequence to Director for assembling.

Normally, animation in Director is run in the real-time frame rate. I could see the real motion without wasting time for rendering, also I was able to control the speed; therefore, I never worked without it. I spent almost half of the quarter doing only character animation. There were hundreds of keyframes, plus tons of in-between frames I had to draw. I felt like I was going to die. I worked so hard in every detail because I wanted my animation look professional. It was boring to keep working on the same work every day, so I stopped drawing the characters and paid attention to the firefly instead.

Honestly, at the beginning, I had no clue how to animate the firefly. In my first experiment, I drew a firefly like a real one, and then I animated it in Director. It was awful because it was just so realistic and looked like either a bee or a fly. It was not the look of the firefly that I wanted. Then, I did another experiment in After Effects. I drew a firefly with a glow on a flat color background in PhotoShop, then imported the pict file to After Effects. I used the effect tool Keying > Color Key to get rid of the background color and adjusted Tolerance and Feather options in order to bring soft edge around the glow. With this method, the firefly looked pretty nice when composing with the boy image but it was very static and did not move naturally.

During a meeting with Elouise, we both agreed that making the firefly looked natural was really important because it was the theme of this animation. Elouise suggested I draw the firefly with Painter by using a Rotoscoping technique. With this technique, animation is created frame by frame using painting
tools in Painter, then all frames are exported as a Quicktime movie. I found this technique was very useful to make the firefly move naturally; on the contrary, the file size while working in Painter was incredibly huge, but the file size was decreased after saving as a Quicktime movie.

Even though Rotoscopying caused a lot of work and took an enormous time to do, I thought it was the best solution for animating my firefly. However, another problem occurred. While working with Painter, the playback mode played the movie slower than the real frame-rate. I could not see how final animation came out until exporting to Quicktime movie. It was hard for me to figure out how many frames were needed in each motion. Sometimes, it was either too fast or too slow. Consequently, Director was used to solve this problem. I simply drew a yellow dot with Vector tool and animated it just like the movement of the firefly and exported entire sequences as Quicktime movies. Then, opened a movie clip in Painter again and used one of the brush tools, hairy brush, painted over the yellow dots to make different shape of the dots in each frame.

After that, I used the soft charcoal brush painted around the dots to create soft yellow glow for the firefly. I also changed the brush size in every 5-10 frames to make the firefly blinking. When finishing, I exported the sequence to Quicktime and set compression to either "none" or "animation" and set keyframe every 1 frame because I wanted to keep the best quality in the movie clips. Using this process for the whole movie was very complicated and time-consuming; however, I could make my firefly flying as beautifully as I imagined. I switched back to character animation again and I tried to work faster
because Fall quarter was almost ended. I made movie in low resolution to see how the movement came along. Everything looked fine and I thought I was going on the right direction. Ending the Fall quarter, I was able to finish some parts of character animation and parts of flying firefly.

**Part II : Winter Quarter**

After coming back from the school break, I reviewed the storyboard and tried to look at what part I should work on next. I started to work on the dream-like sequence in the beginning of the story, which has the prince and princess dancing around with fireflies. I thought it would cause too much work if I drew in a single frame of the entire dancing sequence, thus a Rotoscoping technique was used for this part. I captured the dancing scene from the motion picture "The King and I " and applied filters to change color and brightness of the movie clip in Adobe Premiere. Afterward, I opened the clip in Painter and applied a Rotoscoping technique by using Cloner and various Brush tools to create the dreamlike dancing scene which looked totally different from the original version. When I showed this part to my committee, they liked it and I felt so relieved because another segment of hard work was outdone nicely.

It was about time to think about the color design of the animation. The costume of the characters should be cultural but simple because the story based on a Thai story. The boy was dressed in light blue shirt because it is the common color for Thai casual shirt. The grandma was dressed in light brown blouse and pattern skirt, which is the style most Thai old people wear.
Basically, I colored the characters in PhotoShop 5 because I was able to fill colors and paint shadow in separated layer. An unexpected problem occurred when I imported color pict files to Director. The color shown in Director was lighter than in PhotoShop 5 and RGB value was also very different. Suddenly, I remembered that this problem used to happen when I was working on a project for IT classes. At that time, I solved the problem by using PhotoShop 4 instead of PhotoShop 5.

Fortunately, I still had PhotoShop 4 on my computer, so I tested it again with PhotoShop 4 and the color looked similar to Director. However, I was not able to understand why PhotoShop 4 and 5 gave different result in RGB value when importing to Director. While I was complaining about this complicated trouble, my roommate, who studied in Printing: Graphic Arts & Color Technology explained that this problem occurred because the Gamma setting and the color profile in PhotoShop are different between the two versions. (This option is under File > Color settings > RGB set up). The way to solve this problem was I have to set the number of Gamma setting and color profile in PhotoShop 5 exactly the same as those number in version 4, and then save the new custom setting in ColorSync Profile folder under System folder. It seemed to be complicated to do; on the other hand, it became a new knowledge I learned. In fact, I could work on coloring the characters in PhotoShop 4 but I preferred to use PhotoShop 5 because it had "History" option, which is pretty handy, when users want to apply multiple undo and redo actions.

After the color problem was successfully resolved, I was able to work on coloring the characters conveniently. I kept working back and forth between
coloring the characters and the firefly motion. Now, my committee wanted to see the environment in the animation, so I started to work on it. The background was created in Painter and PhotoShop. First, I was going to use scanned image for the Thai house, but it did not suit with the animation. I asked my sister to draw the picture of the Thai country style house for me. She is an architect, so she would understand the structure of Thai traditional house better. Her Thai house drawings fitted very well with the characters. Also, Payton, my composer, contacted me. He finished the piece of music for my animation and he wanted me to hear it before recording to CD. Unfortunately, we could not schedule the time to meet, so I did not have a chance to hear the music before doing a new edit. At the end of winter quarter, I showed my committee the rough cut which the character and firefly were completely animated. I received positive feedback on my work, but there was some thing, that needed to be added and fixed such as facial expression, action, camera angle, and background elements.

Part III : Spring Quarter

As I had many parts of the animation to correct, I spent the first week working on them because I wanted to finish the entire motion perfectly and all the background in order to have everything ready for final composition. At the same time, I edited the music, which Payton composed and recorded to a CD for me. I used SoundEdit 16 to edit the music by following the rough animation from the last quarter to fit each sequence. Sound effect and other music were added to create atmosphere. After that, I put the soundtrack and the animation
together in Premiere to see how the final movie would be. I thought it was a perfect match. Payton's music was incredibly suited to my animation. When I showed it to Skip, he said "Wow! This is very very beautiful." Marla and Elouise also gave me the same compliment.

It was about time to work on composition. Mostly, I used Director to compose the characters, the firefly and background in different channels. Then, I exported individual clip as Quicktime movie from Director without compression. However, Director has limited ability to import high-resolution color images, some of my background looked obviously awful. Thus, After Effects was used for the composite color quality of the background. Also, some effects were applied to make the scenes look nice and reasonable, for example, Color Key was used for cleaning up the background, Brightness & Contrast were applied for adjusting darkness of outdoor scenes. For the clips, which had the firefly flying, I brought them to Painter for Rotoscoping and exported them as Quicktime movies again.

Similar to CPU in computer, my brain was working extremely hard. I had to work with several programs, for example Photoshop, Director, Painter, After Effects, in the same time and sometimes, I was confused in what I was doing. I felt very tired but I could not stop working anymore. Spring quarter was coming to an end, I finished exporting final movie clips and I thought I was ready for final editing. For my safety, I backed up all files in this thesis movie to CDs because I was afraid that something wrong might happened to my computer. Unbelievably, something wrong really occurred. When I turned on my computer one day, the system could not identify the start up disk; therefore, Mac OS could
not be run any program. At that moment, I was shocked and out of my mind because I thought I would lose all files that would use for the final thesis animation. Then, I tried to boot up the system again but it did not work out. Fortunately, I still had back up files in the CDs, so I started editing my final animation over again. I was really upset about my computer and I wanted to have it fix. My friend suggested that I needed Norton Utility to fix the problem and she had that software. Finally, my computer was recovered and major problems were fixed. I felt so relieved and I could return to work on my thesis.

Initially, I was going to make the final movie with Premiere, but I realized that I had to output my animation to full screen size (640x480) with high resolution for screening. If I rendered the final movie with my computer, the file size must be very huge and I would not be able record from my computer. Actually, I thought that I would cut the movie to fit on to two CDs and bring them into one movie again at the Transfer Station in the Animation Center. When I checked out the Transfer station, I found the computer, which connected to the VDO output has very low capacity to play a huge Quicktime movie smoothly. I should find another way to output my movie and I thought using AVID was the best way to do it.

I never used the AVID before, so I asked my friend, Thawatpong, the first-year graduate animation student, to teach how to use AVID. The interface and tools in AVID look like Premiere but the way AVID imports and saves files is different. The AVID will import and compress file at the same time and it is not necessary to make movie again. We can transfer to video tape directly after editing. Also, the quality of the movie in AVID is much better than Premiere.
For this reason, not only thesis students, but also the first-year students who worked on their spring movies preferred to use AVID. We had to sign up the time for using AVID room in Animation center and checked out the key from the "cage" from our Film/Video/Animation Department. It was about 2 weeks before the deadline. Everybody had to finish the work before Spring Screening. The AVID station was very busy and crashed several times because of over-loaded work. I was very lucky that I could finish everything on time. I felt like I was released from a prison after suffering for a year. The Spring Screening went well and I thought everybody did excellent work.
Appendix A

Original Proposal
Proposal for an MFA Thesis Project

THE TALE OF THE FIREFLY

BY

Weerana Talodsuk

MFA Imaging Arts / Computer Animation

SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ART AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
April, 1999

Maria Schweppe, Chairperson
Associate Professor
Film / Video / Animation Department

Skip Battaglia
Professor
Film / Video / Animation Department

Elouise Oyzon
Adjunct Faculty
Film / Video / Animation Department
**Treatment**

**The Tale of the Firefly**

The story begins with a firefly flying into the scene making a long sparkling path and joins a group of fireflies. Then the fireflies transform into the stars which shine over a rainbow bridge, that leads to a beautiful castle where a prince and princess live. And then, the whole scene becomes a still image in a book in a boy’s hands. Zooming out to a long shot, a 7-year-old boy is sitting with his grandma at the balcony of a Thai country-style house. He is reading the book entitled “The Tale of the Firefly”. The boy looks at the pictures in the book and turns to his grandma with curiosity. Grandma gives him a smile and shakes her head. Suddenly, a firefly flies past the boy. The boy gets up and tries to catch the firefly but it flies away from the balcony. When the boy looks down to where the firefly flies to, he sees a glowing tree. The boy looks at the tree with his eyes wide open with excitement.

Late that night, hundreds of fireflies light up the tree by the small river when the boy sneaks up. He chases the little flying lights and finally captures one. He puts the firefly into a cute little box he has with him. He rushes home to put the box under his pillow. Then, he lies down smiling.

In his dream, the boy finds himself in darkness. He walks to the tree by the river but he doesn’t see any fireflies. He feels cold and scared. He looks around and starts to cry. The boy wakes up after his grandma calls his name repeatedly. He looks frightened and confused. Then he suddenly recalls something. He reaches for the box under the pillow and opens it. The firefly he sees now looks like a worm. It does not look beautiful and glittery anymore. The boy looks at it sadly. Grandma comes to sit next to the boy, puts her arms around him. The boy looks at grandma and hugs her.

At night, the boy comes to the tree by the river with his cute little box. Behind him is his grandma. The boy opens the box and looks inside. When he touches it, the worm in the little box starts to twinkle its tail and flies out of the box to the tree. Out of nowhere, hundreds of fireflies fly to the tree and shine their glittering tails to light the tree beautifully. The boy and grandma look at the tree happily.

The boy goes back to bed. When grandma turns off the light, the boy falls asleep smiling happily and peacefully. So in his dream, he finds himself walking across a rainbow bridge to a beautiful castle where prince and princess are waiting for him under countless sparkling stars.
Technique

I will produce this story in 2D animation lasting about 4 minutes. Before beginning to produce the animation, I will do an animatic in Director in order to experiment with metamorphosis and timing. I will use Painter and Photoshop to create characters and backgrounds. Director will be used for composing walk-cycle and rotoscoping.

Afterwards, 2D elements and backgrounds will be composed into sequences in After Effects, then rendered to a Quick Time movie as an individual clip. Sound and music will be recorded and edited with SoundEdit 16 and Deck II. Finally, images and sounds editing will be done on the AVID station then transferred to SVHS.
## Budget

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Timeline

My thesis will be completed in 3 quarters which are Summer 984, Fall 991, and Winter 992. And it will be screening at the end of the Winter quarter. I will set up my meeting with my chair committees which will be a weekly meeting for each quarter. Time to be arranged.

Spring Quarter (Pre-production)

April
- Working on Thesis proposal
- Approval of the story
- Making the storyboard

May
- Character design
- Animatic

Summer Quarter (1 credit)

June
- Drawing characters: work on expressions and walk cycle
- Pencil Test on Director or Painter

July
- Start working on animation scene 1 - Prologue
- Drawing background
- Finish scene 1

Fall Quarter (5 credits)

September
- Weekly meeting with thesis committees
- Review and revise
- Start working on animation scene 2 - Capture a firefly
- Drawing background
- Finish scene 2
Combine both scenes in QT movie

Approval of animation scene 1 and 2

Start working on animation scene 3 - Nightmare

Drawing background

Finish scene 3

October

Weekly meeting with thesis committees

Review and revise

Start working on animation scene 4 - Truth of the dream

Drawing background

Finish scene 4

Combine both scenes in QT movie

Approval of animation scene 3 and 4

November

Weekly meeting with thesis committees

Review and revise

Start working on animation scene 5 - Beautiful dream

Drawing background

Finish scene 5

Winter Quater (6 credits)

December

Weekly meeting with thesis committees

Review and revise

Refine scenes and sequences

Rough cut for the final story

Approval of animation

January

Weekly meeting with thesis committees
Review and revise

Start Post - Production : Editing & soundtrack

Complete Post - production

Approval of the final movie

February Duplicating for screening and film festivals

Thesis report

Thesis revision
Marketing Plan

- Hiroshima International Animation Festival
  Office 4 - 17  Kako - Machi
  Naka - Ku , Hiroshima 730 , Japan

- Asia Computer Animation Festival
  Deadline for entry , Jan 30
  Head office  : 1631  F. Marina Court
                 San - Mateo , CA 94403 , USA
  Website  : http://www.acaf.com

- International Student Animation Festival of Ottawa ( SAFO )
  Deadline  : June
  Address  : International Student Animation of Ottawa
             2 Daly Avenue , Suite 120
             Ottawa , Ontario , Canada
             K1N6S2

- SIGGRAPH  Computer Animation Festival
  Deadline  : April
  Address  : 300  Rose Avenue
             Venice , CA 90291 , USA
  Tel.  : (310) 455-5085
  Fax  : (310) 455-0595

- ASIFA - EAST  Animation Awards
  Address  : c/o The Effect House
             111  8th Avenue
             New York , NY , USA
- Leipzig Festival for Documentary & Animated Films

  Deadline : September

  Contact : Fred Gehler

  Address : Leipzig Dokfilmwoche, Box 940
            Leipzig 04009, Germany

  Phone & Fax : (347) 294660

- Montreal International Film Festival

  Deadline : December

  Address : 1432 de Bleury St.
            Montreal, Quebec
            H2J 2K9, Canada

  Phone : (514) 285-4515
  Fax : (514) 285-2886

- New York Expo of Short Film & Video interactive multimedia

  Deadline : July

  Address : 532 La Gaurdia, Suite 330
            New York, NY 10012, USA

  Phone : (212) 505-7742

- Santa Barbara International Film Festival

  Deadline : December

  Address : 1216 State St., Suite 710
            Santa Barbara, CA 93101, USA

  Phone : (805) 963-0023
  Fax : (805) 962-2524

- Virginia Film Festival

  Address : Drama Dept., Culbreth Road
            Charottesville, VA 22903, USA

  Phone : (804) 982-5277
  Fax : (804) 982-5297
  E-mail : filmfest@virginia.edu
Storyboard
The Tale of The Firefly
The Tale of the Firefly
The Tale of The Firefly
The Tale of the Firefly
The Tale of the Firefly
Appendix C

Still Images
Intro - Tree Transformation
Still Images
Still images
Still images
Other materials
think about the end.
- This story can happen on one night.
- next week: revised storyboard
  Treatment / Timeline / Budget.
THE TALE OF THE FIREFLY
Thesis Animation by Weerana Talodsuk

Tuesday, May 16, 2000  6:00 pm
Panara Theater, NTID LBJ (Bldg.60)

* Memorable Thai story about the firefly and its true beauty in nature and dream *
The Tale of the Firefly
MFA Thesis Animation by Weerana Talodsuk
Duration: 5:42 min
School of Imaging Arts & Science
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York