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Up the tree

Glenn Ehlers

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"UP THE TREE"
by
Glenn Ehlers

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA Imaging Arts / Computer Animation
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NY
May, 1999

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TITLE OF THESIS:  Up the Tree

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5/17/99

Date
THE CONCEPT

Up the Tree is a four and a half minute animated movie about courage, self-empowerment, the exaggeration of fears, making dreams reality, and the hero within. Most of the story is inside the protagonist’s mind, a small boy whose conflict is resolved in a dream.

The concept for the movie came from two other stories: one a film, one a folk tale. I saw the movie Kundun, the story of the Dali Lama and his exile from Tibet, during the weeks our class had to develop a thesis idea. I was struck by the plight of the people in Tibet; a peaceful, spiritual community forced under Chinese rule, their own leader banished. I thought very heavily for a few days about freedom; not just forced control, but emotional freedom, the internal as well as external, empowerment by ourselves, not others. Freedom needs to come from within, which is very hard for some. It’s very easy for some to feel controlled by others out of fear or lack of self worth; they may even lose themselves in fear and give that power, making the fear bigger than it really is.

One night during this same period I had a dream of being in the Catskill mountains with a book. I woke up wondering what the book was, and it wasn’t long before I thought about the folk tales of New York State and remembering Rip Van Winkle. I soon went to the library to refamiliarize myself with the story: a man who falls asleep in the Catskills, dreams about meeting little dwarf-like men who give him some ale (or was it a dream?) and awakens twenty years later, returning to his town, which is completely
different, resulting in a change of attitude by realizing how much his friend and family had meant to him.

The idea of dreams have always fascinated me; I once taught a dream workshop, meeting weekly to share and study dreams. I always learn from them, whether they are pointing out a fear, a strength, or an idea. I became intrigued by Rip’s tale and the ambiguity of his dream, awakening to changes externally and the eventual internal change...and quite suddenly, I knew what I wanted to do for my last R.I.T. movie production: to take my character, put him in a dream situation, maybe blur the reality a bit, have him gain strength from it, and feel free from a dilemma. Within an hour, I had a story, bounced it off a couple friends on the phone, and by the next day, it was typed up in treatment form.

I already had the character: a small boy named Elmo (though unnamed in the movies), I had used him in my first two movies and loved working with him; there was no question in my mind whether I should use him again or not (I struggled with the issue of repeating a developed character while trying to come up with my second movie; I believe I have made the right choice by continuing with him). Each movie has explored a different aspect of him: The Boy and the Candy dealt with a sneaky, devilish side, with humorous results; A Spring Day dealt with a gentler side, a naive yet strong aspect that was even slightly romantic. This time, I wanted an internal conflict, and where best to look than into my own inner psyche: am I a good animator? Am I a good artist? Can I draw or paint well? Can I be successful at it? These are questions that we all ask ourselves from time to time, regardless of our profession or hobbies, but do we give those thoughts power? Do we get lost in those thoughts so that they become dominant, allowing a
fear to blossom and grow to the point that we lose sight of ourself, hindering us from accomplishing what we want to achieve?

Once I decided to make him a would-be artist, what would he do? Drawing was my first thought, but what do kids draw? My seven year old nephew draws monsters and super heroes, so right away I put my character in a costume, suddenly bringing another element into the story.

There are countless tales about heroes, and countless tales about heroes from within. But isn’t that what makes a good story? In a society that has become desensitized to violence, I felt there can never be enough stories about the inner hero.

I thought about Kundun again, being controlled by others, and giving our own self empowerment to another person. Coming from a child’s mind, it would have to be an authority figure, and a parent was the obvious choice. Children tend to blow things out of proportion, so I felt that his mom or dad could do something which he misconstrues as being worse than it really is, like being a little angry at him for something non-related to his art...a messy room perhaps. What can be worse to a child than not having a parent pay attention to what he/she is doing?

I had Elmo and his parent (it had to be dad, a “father / son” conflict)...did I need another character? Rip Van Winkle had little men in his dream; should Elmo have someone else in his dream, to help resolve his artistic conflict? I thought of animals; kids love animals, but I didn’t want a dog or cat --- too common. But what?

Again I went to another source, a dream tool I use: medicine cards. According to Native American mythology and spirituality, animals are equivalent to spirit guides, or totem animals, as they are referred to. One can
be taught much by the power of the animal, depending on the situation and the quality a particular animal represents. Pulling out the reference book that accompanies the cards, I flipped it open to the page on owls (intuitively?) and wasn’t surprised to discover that not only does the owl represent wisdom but is also a guide to the dream world, representing the seer of truth and deception, pointing out what one often cannot see; that became the final character in my story.

I toyed with the idea of the owl appearing again at the end of the story, outside the actual dream, to bring some ambiguity to it. I also considered that it might be a cheap way to end the story, so I put it off... until a friend of mine heard the story and said he wanted the dream to be real because it’s a child’s world... “have the owl come in again at the end or something,” he said. That was the push I needed.

Elmo sits in his tree, his comfort spot, drawing and becoming frustrated with his work. He eventually thinks it isn’t very good, and throws it to the ground. Putting his head in his lap, he falls asleep. In comes the owl, who guides him down the tree to Elmo’s bedroom, and his conflict. Dad appears, and when Elmo tries to show him his drawing, Dad takes the drawing, barely acknowledges it and points to the messy room. Elmo is saddened that dad won’t acknowledge the art, but blows the situation out of proportion by thinking his dad is really angry, to the point where he becomes a monster. The owl guides him to feel his own power... shows him the super hero comic that he was drawing from, prompting Elmo to regain his power by taking his drawing back. Once he does this, dad reverts to just “dad,” which is all he was in the first place. Once the dream is over, Elmo puts the cape back on, comes down from the tree and picks up his drawing, and begins to work on it again.
Another suggestion I had was to have him fly or leap out of the tree superhero-like; this worked out better than I thought. I was hesitant because a kid doesn’t do that...then again, most of this takes place in his head. Someone told me they felt it was similar to the Calvin and Hobbes comic strip; the first three panels of the strip has Calvin interacting with a tiger, but in the final panel his parents are in the scene and we see the tiger is really a stuffed animal. Response to the “twirling out of the tree scene” was really positive...it was merging the dream with reality. This, along with the owl’s reappearance at the end, does exactly what I wanted it to do.

TECHNIQUE

I love drawing. My first year at R.I.T. I learned that I don’t want to be a 3D animator; I like what they do, but I don’t want to do it. Sitting in front of a computer all day sculpting a character mathematically is frustrating to me. I enjoy the free - flowing pencil or brush. Drawing on the computer isn’t quite the same either; pressing down hard on the Wacom tablet to get strokes or lines is stifling. Besides, I much enjoy trying to draw movement than compose it on a computer.

That said, I do enjoy animating on a computer and seeing how the movement and timing work as you are doing it. As with my other movies, the technique was basically set. However the decision had to be made whether I should use the same software I’d been using, or try some of the newer programs that came into the school this year. The one major lesson I learned throughout this whole process was “do what you know;” it’s easy to say I have two or three quarters to do a thesis, plenty of time...but it’s not
always easy to learn a new software and use it quickly and efficiently. Two attempts were made to do this (on top of teaching a class and having my arm in a cast for four months); I felt frustrated and stuck at times... thirty weeks was flying by like a breeze. I went back to the tried and true formula I had been using all along, safe in the knowledge that it will work and I have lots of time in the years ahead to learn better compositing or coloring methods.

The color palette was the first attempt at trying something new; I wanted a slightly different look than my other work; my first movie had an airbrush look, not a lot of color, with white backgrounds, and the second had the standard paint bucket filled characters. This time I thought about brush strokes, but if I got too painterly it wouldn’t work; Elmo is very cartoony, and blending with a painterly background may work against each other. I didn’t want to get too detailed of a background either, where it would take away from the character. I tried finding a balance and it was very difficult; once I even tried an almost black and white look, or light colors, none of which felt right.

Fractal Painter was the tool I was trying to learn to do all this in; I loved the colors, the brushes and tools to create with... but to actually color animation was very confusing. There is a tool in the program that allows you to see previous frames, but countless attempts to figure out how to use it grew tiresome; it was far from user-friendly. Finally, after a friend in the business said that everyone colors in Adobe Photoshop and no one had ever heard of Fractal Painter -- and those that had didn’t care for using it -- I scrapped it and went back to my old ways. I colored my other movies in Photoshop and was able to use layers very easily and quickly; color one frame on a layer, then transfer it to the next frame, then the next, and so on. Once
the shot is done, I go back and merge the layer with drawing. Coloring on a layer allows you to see through the layer and let the pencil lines come through (my drawings have a lot of open lines, especially Elmo’s hair, making paint bucket fills very difficult).

Once I was back in Photoshop, I found the palette almost immediately. I colored my character with brushes, leaving a white edge inside him so it’s not quite a complete fill; the colors are soft, like pastels. The backgrounds are almost water colorish, yet very light and washed out. The feedback I received on it was “it looks like a child’s world” and “very dreamlike.” Perfect.

I designed the color scheme of my movie to combat the anti-aliasing effect that happens with director; when importing files, there is almost always a white halo around the object that is basically a glitch with the program. There is no easy solution to the problem, and my second attempt at a new software occurred in hopes to find an easy way to deal with it. Adobe After Effects arrived in our lab this year, on two computers only, and currently is on a learn it yourself basis. There are a few who know it and have been helping others, and I was able to sit in on a tutorial. This package supposedly takes care of any halos very easily by keying out the color; being an Adobe product, it obviously works well with Photoshop and accepts the files easily. It has many of the same functions that Photoshop has, including filters. It has become a staple in the business and from what I understand is almost a necessity to learn. As I attempted to import my files, and key out the halo, I had a problem: Elmo has weird hair, and it’s colored with a soft brush, leaving more of a halo around his head than the rest of his body. I’d key out the halo around his body, but there would still be a lot left around his head; I didn’t feel like I knew the program well enough to continue as I felt myself
getting bogged down again. So I let go of After Effects, knowing this wasn’t the right time.

The only ways I knew to get rid of the halo was to erase it frame by frame...or the way I did last time on “A Spring Day:” map the character in Photoshop to the color of the background he’ll be against in the scene, and import him with that color. But first, I finished designing the color scheme: I knew that if I kept the background light enough, the halo wouldn’t be seen, and if I left some white in the character, then the halo wouldn’t be so obvious. Many shots wound up with Elmo against a very light blue sky or white wall. But there were shots where he’s up against the tree, still colored lightly but a dark enough brown where the halo is seen. Pasting Elmo to the tree color in Photoshop, I’d bring him into Director; once in the cast with his brown background, I’d turn it white again with the paint bucket. The result is he’d have a brown halo instead of white...put him in the shot against the tree, and no halo is seen.

Again, there is no easy way to take care of this problem, and I can see why Director is not used so much in animation, unless it’s for multimedia. Other compositing tools are more efficient, and from what I hear, are coming to R.I.T. in the near future.

I wound up somewhat dissatisfied with the way the color scheme looks on some monitors; aware of NTSC colors on video, I purposely checked results on a monitor in the lab and it looked fine; it looked great on the Avid, too---which is supposed to take care of the NTSC problem---but when I looked at it on the big monitor in the lab, the colors were darker and bleeding. Thankfully, other monitors I checked, including my home television, the colors looked okay, but I know there will be the occasional screen where it
won’t look right.

All of this helps make a gentle character and story stay gentle: simple drawings with smooth lines, soft colors, light backgrounds (white and blue sky)...

The sound portion of this movie has been the easiest and the hardest; I always felt it was the weakest part of my other movies, always keeping the sound very basic. In the past, I chose classical music with good results. This time I wanted to use a composer; this movie was harder to draw and took longer than my others; I didn’t have the energy to choose music. I found someone in the fall quarter who had left flyers around R.I.T. looking to work on student films; he had graduated Eastman and was staying in Rochester for awhile. We met a couple times and discussed the themes of the story; I wanted a classical piece that would change with the moods. Vicente’s goal is to write soundtracks, so I was hopeful. The first time I heard what he had created, it was in fragments and I was amazed. I was slightly concerned that it might be too strong; my film is gentle and maybe some of the instruments he had, like trumpets, were too strong and forceful. But intuitively I suggested he stay with it.

The next time I heard it I was speechless. I thought it still might be a bit strong, but it also fit each segment of the movie: a gentle mozart-sounding beginning as Elmo climbs the tree, trumpet fanfares every time the hero image appears, soft and light during the dream, aggressive and frightening during the father’s “anger,” and an incredible sounding cello combined with a wood-block tapping as Elmo draws; I couldn’t change a thing. I thought later about the concern of having too strong a piece of music, and it dissipated the more I edited the movie together; a child’s fears and excitement can be
exaggerated, so why shouldn’t the music be?

Vicente added sound effects in his music, and I figured I needed only a few more, except every time I added them, I took them out because they seemed to be an obstruction, not blending well with the flow of the music. After several of my peers stated that I didn’t need any more, I stopped trying to add anything.

One of the very last decisions was the title; I kept changing it and they all seemed so...serious: “Power,” “Power-Play,” “Hero,” “Drawing Lesson...” I even tried to come up with something that had “dream” in the title. Finally, I realized that it seemed that with any one of those titles I’m trying to hit the audience over the head with the message; also, any one of those would take away from the other themes...if I call it “Power,” then what about the dream aspect, or the hero angle? My composer said he liked the title “A Spring Day” on my last movie because it has so much else in it and it’s such a light, casual title. “Why not ‘Up the Tree’ or something?” he said.

Despite familiarity with the techniques, which helps during stressful periods, there are still always times of overwork, over tiredness, rushing to get on the Avid to edit...plus the movie wound up with about twenty five more shots than anticipated, making everything take a whole lot longer. My thesis was passed on the condition I focus the story better, which I tried to do and made adding shots to clarify what I wanted to say a necessity. But I had so much to say in a short piece...many times I grew tired of the story and wished I had done something light and funny, like my first movie. But...I already did that.

Elmo fits the traditional “kid-character” mold very well; people have
told me my work reminds them of Peanuts; not just the characters, but the line drawings as well. Admittedly, it is a childhood influence. I’m trying to step away from that and into my own world; coming up with different themes and ways to tell a story is my challenge in the times ahead. I would like my thesis film to find an audience; my others have and I hope Up the Tree does too; I seem to be developing gentle themes in my stories, which can be a way to connect with an audience; it would have been so easy to have Elmo change into his super hero costume and fight the “dad/monster,” just as in A Spring Day it would have been easy to have the two boys fight over the girl, as some wanted me to do, instead of resolving the conflict peacefully. There is a need for something a little different out there; the current trend of television animation is dominated with bathroom humor, cursing and graphic violence. I don’t object to any of this, but when something works well, the imitators follow and it can become dominant. There needs to be more of a balance.

The key, I believe, is in character; I think often of characters from yesterday...the highest rated shows on the cartoon network are older: Bugs Bunny and the Looney Tunes gang, Tom and Jerry...How many characters in today’s animation will be around in twenty years? South Park is already a fading trend...current ratings are down from last year. The Simpsons may be an exception; they’ve already been around for ten years and still pull in high ratings, but the themes are sometimes topical. Finding something in a character an audience can really relate to internally is a challenge, and even more of a challenge is telling a story with humor... but it is, I feel, what makes a lasting character.

Elmo is a great character to work with, and there is an enormously
deep well of stories to do with him; I’ve wanted to come up with a character an audience can identify with in some way and I think I’m progressing along that path. I already have a comic strip in mind, a perfect way to develop his him further. One of my own heroes, Academy award winning director-animator Chuck Jones of Warner Brothers cartoons, discusses how the Looney Tunes cartoons of the late forties and fifties are the most well known because that is when the character’s personalities became more defined; he states in his biography film, Chuck Amok: “George Orwell once said ‘I never met a man worse than I am,’ and I never met anybody that didn’t have some of Daffy Duck in them. And if you’re going to be an animated cartoon director then you have to have the courage to reach down inside yourself and pull that character up to the surface and become that character and be able to direct your actors so they’ll be able to understand what we’re talking about here...Bugs Bunny is an aspiration, Daffy is a realization. You know Daffy Duck is within you and if allowed to get loose you’d be just like him. With Bugs... you’d hope to be like that.” What a surprise that these characters are stronger than ever, known world-wide. While Elmo doesn’t have the Looney Tunes slap-stick style of humor, and more of the Peanuts gentleness, the character aspect is right on target; I look forward to see what the next steps are to further explore him, myself and where it goes.
Appendix A

Thesis Proposal
MFA Thesis Project Proposal

"POWER"
(Working Title)

by

Glenn Ehlers

MFA Imaging Arts / Computer Animation

SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ROCHESTER, NY

April, 1998

Carl Battaglia
Associate Professor, Chair
Film / Video / Animation Department

Cat Ashworth
Associate Professor
Film / Video / Animation Department

Luvon Sheppard
Professor
Illustration Department
Thesis Treatment

A small boy is walking, carrying a sketch-pad and comic book. He’s wearing a red towel around his neck, like a cape. He comes to a tree which has wooden planks nailed to the trunk, like a ladder, and he begins to climb. He sits down on a branch and leans his back against the trunk. Pulling his knees up, he rests the sketch pad and the comic book side by side against them. The comic book has a caped super hero on it. The boy looks at it and begins to draw. He stops, looks at his drawing, frowns, and starts again. This continues with repeated scribbling, cross-outs, and frustrated looks until he grits his teeth, tears the paper out of the pad, crumples it up and throws it to the ground. He pulls the towel / cape off and leans forward, putting his head into his arms, resting against his knees, letting out a huge sigh. After a moment, he turns his head slightly to the side; his eyes are closed.

A brief moment passes; the wind blows, rustling the branches of the tree. He opens his eyes, looks in front of him and sees an owl. The owl is staring at him, motioning with its wing to follow. The owl flies off, and with a curious look on his face, the boy climbs down from the tree, following the owl.

The owl flies into a room and lands on a dresser. The boy appears in the doorway and looks around the room, recognizing it as his own bedroom. He looks over to his desk and sees several drawings and the same super hero comic book. He walks over and picks up a drawing. Hearing someone enter the room, he turns around and sees his father. He rushes over to him, smiling, and hands his drawing to him. His father holds it up for a split second, looks at it, then lowers it and turns his face away, looking around the room. The smile disappears from the boy’s face, replaced by a hurtful look, and he lowers his head. He then looks up at his father, who, from the boy’s point of vision, is growing very large, becoming ogre-like. The boy recoils fearfully. His father/ogre continues to grow. The boy closes his eyes and lowers his head. Then he opens his eyes, which are resting on the super hero comic book. He stares at the super hero. He then looks over to the owl, still perched on the dresser. The owl spreads his wings, cape-like, the pulls them around in front, sticking its chest out strongly. The boy’s eyes widen, and he looks down to the super hero comic book again. His eyebrows crease slightly and he stands up. He snatches the drawing back from his father. When he does, his father begins
to shrink; the boy begins to grow. As the boy gets bigger and bigger, the father gets smaller and smaller, until the father disappears.

The boy’s face is seen close-up, still sitting in the tree, eyes closed. His eyes snap open and he lifts his head up. He looks around, and his eyes rest on the super hero comic book. A smile creeps on his face. He looks at the blank paper in front of him, then quickly looks to the ground at the crumpled-up drawing. He quickly feels for the towel/cape, realizes he took it off and sees it resting next to him. He snatches it and puts it back on. He stands up, posing triumphantly, hands on his hips. He leaps out of the tree, arms outstretched like a super-hero, and lands on the ground next to the crumpled drawing. He picks it up and opens it. Smiling, he sits down, leans against the tree trunk, pulls out a pencil, and begins to draw.
Budget

“Power” will be a 2D movie composed of hand drawings, scanned and colored in Painter / Photoshop, and edited on Avid, approximately four minutes; I have two composers in mind for the soundtrack. At this writing, I do not have home equipment and will be relying on school facilities.

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Time Line

Summer---1 credit
Fall---6 credits
Winter---5 credits
April 10 --- Proposal
April 12 - May 8 --- Storyboard
June - August --- Summer Job / Internship, thesis work part-time (drawing, tests, animating, etc.)

September - November --- Complete Animation (2 - 3 shots per week)
December - February 1 --- Soundtrack, Tweaking, Editing, Post Production
February 15 --- Project completion

Marketing Plan

Movies on a Shoestring (February)
SMPTE (June)
Ottawa Animation Festival (July)
John Hopkins Film Festival (January)
ASIFA (March)
Chicago International Children’s Film Festival (May)
Student Academy Awards (January)
Humanitarian Film Festival (May)
Dallas Short Film Festival (February)
Hiroshima World Animation Festival (April)
Appendix B

Storyboard
Appendix C

Movie Stills