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Danny

George Zimmet

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Danny
by,
George Zimmet

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

MFA Imaging Arts/ Computer Animation
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
February, 2002

Howard Lester, Chair
Professor
Chair
School of Film and Animation

Skip Battaglia
Professor
School of Film and Animation

Duane Palyka
Associate Professor
School of Film and Animation
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MFA Thesis

Title of Thesis: Danny

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02/07/02
Date
When I was very young my father took me to see a sci-fi movie. We were seated early so we watched the conclusion of the movie first. I froze in a trance-like state staring at the screen. When this movie ended and then began again I was able to see all the events that led up to what I had already seen. I remember that it felt like I had never seen the end before. Again, I was frozen, staring. The movie was *Star Wars*. When the movie finished for the second time, my father and I had the same expression of amazement.

I could always draw as a child, especially when I practiced. It was no great shock to me that I chose to major in Studio Arts at my undergraduate college. It was shocking for my parents, who were footing the bill. I moved away from drawing and started a concentration in sculpture. I tried all types and styles of sculpture. Found-art and clay were my two favorites. What I loved was the hands-on creation. The surfaces of an actual object just seemed more appealing to me. I wasn’t trying to give the illusion of space. I was creating it. I began to notice a common feature in all of my sculptures that I had not intended on creating. Each piece had a feeling of stress, strain, or movement in it. I almost wished I could make them move, thinking that it would really add to the pieces. I even began studying kinetic sculpture before I graduated.

In the work force I became a welder. I was amazed when I graduated from college to see that there were no job listings for sculptors. I learned a lot of things while working in the metal industry. An old interest of mine was rekindled while working in the sheet metal shops. I loved to put things together and figure out how to get things to work. I was a huge fort builder as a child. My parents never regretted buying me Legos and Erector Sets. I guess this was one of the reasons I enjoyed found-art sculpture in college.

I was working in a sheet metal shop when I was first introduced to R.I.T. My brother was studying graphic design and was taking a 3D modeling class as an elective, and he told me that he was working with the same software with
which *Jurassic Park* was made. Ever since I saw *Star Wars*, I wanted to work in that industry. I thought that filmmaking was one of the most interesting and exciting jobs someone could have. I had never really considered animating computer models before but it did seem very tempting to me. I missed doing something creative. After four years in foundries, steel mills and weld shops, I was ready to get paid for using my brain and not my hands.

When I was accepted to R.I.T.'s computer animation program I came in with ambition, dedication and an art background. The problem was that I had absolutely no computer skills at all. I also had no idea how films were made. Luckily my classmates were in the same boat. We made a group effort to learn the software and shared ideas, problems, opinions, and solutions with each other. I was lucky to find my niche during my first year at R.I.T. while taking a character animation class motion interested me the most. It was what I had been trying to put into all my sculptures, and now I had tools to create motion. The actual modeling, or sculpting, of the characters was secondary. I truly enjoyed making the characters move, and more importantly, to act! I intensified my concentration on animation while still learning about all the other aspects that can go into an animated film.

One of the most influential classes I took started with a demonstration. A visiting artist, an actress, was visiting and conducting an acting seminar for two days. On the second day I attended the seminar. Barbara Geary had demonstrations in moving around and acting in the role of a particular character. She also demonstrated acting in masks and the importance of body language. Before I knew it I was volunteering for every single demonstration. Barbara really showed me that it is one thing to know how to animate and another thing to know how to move.

Barbara taught a class the next year in *Acting for Animation*. I learned a great deal about the subtleties of motion and how to work a joke for more than
one laugh. I learned how to do a “take” and how long to pause a reaction. The most important thing I learned from Barbara was how to become my character, how to feel and move the way my character would in certain situations that would highlight his/her uniqueness. Barbara’s class help re-enforce my devotion to character animation.

Another influence that turned me toward character animation is a modest ability to act and tell stories. Professor Duane Palyka once told me that the better you are at acting and improvisation, the better you are at animating. Most of my impressions about facial gestures and body language came from watching thousands of comedians doing standup. I have watched videos of certain comedians hundreds of time and memorized their jokes and impressions. George Carlin, Robin Williams, Eddie Murphy, Jim Carey, Richard Pryor, Red Skelton and the king of physical comedy, Bill Cosby stand out in my mind due to the way they act out their stories using their entire bodies. They can make the audience picture exactly what is going on in their jokes. It is truly amazing to watch them act.

When it came time to develop a story line for my thesis film I had learned a great deal from my fellow students and my professors. I had started to develop a sense for film aesthetics, my character animation had developed greatly and I had achieved a commanding knowledge of the software involved with 3D animation. My main obstacle in writing a successful story was that I had become burnt out both mentally and physically which made the first stage of my thesis extremely difficult to produce.
The Story:

One of the characteristics of a movie I enjoy is good dialogue. I like a good script, usually something that can keep the audience on edge and has a good twist to it. Another quality I enjoy is the cinematography used to tell the story visually. After learning more about transitions in film and editing, my attention to the cinematography some directors used became captivating. One of my favorite directors is Quentin Tarantino. His movie *Pulp Fiction* left a big impression on me. His use of sweeping cameras and asymmetrical long shots made me want to try some of my own camera moves. It compelled me to try and make a more “fluid” film.

When I started writing down ideas for my film, I tried to incorporate a lot of the things that I liked about other movies. The problem was that I am a one-man show and that a lot of the things I initially thought up were beyond my capabilities given my deadlines. A fellow student, Jason Donati, warned me about falling into the “thesis trap”. This is where a student dreams up a huge scale project because he/she is making their last film and it should be their best to date and should be their major portfolio piece. Listening to Jason’s warning, I tried to start simple. My first story dealt with a group of gamblers around a poker table. I was going to use a lot of Tarantino’s camera moves to move around the seated characters. I was also planning on doing a lot of lipsyncing for some interesting dialog. Two of the problems I ran into immediately were that, I’m not very good at dialog and this film could be realized using live action photography. My professor, Skip Battaglia, always stated that animation should do things that live action cannot otherwise, or why animate it?

I went through several other ideas but the same things were stopping me from developing a good story. After studying film at R.I.T. and developing an aesthetic for film, I was able to critique myself thoroughly; too thoroughly. Often, a potential story would be instantly crushed and ripped apart by shooting
too many holes through it before it had a chance to develop into something. I could easily find problems with set design, lighting, the amount of modeling needed, the amount of animation required and how difficult it would be to edit it all together so that it would tell a comprehensive story at the end of five minutes.

A list of pre-conceived ideas, which I wanted to incorporate into the story, hung over my head while I tried to brainstorm. The list was made up of small details that I wanted to fit into my film. Some of the things I wanted to try to do with the animation were very picky. I wanted to animate a character with a limp. I also wanted to animate a character that had more than two legs. Up to that point I had not tried any facial animation or lipsyncing so I wanted to work that into the mix as well. I wanted to use two characters with completely opposite personalities that played off one another. I had always like to watch Stan and Ollie when I was young. Duos were always much more dynamic whether they were partners or enemies. The interaction between a pair was always much more interesting to me. The list went on and on and encompassed cinematic effects, graphic aesthetics, design and even certain jokes I wanted to attempt to animate. The problem with all of this was that I was trying to cram five pounds of stuff into a two-pound bag. It became impossible to think up a story that would incorporate all of these aspects into one short film.

It became very frustrating to think about new story possibilities. I felt like I could not relax enough to just think freely and openly. My chairperson, Howard Lester, helped me out a great deal with this process. Howard gave me many ideas on how to develop a story line. Some of his suggestions were to keep things very simple. He said I didn’t need a complicated story in order to make a good thesis film and even gave me some exercises to try so that I could free up my creativity. They ranged from writing down my thoughts when I woke up in the morning, to driving home using a different route.

What finally got me thinking was when Howard told me to base the story on some personal experiences, for instance, there had to be some funny stories
from my family that I write about. That is when I started developing my final idea. I have two younger brothers. We are all a little strange and crazy at times. When I thought about it I realized that there were hundreds of stories I could use. All I had to do was filter them down into something that could tell a whole story in about five minutes.

**Danny:**

My youngest brother’s name is Danny. He was the cutest kid when he was young, but Danny had a dark side to him. My brother was notorious for destroying everything around him, sometimes by accident, sometimes not. I decided to use Danny as my main character mostly for his cute looks and charm when he was a child. While looking at pictures of Danny as a young child, I felt like he was begging to be animated.

Some of my past characters have been very complicated looking. I wanted to do something different with Danny. I am a huge fan of Pixar Animation Studios and I love the look of their films, especially their characters. Most of Pixar’s characters have a simplified look about them. It is the way they are animated that makes them seem complicated. I wanted to try to use this in my film. I designed Danny to look cute. My initial sketches focused on Danny’s head shape. (Append. D1, 2) I wanted his face to be expressive so I gave him large eyes and a large mouth. I noticed that a lot of Pixar’s characters used large features on their faces, which conveyed their emotions more easily to the audience. People naturally look at a character’s eyes, so why not give them a bigger target? I wanted people to like looking at him. I had a lot of good reactions from my fellow students when they saw Danny completed without any animation at all. One thing I added to really make my main character look like my brother involved the removal of his four front teeth. My brother Danny had to have his teeth pulled at a young age. When I think of him as a child I see a huge toothless grin. (Append D1) To help fit Danny into his character I dressed him
appropriately. I wanted an average look so I looked at some pictures of my brothers and I at around the age of ten. Jeans and sneakers were in fashion back then. To add to Danny’s warmonger side I dressed him in a camouflage T-shirt. I added other little details, which were suggested to be by my fellow student Josh Gramse, like grass stains on Danny’s jeans.

The construction of Danny became one of the largest technical problems I encountered while making my film. Maya, the software package I used to make my film, had recently been equipped with a new modeling technology called Subdivision Surfaces. With the constant development of new technology I had become accustomed to learning new processes and techniques by myself. Subdivision Surfaces, or Sub-Ds as they are more commonly called, presented a huge problem and a very steep learning curve. Unlike most styles of modeling, Sub-Ds are structured so that the modeler should know exactly what he is doing before he starts modeling. This problem resulted in my modeling Danny’s body several times and remodeling Danny’s many faces more times than I choose to count. In all, Danny took me three months just to construct and articulate. The pre-production was worth it though. Danny functioned very well while I was animating him and I never had to go back and fix any geometry problems.

Danny, the character, was actually an amalgam of both of my brothers as well as myself. My middle brother David largely influenced Danny’s facial expressions. I also received quite a few comments from my fellow students about the surprising resemblance between the way Danny and I moved. I thought it was only natural to mimic myself while animating Danny. I felt that this would make for more sincere expressions that would have a better reaction on the audience. After showing some clips of my film to people in R.I.T. I found that I was correct in my assumptions. To be honest, I found some of Danny’s physical expressions pretty funny myself.
The Robot:

In the final thesis treatment Danny’s nemesis is a homemade robot that he builds in his room. The thought of designing the robot really excited me at first. The robot’s concept came about to satisfy quite a few details that I had written down on my list of things to include into my thesis film. The robot was going to be built out of household items. My initial thoughts were a mix of children’s toys and kitchen appliances. My previously expressed interest in found-art sculpture was the driving force behind the creation of the robot. I wanted the robot to be recognizable as a whole but also recognizable for the familiar objects that went into his construction. The mechanics of the robot were also being driven by my welding experience. The fascination with mechanical parts and gearing helped to push me into making the robot extremely intricate.

The major factor that molded the robot’s shape was that fact that it was built by a child. Even though I build complex forts as a kid, anything past masking tape and Elmer’s glue was above my capacity. The robot would have to look like it was constructed by a child’s mind. I did have some leeway due to the fact that the robot only functioned within Danny’s imagination, which meant that I could take certain liberties in its construction. Not every piece had to be anchored down. Some of the robot’s construction could be held together with imagination. My initial designs were very simple. (Append D3) I only used a few items to make up the body. The robot’s appendages were made up of large items like a lamp, an air pump and a vacuum cleaner. Most of these parts were chosen for their contributions to a more complex and interesting motion for the character.

After constructing the first robot design I realized, as did my professors, that it was not really interesting to look at. The robot seemed skinny and weak. It did not look like the terribly menacing figure I needed for my film. One of the robot’s main design problems was if its profile was shown it would become lost
against the background. Another problem that was brought to my attention was the fact that there was nothing interesting or clever about the robot’s construction. Professor Lester suggested that there should be defects in the robot’s construction simply because it was built by a child. His suggestion was that one arm should not be able to move correctly because it was taped together using some object that prohibited its full range of motion. Professor Palyka suggested that there should be a chain of events with in the robot’s body whereby one object would drive another.

Many people suggested that I look at comic strips by Rube Goldberg which depicted inventions, which were used to do ordinary household chores, but were extremely complex and ingenious in design. One other suggestion made by Howard Lester was the complexity of the robot and the process of slow disclosure. These two aspects of design lend themselves to each other. If the robot’s design is too complex the audience will have a hard time identifying all of its components and might spend too much time analyzing it instead of enjoying it. Slow disclosure of the robot was the perfect cure for the problem. Howard also mentioned the fact that if you show the whole robot at once the audience might become bored with it and would want to see something new. By hiding certain pieces of the robot with larger exterior pieces I could introduce new sections of the robot throughout the film. The large exterior pieces would in-turn simplify the overall look of the robot without taking away from its internal complexity.

The construction of the robot’s final design had two major influences. The first influence came from comedic ideas for the film. Certain objects used in creating the robot gave me ideas for some quick jokes that I could insert into the film without taking away from the story. An example of one such object would be the pop-up toaster located inside the robot’s abdominal area. The toast springing out unexpectedly could parallel a character soiling his/her pants. It could set up a very embarrassing situation that could then lead to an even funnier reaction from the robot, which would hopefully get two laughs from the audience.
Using this concept for construction, the robot’s individual pieces were incorporated with a specific joke in mind.

My middle brother David inspired the second influence on the robot’s design. After showing him a nearly finished model of the robot he quickly critiqued it and offered his opinion as to what he thought I could change on the robot. One of the suggestions I used was the use of a computer chair to make up the robot’s legs.

Initially I had set out to make the robot the most interesting character to animate but I then considered my options. Danny would provide a lot on interesting animation on his own and with time constraints closing in I could use a break in the animation process. The deciding factor was again a comedic idea. The chair’s swiveling bottom would become a gag weapon against an unsuspecting troop of G.I.Joe action figures.

The final robot looked nothing like my initial designs but it was a more commanding figure - not overly complicated; fun to visually investigate. I could have developed the robot further but there comes a time when you have to move on. The robot served all of its intended purposes and after spending months re-evaluating it, it had become a much more interesting character to look at and animate.

The Mother:

Using Danny’s mother in the film was not in my original plans but I found her development essential to make the film work. Skip taught us that a film needs certain ingredients to make it successful, one of which is tension. My film seemed to lack a good ending mainly because there was no real conflict. Danny would do battle with the robot but I didn’t feel any real conflict between them other than a tug of war. If I had left the story as a tug of war the ending would
have ended up being one bigger tug on the rope from Danny’s side. There was no clever twist to an ending like that there is just a back and forth action between the contestants which eventually leads to a predictable finish.

The mother figure helped me to change the pace of the film and add a twist to the story. One of my favorite cartoon strips has always been Calvin and Hobbs. They were ingeniously written to concentrate the lack of reality and the overabundance of imagination which children possess. One of Calvin’s aliases is Space Man Spiff, an intergalactic super hero, who saves imaginary planets from Martian destruction. The endings to all Space Man Spiff episodes are similar in that Calvin ends up saving the universe in his imagination but in reality, he destroys all that is around him and gets into trouble when his parents discover what he has been up to.

The mother figure would provide me with a Space Man Spiff ending. Instead of the robot having a never-ending tug of war with Danny he would turn his anger at Danny’s mother. This would motivate Danny to end the conflict and set up a tremendous amount of tension in the film. In the end, Danny would think he was the hero and turn out to be the guilty party. I decided to end the film with the look of confusion on Danny’s face.

I decided to add another personal aspect to the film in the form of credits. My mother had raised my two brothers and myself alone for the most part. Family tensions went up and down constantly and my mother was known to lose her cool every now and again and as we grew older Danny became the recipient of some tongue-lashings, which left some memories. At the end of making my film I decided to take a humorous stab at my youngest brother’s underbelly. I had my friend Mary Moore, as the voice of the Danny’s mother, adlib some scalding remarks at the end of our recording session. I then arranged them into a flurry of insults that were used to scold Danny at the end of the film while the credits were rolling. My personal thoughts were that it was the funniest
joke of the entire film. My brother, after seeing the film, gave me a mild chuckle and then shot me a “watch it” type look.

**Sound:**

As a musician I have always done my own soundtracks for my films as well as soundtracks for my friends’ films. Most of the soundtracks I have created revolved around the guitar, which is my main instrument. My thesis film, however, was causing me trouble when I was trying to come up with a soundtrack.

I was sure that I could not come up with an adequate sound and feel for my film by simply using the guitar. At the end of the film I needed a real pulse in the soundtrack to help raise the tension that forms just before the end of the film. In my head I heard drums. A pounding rhythm was exactly what I needed to force the intensity of the conflict in the film into overdrive. When I thought about the rest of the film, however, I ran into some problems. I couldn’t think of what to put in the soundtrack for the rest of the film. Again, guitar and/or bass would not give the feel I wanted for the less dramatic parts of the film.

My solution for the soundtrack was to use drums alone to create the music for my film. I chose to vary the style of drumming between key sections of the movie to add a dynamic to the film. The style changes would also avoid too much repetition of any single rhythm. I chose to start with Jazz and evolve into a military march using a snare drum, bass drum and ride cymbal. The final style would be a more tribal rhythm, which was played on a djembe. Each style of drumming would slowly bring the tension of the film higher and higher until the very end when the intensely beating rhythm would suddenly stop to set up a very awkward ending.
I was able to record the entire drum track in one session with the help of my drummer Chris Wright. Chris and I play in a band together so communicating what I wanted out of the soundtrack was not difficult at all. One surprising discovery while making the soundtrack was our substitute for the bass drum used in the first two drum styles of the soundtrack. Instead of using the bass drum, which was clipping while we were trying to record, Chris lightly stomped on the hollow floor in the recording area and the microphones we were using picked up the deep sound rather nicely.

On my second film I spent an entire week, night and day, putting together and coordinating sound effects. I vowed not to repeat my misuse of time again while making my thesis. Because I was using a musical soundtrack I didn’t need too many sound effects to fill up any dead air. I only chose to make sound effect for key actions in the film. One part I did actually spend a lot of time on mixing sounds was the war scene at the end of the film. I spend close to three days dubbing war sounds from sound effect CDs, cutting and pasting the sounds together and finally mixing everything down into one track, which I could use for editing later.

**Conclusion:**

Dan Pejril, a former student at R.I.T. once told me, “Be sure that you enjoy your thesis story because once you start working on it, you’re stuck with it. Enjoying your story will make you work harder and more diligently on it because you will want to see it come to life.” I believe that Dan was right. By taking my time with the story and its characters a more interesting project emerged. I have mentioned earlier that there is a time to say “enough is enough” and move on with your work, but there is also a time to say “this needs more work”. I guess balancing that fine line is what helps to make a more successful film.
An important thing I have learned at R.I.T. is that imagination and creativity are not enough to succeed in the animation field. Perseverance, patience and determination are also required if a student plans on making any film of substance.

I am glad that I was able to enjoy making my thesis film and that it did not become a complete burden to me. It made all the nights of sleeping in the lab and not eating worthwhile. I realize now that one of the most important things about making a student film was something that Skip Battaglia had always been saying to me. Go outside once in a while and do something.
Appendix A
DANNY
By, George Zimmet

The story opens with a door swinging open into a room. A small drags a box of objects into the room. He shuts the door and drags the box into a corner of his room. There in the corner, sitting propped up against a wall is a robotic looking figure made up of household items. The boy takes items out of the box and attaches them to the robot. After some assembling he backs up and jumps up and down with delight. The boy runs out of sight and returns with some kind of hand-held contraption. With a huge smile the boy looks at the controller, pushes a button and quickly looks to the robot for a reaction. The robot begins to move. The boy jumps around the room excited about the robot's reaction. After he calms down, he composes himself and gives commands to the robot by talking into the controller. He tells the robot, “stand up, walk, turn right.” The robot reacts accordingly. The boy is jumping around the robot while it performs its tasks.

The boy runs out of sight again and returns wearing a helmet and says, “Lets play war robot.” The boy runs over to a group of toy soldiers on the floor. He stands them up in formation and runs back to the robot. He stands at attention like a field general and say, “Attack!” The robot walks across the room toward the helpless soldiers with a Frankenstein lumber. The robot picks up his foot and smashes down on the toys crushing them. The boy’s face looks excited and then drops to disbelief at what the robot just did to his toys. “No”, he screams, “Stop robot stop!” But the robot doesn’t stop. It continues its rampage by flipping the boy’s bed over and smashing more toys. The boy looks around in desperation and sees a jump rope. He grabs it and lassos the robot around the leg to try and trip it but the robot is too powerful and yanks the rope from the boy’s hands. As the robot continues its destruction by smashing furniture the boys grabs a box from what use to be under his bed, opens it and pulls out some firecrackers and a lighter. He lights the wick and throws it at the robot but the firecrackers bounce off and land in his waste paper basket. They explode and cause the paper inside to catch fire. The boy’s face drops in amazement at how his assault turned bad so quickly.

After the firecrackers finish exploding a woman’s voice is heard from outside the room. “Danny, what’s going on up there?” says the voice. The boy and the robot both freeze for a second. Footsteps are heard coming up stair. They are getting louder and louder. The voice calls out again, “Danny, are you alright? What was that noise?” The boy looks quickly at the door and then back at the robot. The robot quickly turns face the door and takes an aggressive posture. The boy finds himself between the robot and the door that his mother will enter through. He looks around again in desperation and stops when he sees something off screen. He jumps out of sight and them jumps back in holding a baseball bat. He holds it up like he is ready to swing. The doorknob on the door begins to turn. The robot starts to walk forward towards the boy. The boy widens his stance ready to strike. Just as the door swings open the robot falls apart around the boy.

The mother opens the door and through her POV we see the young boy standing in the middle of the room with a baseball bat in his hands surrounded by junk. His trash can is on fire, the bed is flipped over, furniture is smashed, his toys are spread all over the floor and there he stands with this surprised look on his face which quickly turns to a big smile. The mother screams one word, “DANNY!”
# Thesis Budget: George Zimmet

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## Thesis Marketing Plan: George Zimmet

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<td>BAF</td>
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Appendix B
"Stop!"

"Stop, stop!"
Appendix B6

[Drawing of a character shouting into a megaphone]

[Drawing of a character with a lampshade on their head, saying: "What's going on up there?"]

[Drawing of a character wearing a chef's hat, saying: "Danny! Out of there!"

[Drawing of a character in a kitchen, holding a book and gesturing]
Appendix C
Appendix D