A shadow of an idea

Myung-Chul Jung

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A Shadow of an Idea

By
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in School of Film and Animation

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York

November, 2008

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Revised: 11-05-2008
Acknowledgments

I have many thanks, for I could not have finished my work well without wholehearted support from my supervisor, Professor Stephanie Maxwell, along with the help of other teachers and the contributions of my family and friends.

During this work, even though it became difficult at times, I acquired an immense amount of knowledge and experience, including not only professional skills but also personal insights and life experience from my professors and classmates. The best effect that this project has had on me is that I feel not at an end but rather at a beginning. I can launch into the world, having become enervated from this thesis project and ready for the next challenge.

Throughout this thesis so many people helped me, and I intend to repay the favor by helping others to the best of my abilities. I feel so much gratitude to those who have assisted me and encouraged me during the last few years.
Abstract

This story is about three cavemen’s escape from an active volcanic island. Whenever the island’s volcano begins to act up, they react to run as far away as possible from the volcano. But they cannot go beyond the shoreline to save their life. One day, the main character has had a dream of ship during taking a nap. He explains the ship to his fellow cavemen, however, he is ignored by them because they have never seen ships that float on the water. He is now faced with the additional problem of explaining his vision to them.

In entering the middle part of story, the main character sees his own shadow that is caused by his own body. He gets an idea to form the shadow of ship. He employs the rocks, the bird, the tree and the dinosaur to form a huge shadow on a giant rock face. The giant shadow creates the shape of a sailing ship. The film ends with the ‘shadow ship’ moving on the waves of ocean. Finally the main character accomplishes the mission which is to show his vision to his friends with ‘a shadow of an idea’.

The film is made in 2-D animation and it runs about six and half minutes. Without coloring I had kept the original color tone form shooting work by a camera. It is not gorgeous but heartwarming style and there are left soft pencil lines for characters and tough pencil tones for shadow.
# Table of Contents

Title Page ......................................................................................................................... 8

Back Story – Part 1 (Evolution of an Idea) ..................................................................... 9

Back Story – Part 2 (Idea Development) ....................................................................... 11

Story .................................................................................................................................. 14

Style .................................................................................................................................. 16

Character Design ............................................................................................................. 16

Environment Design ....................................................................................................... 19

Animating ......................................................................................................................... 19

Sound Design .................................................................................................................. 20

Production & Post Production ......................................................................................... 21

  Shooting ......................................................................................................................... 21

  Editing ............................................................................................................................. 22

  Compositing .................................................................................................................. 22

  Coming Up With a Title ................................................................................................. 23

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 24

Appendix A – Original Proposal .................................................................................... 25

Appendix B – Original Storyboard .................................................................................. 29

Appendix C – Concept Art .............................................................................................. 36

  Characters I and II ....................................................................................................... 37-38

  Environments ............................................................................................................... 39

Appendix D – Selective Images from *A Shadow of an Idea* ........................................... 40
A Shadow of an Idea

By Myung-Chul Jung

A Small Island, a Big Volcano, and a Shadow of an Idea.
Back Story – Part 1 (Evolution of an Idea)

I had had an idea for a story before coming to RIT and it became the root of *A Shadow of an Idea*. Truth to tell, the former idea is not similar with the latter one in regards to the minute details and development of the work. However, they both share a common concept and message.

At RIT, I had made two short animations each year in the first and second years, both times knowing how important story development is to creating a successful movie. Previously, I had experienced liking some animations even though the quality of the animation was not good, simply because the stories were interesting and well developed.

I had thought a great deal about how to make a good student animation within the constraints of restricted effort and limited time. I developed some guidelines for myself about what kinds of stories are eligible for a successful student project. Here are my rules about what a good story entails:

First of all, there should be no more than three to four characters in the movie. If you have more characters in your animation project, you cannot develop each character’s personality substantially enough, which is especially critical for the main character. Character development takes time, and as a student you do not have a lot of time. You have strict deadlines and projects must be efficient and do-able over a short period of time.

When you don’t make the best use of your characters’ personalities, no matter how high the production quality, the story will bore your audience to tears.
Second, the better environment to use is an inside one rather than an outside one. If your movie’s background is outdoors, you need to handle a lot of details, ranging from a small house to a huge city or a small garden to a huge forest. But in the inside environment, you have more control: you can concentrate the audience’s attention on your well-directed movie in a tightly closed room and more easily focus attention where you want it to be focused. Above all, making an inside background/environment can help you to save time because you can more easily concentrate the scope of the environment.

Even though I had an idea for my thesis story, I could not decide whether to use this idea for my thesis or not. I had liked my concept, but I was unwilling to use it for my thesis story because it went against my rules for potential success in a student project: there would almost ten characters, including the main character, and the background was a volcano island, which means I would need to explain the volcano and the sea surrounding the island.

Knowing that I would have to find another idea for my thesis, I saved my original idea for another day, and I tried to develop another story.

I was pressed for time to find an idea for my thesis, write a thesis proposal and then seek approval of the proposal from a faculty committee. I just could not come up with any new idea for a thesis. Finally, I made the decision to use my original idea, even knowing that there were lions in my path. This was the one idea I could get excited about creating a story around.
Back Story – Part 2 (Idea Development)

Fortunately, four out of the five faculty committee members reviewing my proposal liked my story and the proposal was passed. Now, before starting the animation process, I needed to develop my story as much as possible. If the story idea is like the trunk of a tree, then from the original idea many branches sprouted and grew. From then on Professor Stephanie Maxwell would continually check to see that the branches were spreading in good directions.

Stephanie and I met once a week at her office, and for each meeting I prepared storyboards for her to examine. The storyboard was a helpful mediator between Stephanie and myself. (English is not my mother tongue.)

I drew each shot on 3.5” (W) X 2.6” (H) white paper. Eight of these shot drawings were then pasted on 8.5” (W) X 11” (H) paper with masking tape. The reason for using masking tape is that I could easily stick or remove the small drawing pieces from the larger paper, and thus change the position of shots, or add in new shots or delete a shot from the story line. (Figure 1)

Throughout the process of fixing my story with Stephanie, she continually asked me, “Why?”; as I developed the story line I needed to continually find the answers to her
question. When I could not answer a question, she gave me hints so I could discover the answer for myself.

I think that this kind of process of question and answer is necessary for making a good story. Character motivation is just one of the many types of questions that audiences ask; if the movie cannot answer this or the many other questions that the viewing audience poses, then it is not a successful story.

However, each time when I did this work another problem would develop. The problem was that the answers about “why” started to make my story to be overly long with detailed explanations. I decided to postpone solving these problems, saving them for later, because I believed that depending on my ability to ‘edit’, I could cut it to down to the desired length without impinging on the passage of the story. In order to prepare for such a plan of action, I decided therefore to spread as many ‘branches’ as I could develop in order to be able to pick and choose the best to keep before lopping off the rest.

After making a lot of amendments to the original story, it had grown 30 percent more than its previous form. A longer and more detailed story is not necessarily better. I knew I would have to make the story much shorter in order to reach my desired movie length, and it was not easy work for me. Over the course of time, however, I had acquired the knack for creating a short story with just enough detail.

Audiences watching movies wonder this and that about trivial, and not-so-trivial, parts in the movies. Not satisfying their curiosity will interfere with their concentration, distract them and ultimately lead them to feel bored, frustrated and unsatisfied. The problem inherent in the short film is that the filmmaker is severely limited by time in which to convey everything.
For example, in my animation, people want to know why the ancient bird visits the volcanic island. In this case, showing the audience simple shots of the bird prior to the bird’s eventual important role in the movie is one of methods I employ to answer these kinds of questions. I show the ancient bird struggling with some fruit on the ground, and this shot helps one to understand that the bird is on the island in order to get this food.

(Figure 2, Top) Illustrating the bird’s action in which she cannot peck the fruit well helps the audience grasp that the bird is stupid.

In the another case, I show a huge skeleton of a dinosaur in order to help the audience imagine that there was a live dinosaur once on the island or there may still be a live dinosaur on the island. (Figure 2, Bottom) By using these kinds of expressive tools, I can save time and keep the story’s length as close as possible to its original intended length.

After this developmental process, I could go on to the next step.
Only three cavemen live on an active volcanic island surrounded by a vast ocean.

When the island’s volcano begins to act up, the cavemen always have the same reaction: to run as far away as possible away from the volcano. The critical place is the shoreline. Unfortunately, they cannot escape from the volcano, nor do they have anything capable of stopping the volcano’s activity. The shoreline becomes the place between reality and possibility: They are stuck on the volcano and leaving is the only thing that would save them.

One day, while three cavemen wait on the shore for the volcano to quiet down after a violent eruption, the main character (who has had a strange dream about a ship during a nap) suggests to the other two cavemen that they could escape from their island to another island across the sea. When the main character explains about the ship in his dream, he is ignored by his friends. His friends, who have never seen ships, have no idea how ships could float on the water or that they could be carried by such a ship across the sea to another island. Now the main character is faced with the additional problem of explaining his vision to his friends that will mean survival. He must find a way to communicate in a manner in which they will understand and believe.

Modern humans, having not come face-to-face with cavemen, have always thought of cavemen’s intellectual abilities as being just a little better than that of a monkey. The humor of this story is in how a caveman, whom modern humans think of as inferior, can succeed in portraying his vision to his friends to help them survive. Even
were it we who were in the main character’s place with our ‘superior’ intellect, it would not be easy to explain to his friends about the purpose and function of a ship or about its huge scale. The main character in this story fails to convey his vision to his friends.

In entering the middle part of the story, the main character, fortunately, happens to be sitting on a rock with the sun at his back when he solves the problem on how to explain his ship idea to his friends. He sees his own shadow that is caused by his own body blocking the light of the sun. Suddenly he knows how he will convey his ship idea to his friends

During one afternoon, he carries large rocks by hand, catches and secures an ancient bird to a tree, and employs a passing, friendly dinosaur in the construction of a large formation that stands erect in the island’s landscape.

The highlight of all this activity is the moment when a very long shadow is thrown by the formation becomes at the sun sets. At that moment, the rocks, the tree, the bird and the dinosaur in their conglomerate form cast a huge shadow on a giant rock face. At long last, on this large ‘rock’ screen, his friends (and the film audience) can see the answer to the cavemen’s dilemma. The giant shadow creates the shape of a sailing ship. The film ends with the ‘shadow ship’ moving as if on the waves of the ocean and this alludes to the cavemen’s eventual escape from the volcano island.
Style

I created my animation in a traditional 2D drawing animation style. I used digital tools, but only minimally, as I wanted to retain the traditional drawing look. The frames are without additional coloring. I kept the original color tones that resulted from shooting the drawings with a camera. The work does not have a ‘gorgeous’ look, but rather a heartwarming style and tone. Left behind are soft pencil lines for characters and tough pencil tones for shadow.

For emphasis on the characters’ active movements all backgrounds are expressed in a simple style. The story takes place during the course of a day, and depending on the length of shadows seen, the passage of time is understood.

Character Design

In my animation, there are three different kinds of characters: cavemen, an ancient bird, and a dinosaur. One caveman is the primary character and dominates the story for the majority of the movie. For this role, I wanted to create a well-conceived and designed character.

It was not easy to create the main character to my satiation. In the earliest character concept, the caveman did not look particularly different from a human being.
He had eyes on his face, and I kept these in the design until I began creating a storyboard. (Figure 3, Left) In faces, characters’ eyes are very important parts. By only the eyes’ expression, a face can reveal an unlimited array of emotions.

When I was finishing the final concept of the caveman, I removed the eyes on the face, instead covering the area with hairs. This meant that I would be challenged to express emotions by manipulating the hairs and the shape of the lips instead of the eyes. (Figure 3, Middle & Right)

From time to time, I felt bored with my caveman character, and I became eager to recreate him with a special shape. Not a complex shape, but using simple shapes of marked individuality. From this eagerness, the first change in the shape was a neck bone attached to the top and back of the skull rather than at the bottom of the skull like how it is in a normal human body. (Figure 4) I liked this modification very much. But, it created a problem for animating movement because it was not a normal body shape and I had not animated this kind of a character before. I felt a limited ability while animating this character on paper and had to really push my imagination, especially for situations like sitting, running and jumping, and various other active positions.

I tried to find a solution to visualize the character better, and it was to make the figure in clay. This helped me to determine how to express various gestures, and it made
me understand why many animation studios make figure characters before animating them. (Figure 5, Left)

The clay figure character had short legs in proportion to body size and it seemed like it would be hard to move. So, I changed this, and in the final concept the arms and legs are thin and long are more amenable for active movements. (Figure 5, Right)

After deciding on the physical characteristics of the main character, I created his friends on the basis of his design. One character is stronger and bigger than the main character and the other is fatter and smaller. Because I do not know the secret of their birth I cannot tell as to their exact relationship: either they are friends or brothers. I will refer to them as his friends.

There are two other characters in this film: the ancient bird and the dinosaur, although both do not appear much in movie.

The ancient bird was created during my first attempt and I used it without making any changes late on. Having a short lower bill compared to its long upper bill means it cannot peck berries on the ground well and its unfocused eyes cannot clearly see. I wanted the bird to look impaired, even stupid. (Figure 6)

Finally, because the dinosaur is shown in the distance in the movie and for only a short time, I fashioned it after the familiar Brontosaurus, rather than attempt to create a new, complex and original character.
Environment Design

In a student work, a high quality, believable outside background or environment is not easy to achieve in a limited time frame. In my case, I decided to greatly simplify the background in order to concentrate on the characters’ movements within my allotted time.

There were no backgrounds in my animation when characters were isolated. However, in close up shots simple environments appeared, and in non-moving shots backgrounds became much more detailed.

Animating

Animation was the hardest part for me because the cavemen characters had abnormal body types. For drawing, I would visualize their gestures or I acted out the gestures myself after putting my pencil aside. Sometimes, my friends performed live gestures for me to observe and draw.

Some parts on which I spent a lot of production time sometimes impeded the progress of the story when I watched them in motion. I resolutely omitted them from my animation if they moved badly, or if I felt I wanted to change a camera angle but found that the time it would take to make changes was impractical.
For my own satisfaction I drew rough sketches two to three times and then checked pencil tests on a computer screen before moving on to the next step of refining my drawings for final animation sequencing.

**Sound Design**

For my scratch track, I used percussive rhythms inspired by African and South Pacific island folk music to accentuate the various moods and movements of the environment as well as the individual characters. These rhythms were modified to individualize characters, to emphasize critical points in the story, and to create mood and emotion. An example is the emphatic beat during the volcanic activity to heighten the sense of danger versus the more subtle rhythm when the main character’s is deep in thought. Eventually, a soundtrack was composed that mirrored the original intentions of the scratch track (see Production & Post Production section).
Production & Post Production

Shooting

When I started to draw final shots I had about one month left before the premier of the work at the graduate screenings. Every day I made LOTS of drawings. The work made me tired, not mentally, but physically. I draw about 20~30 images for the difficult parts and 50~60 images for the easy parts per day. Most of time, I worked at home. I lived alone in a small studio apartment on the third floor. It was the best place for me to work for a number of reasons -- primarily for the quiet working environment and for saving time in not needing to go and wait for food in a cafeteria line if I had lived in a school dorm.

I set up a copy stand at home for shooting, and outfitted it with a digital camera and lights. Every night, after finishing the work of the day, I would shoot the day’s drawings on the copy stand. I found that, depending on the time of day, the lighting would shift because of current fluctuations in my apartment building. When I shot the drawings, the quality and the color of the paper was always changing. They also looked different on the computer screen. Because of this problem I chose to shoot after midnight when the apartment building ‘went to sleep’ and the lighting was more even and I could control it better.
**Editing**

Before beginning final animation drawings, I drew rough images at least twice for each part. I made them into movies in QuickTime format in order to test rough samples of movements and camera angles. After testing, I added all of them together in After Effects program. Also during this period, Stephanie and I discussed and checked the storyline repeatedly and made several important changes that were ultimately wise. In the final rough edit, the length of the animation became less than six and half minutes, down from more than nine minutes.

**Compositing**

I was still not sure that I would finish my animation on time, having only a short two weeks left before its premier screening. I had known from the work involved in creating the final rough cut how much I could handle each day, so I feared that two weeks was too short a time period to allow for finishing the work. However, I showed that I could finish, making the impossible possible in only two weeks.

During this intense period I was not able to prepare for sound for my final animation. I asked Stephanie for suggestions on for finding a composer and she was pleased to introduce me to a talented composer, Rob Drury, who graduated from RIT with a degree in Film and Animation and who has an abundance of experience in soundtrack and music composition.

Even though he was busy with many projects at the moment, he did agree to undertake the job based on Stephanie’s recommendation to him personally. Two weeks before screening, I met with him at RIT. Unfortunately, I had only my unfinished
animation movie on CD to give to him. I proposed that he create a concept and style soundtrack suitable to my animation before I would be able to give him my final version.

He never worried about this job even with a short turnaround time. Additionally, he suggested adding sound effects for me. After one week, I gave him my final animation movie and his great soundtrack was added in only four days later. This was three days before the premiere of *A Shadow of an Idea*!

**Coming Up With a Title**

During the period I did not have sound for my animation, I also had not yet decided on a title. The original working title was *The Art of the Stone Age*, but I felt it was too simple, as did Stephanie as well. We tried to find a good title for the story, finally deciding on the title, *A Shadow of an Idea*. The title of a work is very important, and in my case there are two elements of the title, “shadow” and “idea”, that serve as a guide or context for discovering the meaning of this film. In addition, the “shadow of an idea” represents the monumental changes that can take place because of seemingly small ideas and inventions. *The Shadow of an Idea* was a perfect title in its multiple meanings and representations in this film.

Now it was time for the debut of *A Shadow of an Idea!*
Conclusion

A journey of nine-months ended with high point: the successful screening of A Shadow of an Idea.

It was solitary journey. I was writer, animator, concept designer, editor, and director. Many times I had lost my direction, but then Stephanie would help me rise up and get on track once again. She was my lighthouse.

Here, I do not want to mention as to how others reacted to my work at its first screening. I did not care whether the audience liked it or disliked the work. I was just thankful for finishing it! The final work is not perfect, and some parts still need a little fixing, but I will love every single part of the work anyway because I did each part, except for sound, all by myself.

I do not know if I will be able to make another animation alone in the future because it is very difficult to be an independent filmmaker and be responsible for nearly every aspect of a work. However, this experience of making this film and my experience of being a student at RIT will always be a very important part of my art life and my whole life! I struggled a lot. I worried a lot. I learned a lot. And, I succeeded a lot!

Thank you!
Appendix A – Original Proposal

The title *The Art of the Stone Age*
was changed to the present title
*A Shadow of an Idea*
THESIS PROPOSAL

The Art of the Stone Age

By John Jung

Committee Chair:
Stephanie Maxwell
Story

A young caveman has a vision of a ship in a dream which he attempts to verbally communicate to his people, but he fails. He invents a way to visually convey his vision in his dream. It is just in time as the volcano island they are living on is just about to blow up and the caveman’s dream ship saves the day.

Synopsis

On a primitive island during the Stone Age, with the sun shining in the afternoon, a young caveman is taking a nap. Suddenly, he is awakened by a strong earthquake caused by a volcano. When he opens his eyes he sees that his friends are running in a panic toward the beach. The young caveman also jumps up and runs away. Later, all of the cavemen are on the beach huddled in fear as the island’s volcano is violently erupting in the distance. The young caveman appears, gesticulating wildly in front of them, trying to tell them something. However, no one understands what he is talking about. The caveman suddenly stops his speech and gets an idea. He looks at his shadow on the ground and studies it. He proceeds to find a large rock and he moves it to a tree surrounded by other large rocks. He puts the rock on the very top of the other rocks. He climbs up on top and looks around. He sees an archaeopteryx in the distance looking around the ground for food. The young caveman jumps to the ground and grabs a large stick. He runs to the archaeopteryx and hits it on the head. The archaeopteryx falls to the ground and the young caveman takes its large tail and pulls the bird toward the tree and rocks. He then ties the bird to the top of the tree. The young caveman runs away, but reappears shortly,
followed by a giant friendly dinosaur. The big dinosaur sits obediently down in front of the tree. The young caveman climbs up on the dinosaur’s back, grabs the tail of archaeopteryx and pulls it down. The surprised archaeopteryx spreads its wings. The others on the beach have gathered around the young caveman, and his strange construction casts a large black shadow on a tall rock wall behind it. The shadow looks like a large sailing ship on the water.

Finally, all the cavemen leave the island by a ship similar in shape to the shadow ship on the rock wall. As the ship moves out into the open ocean the island’s volcano violently explodes and the island sinks.

**Approach**

This work will be created in 2D animation (dream part) and 3D computer animation. For editing and compositing, Adobe After Effects and Premiere will be used. Other possible programs include Photoshop and Painter. The soundtrack will be created by a composer.
Appendix B – Original Storyboard
The Art of the Stone Age
Appendix C – Concept Art
Characters - I
Characters - II
Environments
Appendix D – Selective Images from
*A Shadow of an Idea*
These images from *A Shadow of an Idea* show the progressive development of the story.
(Follow numbered images.)