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Let sleeping turtles lie

Jason Jarvis

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Let Sleeping Turtles Lie

by

Jason Jarvis

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
May 2002

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Let Sleeping Turtles Lie

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Signature                                                                (Date)  

May 15, 2002
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**Story Development**

The story went through several incarnations during the development phase. The original concept was based on a short story elaborating on sketches in my sketchbook. The story consisted of seven illustrations and about ten lines of text. The only material to survive this version was the design of the town and the turtle, and the rapport between the boy and the turtle.

In developing the story as a short film, much material was added. Two major characters were developed to serve as a sympathetic character and an identifiable villain, characters that would be dropped in the final story. This version of the story, drawn out as a short comic book, was expanded in far too many ways to make for a comprehensible film. Realizing that the story needed much revision, I cut out much unrelated material and all of the sub-plots and gave more time to establish the logic of the world.

The finished story bore more resemblance to the original story than to the second, expanded version. The story now had three distinct movements, each running for approximately a third of the running time. During the development of the story, I was aware that I did not have a satisfactory resolution to the problem created by the story. I came up with several different and idiosyncratic resolutions, but could not commit to any one. I realized eventually that the only proper way to resolve the conflict was to have a drastic expansion to the world of the characters, and this expansion was to be revealed to the main character after his darkest moment, but before the final confrontation. What began as a story of revenge became a religious journey.

**Development of the Aesthetic**

While the story went through many revisions, my intended aesthetic, both artistic and thematic, was developed at an early phase. The artistic aesthetic was the easiest to develop. In approaching the thesis, I was prepared to use any form of animation, and in the earliest phase of development I was planning on using 3D animation. In the end, I opted to use a mixture of paper cutouts and computer animation to create a distinctively flat world. I chose to create a 2D universe for two reasons. First, since my story was epic in scale, I decided to simplify what I could to
make it easier for the eye to digest the action and understand the architecture of the world. The town and the turtle, while containing much detail, are sufficiently flat to create an iconic feeling. The idea of creating an iconic world was important to me, as I feel it is received in our minds on a different and more personal level than a more literary project. I see my films not so much as entertainment, but as essays illustrating my views of the world.

The second reason for my use of 2D animation, and cutout animation in particular, involves personal preference. While I have no gripe against 3D animation, I found 3D animation to be too physically defining for this project. Three-dimensional characters tend to be rooted in a space and it is easy for us to concentrate exclusively on that relationship, while I wished for the viewer to look for other relationships. Also, I am attracted to the jumpiness of cutout characters. They seem to actually be alive, partially because they are made of materials that we can identify as real. I personally find it easier to empathize with a fully articulated human cutout character than with either a 3D character or a traditionally-drawn character, possibly because cutout characters have physical joints similar to our own as well as an abstractness that allows us to enter the character.

It was also important for my thesis film to continue in the personal style I have been developing over the course of several films. This style includes visual trademarks as well as narrative themes. My visual trademarks include a general flatness to the animated world use of colored pencils, devices used on many but not all of my projects. This style was already being developed prior to my work at RIT, but has been sharpened with access to appropriate software and drawing instruction. Another important trend in my visual style is to avoid images or movement that are obviously computerized. For this reason I do not employ a continually moving camera, or use simple computer-generated coloring schemes. My goal in this respect is for the viewer to not know that any computers were used in the production.

There are some narrative themes in my films that I would identify as central to my style, and thus to my aesthetic. My films are often about misfits or people who are forced into roles, and what happens when they start to question their roles. My first RIT production, “Paper Mammals”, involved a protagonist who was given a world to live in, and the tragedy of his curiosity of things beyond this space. The second film, “Sir Niblet and the Dragon”, shows development of the theme. This time, Sir Niblet is taken from his chosen profession and pushed into a new role, as a dragon slayer. Bestowing this role are three royal people, representing society.
dragon represents that which we are told to defeat, but without the illusion created by the society (in the film presented as a pair of glasses), the dragon is no great danger at all. In the conclusion to this film, Sir Niblet by chance learns this secret and joins the dragon. The three royal people are banished, and a new society is formed comprised of Niblet and the dragon.

The themes for the current project, “Let Sleeping Turtles Lie”, are similar to the last films, but an element of scale has been added. The story is still about a character who is forced into a role that does not fit him. The world is set up with certain concrete rules. There is a town. This town is on the back of a giant sleeping turtle. The turtle is on a mountain peak, with no other land in sight. Once in a while this turtle wakes up, and the town is threatened with destruction. The turtle can only be quelled by the town’s storyteller, an individual so boring that he can put the turtle back to sleep. These are the rules of this animated world, and the story develops after the town loses their storyteller. The boy becomes the protagonist of the film, when he is chosen to fill the role of the town storyteller. In this story, the boy is aware of the importance of the role and the cost to his own freedom (as storytellers must be locked away to prevent any stimuli which would prevent him from becoming dull), and goes through stages where he accepts, refuses, and finally transcends the role. Now, when the hero is thrust into the undesirable role, he sees a potential for the role that no one has seen before, and the whole universe is expanded. I suppose this could be likened to a religious transformation, or a scientific innovation like that of Copernicus.

The turtle has an interesting role. It is positioned directly beneath the town, and could stand to represent those things that our society fights to control or keep in check, chief among them being our fear of death. The awakened and enraged turtle is a literal threat of death for the people of the town, but the sleeping turtle is present at all other times to remind us of our mortality. As with Sir Niblet, the hero develops a bond with that which must be fought, as in the thesis film, the boy and the turtle are both prisoners to the society of the town.

Above all, this is a film about itself. In the eyes of the citizens, the storyteller has only one function, to keep the turtle asleep and society at the status quo. The role of the storyteller is to tell stories, be they in the form of books, films, poems, or ballads. There are many who feel that a storyteller’s purpose is to create a temporary escape, to entertain the masses, to keep the turtle asleep. The boy in my film discovers another goal for the storyteller, to bring the audience to a new level and inspire new ways to see the world.
This new storyteller may be closer to the original prehistoric role that the storyteller filled.

**The Process**

**Character Development and Construction**

Knowing that the characters would be constructed as paper cutouts, I was allowed a large range of style and detail. The characters of the original story were simple pencil drawing, composed primarily of basic shapes. They continued in this fashion into the storyboards, although by that time I was also designing more detailed character sheets. Creating characters with cutout paper permitted me to use a greater level of detail than would be practical for traditional hand-drawn characters. My characters were plotted in pencil, inked, and colored with colored pencils. I used a rough paper, so the colored pencils gave a small degree of texturing.

When designing cutout characters, I give much attention to the layout of the joints. A good character, in my opinion, should be able to show a range of emotions based solely on posture, and for a cutout character this must be incorporated into the design. My process involved first planning out a character’s joints in a sketchbook, making a working puppet model from scrap paper, and then tracing the parts of the model onto good paper for inking and coloring.

After the design and the coloring, the character design was photocopied in color, and the photocopies were cut out and strung together with string and tape (please see the appendix for an illustration of my paper-and-string technique). I used photocopies for the actual production for two reasons: First, I wanted back-ups in case something happened to a character, and secondly, the colored pencil tends to smear on the originals and would not hold up well in the production phase.

Overall, there were 15 characters designed and used in this production. Thirteen of the characters were human, each containing joints in the arms, legs, torsos, and head. The amount of detail given to a character was related to screen-time. My most detailed character was the main character, the boy, who had joints in his body, replaceable face parts, replaceable hands for gestures and actions, and an 8-piece replaceable hair cycle to make his hair blow in the wind.
The remaining two characters were both of the turtle, one for close-up shots, and one for extreme long shots. This smaller turtle also included a cutout model of the town on his back.

**Scenery Construction**

The scenery was constructed to fit with the aesthetic of the characters. The backgrounds were drawn with pencil, inked, and finished with colored pencil. I owe many thanks to Yu Fang Lin, who colored the backgrounds under my direction.

Three different settings were constructed for the production. The first setting was the town. The town was designed as several flat layers resting atop one another, allowing for the town to shake and flop around dangerously during the turtle-quake scenes. Each layer was designed and drawn separately and had a unique color theme, creating in the end product the effect a town with striped layers.

The second setting was the inside of the storyteller’s cell. The general concept was for a room with little or no color. Several views of the room were created, some including the large metal door and some including the small window on the opposite side. A close-up of the windowsill was also created, as well as a view of the outside of the cell.

**Character Animation**

The characters were animated in an unorthodox manner. I animated the characters separately from the backgrounds and one another, with the intent of compositing them together in a later phase of development. The characters were animated over a green screen on a custom-built animation stand. The frames of animation were captured with a Sony video camera plugged directly into a computer. I used Adobe Premiere to capture and manage the animated footage.

This part of the process was long and tedious. Because I was creating straight-ahead animation, any mistake meant I had to start the shot over. As there was no way with my meager setup to check to progression of the shot until it was finished, there were many reshoots required. Some scenes were animated four or five times before I was content with them. Another constraint with this method of animating was the necessity of doing an entire shot at one time. With some shots running as long and 40 seconds, animating a character in one shot for seven hours was not uncommon (and
yet this is considered ridiculously fast when compared to the production times of some recent straight-ahead animated films).

The lifesaver for this phase was the timing sheet. Without a stopwatch and a detailed timing sheet, this project would have been unmanageable. I used timing sheets to plot out every major motion, the mouth positions for the lip sync, and even when a character would blink. This also allowed me to synchronize the actions of the characters.

At the completion of this phase, I had footage of the characters doing actions and delivering lines in front of a green background. The next step was to put them together.

**Compositing**

Putting together the finished shots was a much easier task than the character animation. The first step was to throw in all of the necessary footage in roughly the proper place. I then reworked the shot until I was satisfied with it, slowly adding the effects that were not present in the original character animation. These effects included the water and clouds, the blurring for scenery out of focus, the chalk drawings, and tracking moves. Camera movement was intentionally avoided as much as possible, in keeping with my tradition editing preferences.

**Editing**

The editing phase was brief, owing to my strict planning during pre-production. There was a need to trim from the heads and tails of several shots to maintain continuity and pace, but this film (as with most animation) was shot close to a 1:1 ration of raw vs. final footage.

**Sound FX and Music**

The sound effects were added on an offline digital editing system. The voice tracks were also linked to the footage at this time. I created the sound effects with a DAT recorder and a microphone, in the same manner as the voice tracks. The completed soundtrack was then synced up with the master cut and was ready for distribution.

**The Process: Conclusion**
The finished film, and the technique with which it was made, satisfy my technical aspiration for this project. I feel that combining the paper cutouts with the aid of computer animation created a product that could not have been created with either cutouts or computer animation alone. It is a mixture of the clean perfection of the computer with the jittery human-friendly movement of the paper cutout. With the merging of techniques comes a cost, as the time required for production was greater than anticipated.
Proposal for MFA Thesis Project

**Town on Sleeping Turtle**
*(working title)*

by

Jason Jarvis

MFA Imaging Arts/ Computer Animation
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ART AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
April, 1999

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Howard Lester
Professor
Film/Video/Animation Department, School or Photographic Arts & Sciences
The town sits precariously on the back of a giant sleeping turtle. The turtle is perched atop a mountain. This is all there is.

The people of the town are doing quiet things. At no point do they raise their voices. Mel-O and his friend Patience are playing, when they come across a trumpet, which, like all noisy things, is banned from the town. Despite Patience’s objections, Mel-O plays the trumpet quietly. The inevitable accident occurs: Mel-O plays the trumpet too loud and wakes up the turtle. The town shakes wildly, and the citizens panic. The mayor takes control and orders the most boring person in town to be fed to the turtle, which the panicking townspeople claim to be Mr. Thomas the accountant. A mob carries Mr. Thomas to the edge of the town and lowers him to the turtle’s level on a rope. A woman tells her child that only by eating an extremely boring person can the turtle fall asleep and the town be saved. The turtle eats Mr. Thomas and falls asleep.

A teary-eyed Mel-O guiltily claims responsibility for the trumpet playing and, as is judged by the citizens to be “noisy.” The townspeople gather around the laws of the town, which are carved on a tall column. The mayor reads an inscription that states that the “noisy” must be confined to the Dulling Room in the top of a tower until such time that his noisiness is stifled. Mel-O is imprisoned in the Dulling Room, which contains nothing but a small
barred window. Time passes (montage). Outside the tower, people remark that Mel-O must be duller than a doorknob. Children mock him and throw things (like chalk) through the window of Mel-O’s cell. At night, Patience climbs the tower and looks through the window. Mel-O is furiously drawing pictures on the walls of his cell with chalk. He draws with ever increasing speed and emotion. Sometimes he appears angry, sometimes he appears scared. He laughs and cries. When he has covered the walls of the Dulling Room with drawings, he stops to look over his work, pleased. Mel-O climbs to the window and whispers something to Patience.

Patience leaves and returns with the trumpet. She hands the trumpet to Mel-O through the window. Mel-O plays the trumpet loudly, and then hides it. The turtle awakes and the town trembles. The townspeople panic. They go to the Dulling Room to get Mel-O, talking amongst themselves about how he must be the most dull person in the town. They lower him on a rope to the turtle. As Mel-O dangles in front of the turtle, he tells the turtle a story. Mel-O tells the story of another turtle who also had the misfortune of having a town built on its back and how eating villagers made her sleepy. Before Mel-O can finish his story, the turtle eats him and starts to fall asleep. Mel-O, in the turtle’s stomach, finds many boring people alive and well (and playing Bingo). Mel-O continues telling his story from inside the turtle’s stomach, keeping the turtle awake and making it very cranky. The drawings for Mel-O’s cell are superimposed, and Mel-O’s drawings correspond with what is happening. In Mel-O’s story and in his drawings, the turtle gets so fed up with the boy in her stomach that she slides off of the mountain. Just as the story suggests, the turtle slides off the mountain and the remains of the town is smashed on the top of the mountain. Mel-O and the others in the turtle’s
stomach are pulled from the stomach by clinging to the rope still tied to Mel-O. The people of the town rebuild the town without the sleeping turtle and without the need for quiet. The only thing that remains in ruins are the stone-carved rules of the old town. The people play loud musical instruments.

This story will be animated with the use of paper cut-outs animated under a camera. The footage will be composited and special effects added with the use of a computer. Lip-sync will be used for the speech.
Jason Jarvis
Thesis Timeline
12 Apr 99

I Timeline for the current semester (2 credits)
   Week 6     Propose
   Week 7     Record voices
   Week 8     Record voices
               Character designs complete
   Week 9     Record Voices
               Production breakdown
   Week 10    Voice track complete
               Breakdown complete
   Week 11    Preapproval for summer work

II Timeline for Summer 1999 (1 credit)
   Weeks 1 - 2  Audio breakdown
               Construct paper media (cut-outs & backdrops)
   Weeks 3 - 10 Under-camera animation

III Timeline for Fall 1999 (6 credits)
   Weeks 1 - 11 Under-camera animation
               Compositing
               Effects animation

IV Timeline for Winter 1999-2000 (5 credits)
   Weeks 1 - 4  Editing
   Week 5, 6, 7 Tentative screening
               Duplication
   Week 11     Paper complete
Marketing Plan

To promote my finished thesis film, I plan to submit it to the following festivals.

Ann Arbor Film Festival
ANNECY International Film Festival
ASIFA-East Animation Awards
Blue Sky International Film Festival
California Sun International Animation Festival
Chicago International Film Festival
Chicago International Children’s Film Festival
Hiroshima Animation Festival
Los Angeles International Film Festival
ORF-PRIX Ars Electronica
Ottawa International Film Festival
Rochester International Film Festival
SIGGRAPH
Zagreb Animation Film Festival
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TOWN ON THE SLEEPING TURTLE

Town: "Hi!"

Man: "Hey!"

Look at this. "That's not supposed to have that. That's a funny thing."

I'll be careful. "Little noise."

Big noise."

Gired."

The turtle is awake! "Ahhhh!"

Help!"

Don't panic! Quickly, what among us is the most boring?"

Effect of noise."

Mr. Tana, the accountant."
But Lisa's going to do what taxes?

粉尘

尘爆

snap!

I hope he was done enough to keep the turtle asleep...

Who was responsible for this?

I heard a trumpet!

Mel-o, did you make that noise? Don't you know that trumpets are banned in our town, and for good reason too! These laws are very clear about this.

Mel-o is a menace.

Yeah, he's noisy.

The law pillar

Rules

Feed him to the turtle.

No, the laws are also clear about this. He is to be confined in the tower until further notice.

Slam
Look, it's that noisy kid.

With all that time in the tower, Melo is probably duller than a door knob by now.

He's turtle food for sure.
One day, the turtle ate something that didn't agree with her. It was a boy who made a lot of noise from inside her stomach and kept her awake. The turtle got very angry. The boy got louder and louder, and the turtle got angrier and angrier. Then she got an idea... if she slid off the mountain, the people would leave her alone forever, and so she...

Before you eat me, I'd like to tell you a little story, okay? Once there was a turtle very much like you who also had the misfortune of having a town built on her back. The people in the town would wake her up and she would get angry, and she would eat one of them, which would make her feel better and she would fall back to sleep...

Much later...
let sleeping turtles lie