The winner

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The Winner
by
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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Sheng Jin
Pre-Production

The Idea

I always believe that every living creature, including human beings, who lives in this three dimensional space, follows its own instinct to do what seems necessary to its own benefit. It is often unconsciously blinded and deafened by these basic desires. It can only see and hear what it wants to see and hear. Its vision, hearing and wisdom thus are limited by its own needs. At each specific moment of its life, it could be a winner, who thinks it's getting or would be getting the things it needs, yet completely ignores the big picture and those things behind things. With these thoughts in mind, I set off to create a story which not only has the capacity to sustain an intriguing cinematic experience but also clearly carries out this philosophical message. As a result, “The Winner” is an animated satire about the unpredictable nature of this egocentric and chaotic universe we live in.

The Story

The first attempt of my proposal was a failure due to, as my reviewing committee pointed out, the lack of necessary story structure to sustain
reasonable complexity for a short film. This failure led to an overhaul of my story and the result is “The Winner”, which basically contains two parallel events that starts out separately with very different pace and physical shapes to purposefully make them seem completely irrelevant and eventually they meet each other and resolve. The reason of doing this is to raise some questions: why am I showing two irrelevant events? Will they interfere with each other? If they do, how would they resolve? How would the whole thing end? Who would be the true winner?

My committee agreed that by introducing this kind of parallel structure, it gave me the opportunity to raise their curiosities and set up potential surprises for the audiences by using their imagination. To make the whole film more intriguing to watch, for one event, I chose to use humans and on the other event I chose to use cold blooded reptiles. To even further the pacing difference between the two events and increase the intensity of the film, for the human side, I designed a series of fast action sequences consist of two warriors fighting against each other, and for the animal side, I purposefully made their motion slow by choosing specific types of reptiles, a chameleon and a cobra snake. There are totally five characters in my story, three human, one lizard and one snake. In essence, the majority of the characters are very
serious, aggressive and even deadly, thus in contrast, make the minority, the lizard even more vulnerable and innocent. Therefore I made my decision of using three fully armored professional warriors, one king cobra snake and, for the minority, one chameleon. The chameleon is a very unique type of lizard not only by its distinctive look but also by its slow locomotion. Its only defensive mechanism is to camouflage itself by changing its skin color to blend into the environment. Once it is spotted there is usually no way for a chameleon to escape from its prey. That's a common assumption which could be used as a setup for a twist in my story. Its funny look, especially its individually moving eyes also serves a comical relief for the film.

Due to limited man power and time, I had to limit the length of my film to be around 3~4 minutes. With that in mind, the contents of my story have to fit in couple of minutes of screen time. Therefore, I have to keep the structure as lean as possible to use all the screen time to tell the story and convey the message. In general, I want two parallel events to have high contrast in terms of pacing, especially in the beginning, one fast and abrupt yet another slow and mysterious, and they go on developing their own paces until the first climax where two events meet. And then the whole piece goes into a slow period to prepare for the second climax and the ending twist. I also want the
viewing experience to feel like a full circle where it starts and ends with a similar composition. For that reason, I designed the story to start and end with the same character, the chameleon, doing almost the same thing. I believe, like composing a piece of music, once you grasp the main rhythm of a film in terms of timing, you are basically leading the audience’s viewing experience thus their emotional experience. I believe the timing is probably the most critical components of a film experience. And this story is a perfect chance for me to test this belief.

In terms of character development, I decided to make three human characters have three distinctive personalities. One is courageous and aggressive, one is strong yet obedient and one is manipulating and cunning. By putting those three characters together, I had a lot of space to develop an interesting relationship among them. To serve the purpose of delivering the message, I decided to let all three die from their doings at the different time point in the story. Each death serves as a surprise or a twist in the development of the story. I designed each death to be different in terms of possibilities. One is more likely to happen than the other. To enhance the message I wanted to convey, there is one death has to appear in a way of coincidence, which is the one near the end when the warrior is bitten by the
cobra. Along the course of the story, I wanted to give the audience some visual and sound clues to make them guess what would happen next. By doing this, I could lead the audience and build up the suspension, and eventually surprise the audience by giving them some unexpected results.

The last touch in creating this story is to give it a rich period background. I set the story a time line near the end of tang dynasty, the most powerful and vivid dynasty in Chinese history. By doing this, I gave each human character a more believable motivation to develop their relationships in the story and also opened the window for me to design more interesting looking characters with period costumes.

Storyboard

Due to the extremely time-consuming production nature of an animated film, storyboard is, in my opinion, the most important pre-production stage. At this stage, I managed to design and figure out major motions for my virtual actors, each camera angle, shot composition, and the number of the shots needed to tell the story. By putting these still images together digitally and editing them in premiere to create a rough pass of the film, I was also able to
nail down the timing and the length of my film. Also by using this rough cut, I started grasping the rhythm and tuning the feel of the whole piece by incorporating first pass music and sound into it way before I started my real production. To me, it is also one of the most fun parts of the whole process since you can get feedbacks very fast by making fast adjustments in the drawing boards and editing software. It is very satisfying to see your vision come together on paper in couple of days. It's the fastest and the most efficient way to make a film without wasting millions of dollars and countless hours of labor. By the end of storyboard stage, I cleared out most of the directing questions that would have major impacts on the viewing experience and following production process.

**Production**

**Character and Environment Design**

This is where I decide which direction I wanted to go with the look of my film. After some debates, I decided to go with stylized realistic looking for my film. I wanted my film to look heavy, dark and dramatic. I wanted the look to be able to carry the weight of my message; however, I also wanted it to have a
sense of humor. I am always a believer that visual style of a film has to serve the purpose of story-telling and has to match the nature of the story. Based on my previous viewing experience and personal preference, I always feel that if the topic of your story is fairly serious, realistic and dark then it'd be easier to achieve that similar theatrical intention by deploying a less exaggerated and cartoony visual style. Of course, this kind of decision is usually highly subjective; hence I wouldn't argue that one could probably achieve the same effect by going the completely opposite direction of mine. Creating believable CG characters is always a challenge, both artistically and technologically speaking, however, by saying “believable” I don’t mean it has to be photorealistic. Realistic looking could be very dull and have no soul at all and that’s one thing I definitely wanted to stay away from.

I have totally five characters, three human, one chameleon and one king cobra. Since my story is set in ancient china, roughly 1000 years ago, I had to design my human characters to fit in that period. I did some extensive studies on that period’s costume styles but I didn’t want to limit my imagination by strictly following the period style without any design freedom. After couple of sketches, I decided to be more symbolic with the color. I chose color red for the courageous and aggressive warrior, black for the strong yet obedient
warrior, and blue grey for the cunning warrior. The two in red and black are wearing heavy full-body armors and wielding long, double-handed heavy weapons. Those weapons were typical choice for the warriors during that period in China. This makes the visual more brutal, aggressive and interesting. The third character is light armored and equipped with long battle bow. He is more like a sniper back in old days. This sniping design also fits his cunning nature.

Based on studies I did on reptiles, I chose one specific type of black king cobra as my design base for the snake. This type of king cobra is the largest living poisonous snake on earth. I actually had a chance to see this deadly creature in person while I was at a snake valley in Thailand. It can stand tall enough to look you straight into the eyes and its head is as big as your hand. According to the keepers there, one bite of this specie could kill an adult elephant in less than 25 minutes. It’s a truly terrifying creation of Mother Nature. Without further modification, its shiny, pitch-black scale-covered long and thick body gives it a devastating presence that would send thrills through your whole body even under bright sunlight. To give it an even scarier look, I tweaked its eyes from grey-gold to angry dark-red. With this kind of look, nobody would argue that a poor tiny, green and slow-motioned chameleon...
never stands any chance to see its next sunrise if it’s ever targeted by this preyer. For the chameleon, I chose the smallest, most innocent looking one I could find during my research.

As to the environment, I decided to go easy on it so I could focus on the characters. I chose a very dry and barren looking landscape popular in Northern china as the location for my film. This gives the film a very foreign and distant look which helps to enhance the dark and brutal mood of my story.

**Layout**

In an animated film, what really matters is what you can see in final frames. Before I started modeling all the characters and background sets, I did a layout pass based on the 2D storyboards I drew. It’s basically a 3d version of my storyboards with more accurate 3d shot compositions and timing. In this pass, I used low resolution place-holders to help fine tune the camera motion and composition. By doing this, I could decide which parts of my model would be close to the camera thus requires the most details and that’s where I should spend most of my time. This is a very efficient way to reduce unnecessary workloads and save production time.
Modeling and Texture Mapping

Based on the layout pass I did, I started modeling at full speed. This is probably one of the most time-consuming processes. Since my three human characters share similar body proportions, I modeled a generic body that could be used for all three characters. During this process, it’s a great opportunity to fine tune my 2D character designs in 3D world. In many cases, I noticed that 2D designs don’t always make sense once you start to model in 3D space. Modeling is basically a digital sculpting process inside computer. By cutting, welding, pulling and scaling mesh geometries, my 2D designs slowly turned into 3D objects that have volume and base shading. I also made sure all 3D models actually work with my motion designs. I did some extensive range of motion tests to make sure all these character models would be able to move without obvious intersecting problems.

Once the modeling process reached a certain level, I started doing texture and shading works on all the models. I found that a lot of small details could be done by using texture tricks. In fact, I found that a bad model could be saved by excellent texture and shading work and vice versa.
The most challenging part during the texture mapping process was to create convincing human skin look. Since we are naturally familiar with the look of a human being down to the smallest detail, it's very difficult to escape the critical judgment of our own eyes. After numerous tests, eventually I managed to achieve a fairly believable natural looking human skin by utilizing several fairly tricky process of mixing real human skinning textures and manually painted maps. It’s a very laborious and frustrating process and probably my least favorite one among all the production procedures. One other very important thing I learnt during this process was how important it was to know what kind of lighting situation my models would be in during the shading process. The look of one character with the same set of textures could vary dramatically from different lighting setups. By knowing what kind of lighting it would be in before doing textures, it gave me the choice to customize the textures to that lighting situation to achieve the desired look. This is fairly important in terms of saving precious rendering times in the later stages. The results of my work were quite impressive and actually surprised some of my committee members by how natural looking those CG humans appears. That’s sure a plus for my hard work.
Animating

The goal was to give life to all my virtual actors by achieving natural and fluid organic motions with such a style that would fool the eyes of the audiences and help them dive into my story. This was another very challenging part of the production since we are again very critical to our own motion yet my favorite part of all production. I had a very specific vision of the style and intensity of the fights. I wanted it to be fast, heavy, vicious, and deadly. It was actually a lot of fun designing the action sequences for the two warriors’ fights. I watched a lot of reference footages, acted out each motion I had in my mind and video-taped my movements, and then digitized those footages into video clips to be used as visual guidance for animating CG warriors within a 3D software package. It was definitely not an easy task at all to make natural looking human motions. In the very beginning, I was even considering using motion capture to do this and then I found out it was actually very difficult and expensive to find motion actors who could act out the exact fights I had in mind. Apparently, I would have a lot more control by doing it in a traditional key frame method. The trade off is that it would be a lot slower than motion capture. However I am very happy and proud with how the animation turned out after months of hard work and it really shined in the final
film. The snake was also a difficult case as it turned out. I managed to achieve the unique fluid motion of a snake by utilizing a technique called splinelKed-path-deformation. The snake’s rigging was probably the most difficult part of all the characters’ set up process. I would probably choose another retile if I knew it would be this hard to rig. However, the king cobra was such a key character in my film and it was worth all the hard work to make it into the film.

**Lighting and Rendering**

I designed my film to happen in one location and this made my lighting process a lot easier. I used two lighting set-ups to light all 36 shots and made sure all of them have consistent look. The rendering went fairly smooth other than some minor issues with memory caps of the software I used to do the rendering. One thing I learnt along the way was to only render those things you can see through the camera to save precious memory space to ensure stable rendering process.
Post-Production

Sound Design and Editing

Once all the final frames went through and I was ready to put them together in the editing software and add sound to it. I did all this in Adobe premiere pro 2.0 which I found is a very handy program. Since I did a fairly good pre-production job, the editing was a very straightforward process.

The enormous impact on my film from the sound and music was truly amazing. I was shocked how much difference it made for my short film with or without sound and music. It was such a pleasant experience adding sound FX and music to my film and seeing how it added textures and emotional effects to it in real time. They basically served as a dose of super stimulating adhesive compound that glued all visual elements together as well as enhanced them with sensational dramatic power. The score I chose to use is from one of the classic Chinese traditional drum themes. I edited the original score quite intensively to work with my film. The result was a very powerful example which showed its magic during the screening. It really helped to create the mood I was seeking for the short piece.
The Screening

The Winner was premiered on September 15, 2006, in the Carlson Auditorium at RIT. There were totally eight of us doing the screening this time. To my surprise, there were quite a few audience showed up for the screening. The screening went very smooth and the winner was a success. The response from the audience for my movie was very positive. People were impressed by the quality of my work and especially liked the way I edited the film and how well the sound worked with the film. The audience firmly grasped the message of my story and was also entertained at the same time. That was probably the best reward for all those hard work I put in.

The Conclusion

Creating The Winner was a time consuming, exhausting, frustrating yet challenging, exciting and extremely rewarding process. It is probably one of the most invaluable and unique experience I'd ever gone through. It made me understand how to make a film really work through different stages of the making, how much work it actually involves to create a short film even as short
as The Winner, how important it is to wisely choose your art style to fit in the time schedule and man power, how difficult the technological challenges could be during a CG production, how hugely important a detailed storyboard is for animation production and hundreds of other real production experience I'd never learn otherwise. I believe that I will be forever grateful for this once in a life time experience.
Appendix A
A grasshopper is standing on a leaf of a grass, swaying together with the leaf in the wind.

A warrior charges towards another warrior with his huge knife. The other warrior blocks this fierce strike with his long spear.

Camera slowly changes its focus to the background and reveals us that there is a chameleon behind the grasshopper, moving very slowly to its prey.

The long spear warrior counterattacks the huge knife warrior with a furious thrust. The huge knife warrior dodges his attack skillfully and successfully knocks down the other warrior's weapon.

The chameleon moves closer and closer to the grasshopper, then it pauses at a very close distance to its prey, waiting for the final moment of the fatal strike.

The warrior who lost his weapon is now running for his life and the huge knife warrior is chasing him.

In a flash, the chameleon strikes the grasshopper with its tongue at an unimaginable speed and begins to swallow the prey. However, what the
The chameleon doesn't realize is that there is a pair of deadly eyes staring at it. The camera changes its focus to the "rock" which is really close to the camera and we realize it actually is the head of a cobra. The body of the cobra is hiding under the sand with only the head staying outside and it is slowly moving out to the chameleon.

The spear warrior who lost his weapon is running as fast as he can. He is panting very heavily and keeps looking back. The knife warrior is faster than the spear warrior is. Every time the spear warrior turns his head, the terror on his face increases and the knife warrior is closer to him than before. With his huge knife swinging in the air, the knife warrior is getting closer and closer to his target.

The cobra keeps moving quietly to its target. The chameleon realizes the danger, however, it can only move so slowly that it seems its fate is doomed. Yet, before the cobra can get close enough to the chameleon, we hear fast paced footsteps, and the spear warrior rushes into the scene suddenly and, immediately, a sharp whistle comes out from his mouth while he is running towards the camera. The chameleon keeps moving at its own slow pace. The spear warrior passes the chameleon from the top and almost steps on the cobra. This unexpected invasion stops the cobra in the middle of its hunting and it quickly moves away from the spot since the second warrior is rushing into this way, too. Yet before the cobra can completely get out of the knife warrior's way, two arrows come from nowhere suddenly shoot the knife warrior down. And he accidentally falls on the cobra. Then we see an archer reveal himself from the place he is hiding.
The spear warrior kneels down, panting heavily, and opens the backpack of the knife warrior, which is filled with gold.

Behind the spear warrior, the archer's eyes are wide-opened when he sees the bag of gold.

With a smile on his face, the spear warrior holds a piece of gold and turns to his partner. However, the smile on his face freezes when he moves his eyes from the gold to the camera. P.O.V of the spear warrior: we see that the archer's arrow is aiming at the camera. The archer releases the arrow and it pierces his partner's head instantly. Putting his bow back on his back, the archer walks to the body of the knife warrior. He is laughing when he kneels down and tries to untie the backpack from the knife warrior. Suddenly, the cobra comes out from the bottom of the knife warrior's body. It raises up its upper body that now looks like the shape of a cap, staring at the frightened face of the archer. The archer keeps still for couple of seconds and suddenly he pulls out the knife he hides in his boot. P.O.V of the archer: the furious cobra bites right on his face. Cut to black.

Fades in:
The archer is dead even though his knife chopped the cobra in two. The camera slowly pans up to the only survival, the chameleon, which is still moving at its own slow pace.
Fades out.
Appendix B
Appendix C