Three's A Crowd

Paul Engin

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Three's A Crowd

BY

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MFA Computer Animation

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

April, 2006

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Computer Animation Thesis Report
Three's A Crowd
Paul Engin

The Story

My method of story development stems from visual items that interest me. For my thesis I went to the Artisian workshop to be inspired by a sculpture, drawing or painting. While there I saw a long strip of paper with a large landscape. After studying it for a while I had the initial idea of possibly doing an animation that would always have the camera moving in a horizontal direction while it followed a story of a character. I was planning on doing this in 3D with a painterly outline look and feel. After further analysis I realized that it had many different aspects, which I wanted to explore, but I did not have a character or a story. I have found in the past it is easier for me to build a story around interesting characters, rather than building a story around a technique I wanted to investigate. I then toyed with the possibly doing something with a crystal-type character that tries to escape its' prism. Although the idea was not bad I didn't feel I would enjoy working with the character for a long period of time. Both ideas were in the direction of wanting to create a thesis that appeared to be made of different material and not a typical 3D computer generated character.

One weekend I watched some of my old work. I saw a quick stop-motion test I had done with a blue clay character and remembered that I enjoyed working with the character. My thought was that I could take the clay character and recreate it on the computer -meaning- the stop-motion feel and soft look from the clay. I felt that if I enjoyed animating him in
clay that he would be a fun character to animate on the computer, so I updated his look a bit and began to wrap a story around him.

From there I developed an initial story that centered around four clay type characters in a stark white room that approach a ball. Through playing with the ball several of them begin to get dented or dismembered. While playing with the ball one of them bumps into a lamp knob turning it to maximum power, melting the others and leaving one of the characters with the ball. The last character standing turns off the light and approaches the ball when suddenly the light turns itself on and begins chasing the last clay character until he melts. Once the last character was melted this story ended with more clay type characters approaching the ball. The problem points were introducing the light as a character and the theme ‘curiosity killed the cat’ didn't really work for me.

The next iteration of the story was of three characters approaching the ball and two of them try to turn off the lamp to prevent them from being melted. During the lamp chase scene, the lamp hits the camera, bringing it to life. The camera then goes after the lamp and knocks it over, breaking the bulb and cracking its own lens. This version of the story had one of the clay characters at the end staring into the cracked camera as it lay sideways while the noise on the TV screen gets stronger, then cuts to black. Again, I felt I was getting closer to something but it still needed to be fleshed out more. I introduced a fourth wall of the viewer/camera coming to life, which also had some issues. At this point I realized a good theme would be working together and to resolve an issue and I liked the characters, that where being developed.
I carried over the idea of working together into my next two drafts, which were identical except for their ending. They both told a story of three different colors - Red, Blue and Green - with three distinct personalities and lands. Blue discovers an object outside of their world and Green and Red want it. They fight over it, creating a disturbance in their world by cracking a wall. That crack lets in a light beam, which begins melting them and their world. They realize that they must work together to overcome this obstacle. In working together they resolve the issue of the cracked wall by using the ball as a plug. Once the chaos has calmed they look at themselves, then each other and realize that they are all different colors. At this point I had two different endings. The first ending was to keep their world unchanged with some of the trees wilted slightly due to melting and as the camera panned back all three characters are confused, not knowing which land to move toward. The second ending was as the camera pulls away their land with all the colors merged to form a true to life color scheme with green grass, orange flowers, blue skies and birds chirping. My story now developed into an animation, which carried a moral tale. Knowing that many times people don’t like things pushed on them, I struck a good balance of not being to blatant, yet still pushing an idea. I felt the great aspect of my film is that the message was hidden in the story and only at the end do you realize that there may be a moral, keeping the film entertaining while getting a message across.

At the time of the proposal I choose to present the ending with their land staying the same and them seeming confused as to where they need to go. But near the completion of my development I ended up changing my idea back to having the environment melting into a
true color world. The reason I went back to the merging of the color during development of the animation is because I felt it would have more of an impact on the audience. After working together to resolve their worldly disaster they had no artificial divides any longer. They themselves had no true division of color nor did their world. Interestingly it leaves you with a sense of peaceful confusion. Confused because they are mixed colors now and not sure what to do, but peaceful because the environment gives the impression of a restful valley.

Another aspect that was updated during the development of the film was how the shiny ball was found. In my proposed story I had Blue pulling out cutting shears and trimming the hedge, when all of a sudden he sees a shining ball through it. Creating the reveal in that manner seemed like a forced exploration. So the workaround was since the audience knows at this point that Red and Green are throwing blobs at each other, a red blob whizzes by Blue as he is near the hedge. The blob creates the opening that Blue can see through, allowing him to spot the reflective ball. Removing the shears was good for the story because it allowed more of an accidental feel, where Blue stumbled upon the shiny ball by chance of something out of his control, versus an action that he took which revealed the ball.

**Character Development**

From the beginning of my story development I wanted my characters to look like clay figures. Although the story was not completely fleshed out yet after my second draft of the proposal I wanted to have three characters. I knew I wanted each character to have
different personalities in an effort to create the greatest potential for conflict. Taking that idea I came up with 3 personalities: angry, intellectual and vain. Once their personalities were established I picked a color that best represented those attributes, Red, Blue and Green. I also liked the (RGB) colors because together they can form any other color, which I felt helped establish the ending as their land became one.

Character Design

For my character design I had an initial concept of blending both stop-motion and CG, where my characters would have been clay stop-motion characters and the background CG. Although I thought it might have been a successful piece my timeline and other constraints made me move toward an all CG approach. I wanted to keep the clay look because clay as a medium fit my distorting and dismemberment of the characters in my story. To try and make the clay approach work on the computer, I sculpted all three characters out of clay. I used the specific color clay for each of the characters and did not use an armature. I wanted to see how I would have to sculpt the character to have them stand on their own. From there I realized that they needed big feet to balance them and to avoid tipping over, and they could not be very tall.

In sculpting all three characters out of clay, I then used that as my reference for the texture and modeling of the characters. In studying the sculptures I found that there were many imperfections, which I made sure to add on my characters from fingerprints to a random bumpiness through out the body. I also wanted to keep their respective colors,
Green, Blue and Red, which help represent the individual characteristics the best. Red being anger, Blue as intellectual and Green being vain.

In watching Aardman's Wallace and Gromit I liked how Aardman handled the brow so that it was an uni-brow and wanted to integrate that into my character design. I also studied how they sculpted eyes, eyelids and their textures. Making the eyes bulge, giving the lids a thickness and adding a slight bumpiness to the materials helped to establish that clay character look I was going for.

Beyond the characteristics I wanted to also give them special attributes, which I felt again emphasized their nature. Red was built with big, long arms, a buzz cut, a sharp nose and a square chin to bring out the idea of strength. Blue was given a more combed hairdo, glasses and a potbelly to bring out that he did not exercise much because he is always studying something. Green was given a thin physique, sharp chin and long hair to help bring out his vain character.

The glasses for Blue where one of the more successful models because I made the computer model the same way I created the clay model. I had created five cylinders in the computer and in the clay model I rolled five clay strands. From there with both the computer and clay I created circles for the glass area, handles that wrapped around the circles and a bridge with connected both sides. I then made sure there was not a flat surface in the computer model because there was not a flat surface on the clay.
Environment Design

At my original proposal I wanted to keep the environment simple so I could concentrate on the animation and building out the story with each characters' specific personalities. I began with a stark white world in my first proposal then went toward just a portion of the world being white and the rest of the world being divided into the three colors. To divide the white area and color areas I added a hedge. In the color area I was going to simply add a garden and several trees. After working through the idea with my Chair, Malcolm Spaull, he brought to my attention that he didn't feel the characters could exist in the world I had made. After thinking about it I felt that he was right. They had nothing to indicate that they lived anywhere, it was just a valley with nothing else. That conversation was a catalyst for questions to myself regarding where they would live? How will they have power? How could they eat? So although my original concept was of a stark environment, I needed to answer these questions to make it a successful film. To answer my first question of "Where would they live?" I built them each a house with a stream running near them. My logic was that they could go fishing and get food from the water if needed, which answered the question of their food source. Then as a way to generate power I thought why not put a turbine wheel in the water so that they could each have a source of power. I believe once those elements where added it seemed like it could be a self-sustaining world and the background was no longer a distraction but became part of the story.

In the environment I added several props for all three of their land plots that helped emphasize each of their characteristics further. I thought that Red, being angry and
testosterone driven, would have a weight set and nothing else because he didn't care for growing anything or keeping anything nice. I gave Red a gravel walkway trying to show that he would not have spent time or energy putting in a nice stone path. That path also ended in a square for the same reason I felt he would just do it because it was fast and easy for him.

Blue, being the intellectual would groom his land nicely growing plants, bushes and a beautiful garden. I added a bridge on Blue's property that went over the stream because between all three characters he would be the one that would build it or want to build one. His path was made of symmetrical stone and ended with a hollowed circular pathway with a bench in the middle facing his garden. I wanted to give the idea that he would sit there and study his plants and flowers.

With Green I felt that he would have a somewhat manicured lawn with well-placed bushes and a nice cobblestone walkway. The other props on his land were his drink glass, lounging chair, and table. These items seemed to bring out his conceited type attitude, someone who just lies around all day sipping his drink and not caring about anything.

An interesting question was raised after my screening which was "Why didn't I make the background more like a stop-motion type environment?" I actually began in that direction with textures based on real-world materials as if I was trying to create a live stop-motion set. As I developed the trees and grass strands I felt that it did not work as well as I would have liked. It took away from the characters and possibly competed with the characters.
Then I went to another extreme, which was trying to develop everything realistically. That had its issues because by the time I was done with a test and tried to render it, I realized that 20 minutes a frame to render could not work within my timelines. So I went in a direction that had a little of both treatments, which was a surreal environment where everything had extremely saturated colors while looking somewhat real.

As for the sky, which was not seen much in the film, I left it a neutral tone for several reasons. First, I did not want it to favor anyone. Second, I did not want it to be a distraction. I did think of adding a divide in the sky, which was similar to the ground division, so there would have been a red, green and blue divide with similar color clouds. Although it may have worked, the sky was not visible much and at no time would you have seen the entire sky, which viewers may have perceived as the entire sky being a specific color if they just saw a portion of it in a shot. The other two factors were the amount of time to develop it would not have been worth the screen time I gave it and could have competed with the hedge as well. During the last scene it was nice to incorporate the blue sky that really made the scene pop, almost giving it more life than before, emphasizing the change which had occurred.

**Title**

The introduction title sequence was an interesting component to my animation. I remember from the beginning speaking with my thesis committee about what I wanted to do with it, if I had time. The more I thought about it the more I felt the introduction title sequence needed to be added and implemented a specific way. The reason being it gave
you a sense of the landscape and it was a subtle introduction to the characters. I feel without that introduction the audience may have gotten confused about how many characters were in this and where the balls are being thrown from. I was satisfied with the way the title sequence turned out, because I was able to add the credits in a manner that was conducive to the story.

As for how the title Three's A Crowd was developed, it actually was originally titled Clay from the first proposal until about halfway through development. I originally thought that Clay would be a good title because it prepares the audience for the portion of my animations where they become dismembered and hit by objects. After working it out with my committee I was able to achieve that by adding two sections in my animation where we see Blue and Red being deformed after getting hit by a ball. I think this was an important aspect to show early on, so during the dismemberment sequences the audience would have established that they were ok and could put themselves back together. Once I added those sequences, my title Clay was not needed anymore. Several ideas were thrown around such as Closed Mind and Three Neighbors. I was leaning toward Three Neighbors until it was brought to my attention that there was a pixelation movie titled Neighbors. So titling it Three Neighbors may have taken away from the piece, because although you could compare both films to each other I did not want the viewer’s initial ideas relating my film to the other film. From that I decided to use the saying Three's A Crowd. I thought it was appropriate because of the conflicts and differences all three of them had, but also how all three of them were needed to resolve the conflict to their world.
Music and Audio

The foley and music, which really brought the film together, evolved during development. When I added the original score to the piece my plan was to have the music run throughout the film with no foley. In reviewing the film further with my committee I agreed that the visuals and music were competing with each other. From that I asked the musician to take out a piece of music and break out the audio channels. I used the music in several specific areas for different reasons- the intro and the ending of the film to help establish a mood for the animation. Music was also added when Blue sees the green flower and when Blue is about to approach Red after getting hit by a red ball, because it helped foreshadow a possible confrontation. Also I brought the music in during the shots where the light broke through the wall. The music is subtle in the background, and added another layer of audio chaos on top of the noise of the light rays, heartbeat rhythm and the character sounds. Along with the music emphasizing actions I think the foley was the key factor that really put the audience in the environment with the characters.

Conclusion

It was a bumpy start with my initial proposal being turned down. My second proposal seemed to just get by because reviewers had doubts about the story and how I was planning to represent my characters on the computer to be like clay. I am glad I stuck with the story and my character treatments. At the screening several of the professors who were initially doubtful gave positive feedback on the story and character treatments.
I think that overall the film was successful because it conveyed a good message while having an entertainment value. One of the best highlights of producing the film was at my screening during the Q&A when a young boy not only said that he liked the film but actually spoke to the philosophy of the piece. It was great to see the message of diversity and working together for a greater good to be conveyed by such a young audience member. I look forward to hearing more feedback from viewers in the future.
Approach:
Maya 3D with clay looking characters, a starkly populated environment with 3 duo tone color sections and a large wall.

Story:
Three clay characters are curious about a chrome like ball, which brings trouble and change.

Synopsis:
The environment is broken up into four sections: a green duo tone; blue duo tone; red duo tone; and a large grayscale (almost white) wall. All the colors converge into a white circular opening.

The scene begins with Blue walking down a path studying the flowers. He sees a green flower in his blue area and removes it by throwing it back onto Green’s property. He looks over to see Green on a beach chair taking in the day. Blue waves to Green to say ‘hi’. Green ignores him, sighs and continues relaxing in his chair. Blue continues down his path.

Blue suddenly gets hit with a red object and is knocked down. Red, a brawny guy, is in his environment laughing. Blue picks himself up, grabs the red object and puts it back into Red’s property. Green chuckles in his chair when suddenly a red blob pelts him, knocking him off his chair. Green takes the red blob and throws it back.

Blue continues down the path as green and red objects fly across Blue’s property behind him. Blue trims a bush near the end of his property and through the brushes sees something shiny. He trims a bit more to see a bright shiny ball in the white environment. He looks back to see what Red and Green are up to, then proceed through his brush toward the object. He hesitantly steps on the white area making sure it is ok, then gets closer to study the object.

Green launches a big object toward Red knocking him out. Green smiling looks and sees that Blue has entered into the white area. Green moves toward the white area curious with what Blue is up to. His eyes grow big as he sees the shiny object. He then approaches the object looking at himself admiring it. He looks at Blue, who has a tape measure out studying the shiny object, then looks at the ball. Green scoots over to Blue casually and bumps him out of the way, sending him flying to the ground. He quickly takes some of himself and begins placing stakes on the ground around the shiny object.

As Green places the stakes in the ground he backs into Red. Red moves Green out of the way and touches the object. Suddenly you see Green jump on top of the shiny ball, hugging it in.

Title: Clay
Producer: Paul Engin
Budget: $619.25
Start Date: June 05
End Date: Feb 06
Running Time: 4.5 Minutes
Release Format: DVD, VHS
an effort to state that it is his. Red picks up Green who is continuing to hold the ball and throws him against the wall flattening Greens belly and creating a crack in the wall. The ball pops out of Greens hands and rolls to Red. Just as Red is about grab the ball a green post strikes him, knocking off his Head. Once Reds head lands he looks up to see Blue holding the green stake.

Cut to the crack in the wall, which is getting bigger.

Red’s body blindly grabs the ball and throws it at Blue creating a hole in his stomach. No longer being able to support his torso Blue splits in half. Green is seen crawling toward the ball and just as he reaches for it a Red clay ball hits his arm knocking it off. Blue’s torso approaches the ball and rolls it at Red’s body. Red’s body can’t see so he doesn’t move out of the way, getting knocked down on top of Blue’s legs. Suddenly Red gets hit by a green clay ball, which is thrown by Green.

You see the crack on the wall getting even bigger while red, green and blue balls begin flying everywhere. The crack opens up and a bright light pours into their world.

Red, Blue and Green stop fighting and observe what is happening. They recognize that the light begins to melt them and their world. Realizing something is not right, they begin to assemble themselves with any parts that are near them, rolling clay and adding limbs that may be missing. Blue is the first to finish and begins to roll the ball toward the wall. Red and Green join him. Red lifts the ball but can’t reach the crack. Blue grabs the ball and points to Red and Green to lift him up. Blue gets on Red and Green’s hands and is raised to the crack. Blue pushes the ball in the crack making sure it is in securely stopping the light from shining in. When Blue seals the hole and is put down the three look at each other and realize that they are no longer Blue, Red or Green, but a mix of all three colors. They turn to look at their land and one of the characters with a Red head and Blue and Green body begins approaching the Red section. Before he enters it he pauses and his body turns to move toward the green section. The others look at each other and as the camera fades, the three of them try to figure out where to go.

The End, credits roll.
Title: Clay
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Thesis Budget

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*Sound FX and music provided by co-worker.*
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**Thesis Timeline**

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