Passage

Brian Andrew Vogt

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PASSAGE

by

Brian Andrew Vogt

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

MFA Imaging Arts/Computer Animation
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION
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Signature  __________________________

Brian Vogt

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Finally, I especially acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Michael Hay, who found the time to compose and produce the musical score for my thesis as he completed work on his own master’s degree at the Eastman School of Music.

Brian A. Vogt
**The Concept**

In order to describe my concept, I think it is useful to first talk about my thought process with respect to coming up with a concept in the first place. The concept plays an extremely important role in my animation “Passage.”

Everyone has his own way of finding ideas. Most of my ideas for my animations originate from sketches that I have worked on for many of my fine art projects (*i.e.*, in drawing and painting). Many times my animations start from a still image idea that I mentally “see” first as a drawing or a painting, which then evolves into interesting sequential ideas. I tend to build a story upon my still image ideas, rather than build a story first and later add the look, feel and overall style. However, neither aspect should be overlooked; each lends a unique perspective and plays a critical role.

When it comes to personal work, my most important goal is to have a concept to which I feel personally committed. I have to feel an excitement about what I am doing. Once I find that excitement, my imagination does the rest. Imagination, ideas and dreams for me are all one and the same. The idea or dream lingers in my mind, making it hard to think about anything else, and in the same way one might describe experiencing an amazing dream, and then spending the rest of the day trying to remember all the wonderful details. An idea, like a dream at times, can be very clear. You have a deep understanding of the idea, and all you can think to do is blurt it out or get it on paper so you can transform it into something tangible and attempt to share this amazing idea with others while it is still fresh, clear and magical. Unfortunately, these kinds of dreams and ideas are not always the easiest to come by. It is the not-so-clear or surreal dreams and
ideas that seem to happen more frequently and often times send you down many dead end paths. The good news is that these conceptual dead ends often lead to even better ideas. Neither ideas nor dreams can be shared until they are documented in some way. They need to be written down or sketched in order for them to evolve into something even larger and more susceptible to expression. The problem often is that, although your dreams and ideas seem so clear at first, when you take the time to sit down and document them, you find they suddenly seem not quite so clear and may even slip away. Nobody ever said creativity is effortless. For me, the important thing is to remember before this point, the idea only exists in my brain as a passing thought, a mere chemical reaction that occurs in my brain, creating a thought, that is stored away and finally forgotten if it is not somehow documented. I believe the best thing to do with an idea is to treat it like a dream and revisit the idea and let it grow and change as your work progresses. In creating "Passage," my main goal was to keep my idea/concept always alive and magical. It made working on "Passage" enjoyable because I was always spontaneous and flexible while still sticking to a story and a consistent theme.

When I first came up with the idea for "Passage," I also envisioned a specific look and feel for the story. My concern with the original concept was to create a solid and original story to fit with the look and feel of the work. From the beginning I knew I wanted the story to have a great deal of personal meaning. I envisioned a character entering into a painting, thereby allowing the painting to become a window into an incredible world of art. I liked the idea of someone having the ability to experience the unique and creative worlds that artists have created in many different ways. I found the idea exciting because many of my ideas have been inspired from the powerful imagery of
many talented artists. Going to museums and seeing the works of various masters was extremely inspiring. I often found myself looking at an art work and imagining it to be a still snapshot documenting an incredible art world, the richness of the paint strokes and colors describing a “real” and tangible space. I enjoy the idea of being taken somewhere in a metaphysical sense where only one’s mind and imagination can go.

My concept was to have as my main character an artist searching for a deeper meaning in art. I also liked the idea of creating a secondary character who would represent the beauty of art. The Renaissance woman in “Passage” became a metaphor for art itself. The Renaissance woman guides the main character through many different art worlds as he tries to discover a deeper meaning in art. He finally comes to understand this meaning at the end of his journey and stops chasing art and lets it come to him. Having begun his journey standing in front of a painting in the museum so too does he find himself in the same spot at the end of his imaginary journey. It is at this moment that the artist finds his inspiration. The artist imagining an art journey also represents the power of imagination that perpetuates the cycle of creativity.

The Treatment

My treatment went through many changes before submission to the SOFA faculty for review and approval (Appendix A). I spent a tremendous amount of time in bookstores and libraries, searching through many art books trying to decide which artists’ works were important to include in creating the imaginary worlds of art I would create in my animation. My problem right from the beginning was narrowing the large number of great artists with unique visions and representations of the world down to only a select
few. Often, as soon as I selected one artist for inclusion in my work, I would happen upon another artist that seemed just as important for inclusion.

I felt confident about creating the different art worlds. What concerned me was getting my character into the art worlds with some identifiable reason and intention. I also did not want the character’s style to conflict with, or get lost within, the style of each art world. After many class discussions, long talks with friends, and several meetings with the members of my thesis committee, I submitted my first treatment. The original story needed to be malleable because I found it hard to stick to the original story. It was a necessity to be able to continually perfect.

In the proposed treatment, it was important for my character to spend a large amount of time in a museum where he would have the chance to observe several paintings before finally discovering the portrait of the Renaissance muse who would transport and lead him on his journey of discovery. I also thought it was necessary to show my character leaving the “real” world and then entering the “art world.” In this way, my audience would have an idea where the animation was going from the beginning. I thought that, once my character was in the art world, there might be some risk of losing the clarity of the story due to some of the more abstract elements in some of the art through which my character would move during his journey. I was very happy with the idea of using the Renaissance woman to guide him through these worlds. The Renaissance woman would be a familiar and consistent figure to the main character (giving him a reason to continue his search), as well as for my audience. I did not want the animation to feel as though my character – and with him, my audience – was merely wandering aimlessly through disconnected imaginary worlds of art.
In the proposed treatment I wrote rough descriptions of the art worlds and what would happen in each of them. I intentionally wanted to leave the art worlds vague, knowing that these worlds might change during the entire production process. I hoped the faculty review committee would get a good idea of the main theme understanding the necessity of keeping a spontaneous quality in my working process.

Surprisingly, the finished animation remained close to the original proposed storyline. The animation begins with a white void, in which the main character stands with brushes in his hand in front of a blank white canvas. The blank canvas transitions to the museum. The main character faces a painting in the museum and makes a conscious decision to enter the painting rather than being sucked into the painting or forced into the painting.

The ending of “Passage” did change somewhat from the original ending in the proposed treatment. The actual animation concludes with my character sitting on a white cube with a sketchbook. After much thought, he begins to draw the Renaissance muse standing in front of a window. He then begins to draw himself next to the woman, which symbolically ends his search. The camera pulls back, revealing an eye. This is the eye of the main character standing in front of the painting in the museum. This scene, in turn, fades to the main character painting himself depicting the same view of himself and the Renaissance woman standing together in front of the same window.

PRODUCTION

Storyboarding

I find storyboarding to be an extremely important and helpful step in creating an animation – perhaps the most important step. Animation forces one to create from
scratch everything that is seen on the screen. Animation is a very slow process and demands a great deal of time and energy for the production of a work that may last only seven minutes or less. However, natural limitations on the amount of time and energy available to produce an animation necessarily limits the number of changes that can be made during the production process. As someone once told me, “An animator’s life goes by in 30 seconds.” This is why I believe storyboarding – i.e., planning and building the story line by the use of very simple sketches – is so important. It takes only a few seconds to change a crude sketch, but it can take weeks to change a finished section of animation. Storyboarding allows me to plan out the look, feel, timing, camera angles, movement, editing, and many other important elements before the production even starts. I find that many people dislike the storyboarding stage and that often they do not use it to their advantage. I like to see my animation from the storyboard before I move on to building the detail.

In creating the storyboard for “Passage,” I started by acting in front of a video camera. This helped me explore and experiment with my character, timing, and camera angles. I considered it sketching with a camera. In drawing out the storyboard, I reviewed my concept sketches, the experimental video footage and some still photographs I took, and used these to create a rough layout. By the end of this process, I created a formal drawn-out storyboard and an animatic. By this method, I was enabled to have a more dynamic vision of what the animation would look like.

My storyboard went through many changes throughout the production process. I wanted the freedom to experiment with the animation and depart from the storyboard. Some of the animation came from happy accidents that can’t be planned out in a
I tried to balance the structure of the storyboard with the freedom to experiment. In the end, some shots were cut from the story while others were added after the basic animation had already been created. If it were not for the storyboard, I would have never been able to visualize my animation. I also would have never been able to explain my ideas to other people.

**Character Design**

There are two characters in my film. The main character, the artist going through the journey of discovery, was fairly simple. He was a regular human character modeled from anatomy books. I wanted him to look just like an average person, nobody special. I did not, however, want the 3D computer aspect of him to go too close to realism. So, I decided to add a more drawn-like texture to him. I also wanted his hair to look somewhat stylized. I found the realistic nature of 3D computer to be very tempting and yet potentially harmful to the animation. I did not want my animation to necessarily look like 3D computer animating. I wanted the style of my animation to appear more like an artistic hand was involved. My main goals included having a unique quality to my animation and also having the animation remain somewhat true to the style of the various art worlds included with the working itself. The reason I animated the main character in 3D is because I wanted to have the ability to quickly and easily change the animation in the computer to fit the story.

I wanted the second character, the Renaissance woman, to look like a ‘live’ painting. I envisioned her looking very different from the main character in terms of style. I wanted to have hand-painted, active paint strokes dancing all around her and in rich colors. I chose to paint her frame-by-frame in a program called “Painter.”
able to borrow a Renaissance dress from the RIT’s National Institute of the Deaf (NTID) theater department. A friend and fellow student, Jung-mi Yoo, wore the dress while I captured her in various movements and poses on video in front of a green screen. I then painted over every third frame of the video creating the finished character. I ended up painting about 1,500 frames in total. In animating the Renaissance woman, I was limited to the video footage I had captured and had to commit early on to her exact movements and poses.

Environment Design

My set designs were based on the specific style and artist attributes of each artist whose work is represented in the work. The most difficult part was re-creating the artists’ styles and translating them into a three dimensional world. For me, this was one of the most challenging aspects of the entire production. I found it difficult to get my characters to fit within each style. Creating the style of the environment to look the same as the artist’s original work, using a different medium than the one used by the artist, required considerable analysis of the original artistic work and careful use of the technical tools available to me. I also found that most of the traditional and most recognizable artwork in museums contains portraits of people or still life depictions. I was unable to find workable ways to integrate such paintings in my animation. I found that the works of modern artists and abstract environments and dreamscapes to be more readily useful.

Animation

“Passage” is a mixture of both 3D computer animation and 2D animation. I really enjoy doing both these types of animation. Working with both techniques kept things
from getting monotonous. When I got tired of working in one form, I moved to the other. I wanted to the right tools and techniques to tell my story in the style I envisioned. I think it is important to pay attention to the tools that are available in animation. It is also important not to get stuck exclusively using only one kind of tool. It is best to find the right tool for the right job. I found that by exploring all the tools available to me, my animation naturally developed its own unique style.

I would have liked to have spent more time cleaning up the animation of my main character. I find, in using 3D, it is difficult to get natural looking animation. This has been a struggle for me from the beginning. This is not to say I was not happy with my character and his animation; however, there is always room for improvement. I did find that when I exaggerated my main character's movements, they did not fit my style. I therefore kept my main character somewhat natural and gave him slow, subtle movements. The result was that my character had the walk cycles I desired and the overall quality of the animation was what I initially envisioned.

**POSTPRODUCTION**

**Sound Design and Editing**

I consider the sound in "Passage" to be equal in importance to the animation itself. Sound, in my opinion, can make or break an animation. In the past, I have both created my own sound and worked with people who are more familiar with music than I. For "Passage," I decided to work with a composer. I wanted the sound to really be of professional and creative quality. As much as I love working with sound, I thought that for this animation, it was important to let someone who really understands music and sound to be the creator of it for my work.
Fortunately, composers at the Eastman School Of Music are available often to compose for student projects. I created some flyers to pass around the School and was lucky enough to receive a response from Mike Hay, a very talented composer who was completing his graduate studies at the School. We met once during pre-production and reviewed the storyboard. He then experimented with some sound ideas and then waited for a rough cut of my animation. It was difficult for me to finally commit to a particular cut, knowing it would be hard to make any major changes without affecting the timing of the sound. Mike had about three weeks to compose and produce the final accompanying sound before the animation was due. He worked quite fast and was able to finish the music within two weeks. When I first heard the music I was very impressed. In fact, I felt a chill go down my back the first time I heard it. It was better than I could have ever expected. The music really helped tell the story. It also added an appropriate feel and mood to the animation.

The final cut of my animation ended up being essentially unchanged from the rough cut. I was able to fabricate an efficient system to get the renders and timing to be exactly the same as the rough cut. I was able to do this by editing the rough cut with playblasts created in Maya. Playblasts are short, low resolution movie clips of animation. I found a way to number each frame in the lower left corner of each playblast, in much the same way a 2D animator writes each frame number in a pencil test. When I edited each playblast, I knew exactly which frame to cut on. When it came time to edit the final cut, I simply thumbed through the rough cut, got the information recorded, found the finished renders and replaced the rough clips on the timeline with the finished renders on the same timeline. All my editing was accomplished by looking at the storyboard,
creating low resolution movie clips, and editing the playblast movie clips together. I found this to be an efficient way of working and plan to use this same technique for animations I do in the future.

**REFLECTIONS**

**The Screening**

“Passage” screened on May 19, 2003, at the annual spring animation screening of the graduate RIT School of Film and Animation. I had a really good feeling about the screenings. This screening was the first for which I did not have to submit the animation at the very last moment, because of a new screening rule required that all films be submitted two days before screening. Although it was a bit unnerving to not have those extra hours to polish my film before the screening, I appreciated having some time to unwind after such an intense production experience.

I was very pleased with the response I received from the audience. My goal was to create an animation that both told a story and took the audience on a unique journey. Many people commented on my original style and my use of color. I was happy to see that people recognized many of the famous artworks I used in my animation. Although I knew some people would not be familiar with some – or even all – of the famous art “worlds” represented in my film, or the famous artists who created the original pieces, I hoped that the audience would nevertheless appreciate and enjoy “Passage.” I was not disappointed.

In hindsight, I am pleased that I did not choose to base my animation on comedy. I did not want my goal solely to be making an audience laugh. I really wanted to have an animation that had something to say. After the screening, I had the opportunity to talk
with people individually. It was satisfying to hear their responses. It made me feel that all my hard work had paid off, and it has encouraged me to enter "Passage" into festivals and to otherwise share my visions and work with others.

CONCLUSION

I really do not know how many hours it took me to create "Passage." I know the hours I worked on the project would be counted in the thousands. It took me about one year from start to finish with six months in actual production. In many ways I am happy not knowing the precise amount of time I devoted to the project. It was a wonderful experience. In creating "Passage," I was pushed to new creative levels. I learned new techniques in both 2D and 3D. At times I really felt I knew what I was doing, while at other times I was not so sure. At the not-so-sure times, I just kept pushing forward, knowing that in the end, everything would work out. In creating "Passage," I realized that, even after doing two animations previously, every animation can feel as though it is a first-time experience. Each new animation demands new ideas, and challenges the animator’s current skills. I look forward to starting my next animation. I would never have been able to create "Passage" without the help of my committee members and especially my committee chair, Stephanie Maxwell. I also owe so much to my classmates and friends. If it were not for my parents and family, I would not have been able to attend RIT in the first place.

Thank you all!
THESIS PROPOSAL

Title: Passage

Brian Vogt

Chair: Stephanie Maxwell
Signature: [Signature]

[Image: Signature]
Treatment

Synopsis

A man in a museum finds himself caught up in a series of paintings.

Story

A man steps into a museum. He carefully examines a number of paintings. In doing this he comes across a beautiful portrait of a woman. The woman looks much like many of the iconic Renaissance female depictions. The man hears voices coming from the painting. The painting draws him near and finally sucks him in. His bag is left behind, sitting quietly in front of the painting.

The man finds himself being pulled through a kind of ‘twilight zone’, wormhole dimension. A number of bright lights and streaks swirl around him.

Emerging from the darkness a 3-dimentional, painted art world is revealed. He finds himself in one of many strange surroundings he is about to encounter. It is an active surrealist space containing elements from surrealist paintings. The man begins to explore the world he is in. As he explores deeper into this world he encounters the woman he saw in the portrait. He runs towards her and as she eludes him the space around him transforms.

The world is now black and white and made up of stylized, simple shapes which constantly move and metamorphose. These shapes are reminiscent of the cut outs of Matisse. The man keeps his physical form, however when he moves behind the shapes his silhouette transfigures and playfully imitates the variety of shapes that surrounding him. The man loses himself in a blissful dance.
The world transforms yet again. It is an Escher world with the illusionistic fabrications and expanses of forced perspective that has the pictorial attributes of drawing. The woman emerges thaumaturgically within this fantascape. They play the game of pursuit as the woman disappears and reappears spontaneously in the Escher surroundings. While the man is caught up in this game the surroundings shift yet again.

Breathless and exhausted the man now finds himself in a rapidly shifting montage of many different art styles that surround and delight him. The woman comes and goes throughout this montage. She is leading him through this art matrix that will end in a minimalist world. Here the woman stops, turns towards the now exhausted man and approaches him. Face to face the man and the woman smile. The whiteness of the space around her absorbs her, the man is pulled backwards into the museum and in front of the portrait where the woman now has resumed her original pose.

The man picks up his bag and moves to the next painting.

**Approach**

This work will be animated with several different techniques and tools. I plan to use traditional drawing and painting, Maya, After Effects, 2D applications and compositing. This animated work will incorporate many different artistic styles. These different styles will be vital in the telling a story and allow me to also play with characteristics of composition, the mixing of different art styles and reinventing their stylistic adaptations. I will experiment with new expressions
using movement, positive and negative space, transformed perspective, qualities of light, depth, color, texture and shapes. In creating this animation I plan on leaving room for spontaneity and change as the work develops.
Appendix B
Passage
3, I

He goes to table.
She goes through and door by front stirs.

Stairs to door.
Location show man still from walk to room.

Blend on in.
Stair M.C. Echoc.
Fade in: mc Echo. Stairs.
Appendix C