5-1-1999

A Cruel nature

Dylan Gottlieb

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A Cruel Nature

BY

Dylan Gottlieb

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

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

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Professor
Film/Video/Animation Department

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Associate Professor
Film/Video/Animation Department
TITLE OF THESIS:

A Cruel Nature

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______________________________
Signature

May 11, 1999
Date
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Thesis Paper
Cruel Nature

A little over a year ago I began the conceptual development of *A Cruel Nature*. I realize now that I began this project with a certain degree of naivety. I lived and breathed this film day to day, creating solutions to the obstacles presented each day with a kind of reckless enthusiasm. *A Cruel Nature* was a creative challenge that helped me to unleash some of the artistic energies that have played a major role in my life.

Generally speaking, my work is not a personal commentary about my inner self; I do not consider myself having an introspective personality. My film, *A Cruel Nature*, is no exception to that rule. My goal was and is to become employed in an industry that entertains and communicates to a broad, diverse audience. To that end, I hoped to make my thesis film fun and exciting -- most of all I wanted it to be entertaining.

Although I expect *Cruel Nature* to live up to my ambitions, the plot metamorphosed into a far more complex and philosophical statement than I had originally planned. The actual finished product paralleled the original story in numerous ways. Both began as a single idea and grew and developed into something more -- something I had never contemplated during the film's nascence.

Story Development

While mulling over several ideas I had envisioned for my thesis plan, none impressed me as being overwhelmingly powerful. One morning I was sent a list of nonsense ideas via e-mail. One caught my eye: "Eagles may soar but weasels don't get sucked into jet engines." I really liked that. It hit me immediately as a great foundation for an animated film project. I simply had to write a story line that reflected that conceptual idea.
My first draft was basically a three gag short that ended with the eagle getting
sucked into the plane engine. It worked, but it wasn't very satisfying. As each iteration was
written and edited, the narrative slowly evolved into something less and less amusing. From
my perspective, It became more about the natural links in the environmental food chain and
about nature as a whole.

My film was threatening to become a bore; the theme needed something fresh and
different to set it apart from a PBS educational documentary replete with narrator. With this
goal in mind, I began to examine the weasel's role. Was he the protagonist? If so, then
how would he take control of his situation? At this point in the development process the
weasel had taken no overt action and the eagle was brought down by an old twin-engine
crop duster. I had begun to consider the plane as a metaphor for technology as predator. A
concept that would suggest that ultimately humankind had the last say. I was not satisfied. I
dismissed the entire concept of the environmental food chain. Man was far too easy a target:
an overused villain.

Back to the proverbial drawing board, I decided to move in another direction
entirely. When people think of the laws of nature, the food chain and Natural Selection
inevitably comes to mind. I began observing the behaviors of animals around me. I observed
how a domestic cat would kill a mouse or a shrew and then drop it on the welcome-mat of
the front doorstep. In many cases cats do not eat their prey. It can be argued that the cat is
working on instinct; its nature is to kill. However, the cat's action can be perceived as a form
of self-entertainment. By failing to eat its prey and choosing to hunt despite being well fed
by a dotting owner, the cat exhibits a darker side of nature. This I observed as an element
that is not as cut-and-dried, surely not as simple as the food chain concept.

I decided to portray this mordant more sardonic view of nature in my film. To lend
the weasel more character development, I moved to present him as less innocuous. In the
beginning of the film, I predict that the audience will accept the weasel's natural need to kill
and eat the mouse. Borrowing from the genre of dark humor, I believe that they will even be
subtly entertained by the eagle's fate as he falls victim to the propellers of the plane. However, I doubt that many will find it easy to accept the final scene of the film; the last action. The weasel smashes an insect; it is left dead beyond all doubt, yet the weasel hops away without eating it.

Only a split-second before, the weasel's own life was nearly terminated, yet he chooses to blatantly kill for the sake of simple play. This is the darker view of nature not so readily accepted -- one we close our eyes and pretend not to see.

The weasel survived that afternoon. Will it survive the perils of another minute, a tomorrow or a day after? By killing the insect the weasel not only unveils its true identity as one who is less than a hapless innocent playing out its natural role as part of the environmental food chain, but also lends credibility and roundness to the concept that it is in fact, a main character.

Character Development – The Weasel

*A Cruel Nature* was a challenge from conception to completion. I had created a prototypal story line built on a solid foundation and inspiration. The next step was to use that foundation and rebuild it from the ground up, converting it to visual imagery. The main character, the weasel, was by far the most difficult character to develop; not only in terms of movement but also the methodology I would apply to the development of character, texture and physiology. I discovered that I had to make major compromises that I could never have predicted during the initial development of the story line.

When I began the project, I was technically limited to one animation program, Alias/Wavefront. The program includes an excellent particle package that allowed me to place fur onto my animals; the fur would hide intersecting geometry such as the legs and body. However, from the start it was obvious that Alias and the equipment at my disposal at RIT was not going to furnish the tools necessary to produce the level of realism I was striving for. The machines handled only a limited number of particles per second -- I was
forced to settle for a little over 400,000 particles. In addition, I couldn't switch on collisions, the capacity for geometry to affect the hair so that it would respond realistically. The computations necessary to create imagery of that complexity were far too strenuous for the Indigo's.

I rendered out an initial image of the weasel. That one character alone took well over an hour a frame to render at the highest setting. This means that every 30th of a second of rendered imagery would take over an hour to create. I was reluctant, but had to admit that this was not an acceptable option. If I were to finish my thesis within a reasonable period of time, I would have to cut back, sacrificing my artistic goals in order to meet the deadlines.

I changed my approach and rendered the weasel at the medium setting, decreasing the rendering time to approximately forty minutes a frame. The result was exactly as I suspected. The realistic nature of this critter was seriously compromised. Using this modified approach, I calculated just how long it would take to render the weasel in addition to all the geometry necessary to create the background I'd planned. My conclusion was that this was not realistic, I had to reconsider my goals or try another approach. Again, back to the drawing board -- literally. I scrapped the entire concept I'd originally planned for rendering the animal's fur.

Using Studio Paint 4.0, I decided to paint a texture map as realistically as I possibly could. This involved painting the fur onto the 3d geometry of the weasel. The approach would speed up render time to only about two minutes per frame. However, again the attempt was a failure. Though the painted fur looked realistic, the weasel as a whole was a semblance of a rubber toy replete with seams where the legs joined the body. I decided I needed a break; I wasn't making any progress. I needed to move on and approach the subject only after further research and experimentation.
Character Development – The Eagle

I set aside the weasel project completely and began working on the eagle. The most difficult part was obvious, creating the wings. I wanted to keep the geometry as simple as possible to keep rendering time down to a minimum and to make animating as easy as possible. I created the body from beak to tail the eagle as one piece of geometry. The wings, however, presented a problem. The challenge was to devise a method whereby a simple cluster of feathers created the model wings. Pulling CV’s wasn’t the answer; not only was the outcome visually unappealing, but it required a much too complicated geometry. The next step was an attempt to create a tuft of multiple feathers and then group them together as a single object. Again, the visual affect did not meet my expectations; in fact, it proved virtually impossible to animate with the materials at my disposal.

Several days later it occurred to me that I might attempt to create only an illusion of feathers. I designed a very simple wing with no modeling of individual feathers -- basically just the mass of the wing itself. I then painted a texture of feathers onto it. I also painted an additional texture map for transparency so that it would look like individual feathers. The areas between each feather would be transparent. The result, after a little tweaking, worked. My first character had been designed.

SIGGRAPH – New Idea’s

It was around this time that I flew down in Orlando, Florida to attend the annual SIGGRAPH Convention. Following interviews with several companies, all of which specialized in special effects for major film production, I began to consider what these companies did and what they were looking for when evaluating the work of potential employees. I discovered that most every company represented at SIGGRAPH followed the same basic methodology; they composited 3d work into film footage. I was beginning to
wonder why I wasn't taking the same approach. If compositing was what the professionals were doing, that was really what I should be learning to do as a graduate student.

On one hand, I considered that the approach would probably save me hundreds of hours of render time. On the other hand, I had no experience with the type of application required. I didn't even know where to begin. No one I knew at Rochester Institute of Technology had attempted compositing anything more complex than a still shot. Knowing this, I decided to take advantage of my time at SIGGRAPH, not only to seek out potential employers, but also to glean valuable information perhaps not available at RIT, for the completion of my thesis film.

I approached a manager at George Lucas' Industrial Light & Magic, to discuss my idea. He suggested that I use Adobe After Effects. I was a little shocked, I couldn't believe anyone at ILM would suggest using a product as commercial as After Effects. I pretty much dismissed the suggestion in favor of Alias Composer on SGI's. At the time, the approach seemed much more professional. At this point, it was all still just an idea. I placed it on the back burner for the time being.

**Return to Modeling**

I returned to Rochester and to my modeling work. I completed the geometry of the mouse and started creating the backdrop, my landscape. I made everything from trees, to a small running brook (created using an animated bump map), to individualized weeds. The process progressed well and the illustrations possessed the realistic imagery I was seeking. That is, all except in one area, the ground itself. I tried particle grass, which proved impractical. I tried creating geometry grass; also not a workable solution. The best I could come up with was a grass texture map; it looked great from a distance but definitely failed close observation. It was at this point that I began to reconsider compositing.
Video Footage

I purchased a hi-8 camcorder -- the best quality video recorder I could afford. The next challenge reared its ugly head: the quality of video is far from superior. This would have to be another concession.

One nice sunny September day I began filming shots of trees, grass, fields and rows of corn; anything that might prove applicable. I shot from every conceivable angle. In the end, I had over an hour of footage for what was probably going to be perhaps a three-minute-long film. I transferred the footage to a DVCam tape and edited it on the Avid.

The Weasel’s Aesthetic Development

Now that I was compositing I could afford to devote longer rendering time to develop my weasel. Because my video footage was not at a very high standard, rendering the weasel with fur at the medium setting would not be as artistically detrimental. However, I had to make a choice. Did I want my weasel to look like a rubber toy (its limitations all the more emphasized as it moved about within the setting of a real photographic background)? Did I want a character that was neither a cartoon nor completely photorealistic (I thought of it as a furry stuffed animal look)? Which was the worse of the two evils? I chose the furry image. It had its limitations but it was beyond doubt the closest to my original plan.

The next step required teaching myself how to render my character using alpha channels. In addition, I had to learn how to render shadows separately, a method that also required dedicated alpha channels. Lighting had to be factored; each character had to be highlighted to match the film footage. As a test, I rendered out a simple walk cycle in various passes. I was ready for my first composite job.
Compositing

After some complications at getting Composer installed I decided to investigate After Effects. I requested that a fellow student, who had already worked with the program, go over the basics with me. I was amazed at how powerful the program was. I immediately recognized that the ILM manager had steered me in the right direction; this program was going to be a lifesaver.

I began to comprehend the enormity of the project I was attempting, I was really pushing the envelope. My characters, 3d characters, had to exist and function within a 2d background. The weasel had to walk, run, leap and prance through grass in the bright daylight. There is a good reason why most professionally produced special effects based movies take place at night and in the rain. It’s really easy to cover up mistakes and it’s easier to composite all the images, smoothly blending them together when one is working in a dark environment. By setting the story under a clear, blue sky on a sunny afternoon, I had given myself very little leeway. I used shadows and individual masks I painted using PhotoShop to keep my characters grounded. It was these masks that permitted me to properly place the weasel’s feet in the grass.

*Consider this:* There is a shot in the film where the eagle is pursuing the weasel that is scampering around a tree. I began with five layers, the eagle, the weasel, each of the animal’s shadows and the background. The first challenge was to create realistic shadows of the animals on the tree and ground. I had to create 3D shadows on what is essentially a 2D backdrop. In addition, the animals had to run around the tree, as though it were a 3D object, starting from behind it and moving circularly to the front. The conundrum? The weasel was in front of the eagle but the eagle’s shadow, which obviously has to be behind the eagle, had to at one point cross over the weasel. I was able to create this shot by layering masks within many other layered masks. By this point I truly respected After Effects.
Animating

All the while that I was texturing and composting, I was simultaneously animating. I was unable to animate the skeleton with the geometry attached. The computers were simply not powerful enough. I had to animate the skeletons individually and then overlay the characters in order to observe a finished result. I discovered that after I animated the skeleton to my satisfaction, and then attached the geometry, the movements of the characters lost their emphases. To compensate for this, I exaggerated all the animation on the skeleton so that the characters appeared to move normally.

Animating the Weasel

When I began test animating the weasel, I did so with no reference, I didn’t even have accurate anatomical information to work from. It was my first attempt at animating a four legged creature. The result was laughable; it looked very similar to two men in a horse costume. As I had earlier planned, I visited a local pet store and studied ferrets. A smaller, shorthaired version of its cousin, the weasel. I made sketches of the animals as they moved around in their cages. I handled them to feel their skeletal structure. I let them lose on the floor to watch their movement over a longer expanse.

The first thing I noticed was that I had placed the joints of the legs in the wrong position. After that single correction was made, the weasel seemed to automatically move in a more natural, identifiable manner. I noted that ferrets begin to walk normally but will consistently conclude every saunter with a hop. Ferrets appear never to cease sniffing everything around them. I tried to incorporate these and all the other attributes I’d noted at the pet shop and apply them to my weasel.
Animating the Eagle

Since I couldn’t run down to the local pet store to observe a Bald Eagle with a price tag hanging off its bill, I taped a documentary presented on the Discovery Channel entitled Birds of Prey. It was invaluable resource covering everything from how these animals attack their prey to their eating habits. It even discussed the physics associated with how each bird flew. I replayed segments of the documentary until I felt I’d observed enough to reapproach my character with a little more respect.

Rendering

Rendering became one of the more tedious aspects of the project. I had to keep a daily log of what had been rendered and what still needed rendering. It became quite complex; while most people can render a shot in a single pass, I had to render a minimum of four passes, since all the shots were being composited.

Keeping track of all the layered renders became a job unto itself. Since rendering time is such a rare commodity and I had so much to render, I created quite a different approach to the problem than other students. Many students will render a half-resolution animation overnight. They do this to see if their work looks correct. I was a full-time grad student, I was employed as an animator for a Rochester firm, and taught a graduate level animation course at RIT. Time was not a luxury I had; I simply had to create a more efficient rendering practice. I considered that if I was going to render overnight I might as well render at full resolution so that if it met my expectations, I could warrant it completed and move on. This cut back on a lot of unnecessary repeat rendering time. After numerous playblast’s (the ability to access the movement of the characters as wireframes) I could make sure that the animation was correct and a few single frame renders to check on the lighting, the need to rerender became minimal. If it wasn’t completely perfect, for example I
discovered that the eagle needed to be a little brighter, it could usually be corrected using After Effects.

The Schedule

I created a daily cyclic schedule. I would animate my film for approximately ten hours a day and render the work at night. After the RIT lab closed at midnight, I would go home and composite everything together with images rendered from the previous night.

At the end of each week I digitized all the frames into media files on the Avid and edited the film together. The pieces of the puzzle were being inserted three or four at a time. In fact, I had applied so many tactics developed to increase productivity that I discovered I was completing the film faster than I had predicted. This provided time to add extra shots and to improve shots that would otherwise have had to be left as they were, despite the fact that they didn't meet my standards.

Sound

By the third quarter of the film, my time was dedicated predominately to creating and developing the necessary sound effects. This involved the search for a suitable composer. I labored through several prerecorded collections of sound effects but without satisfaction. With the exception of a few, I found the sounds either generic or simply not appropriate to the theme of the film.

Armed with only a tape deck and a microphone I entered the wilderness of my suburban backyard. It was there that I was able to gather the necessary auditory ambiance for my film, in addition to other nature-related sounds. I used Macromedia's Sound Edit Pro to digitize and edit each sound from birds chirping to grass crunching under my feet.

After contacting the Eastman School of Music, I made several unsuccessful attempts to locate a student composer willing to take on the project of writing a classically inspired
film score. This was a result of a combination of factors, including poor timing in relation to the school's academic schedules.

I eventually turned to a fellow RIT student, George Zimmet, who had offered his services. Although the end product was different then what I had anticipated, after to listening to some examples I agreed to go with a simple guitar riff. It worked out surprisingly well. The music followed the action of my piece, giving each character gesture more emphasis.

**Conclusion**

I thoroughly enjoyed the development and progression of *A Cruel Nature*. I began my film with the concept of producing a comedy -- a whimsical anecdote aimed at entertaining a wider audience. However, as the story progressed it became increasingly thought provoking. In fact, my film may have become less accessible in terms of its direction to the general, broader public.

From the initial character development, modeling and texturing, to animating and rendering and the final editing, each stage demanded creative solutions to unexpected obstacles. I was unaware of the route this film would eventually take, the ever developing film took a direction unto itself. It became a living entity. It evolved both artistically, intellectually and technically, changing from moment to moment as I played with new ideas and was inspired by both the production process and the form the piece was taking in my own mind.

The weasel, by his action of killing without need, points to an attitude that can only be contained in art: This notion that nature is not benign, but viscous; not unconscious, but one that seeks pleasure without the ability to think of consequences or apply human moral judgments. The concept in this film is one that is dramatic by nature, rather than controlled by the "natural" order of nature.
Appendix A

Thesis Proposal
MFA Thesis Project Proposal

“Pursuit”
(working title)

By Dylan Gottlieb

MFA Imaging Arts / Computer Animation
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
April, 1998

Carl Battaglia, chair
Associate Professor
Film/Video/Animation Department

Marla Schweppe
Associate Professor
Film/Video/Animation Department

Adrienne Carageorge
Assistant Professor
Film/Video/Animation Department
"Pursuit" will be a 3-D computer animated film. I will start modeling in Alias 8.5 and when it becomes available I will continue using Maya. Final editing and postproduction will be done on the Avid.

**Budget**

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**Time Line (*)**

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<tr>
<td>Early April</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 1st - August 31st</td>
<td>Some character and scene modeling</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 1st - November 30th</td>
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<td>Start Animating</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Start rendering</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 1st - May 10th</td>
<td>Rendering, editing and sound</td>
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<td>Project Completion</td>
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(*) I have tried to take into account the moving of the SGI lab this summer. It is very possible that I will finish earlier but with the summer construction and the impending arrival date of Maya I am a bit pessimistic.

**Marketing Plan**

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<td>Ottawa Student Animation Festival</td>
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<td>January 31</td>
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<td>Movies on a Shoestring</td>
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<td>Spike and Mike</td>
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<td>California Sun International Film Festival</td>
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Estimated Shipping: $55.00
Pursuit

It is late summer. The sky is a deep clear blue and the sun is bright.

A snail is clinging to a leaf swaying gently in a breeze. Shafts of wheat are rustling. The wind whistles through the swaying fronds. A crop duster grinds over; Its motor temporarily drowns out the buzz of insects and the rustle of leaves in the breeze. The oily grating of its choking engine physically disturb the insects down below. Dragonflies and beetles fly this way and that. The plane grows distant as it lumbers away toward a farm and distant fields, visible in the distance.

A weasel pokes its head into the sunlight. It blinks, adjusting its eyes to the sudden brightness outside its hole. The weasel gracefully tilts its head up to sniff the air. Its whiskers twitch. A field mouse catches the weasel's eye. With one hop, the weasel projects itself out of its hole and lands on the grassy turf. It begins to follow the mouse, slowly, carefully, silently. The weasel reaches the mouse and investigates its find. Patting it with its paw the weasel's inspection is met with the sound of panic and anger. The mouse squeals incessantly. The weasel arches its long back and pounces. Quickly stabbing the mouse with claws projected, it pins the tiny creature to the ground and with an audible “SNAP”, the weasel bites down and breaks the tiny mammal’s neck.

A shadow of a bird washes over the silent pair. The weasel looks up. The silhouette of an eagle eclipses the sun. Its wings flap once and the bird glides on a breath of air. The weasel stares up, its mouth and chin stained and wet with fresh blood. From the ground its tiny sharp eyes begin to follow the path of the eagle. The weasel's head never turns from the sky. The weasel lifts itself upright on its hind legs and twitches its nose at the sky.

In the sky the eagle whips its head in the direction of the rodent. The bird arches its back, spreads its wings to their full width and dives. The weasel is paralyzed. The predator streams down from above. Instinctively the weasel tries to drag the dead mouse with it to safety. The eagle’s claws move rhythmically, clenching and opening in anticipation. With a
quiver the weasel forsakes its meal and darts quickly to the side just as the large bird attacks.

The eagle slows itself, pumping its wings as it floats only inches from the ground, then swoops upward and down again to continue the chase. The weasel quickly scurries, zigzagging from one direction to the other gasping for breath. The eagle lashes out with its claws, occasionally stretching its head forward and snapping its sharp beak. Leaves and fur fly as the pursuit continues. The eagle opens its jaws for the final attack just as the weasel dives toward a jut between a clump of rocks.

A horrible ear-piercing screech is heard outside the safety of the hole. The eagle uses its beak and claws furiously attempting to penetrate the opening. Scratching and tearing with its talons, dirt and rocks fly in the air around him.

The bird suddenly becomes quiet. With wings slightly bent it balances itself as it steps back from the hole. It takes flight and begins to circle the rocks from above.

Its body vibrating spasmodically, the weasel raises its nose to the top of the crevice and edges up slowly till it is able to stare out. A hum is heard in the distance. It gradually becomes louder. The eagle turns its head toward the sound. There is a roar-like thunder. A shadow blankets the eagle. It whips its head around to be confronted by an old crop duster. A yellow mist is spewing from the tail of the plane. The eagle flaps its grand wings wildly to escape the swirling propellers, but to no avail. It is powerlessly sucked into the plane’s engines and with an explosion of feathers, its final squawk is drowned by the roar of the motor.

The weasel watches tentatively as the plane speeds by and disappears into the distance. The carcass of the eagle lays close-by, its empty eyes staring to blue skies above. A layer of yellow powder gently falls and blankets the dead bird. The dust opaques the bird’s unblinking eye.

The weasel sniffs the air and wiggles its whiskers. It stares at the broken and mangled bird. Something flashes in the sunlight. Catching its eye, the weasel quickly turns
its head. A beetle scurries up a rock. With a flash the weasel slams its paw against the rock, crushing the bug. Leaving the bug, the weasel scurries away.
Appendix B

Story Board
Appendix C

Color Stills