2004

The muddy trail

Jonathan Kohles
The Muddy Trail

By
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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Table of Contents

Title Page .................................................................i
Table of Contents ......................................................ii
Permission Sheet .......................................................iii
Thesis Report
   Introduction ..................................................................1
   Concept .......................................................................1
   Character Design .......................................................3
   Backgrounds ..................................................................6
   Animation .....................................................................8
   Editing .........................................................................11
   Sound .........................................................................12
   Screening .....................................................................13
   Conclusion .....................................................................14

Appendix A
   Original Thesis Proposal .............................................A

Appendix B
   Complete Storyboard ................................................B

Appendix C
   Production Stills .......................................................C
Title of Thesis: The Muddy Trail

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Jonathan Kohles

Signature

Date 5/18/04
INTRODUCTION

When I first embarked on this thesis I thought to myself I am going to do whatever it takes to make this film my best work. The second thing I thought was that I only have ten months to do this project. In the end, the time pressures and personal sacrifices played a pivotal role in making The Muddy Trail both a good and bad experience.

CONCEPT

I have always believed that all art must come within. So for me most of my ideas have to come from a personal experience. Sure, you can do research until your eyes go bad but the core concept should start with something that is you and you only.

I had always thought of doing an artwork that stemmed from my feelings about my father not being around for most of my childhood. For years though I had avoided it because I was too insecure to approach the issue in depth. Eventually though I couldn’t avoid it and decided to make it a part of my thesis work. So I began the concept by trying to visualize my feelings about my father not being around. Most of the major elements came from these feelings. The large “mud” character was everything I wished my real father were. He was scared, vulnerable, and caring. Most of his emotions were things that my father never showed me. The child was a naïve, hopeful dreamer. This character was easy for me to identify with.
With these two characters in place I thought the problem of the story should be to try and find the father and the truth about the father. How this was going to happen took longer for me to develop. The only thing I knew was that the truth about the father being absent had to be shown at the end. I also knew I had to show how the father’s absence destroyed the child’s hope and imagination. Hence I decided to make the large “mud” character an imaginary figure that the child uses to realize the truth about his father. Once this was set the concept began to come together.

The forest environment came from my love of redwood trees. I thought the forest would create a good journey environment where the child could find this imaginary “mud character” and discover the truth about his father. The forest also provided the opportunity for metaphors like the tree destruction. The tree destruction was meant to be a metaphor for the destruction of the child’s relationship with his father. I thought the trees should be cleared at the end of the film because of this.

After I got to this conceptual point I began doing research. The research I embarked on was mostly visual. I took hundreds of pictures of forests and dirt. I also gathered pictures of children from the thirties and forties era. These pictures led me further into the story concept.

I stumbled upon an old picture of a Chevy truck in a forest one day and that is when the major plot line of the story came to me. I thought the truck could be something the child would chase throughout the forest and never catch. The child would only see
that his father really was not who he expected. This seemed to be a good vehicle (no pun intended) to drive the child forward.

One of the last important pieces of the concept was whether or not the child should reject the hope of ever seeing his father. For a long time I struggled with this. I wanted the concept to be about how a parent can effect a child’s hope and imagination. I knew the story would be stronger if the child grows by realizing his father is not and never will be there for him. But I guess I wanted a happy ending where the child and father come together in the end. In a way I think I was too close to the story because it was hard for me to let go of this happy ending scenario and honestly I don’t think I have yet. But by the time I had the original treatment together I think I made the right decision by having he child accept the reality that his father is never coming.

CHARACTER DESIGN

Designing the characters for this film was a daunting task. I love to design characters and I wanted these characters to be better than anything I have done. In addition to these pressures I put on myself, there was also the importance of the character concept. The mud character was a huge challenge. I needed to develop a character that was large, loving, insecure, and organic. That is what the concept called for. The character had to be a part of the forest so I thought it would be a good idea to make him a mud creature. Unfortunately, large loving, insecure, and muddy is a hard combination.
One wrong detail can make a large character look mean and a simple character rarely looks very organic. So the design of the mud character started with me looking at all of the mud visual references I could find. From mud sculptures to mud puddles I looked everywhere and thought of everything. The shape of the character also required research. I looked at a huge number of large character types. In the end I just had to go with my gut and draw something. Once I did this I was happy with the result. The character ended up having a series of mud cracks all over the body. These cracks helped give the character mass a unique anatomical shape. A basic mud texture was also present all over the body.

The head required special detail because as I mentioned before I couldn’t have a character that looked mean. Hence I raised the characters mouth up high towards the nose. I also gave the character a leaf extension because it made the character look more friendly and organic.

The next step was trying to translate this design into a 3d space. This turned out to be the hardest part of the film. It is one thing to simply draw and design a character but it is another thing to make it a moving three-dimensional figure. The character possessed so many characteristics that didn’t lend themselves to 3d. There wasn’t any set method to go about it. I had to make all of the mistakes until I got it right. The first mistake I made was assuming that a computer displacement map would take care of all the mud texture and crack detail. I modeled a smooth version of the character but when I
applied a displacement map to the model it destroyed the geometry. Unfortunately, there was nothing to do but start the model all over. This cost me a month of time and was very discouraging. I was forced to learn and use a different method of character modeling and animation. Fortunately, though I just kept working through the problem and in the end the character came out better than I imagined. I was happy with the result and this character was an important part of the story so I figured it was worth it.

Once I conquered the Muddy character I figured the child character would be a piece of cake. This turned out to be a bad thing to think. I looked at a lot of reference pictures for the child. In the end I came up with a character design that was good but didn’t fit the story well enough. My initial character sketch had a child that was too healthy and generic. The story did not call for a child that was supposed to be the ideal. Hence, I revised my drawings and made the character much more thin and exaggerated the characters features. This worked out better and the character’s eyes became a major focal point for expressions.

Translating the child into a 3d space was not as difficult as the mud character but still had its challenges. The eyes and hair were the most difficult parts. The eyes in my drawn design were shaped like round doorways. In 3d, a perfect round sphere eye is easier to work with especially at the animation phase. I had to work the eyelids in order to give a less spherical look to the eyes. I felt I achieved an eye look that was very close to my sketches. The hair was another challenge that worked out well. I modeled a series
of planes and used a variety of texturing tricks to give the hair the stylized look of the character.

Another aspect of my character design was the overall visual look of the film. I wanted to achieve a soft storybook look to the film. Therefore, it was necessary for me to work with materials and texturing and develop my own techniques. The last thing I wanted was a shiny 3d look. I was able to achieve a softer look by dealing with material attributes and painting all of my own textures in PhotoShop.

Once I had a soft textured look the color choices for the characters came quite easily. Color is something that I studied when I was a designer so it has never been a problem. I chose to have a palette that was not too saturated. The Muddy character had to be dark yet stand out from the redwood forest so I chose a brown palette that did not have too much red in it. The child had to be a focal point so I chose a primary color scheme of red blue and yellow.

BACKGROUNDS

The funny thing about the backgrounds of my film is that I spent the most time worrying about them but they were one of the easiest things to do. In the beginning everyone kept telling me a forest would be hard to do. Some students told me they tried to model a forest and it crashed their computer. Others told me I would have to do a bunch of compositing in Adobe After Effects. Well I am proud to say that all of that was
not a problem for me. I didn't model a whole forest and didn't have a one-year compositing project either. What the forest came down to was shot by shot creation and texturing.

I was fortunate to have made a good detailed storyboard before I started the film because it helped me eliminate useless modeling. I have to admit that I did try to model a huge forest in the first quarter but all that happened was I crashed the computer with two trees. So I took a step back and thought about how a painter would create a forest. That is when I decided to use a variety of textured planes and model only the pieces that would be shown in the shots. The storyboard really helped out with this.

Texturing and Lighting enhanced the look of my backgrounds. Most of my time was spent painting textures and positioning planes to have forced perspectives. The amount of textures I had to create for the film got into the hundreds. Many times I would create several lighter and blurred versions of a texture to give the environment more depth.

Even though texturing made the modeling tasks easier I still had a hard time with lighting. One of the biggest problems I had with lighting the backgrounds was a scale problem. To my surprise, the shadows in the software package I used (Maya) was scale dependent. This is something I probably should have known before but life is full of surprises. What this meant was that I had to light each piece of geometry separately and this also wasted a large amount of time. There was no workaround this problem. But
just like the mud character problem I pushed forward and worked through it. In the end I
was happy with the lighting for most of the shots.

The background tasks were not just limited to forest issues though. The film had
quite a few sets. There were a bunch of things I had to create in addition to forest
elements.

One of the most important elements was a truck that the father drove. I wanted
the piece to be set in the late forties so I chose an old Chevy pickup and used that as a
modeling guide. The truck came out well and I thought it was a good object to represent
the father. I also modeled the father too. The screen time of the father was short though
so I only modeled a head and spent the rest of the time taking body parts from other
projects I have done in the past.

Other sets included the house porch set, a cave set, and a desolate stump set.
These sets were not too hard to create. I just had to work to give these sets the same soft
and textured look as the forest and characters. In the end my texturing methods, lighting
ability, and color scheme unified all of these sets together and gave the film the look I
had imagined.

ANIMATION

Animation can make or break so many beautiful films. My goal was not to
tighten up on the animation for this piece. Often times, people don't let loose on their
animations. They stop moving and acting out scenes and it shows in their piece. I had this fear throughout the year so I decided to do some things to help resolve this problem.

The first thing I did to avoid a stiff piece was to shoot reference footage for the whole film. In this footage some friends and I acted out and filmed every shot in the piece. I already had a good storyboard but this reference footage got me to act out the scenes before I had even set a key. It also gave me a very important thing—timing. This footage helped me time out movements for my characters.

The next thing I did was to study the movements of children and large people. I found some good reference from the web and movies. By looking at this reference I discovered that children usually lead with their head when they move. I also found some consistent habits on how larger people move.

The last thing I did was to create a good rigging system for both of the characters. I have known how to rig characters for a while but each year new discoveries on rigging are made. I could have used the old methods of rigging but I knew my animation would be better if I taught myself and utilized the newest rigging technologies. Hence I had to spend quite a bit of time teaching myself how to rig my characters the right way. At first I was very worried about this and thought it would waste too much time but I realized later on that a good rig could save you days of animation work. So it all evened out in the end.
When I first started the animation work a great sigh of relief and happiness came over me. All of the hard work and technical problems were behind me and the characters were very easy to move and animate. I found that I was able to animate my characters very quickly. With the reference footage help I could also time out my movements.

Despite this release from technical hell I was still putting in thirteen-hour or more days to get the film animated. One day during the animation stage would consist of setting up a shot, studying the reference for that shot, acting out the shot, blocking out the timing for that shot, going through a second pass of animation, and if there was time going through a third pass where I worked on secondary motion like hair etc. This really wore me out but I learned more about animation than I ever have before by doing this.

During the animation stage I worked hard to get some subtle movements, strong poses, and nice arching curves from the characters. I also tried to give each character a specific style of movement. It usually takes about ten years to be able to animate a character with its own style. Good animation is one thing, but character-specific animation style is rare. I don’t think I was able to do this for the whole film but I feel I have some small flashes of greatness where an animated style becomes apparent.

My major goal was to have better animation than in my last film and even though the animation gets rough in some shots I believe I achieved this. The most important thing though is that I feel much more confident in my animation abilities now. I can’t wait to animate again.
EDITORING

Editing is something that I underestimated for this film. I thought that since I had a set plan editing would just be an afterthought. I was wrong about this and failed myself in the editing department. It is too bad I didn’t spend more time and thought on editing. I have seen people take only two shots of animation and work it into a beautiful film in the editing stage.

I think my failure in the editing stage comes from the fact that I don’t understand enough about editing and that I have so little experience with it. When I look at the final product I realize that my animation needed more transitions between shots. Even the few transitions that I do have are too short. At the end of the film, the film fades to black and the sound fades out in one second. I realize now that I shouldn’t have done that.

The ending shot cuts are also rough and happen to fast. When the boy realizes his father is not coming back there isn’t enough time for everything to sink in for the audience. I think a good transitional fade and a longer shot time could have resolved this problem.

The beginning has its editing problems too. Most of the shots are aligned next to each other. These hard cuts don’t match the feeling of waiting I wanted the beginning of the film to have.
I guess I thought the visuals and the animation would be enough to overshadow the editing style of the film. Unfortunately, it didn't and the overall feel of my film suffered because of this. At least I will know better for my next film.

SOUND

I had a clear vision of what I wanted the music to be like once I had my concept down. The only problem is that I never have the tools or musicians necessary to create exactly what I hear in my head. I have tried to use composers but have had bad experiences with commitment. When a composer isn't getting paid for doing the work they usually don't make the project a priority. I understand this though so I always have a backup plan. The backup plan is what I had to use for this film.

My backup plan was to mix music from final cut pro’s soundtrack software and copyright free music compact discs. This worked out better than I expected. I felt the music matched the style and story of the work. There are parts where the soundtrack saves the film from dying and it keeps the film moving forward. The music soundtrack I mixed together works especially well when the Muddy character and the child walk through the forest.

The sound effects I used for the film also worked well. Throughout the film there is a distant chainsaw cutting sound that represents the father and drives the boy to chase
his father. I thought this sound effect and many of the other sound effects I used enhanced the film.

One of my worries about the sound was the voice dialogue for the child. I was worried about finding a child to record the dialogue for the character. Eventually I found a young boy to record the sound and I thought my worries would be over. When I recorded the boy his voice sounded like the character did not know what was going on. Maybe it was just bad acting or maybe the boy was just too young. I don’t know but either way the child voice that I recorded at first did not work. It was at this point where I decided to use a woman’s voice. I figured that most animated series use a woman to do a young boys voice so why couldn’t I. This proved to be a good decision and I used a friends voice which worked much better. I handled the voice of the muddy character myself and felt that worked well too. The voices also helped my characters come to life with my facial animation.

SCREENING

Screening night was a disaster for me. What started off as bad only got worse. The first problem was the sound. The person who screened before me used a different tape format so they had to adjust the sound for that. The problem was they never put the sound back too normal. Hence when my film played the left channel of sound did not play and the right channel was turned down very low. No one could hear any of my
sound effects. Even though the music and dialogue could be heard they were very faint. I felt that this problem made the film die at certain parts. After the film finished there weren't many comments. For a second all my hard work seemed pointless but then I remembered that most of this stuff was out of my control. I recorded the sound correctly and I can't control the sound booth or the audience response. So I left it at that and haven't really thought about it since.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this journey I am proud of this film. For me this project wasn't about making the perfect film it was about making the best possible film given a specific deadline. I think I accomplished that and pushed myself as far as I could go. I am one of those people who can spend years perfecting something as simple as an animated turn. So I wanted to be able to put limits on myself because I knew that these limits would make the film better.

Throughout the year I made many personal sacrifices and battled myself to make this film a reality. I put in thirteen-hour days for eight months, centered the story around a personal concept, and gave up all of my free time. I have learned a great deal academically and personally from this experience and that is what school is about. I also have to be thankful to the people who supported me throughout this time when this film
was my biggest priority. Without them I would have called it quits months ago but they helped keep me focused on my goal.
Appendix A

Proposal
MFA Thesis Proposal

Allen's Friend

By Jonathan Kohles

May 1, 2003

Thesis Committee:
Malcolm Spaull, Chair
Johannes Bockwoldt
Tereza Flaxman

Malcolm Spaull 5/5/03
**Working Title:** Allen’s Friend  
**Producer:** Jonathan Kohles  
**Budget:** $6,424.00  
**Start Date:** June 1, 2003  
**End Date:** May 15, 2004  
**Running Time:** 4 minutes  
**Release Format:** DVCam/VHS/DVD

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**Story**

A child tries to use his imagination to be closer to a distant father.

**Synopsis**

A young boy of five years named Allen sits on a porch step waiting for his father to pick him up. Allen is dressed in a small suit and a suitcase sits beside him. In his hand he holds a picture he drew for his father. The picture is of a large brawny dirt and rock creature the boy has named “Muddy”. From inside the house a voice yells out to the boy and says “He is more than two hours late and is not coming. Come inside before you catch a cold.” The child ignores the voice and stares at the picture he has drawn for his father.

After looking at the picture for a while Allen takes his belongings and walks out into a forest to try and find his father. As the boy walks around in the trees he becomes lost and the night engulfs the boy. After being startled by the sound of footsteps Allen drops his suitcase and picture. While feeling around on the ground Allen’s hand is grabbed by a large dirt hand. As Allen looks up he realizes that the hand belongs to his friend “Muddy”.

Allen tells Muddy that he is looking for his father at the end of a large trail that leads to a river. Allen explains that his father cut the trail and may be found at the trail’s end. Muddy decides to help the boy and leads Allen to the trail. As they walk down the trail it gets thinner and winds down to nothing. The trail is unfinished. Muddy tells Allen he can finish the trail himself and get to the river. Allen follows Muddy as the creature uses his massive body to knock over trees and vegetation. When the two get to the river, Allen’s father is nowhere to be found.

Despite the disappointment, Allen continues his search and tells Muddy of a damn his father built at the end of the river. Allen explains that his father should surely be at the end of the damn. Both Muddy and Allen swim down to the end of the river. When they get to the damn they find the damn is not finished and Muddy gets stuck in-between a powerful current. The water begins to dissolve Muddy but Allen saves him by pulling him out of the water. After the incident the two realize that Allen’s father is nowhere to be found.

Although discouraged, Allen says he knows of another place his father may be. Allen explains to about a land of waste that his father had cleaned up. Muddy leads the boy to a water pipe near the river that leads to the wasteland. The two crawl through the pipe and come out to a swamp like wasteland. Nothing has been cleaned and Allen’s father is nowhere to be found. Muddy can not handle the polluted swamp or polluted atmosphere and begins to fall apart and get sick. Allen tries to help his friend and push him back into the pipe but the large static dirt creature is too large. Allen continues his efforts until Muddy finally forces the child to leave and continue looking for his father.

Saddened, Allen leaves his friend. As he walks off he stares into the huge desolate landscape. Overwhelmed and discouraged, Allen sits down on a piece of garbage and looks hopelessly at the ground.
As Allen sits down, the imaginary world around him transforms (dissolve) into the porch stair and the house he was originally sitting at. The picture of Muddy is in the boy’s hand again. The boy crumples up the picture of Muddy and throws it on the ground.

While looking at the crumpled wad of paper, the sound of a horn honking startles Allen. He looks up and sees a truck with the words “Joe’s Construction” painted on the side. His father gets out of his truck, leaves an envelope in the mailbox, and gets back in the truck. Allen smiles, picks up the crumpled picture, straightens it out, and then runs after the man in the truck.

Allen puts his hand out and gives his father the crumpled picture. His father takes the picture, smiles at Allen, and drives off.

**Approach**

This film will be produced using the 3d animation software called Maya by Alias|Wavefront, composited in Adobe After Effects and edited in Final Cut Pro. All of the character animation will be done using Maya. The backgrounds, character textures, and environments will be created with traditional paint media. I will scan these hand renderings into the computer, tweak them using Painter and PhotoShop, and then I will bring the images into Maya and After Effects. All of my sound effects will be taken from my own recordings and royalty free sources.
Working Title: Allen’s Friend
Producer: Jonathan Kohles
Budget: $ 6,424.00

Start Date: June 1, 2003
End Date: May 15, 2004
Running Time: 4 minutes
Release Format: DVCam/VHS/DVD

TIMELINE

Preproduction
Research
Script draft
Script final
Character Design
Set Design
Storyboard
Sound Recording
Animatic

Production
Character Modeling
Character Texturing
COMMITTEE REVIEW
Character Rigging
Set Modeling
Set Texturing and Lighting
Animation
COMMITTEE REVIEW
Rendering
Sound Editing
Compositing
COMMITTEE REVIEW
Title and Credits
Final Editing
Screening
**Working Title:** Allen’s Friend
**Producer:** Jonathan Kohles
**Budget:** $6,424.00

**Start Date:** June 1, 2003
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### BUDGET SUMMARY

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## BUDGET BREAKDOWN

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- **$68,640.00**
- **$1,000.00**

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### ADMINISTRATION SUBTOTAL

- **$1900.00**
- **$490.00**
### BUDGET BREAKDOWN

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>RATE</th>
<th>QUANTITY</th>
<th>INDUSTRY</th>
<th>STUDENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRE-PRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyboard Artist</td>
<td>$ 20/panel</td>
<td>60 panels</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character Designer</td>
<td>(Flat Rate)</td>
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<td>$400.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Art Materials</td>
<td>(misc.)</td>
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<td>$1,700.00</td>
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<td><strong>PRODUCTION</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>$ 15.00/wk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equipment Rental</td>
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<tr>
<td>Software</td>
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<td>$3,000.00</td>
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<td>Media (hard drive)</td>
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Appendix B

Storyboard
Appendix C

Production Stills