



Prepare to Board!

Creating Story and Characters
for Animated Features and Shorts

Nancy Beiman



NANCY BEIMAN

PREPARE TO BOARD!



CREATING STORY AND CHARACTERS
FOR ANIMATED FEATURES AND SHORTS



Amsterdam • Boston • Heidelberg • London • New York • Oxford
Paris • San Diego • San Francisco • Singapore • Sydney • Tokyo

Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier



Senior Acquisitions Editor: Paul Temme
Senior Project Manager: Brandy Lilly
Associate Editor: Georgia Kennedy
Assistant Editor: Robin Weston
Marketing Manager: Christine Degon Veroulis
Cover Design: Nancy Beiman
Interior Design: Detta Penna

Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier
30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA
Linacre House, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8DP, UK

Copyright © 2007, Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Permissions may be sought directly from Elsevier's Science & Technology Rights Department in Oxford, UK: phone: (+44) 1865 843830, fax: (+44) 1865 853333, e-mail: permissions@elsevier.co.uk. You may also complete your request online via the Elsevier homepage (<http://elsevier.com>), by selecting "Customer Support" and then "Obtaining Permissions."



Recognizing the importance of preserving what has been written, Elsevier prints its books on acid-free paper whenever possible.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beiman, Nancy.

Prepare to board! : creating story and characters for animation features and shorts / by Nancy Beiman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-240-80820-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-240-80820-7 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Animated films—Technique. 2. Animated films—Authorship. 3. Cartoon characters. I. Title.

NC1765.B38 2007

791.43'34—dc22

2006028112

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 13: 978-0-240-80820-8

ISBN 10: 0-240-80820-7

For information on all Focal Press publications
visit our website at www.books.elsevier.com

08 09 10 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Printed in China

Working together to grow
libraries in developing countries

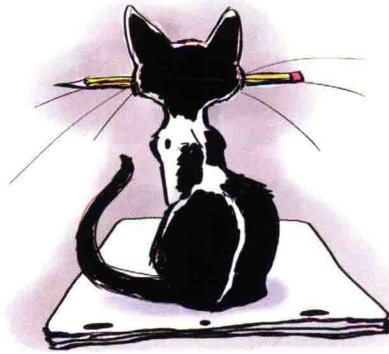
www.elsevier.com | www.bookaid.org | www.sabre.org

ELSEVIER

BOOK AID
International

Sabre Foundation

PREPARE TO BOARD!



Introduction

"Just be sure you don't use the words 'old-fashioned!'"

—Roy Disney in email to author, 2005

This book describes visual storytelling and design methods developed during the "Golden Age of Animation" and still in use today, as Roy Disney pointed out to me. Some people say that story is the *only* thing that matters in animated film. I agree. Good animation and good design never saved a bad story. Strong characters can make a weak story tolerable and a good story better, but characters develop within a story context. Each depends upon the other.

The first part of this book will concern itself with developing *story content*. *Technique* will be discussed in the second part, and the third part will deal with the *presentation* of the story and artwork before an audience.

Story works out of and depends on your experience and skill. There is no software that will draw good storyboards for you.

Memorable characters exist in every medium. The technology may vary but basic design principles remain constant. A well-drawn character will translate into a well-designed puppet or computer-generated imagery (CGI) character. The principles described in the book's character design sections are intended for use in all media.

Eighty percent of an animated film's production time is spent in developing the story, art direction, and designs for the characters. The other 20 percent is spent on the actual animation production and post-production.

Outlines, scripts, and storyboards for television, feature length, and short animated films differ greatly from one another. Feature and short animated films are more popular than ever before. Yet their production differs from that of a television show. Most films and television shows start with a script. While scripts are important on longer animated films, they are not necessarily written at the start of the production. Animated short films may be created without any script at all.

This book will concentrate on visual scriptwriting.

There is a danger of concentrating solely on technique—the 'how'—of animation (squash and stretch, how to turn a head, how to do a walk, how to run a program) and considering story and context—the 'why'—almost an afterthought.

This is putting the cart before the horse.



Animation and story are not mutually exclusive. Good stories and appealing characters will transcend their technology. Professional animators and hardcore fans will notice minor inconsistencies in a film. If the story is good, and the characters appealing, the audience will overlook these same inconsistencies.

Animated characters are often able to defy the laws of gravity and physics, but animated stories cannot defy the laws of

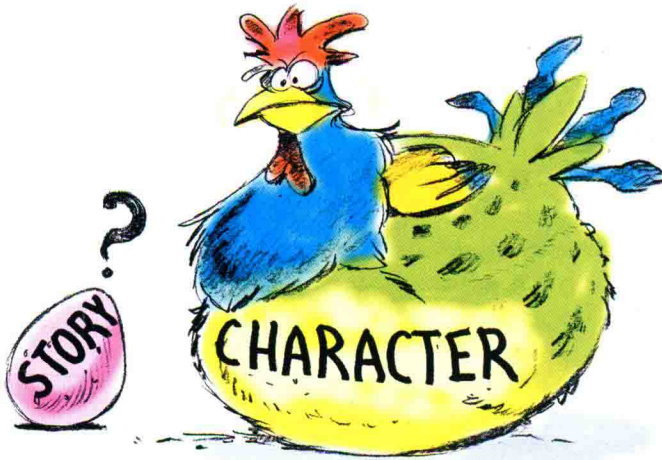
common sense. The animated film must create its own reality. We must immediately comprehend the power of the poisoned apple, or the character weakness of a lion cub or a "Beast." Boredom and frustration results if a character's properties change mid-picture solely to accommodate weak storytelling.

It is not enough to rely on the soundtrack to carry the story. Ideally, dialogue in an animated film complements the visuals and not vice versa. The very best character animation can still tell the story with the soundtrack turned off. It should illustrate a story that is worth telling.

Good writing leaves a lot to the reader's imagination. Each reader creates their individual pictures of the settings and the characters' appearances based on information that the author provides. Author and reader collaborate to create the story. An animated film distributes a few artists' fantasies to large masses of people. We should try to make them good ones.

Animated actors are harder to watch than human actors. The animator must convince the audience to suspend disbelief and accept imaginary characters as living beings with real problems. Most live actors don't have this problem since we accept them as 'real' from the start. Animation *brings the inanimate to life*—the life is not there to begin with.

A good character can be developed from a story. A good character can *inspire* the story. Story is the most important thing in animation, but creating appealing characters to tell it—*animated* characters—is the *other* most important thing. Which element should the animator develop first?



Which comes first?

Character and story reinforce one another and are created concurrently during preproduction. They will be discussed in all three parts of this book since developing one in the absence of the other is like making an omelet without eggs.



Character and story develop simultaneously!

Development is a marvelous creative process in which the journey is as important as the destination. It's what you do, *and* also how you do it!

I've always felt that animators are not merely "actors with pencils," as the cliché goes. That term does not begin to cover what an animator really does.

We bring the inanimate to life.

We create universes.

We are *magicians*.

Nancy Beiman
Rochester, New York
August, 2006

Dedication and Thanks

Jack Hannah, T. Hee, Ken O'Connor, Bill Moore, and Elmer Plummer taught at the California Institute of the Arts' Character Animation Program so that their knowledge of animation, learned from the ground up during its Golden Age, would not die with them. My notes from their classes, written between 1975 and 1979, are the backbone of this book. It was a real privilege to learn from these talented artists.

A new generation of students from the Rochester Institute of Technology generously permitted me to print some of their class exercises and senior project materials. I thank Brittney Lee, Nathaniel Hubbell, William Robinson, Jim Downer, Sarah Kropiewnicki, Kimberly Miner, Jeremy Galante, Rui Jin, David Suroviec, Joseph Daniels, and Jedidiah Mitchell, my students in the School of Film and Animation, and Alycia Yee from the School of Photography, for their outstanding work.

I thank Margaret Adamic of Walt Disney Publishing Worldwide for permission to reprint artwork from Disney Enterprises, Inc., and Howard Green, Vice President, Studio Communications, Buena Vista Pictures Marketing, for his valuable assistance.

Thanks to David Fulp for his photo of T. Hee posing in front of Ralph Eggleston's caricature portrait, to John Van Vliet for the T. Hee 'ranch' portrait, and to Cyndy Bohanovsky for the Ken Anderson photo. I also thank Patricia Bernard for permission to use my illustrations from her books *Basil Bigboots the Pirate* and *Duffy and the Invisible Crocodile*, and Daniel Schechter and Globalvision Inc. for two illustrations I drew for the documentary film *IN DEBT WE TRUST*.

I owe special thanks to Floyd Norman, Nina Paley, John Van Vliet, David Celsi, Dean Yeagle, Nina L. Haley, J. Adam Fox, Nelson Rhodes, Doug Crane, John McCartney, Brian P. McEntee, and Mark Newgarden for permission to use some of their illustration work so that this did not become a one-woman show.

This book and its author are indebted to many key people. Art director/author Brian P. McEntee provided terms for the Glossary and, along with Sheridan College instructor Mark Mayerson, proofread the entire manuscript and suggested improvements to the text and illustrations. Greg Ford and Ronnie Scheib read early drafts of the book and fact-checked my Looney Tunes history. My parents, Melvyn and Frances Beiman, provided 'lay perspective' on the book's readability. Yvette Kaplan, Tom Sito, and Tony White offered excellent suggestions for the book's format and contents at the beginning of the project. Jud Hurd published my interviews with animators in *CARTOONIST PROFILES* magazine for 13 years and encouraged me to write interviews and articles on animation. Editors Paul Temme, Amy Jollymore, and Georgia Kennedy at Elsevier/Focal Press were a pleasure to work with. I also thank my friends and mentors Shamus Culhane, Selby Daley Kelly, T. Hee, Mary Alice O'Connor, Ken O'Connor, Alice Davis, Frank Thomas, Ollie Johnston, and Joe Grant for their friendship and advice over the years. Last, but not least, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Roy Disney for his continuing support for the art and artists of animation.

This book is dedicated to A. Kendall (Ken) O'Connor—a brilliant layout man, designer, draftsman, story man, art director, and teacher who was able to explain everything from how a caterpillar's muscles move to why a 1926 trash can silhouette differs from that of a modern one. In story, these things matter! So this is for you, Ken.

Circumstances alter cases!

Nancy Beiman

Contents

Introduction ix

Dedication and Thanks xii

PART ONE: GETTING STARTED

1 First, Catch Your Rabbit 1

*Working From News Items; Interpreting reality.
Creating extraordinary stories from ordinary materials.*

Linear and Nonlinear Storytelling 5

An explanation of two types of storytelling.

Setting Limitations and Finding Liberation 6

Your personal experiences can be adapted to animation. If you haven't got a life, why not create one?

Shopping for Story: Creating Lists 7

Use free association to create story ideas.

Nothing Is Normal: Researching Action 11

All Thumbs: Quick Sketch and Thumbnails 13

What a character designer should know.

Reality Is Overrated 13

Why caricature is better than literal interpretations of anything.

Past and Present: Researching Settings and Costumes 15

2 Vive la Difference! Animation and Live-action Storyboards 17

Comic Boards and Animation Boards 23

Comic strips also use storyboards, but they are dramatically different from animation boards.

Television Boards and Feature Boards 26

Television series boards differ from those for short and feature film boards. Why you should know this before you start your own project.

3 Putting Yourself Into Your Work 29

The Use of Symbolic Animals and Objects 32

Allegorical and cultural figures that carry meaning to your viewers. A short list for all you clever foxes.

The Newsmen's Guide: Who, What, When, Where, and Why 36

A series of exercises in character design.

4 Situation and Character-driven Stories 41

Stop if You've Heard This One 44

Clichés and how to avoid them or turn them on their heads. It's not what you do, but how you do it.

Defining Conflict 45

You gotta do what you gotta do.

Log Lines 46

Summarize the story line before you start.

Stealing the Show 47

Tell your story with the most interesting characters. Avoid letting secondary characters and storylines become more interesting than your main story.

Parodies and Pastiches 48

Parody satirizes a specific target, pastiche can reinvent an entire genre.

5 What If? Contrasting the Possible and the Fanciful 49

Beginning at the Ending:

The Tex Avery "Twist" 53

Get your ending first, then work on the start.

Establishing Rules 56

Your animated universe may not obey the laws of the 'real world,' but it has to obey its own internal laws.

6 Appealing or Appalling? Beginning Character Design 59

Reading the Design: Silhouette Value 60

Create a good, simple, recognizable shape for each character that will render it instantly recognizable in a 'lineup.'

Construction Sights 61

Building a character.

Foundation Shapes and Their Meaning 65

How to design complex characters from simple shapes that you probably have lying around the house.

The Shape of Things 68

Going Organic 70

Designing characters that look alive by going with the design flow.

Creating Characters from Inanimate Objects 73

The only limit is your imagination.

Across the Universe 75

Unifying the setting and character designs.

7 Size Matters: The Importance of Scale 79

Practicing Your Scales 81

A character's scale can vary within itself or with its mood.

Stereotypes of Scale 83

The villain is always larger than the hero, the hero is always well built and strong. As Sportin' Life sang, "it ain't necessarily so."

Triple Trouble: Working with Similar Character Silhouettes 84

How do you tell the Three Little Pigs apart?

Getting Pushy 88

Going just a little too far, then pulling back.

8 Beauties and Beasts: Creating Character Contrasts in Design 91

The Great Dictator: Charlie Chaplin's Character Acting 91

Chuck Jones told me: "Steal from the best."

I Feel Pretty! Changing Standards of Beauty 92

What makes a character beautiful?

A Face That Only a Mother Could Love? 96

Facial shapes that suggest character traits.

Gods and Monsters: Contrasting Appearance and Personality 97

Why ugly is easier to portray than beauty.

9 Location, Location, Location: Art Direction and Storytelling 103

If these walls could talk, they'd be in an animated film!

Using the setting to help set the story.

PART TWO: TECHNIQUE

10 Starting Story Sketch: Compose Yourself 115

Tonal Sketches 115

Compositional rules to remember.

Graphic Images Ahead! 120

Graphic shorthand and longhand and floor plans.

The Drama in the Drawings: Using Contrast to Direct the Eye 122

Every little movement has a meaning of its own.

The Best Laid Floor Plans 124

Blocking animated scenes and sets.

Structure: The Mind's Eye 127

Whose story is this? Everything depends on your point of view.

11 Roughing It: Basic Staging 135

I'm Ready for My Close-up: Storyboard Cinematography 142

Cartoon characters have 'good sides' and 'bad sides.'

12 Boarding Time: Getting With the Story Beat 147

Working to the Beat: Story Beats and Boards 149

Establishing the framework of the story.

Do You Want To Talk About It? 151

Storytelling for animation is like making a speech.

13 The Big Picture: Creating Story Sequences 155

Panels and Papers: A Word about Storyboard Materials 157

More differences between television and feature-film boards.

Acting Out: Structuring Your Sequences 158

An illustration of a story that uses sequential structure.

A-B-C Sequences: Prioritizing the Action 161

*Why B does **not** necessarily follow A in animation preproduction.*

Arcs and Triumphs 162

How and why a character changes and develops over the course of the film, and if not, why he should.

Naming Names 164

Sequences and characters in animated films all have names for identification purposes. Learn some of the funnier ones.

14 Patterns in Time: Pacing Action on Rough Boards 165

Climactic Events 182

A story can be constructed like a really good roller-coaster ride.

15 Present Tense: Creating a Performance on Storyboard 183

Working with Music 189

I've got a song in my heart, and in my film.

Visualizing the Script 190

*So you thought I'd never get around to scripts? Yes, animated films **DO** use scripts...sometimes cruelly...*

16 Diamond in the Rough Model Sheet : Refining Character Designs 195

Tying It Down: Standardizing Your Design 199

Turn your characters upside down and construct them from the inside out.

Your Cheatin' Part: Nonliteral Design 209

Things are not always what they seem to be.

17 Color My World: Art Direction and Storytelling 217

Fishing for Complements 218

Simple color analysis and color theory.

Saturation Point: Colors and Tonal Values 220

Why color is like grayscale, only more so.

Writing the Color: Color Scripts 227

The action, mood, and setting changes can be indicated by changing colors.

O Tempora, O More or Less 229

Researching illustrators and materials from different historical periods.

PART THREE: PRESENTATION

18 Show and Tell: Pitching Your Storyboards 231

The More Things Change: The Turnover Session 241

Utilizing and accepting suggestions for change.

19 Talking Pictures: Assembling a Story Reel or Animatic with a Scratch Track 243

This Is Only a Test: Refining Story Reels 247

Previewing and reviewing your story reels and animatics.

20 Build a Better Mouse: Creating Cleanup Model Sheets 249

Setting your characters' final appearance

21 Maquette Simple: Modeling Characters in Three Dimensions 257

Sculpture can help refine the design

22 Am I Blue? Creating Character Through Color 265

Creating Color in Context 269

Why 'realistic' color is only a relative concept.

It's a Setup: Testing Your Color Models 276

Place the characters on the backgrounds to see if they get along well together.

23 Screen and Screen Again: Preparing for Production 277

Goodbye, Good Luck, and Have Fun!

24 Further Reading: Books, Discs, and Websites 279

25 Appendices: Animated Interviews 283

1: Discussion with A. Kendall O'Connor 283

2: Caricature Discussion with T. Hee 290

3: Interview with Ken Anderson 296

Glossary of Animation Preproduction Terms 303

Index 309

Part One

Getting Started



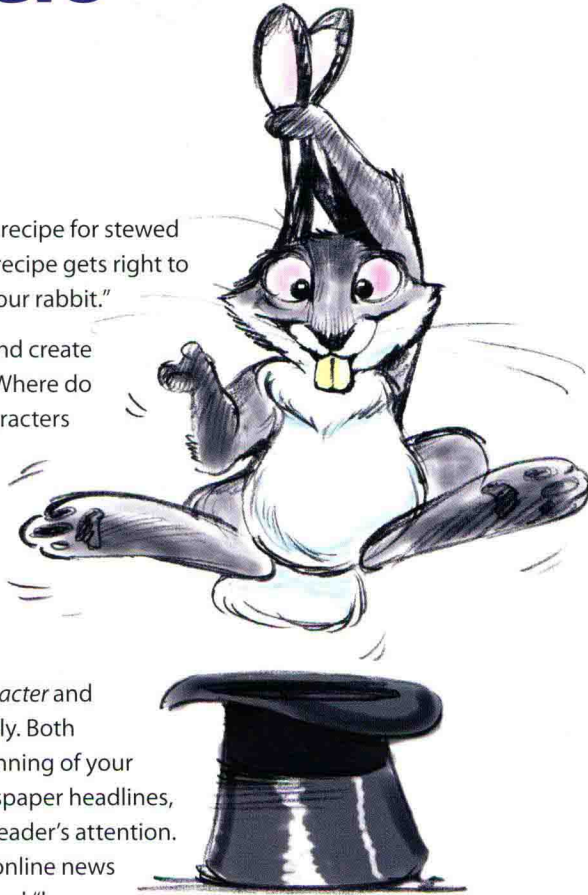
First Catch Your Rabbit: Creating Concepts and Characters

There is a famous old cookbook recipe for stewed rabbit. The first sentence of the recipe gets right to the point. It reads: "First, catch your rabbit."

How do you "catch the rabbit" and create original characters and stories? Where do ideas for original stories and characters come from?

A story recipe depends on the freshness of the ingredients, the quality of the preparation, and the skills of the creator.

The first two ingredients—*Character* and *Conflict*—develop simultaneously. Both must be established at the beginning of your story and, like well-written newspaper headlines, they will immediately grab the reader's attention. A quick search through several online news sites yielded the following unusual "human interest" stories:



- Robot Runs On Flies and Sewage
- Berlin Bear Steals Bicycle, Attempts Breakout From Zoo
- Boozy Bear Plunders Camper's Beer
- Zombie Worms Found Off Sweden

These actual news items already sound like story lines for animated cartoons. All of the stories have one thing in common: they convey a visual image.

[Fig. 1-2] Sketches based on online news reports from the BBC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and Reuters News Service.



Some of these headlines leave the reader wanting to know what happened next—(Where was the bear going to go with the bicycle?)—or empathizing with a character's situation—(What kind of self-esteem does a fly-eating robot have?). An animated story line may grow from a grain of truth.

Animation pre-production is called *development* for a reason. One definition of development is “the act of improving by expanding or enlarging or refining.” The story and characters grow and change during pre-production from simple ideas to the complex, structured, *visual* story.

The next ingredient in the story stew is imagination. Animation is not reality and it is at its best when it portrays things that could *possibly* happen. The seed of reality provides the viewer with a point of identification and then germinates into a fantastic story.

Feature animation often does not start with a written script. The germ of the story can be conveyed in a short *outline* or *treatment*. The characters and plot twists are then developed visually. Stories can change dramatically when they are boarded. Scripts are not finalized until the latter stages of preproduction so that they may incorporate new material created on the storyboard.

Old-time animation story men referred to a story as the “clothesline” on which they would “hang” gags and character development. The shorter film develops more quickly than a feature since it has less time to tell the story. You should be able to convey a story idea in a few short, direct sentences. If you are unable to do this, the idea needs work.