



Ideas for the Animated Short

Finding and Building Stories

Karen Sullivan
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and Kate Alexander**



AMSTERDAM • BOSTON • HEIDELBERG • LONDON
NEW YORK • OXFORD • PARIS • SAN DIEGO
SAN FRANCISCO • SINGAPORE • SYDNEY • TOKYO

Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier



Associate Acquisitions Editor: Georgia Kennedy
Publishing Services Manager: George Morrison
Project Managers: Lianne Hong, Kathryn Liston
Editorial Assistant: Chris Simpson
Marketing Manager: Marcel Koppes
Cover Design: Fred Rose


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

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Application submitted

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-240-80860-4

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

09 10 11 12 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Printed in the United States of America.

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Foreword

MEMO

To: Animated Short Film Directors

From: John Tarnoff, Head of Show Development, DreamWorks Animation

Short films aren't so different from feature films. The rules of storytelling still apply. But the beauty of short films is their ability to distill, in just a few minutes, the essence of an idea, and concentrate that essence in such a way that the audience is moved and stimulated in as strong a fashion as if they had just sat through a full-length feature film.

Animated short films provide even more opportunity to engage the viewer. Animated films are distinguished by the uniqueness of their artwork, and this completely invented and imagined aspect is what sets animated shorts so resolutely apart from live-action shorts. This is your challenge and your opportunity in the realm of animation—a realm where it takes both a graphical, painterly talent (and skill), in addition to a photographic, cinematic, and narrative inspiration. Because an animated film has so many more visual possibilities than a live-action film, the bar is significantly raised for the animation filmmaker to attempt something truly integral and affecting.

What makes for a good idea for a short animated film?

To fulfill their inspiration, filmmakers have many options to express the one idea. Just as mash-up videos show how it is possible to create different stories, genres, and styles out of existing material, at the concept stage in developing a short, filmmakers need to balance their inspiration with a format that, to their mind, best expresses the impact they want to make with their film.

This can mean that the film is narrative or non-narrative (poetic), that it draws from a particular artistic style, uses a particular style of animation, mixes up styles and genres to create something unique . . . the possibilities are endless.

While there are rules of good artistic composition, good storytelling, good character development, good visual design, and all of the large and small elements that go into the creation of a film, the filmmaker must not get bogged down by too many conventions that can be creatively stifling.

Animated films are films first and foremost. Films exist in five dimensions: the two dimensions of line, tone and color, the third dimension of space, the fourth dimension of time, and the fifth dimension of content. It is this fifth dimension that unites and binds the other four and, if successful, touches an audience and resonates with them in a mental, physical, emotional and artistic (some might say “spiritual”) way.

How should fledgling filmmakers proceed? Assuming they have learned the basics and spent time cultivating their eye, their techniques, their tools, and most of all, their own creative voice, there are a few guidelines for jumping in. For me, a good film is always an exercise in contrasts and in the unexpected: a conventional story with unconventional characters or situations or, conversely, an unconventional story with a conventional character. It can be a conventional story with a surprising punch line, or maybe an unconventional, non-linear story that concludes in a familiar way. The point is to create a particular definitive and definable dynamic. Perhaps the film displays a specific, evolving color palette as it unfolds, and that palette reflects the precise evolution of the story or characters as they transform over the course of the narrative.

It is the dynamic (or dynamics) that supports the execution of the film and makes it intriguing beyond merely one’s inspiration that it “seems like a good idea.”

For the two-dimensional elements, there are centuries of artistic reference and a whole world of physical reference for artists to create the look of their film. Care should be taken to draw from multiple sources in synthesizing a single vision and to weigh those sources in comparison with one another. The filmmaker uses references, to build the look of the film and can create sketches or workbooks of ideas based on these references. This Visual Development phase is key, no matter what the size of the film is, as it must co-exist with the story in a highly compatible way for the film to work. Various design elements assist the filmmaker in creating a visual script for the ultimate look of the film. Set designs, whether in rough line sketches or fully rendered paintings, establish the locations or environments where the film will take place. Color and lighting keys establish the flow of visual elements over the course of the film. Character designs and turnarounds establish the look of the characters and their visual relationships to one another. While a short animated film is arguably less complex than a full-length feature, because it is short, it is subject to perhaps increased scrutiny or attention as all of its design elements will be so much more important in proportion to the length of the overall film. People will look more closely at a short film, and expect more from it, merely because it is expected or hoped to be a gem.

The third dimension is where animation has branched off into a new realm over the past 20 years, and the medium has never been the same. Whether one is creating a 2D film by hand drawing, or in the computer in Flash, or creating a 3D CG film, the visualization possibilities of working in 3D have irrevocably changed the way animation is made. Audiences are now so much more attuned to seeing animation in virtual three-dimensional space that their expectations have been altered significantly from a time when everything was basically flat. Even Disney’s Multiplane system from the 1950s, where layers of animation elements

were photographed in real depth, one behind the other, still created an essentially “proscenium” experience, where the audience was looking at a stage-like environment and action was taking place largely in a horizontal, right-to-left-to-right space. In addition to allowing shapes to have a greater sense of weight and dimensionality, 3D animation allows the camera to explore and to light these objects and their environments with a much greater degree of variation and movement.

The fourth dimension is the truly cinematic dimension, the dimension of time. No other art form has worked in the fourth dimension in the same way as cinema. From the early revolving zoetropes to today’s high frame-rate digital projectors, the element of time, of beginning, middle, and end, is the hallmark of this medium. The editor is the high priest of the filmmaking process, taking the raw elements of shots and scenes and piecing them together to create rhythm, pace, and narrative coherency. Indeed, the juxtaposition of images, as the early master directors like Griffith and Eisenstein discovered, is the highest expression of this art form. This juxtaposition of image, and juxtaposition over time, creates emotions, from joy to sadness to suspense and fear. The addition of sound, both music and sound effects, further dimensionalizes the timeline, making the pace seem longer or slower, punctuating the visuals and improving the flow.

The fifth dimension, content, what the film is about and how it unfolds, is the keystone that brings the other dimensions together and gives them life. Without a compelling visual or dramatic narrative, the graphical elements are static, the 3D elements are distracting, and the timeline is boring or frenetic.

Every film really needs some form of beginning, middle, and end, whether it is a short tone poem or a character-driven narrative.

Key images, “movie moments,” establish the tone or the essence of the film: a great opening shot, signature lighting, a musical theme. This tells us what the film is going to be about, about the world we are about to be immersed in. Remember that you are communicating with your audience. For you to touch them, you’re going to have to make your expression understandable, whether this is through your use of visual language, choice of artistic style, cultural reference, or otherwise. So from the first frames, we the audience need to know where we are and feel like something is happening that is engaging. From there, the filmmaker has to stay “on point.” Everything that follows must serve the purpose of the film. This process of choosing and editing what goes into the film is the most painstaking part of the process and will challenge you to really discover what it is you are actually saying in your film.

Having laid down these ground rules, it is now important to say break them! Trust your instincts, trust your experience. Don’t get bogged down by anything that stands in the way of your vision. This is perhaps the most important lesson: Dare to fail, because in your failure is always the seed of your eventual success. Be open to the lessons and dare to try again.

Preface

Why Read This Book?

Story is the backbone of all film. Without a good story, all you have is technique. This book is a guide to help you make good stories for the animated short.

Why Did We Write This Book?

There are many good books that address scriptwriting, storytelling, animation, and animation technique. Most of these books focus on feature films. This book is devoted to ideas for animated shorts that are 2–5 minutes in length, produced by one individual or a small group.

When this book was proposed, there were few books like it. Our goal was to write a book that provided the basics and that was short, easy to read, and affordable.

What This Book Is and Is Not

It is not a “how-to” book that will give you a step-by-step process for a successful story. There is no magic formula for story. This book covers the things you need to think about and consider, so you will be able to recognize a good idea, make a good story, produce good designs, and make good storyboards for the animated short.

Who Should Read This Book?

This book is designed for the beginner but has information that may be useful to any animator who works with story.

What You Will Learn

- How story for animated feature films relates to story for the animated short
- How to get good ideas
- Why acting is important to the animator
- How emotion drives the actions and reactions of a character
- What makes a good character and a good character design
- What makes a good location or environment

- What to think about when building a story
- Why conflict is essential to story, character, and audience
- How to translate story into visuals for a storyboard
- What constitutes good staging for a film

Interviews Add Depth

Interviews from professionals provide insight from the industry into story, development, and storyboarding. More interviews are included on the DVD. Don't miss them.

Why Did We Choose These Animations for the DVD?

Some of the animations on the DVD are older films, some are newer films. Some are more polished or animated better than others. Some are from professional studios and some are student work. All films were chosen because they are examples of good storytelling. When possible, animatics and process work are shown on the DVD to give a fuller understanding of the development of the ideas for each film. The DVD also includes a videotape from an acting workshop that illustrates the principles in the book.

Summary

The animated short is one of the enjoyable forms of entertainment. It doesn't take too long, but can be as poignant, humorous, and moving as any other form of storytelling. Doing it well creates memories.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the following people for their help, support, and contributions to the book:

Family:

Larry and Mack Sullivan; Milton and Helen Alexander; Barbara and Nathan Schumer

Editors:

Georgia Kennedy, Paul Temme, Elsevier

Editorial Assistant:

Chris Simpson, Elsevier

Project Manager:

Kathryn Liston, Elsevier

Proposal Reviewers:

Mark T. Byrne, Craig Caldwell, David Maas, Joseph Guiland, Alan Choi

Technical Reviewers:

Craig Caldwell and Sharon Cavanaugh

Colleagues:

Jim McCampbell, Computer Animation Faculty, and Students at Ringling College of Art and Design; Richard Hopkins and Florida Studio Theater

Contributing Students:

Meng Vue, Eric Drobile, Gwynne Olson-Wheeler, Nick Pitera, Chris Nabholtz, Thelvin Cabezas, Fernanda Santiago, Kevin Andrus, and Maria Clapis from Ringling College of Art and Design; Parrish Ley from Sheridan College; Mark Shirra and Alejandra Perez from Vancouver Film School; Chris Perry from University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Sven Martin, Moritz Mayerhofer, Jan Locher, Hannes Appell, Holger Wenzl, Jan Thuring from

Flimakademie, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany; Alex Cannon from Brigham Young University

Contributing Studios:

Jeff Fowler, Sean McNally, and Chuck Wojtkiewics, Blur Studios; Sande Scoredos, Sony Pictures Imageworks; Sylvain Chomet, Django Films

Foreword:

John Tarnoff, DreamWorks Animation

Interviews:

Jeff Fowler, Blur Studios; Andrew Jiminez, Pixar Animation Studios; Kendal Cronkhite, DreamWorks Feature Animation; Kathy Alteri, DreamWorks Feature Animation; Tom Bancroft, Funnypages Productions, LLC; Chris Renaud, Blue Sky Studios; Mike Thurmeier, Blue Sky Studios; Sande Scoredos, Sony Pictures Imageworks; Nathan Greno, Walt Disney Feature Animation; Barry Cook, Story Artist and Director; Steve Gordon, Professional Story Artist; Jim Story, Instructor of Story at University of Central Florida; Paul Briggs, Walt Disney Feature Animation; Frank Gladstone, Independent Animation Consultant

Videotaping:

Phil Chiochio

Scriptwriters:

Nick Pierce and Christianne Greiert

Actors:

Katherine Michelle Tanner, Adam Ratner, Christianne Greiert

Illustrators and Photographers:

Mike Peters, Adam D. Martens, Gary Schumer

Other Great People Who Helped Us Connect with Other People:

Patricia Galvis-Assmus, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Brent Adams, Brigham Young University; Larry Bafia, Vancouver Film School; Thomas Haegele and Tina Ohnmacht, Flimakademie, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany; Marilyn Friedman, Olivier Mouroux, Fumi Kitahara, DreamWorks Feature Animation; Steven Argula, Pixar Animation Studios; Christina Witoshkin, Blue Sky Studios; Samantha Brown, Sony Pictures Imageworks; Billy Merritt, Ringling College of Art and Design; Tyson Sturgeon, Elsevier; and all of our friends who provided constant encouragement.

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The Purpose of Storytelling: Analyzing *Dag and The Dinosaur*

Once, there was a great tribe that lived in caves near what is now ZhouKouDain in China.

They were not so different from what we are today. They played games, enjoyed each other's company, raised their families, and worked.

One of the toughest jobs in the tribe was hunting. The best hunter in the tribe was an Upperman named Dag. He was proud of his ability to bring in game quickly. In those days, the hunt lasted until there was a kill. The hunter would never return to the tribe without food. It would disappoint the tribe and the hunter would be disgraced. Dag was rarely out more than one day on a hunt. Because he was so good, he was appointed the task of training the new hunters in the tribe. So one day, Dag set out taking with him a new partner, Og.



Dag taught Og all that he knew, but they had not caught a single thing. They had been hunting for *four* days. They had traveled farther from the tribe than they had ever been before.

Dag was worried. In addition to being hungry themselves, they knew their tribe must be impatient and hungry as well. They were restlessly settling down by their campfire, bemoaning their bad luck, when things went from bad to worse.

Thump! Thump! Bam! Boom!



Dag and Og jumped to their feet! It happened again, Thump! Thump! Bam! Boom! From out of the brush came a large sharp-toothed monster!

They had never seen anything like it. They thought it was a dinosaur!

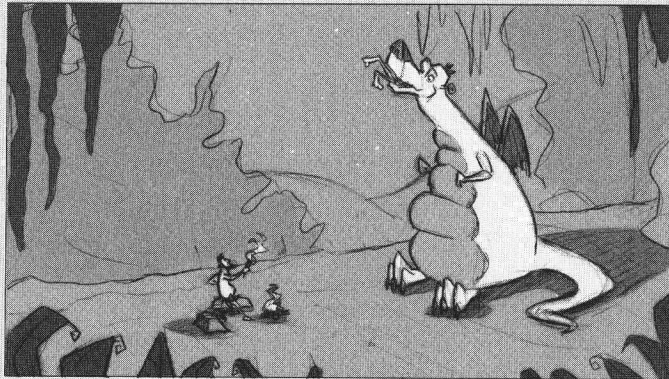
But it couldn't have been a dinosaur. The dinosaurs died out long ago.

It really didn't matter. Whatever it was, they were under attack.

Dag grabbed a log of fire and braced himself. Og started to run. The dinosaur moved between them. They were divided.

The dinosaur looked at Dag—he waved his fire. It looked at Og. Og ran. In one step, the dinosaur caught him and ate him up. Then it turned back toward Dag. Dag waved his fire. He screamed and waved his fire and threw it at the beast. And do you know what happened?

... The beast left!

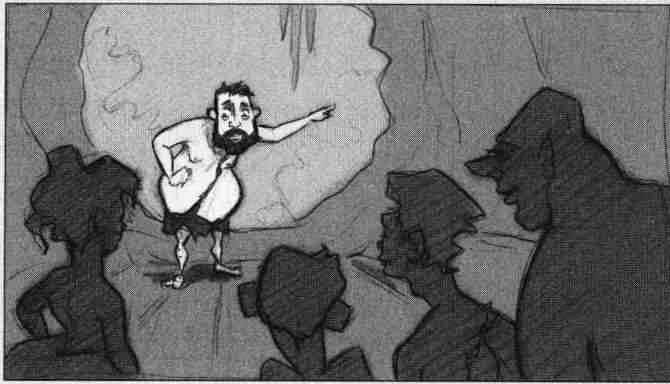


Dag ran, as fast as he could, back to the tribe.

"Where is our food?" they asked, "Where is Og?"

"No, no, no, you don't understand . . .," exclaimed Dag and he began to tell them his story.

"Og and I were settling down for the night. The hunting trip had not been going well. We were talking about our bad luck—when a dinosaur attacked us." At this the tribe laughed.



"I know, I KNOW—it couldn't have been a dinosaur—but it was something like that with big teeth! I picked up a log of fire. I don't know why—I just did."

"Og ran. Og got eaten. But me—I waved my fire! I screamed and threw my fire at the dinosaur. . . ." The tribe laughed.

"Pay attention!" shouted Dag. "I threw fire at the dinosaur! And do you know what happened?! It LEFT! I ran back here to tell you. . . ."

The tribe thought about this. They talked about it. They decided, as a group, to stay close to home and always have fire with them. They agreed to never go near the land where the dinosaur lived.

This worked really well for them for many years. But eventually the animals near their home started dwindling in numbers. They found themselves venturing farther and farther on the hunt, creeping closer and closer to the dinosaur's home.

During one hunt, Dag, and his new partner Nog, were settling down for the night. Nog was nervous. They were very close to the border of the dinosaur's home.



Dag was already asleep and Nog had finally begun to relax when—Thump! Thump! Bam! Boom!

Both men started to their feet! They grabbed their flaming logs. They stood back to back. They were ready.

From the brush emerged two large feet. Attached to these feet was a huge body with large scales lining the back and flowing all the way down to the tip of a strong tail. At the top of the body was a large head with huge nostrils. From the nostrils, there were trails of smoke. It was the largest, scariest creature that Nog had ever seen.

Dag and Nog looked at each other. They were in agreement. They shoved the points of their flaming logs together and they showed the beast their fire.

Then, the beast showed them HIS fire. Nog was burned to a crisp. Poof! Just like that, ashes floated to the ground. Nothing was left.

