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UNHINGED

by Gayane Bagdasaryan

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IMAGING ARTS/COMPUTER ANIMATION
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
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November 2011

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Abstract

“Unhinged” is an animated graduate thesis film 7 minutes, 30 seconds long, which was originally conceived as a story about decision making, and it turned into a story about loneliness and an acceptance of it. It tells a story of a troll, Lancelot, who carries on a lonely life in a neglected cabin in the middle of a desert. He entertains himself by playing masquerade with his friends, mannequins-hat-holders. One day he hears a knock on the door and struggles with fear to open the door.

This film is a hand-drawn animation that was mostly produced in TVPaint Animation Software. It is done in full color and has an elaborated soundtrack.

This paper outlines the whole film creation process from the very beginning of an idea development stage until receiving a response and critique. It describes all my inventions, obstacles, failures, and successes, as well as technical specifics of the process.

Acknowledgments

Amongst all the contribution to this film, I would like to thank my thesis advisor and chair, professor Brian Larson, at the School of Film and Animation. He was a great support who kept my motivation high, criticized me when it was necessary, and was my indispensable advisor who supported me from the idea stage to the final screenings of the film. Being highly organized by Brian I was able to complete my seven-and-a-half minute animated thesis film within one year, while it seemed impossible for almost everyone else. I also would like to express my gratitude to Professor Tom Gasek and Professor Skip Battaglia, as my committee members they offered many invaluable suggestions and constructive feedback. I also would like to thank David Sluberski for his great help with audio postproduction, and Shreyasi Das, who assisted me during the production stage of my film, raising my inspiration and making me feel like a real director. This project would not be possible without the help of my classmates, especially during those moments when I could find almost all graduate lab students working on my project. I would like to thank Fulbright for giving me the opportunity to obtain my Master in Fine Arts degree in Animation and the Small Graduate Student Research and Creativity Support Grant at the RIT, without their financial support it would be impossible for me to afford such a project.

Last but not least, I would like to express my heart-felt gratitude to my family and their encouragement during the year of study at RIT and particularly to my Mom, who came all the way from Russia to Rochester to attend the final screenings of my film.

Introduction

Creation of the graduate thesis film “Unhinged” began in March 2010 and lasted until May 2011 as a final project within the MFA animation program at the School of Film and Animation of Rochester Institute of Technology. My work was arranged under supervision of my thesis committee members, Brian Larson, Tom Gasek, and Skip Battaglia. The whole process consisted of preproduction: story development, concept design, character and background design, storyboards and layouts; production: animation and coloring; and postproduction: compositing, visual effects, color correction, credits, sound and music design.

I had three main goals for this project. My first and most important goal was to try myself as a director and create a memorable film. Although it was a school project, I tried my best to organize the film creation process similar to one at the professional studio environment. I wanted to plan the whole production process correctly, lead and make decisions, choose assistants and properly delegate the work, and, consequently, be responsible for everything.

My second goal was to prove that I am an animator and able to handle serious emotional character animation. I wanted to apply all my knowledge of animation principles and drawing skills, use complex space perspective, and interesting camera angles.

My last goal was to tell a story through traditional hand-drawn animation. Recent popular trends in 3D animation make traditional hand-drawn animation seem old fashioned; however, personally I prefer traditional animation, and I believe that its uniqueness and beauty should be always maintained and widely spread.

In addition to all these goals, I had a challenge to complete the project within my last year at RIT because of my immigration status. As a Fulbright grantee, I had to follow my sponsor’s rules; my Certificate of Eligibility for Exchange Visitor Status was expiring on May 21, 2011, and by no means could I extend my stay in the US. Therefore, I was obliged to submit my film to the SOFA screenings in May 2011.

Preproduction

Story development

Development of a story is a very important and difficult part of a film creation process, especially taking into account that a thesis film is the first serious film project requesting a well-considered story to create and live with for an entire year. It was a journey with many attempts before I came up with a solid story.

I began to develop a story for my thesis film while I was enrolled in the Big Apple Animation Program with Tom Gasek during spring 2010. We were based in NYC, and among all courses we had a thesis research course once a week where we discussed our thesis ideas under Tom's supervision. That discussion often continued at home between four of my classmates and me, because we were sharing an apartment in Brooklyn Chinatown. On the same subject I was corresponding with Brian Larson back and forth through emails, who at that moment was at RIT.

I had many ideas for a story, and it took me three months to decide in favor of one of them. It was a big choice whether should I use an existing story or create my own. Originally, I intended to use one of the old Middle East Hodja Nasreddin¹ stories. Brian Larson suggested many aspects I should consider and, particularly, that searching for a story out of the blue was often very limited, especially for a thesis film. The thesis project gave me an opportunity to show what I had learned in school and express myself as an animator, artist, storyteller, and individual, and it was more than just another school project. My job was to show knowledge, creativity, and innovation, and it was a good place to look for an idea. I had to ask myself these questions: What do I want to do as an animator? What do I find fascinating that I want to explore or be a part of? I looked back at my admission letter, the one I wrote when I applied to school at RIT. In that letter I indicated my goals to learn all aspects of traditional animation and film language. I wanted to explore character acting and performance, use of color, and all aspects of film language, as well as storytelling. I wanted to prove to the world and myself that I am an animator with something to say. A thesis is a statement that ought to be defended, so I had to find a subject, story, theme, problem, or something about the field of animation to which I wanted to provide an answer. According to Brian Larson:

...Even if your "thesis" is "I want to explore character acting and performance" then that should be how you construct your story. So the Nasreddin idea can be a good start, but what do you want to do with it? How will it prove to yourself and the world that you are an animator with something to say? This is the hard part, but also the very fun part. You get to set yourself on the cliff's edge and craft the wings you need to fly off, a very compelling place to be! Be creative, say something, and take this opportunity to make exactly the film you want, these chances are few and far between after this.

¹ A Turkish satirical figure, populist philosopher, and wise man, remembered for his funny stories and anecdotes

Thus, it was settled that I was writing my own story and, apparently, finding a story line first. One of the first ideas was to create a life cycle of a person full of greed and consumption, to show the struggling throughout his life and transforming into innocence again before he dies. This philosophical idea was debated and called too epic. Therefore, the consensus was made that I should draw my attention to a more simple idea.

I was trying to find inspiration by reading classic and contemporary literature. Brian Larson suggested that I read short stories by Fernando Sorrentino,² who has a wry way of writing, and Brian thought that it was a little bit like mine. I read “Hitting me With Umbrella,” “The Return,” and “A Lifestyle,” and it brought me some ideas; however, I still couldn’t find my story there.

The criteria to a story were the following: be simple and short, full of imagination, transformations, and metamorphoses, character animation, and good color work, for example, as they used in the animated film “Anna and Bella” by Borge Ring.³ I tried to find an inspiration amongst children’s books, as they are very imaginative. Italian writer Gianni Rodari’s⁴ tales carried me away. As a result, I came up with a following story:

A House in A Desert

There is a huge house in a middle of a desert built of coins and bills. A very rich man lives there keeping all his fortune built in the house. All interior objects are made of different coins and bills: windows, stairs, bathrooms, lamps, chairs, and even books in his library. He sits in a living room made of coins on a comfortable armchair made of coins in front of a fireplace made of coins and he tenderly strokes the pages of a book made of bills.

Suddenly he hears a knock on the door. He is surprised. He does not expect anybody to come visit him. He gets anxious of not knowing who is on the other side of the door. ‘Knock, knock...’ He listens, and this sound immediately fires up his imagination. He imagines that he opens the door and sees an army of gangsters with weapon pointing at him. They kick him out of the house, and a huge helicopter hooks onto his house and steals it away. He ends up living in a desert in a tent.

‘Knock-knock...’ Knock on the door again. He comes back to his own senses. Looks at the door and becomes more worried. Gradually, he gets plunged into a new imagination in which he opens the door and sees two hungry and frozen poor children asking for money. He angrily shuts the door and turns back to his chair. But children keep knocking on the door. At last, he takes pity and gives them the door made of coins. Children take the door and leave. He returns to his book, but suddenly hears noise outside. He looks from the window made of coins and sees a huge line of poor people counting on his generosity and waiting for some parts of his house. As a result, they take his house apart, and he ends up living in a desert in a tent.

A knock on the door wakes him up again. He listens to it. ‘Knock...’ and then silence. He sighs and keeps reading.

² An Argentine writer

³ The Oscar-winning Danish animation director

⁴ An Italian writer and journalist, most famous for his books for children

CREDITS... A postman is walking away from the house in the desert holding his messenger bag in one arm and a newspaper in the other. The title on a first page of a newspaper says, "Attention! Denomination..."

I received the following feedback from Brian Larson:

The new script is good. It has a lot of good visuals. I am confused by the ending with the newspaper, but this can be resolved later. This has a very Dickensian feel to it, Mr. Scrooge and all that. His character was actually based on a common 'fear' at the time that creating a welfare state would encourage people to breed and live off the dole, and the character represented the fear society had of poverty and poor people. You may have a strong connection to that in your film whether you realize it or not. To me the ending is left open, which I like better than having him make a decision. The 'sigh' can be very telling, I think. Maybe you leave it with him about to make a decision, but don't actually show it, so the audience gets to fill in how they would act?

From my point of view, I too preferred to leave the story open ended and leave the audience to resolve the conclusion. However, the story still seemed too abstract and impersonal, and I kept rewriting it. I came across Jansson Tove's⁵ "The Mommins" tales during my research, and they inspired me to use a troll as a main character and a surreal environment. As a result, I came up with a new story:

An evening in a desert and the sun shows its last rays. There is a sequoia in the middle of the desert. A huge absurd-looking house-castle is squeezed onto the sequoia's top. A warm light spreads out of the one little window of this castle. That is a living room where Moomin troll is sitting on the floor and playing with hats. The living room is huge, richly furnished, poorly lighted, and filled with big variety of hats. There are many different pictures on the walls with different Moomin trolls in various hats. In old pictures he is presented with other Moomin trolls, perhaps his family, and in the newer ones he is alone and wears different hats. The patches of light from the fireplace dance on Moomin troll's face. Moomin troll tenderly takes a hat from one pile, tries it on, and places it on another pile, expressing appropriate emotion on the face according to the hat. For example, he becomes serious with top hat on or whistles in a cowboy hat. He changes hats one by one. The atmosphere is warm but lonely.

Suddenly, he hears a knock on the door. Taken by a surprise, he drops a hat and looks at the door. He hesitates to open it and keeps staring at the door and automatically picks up the dropped hat. Close up to the face. His eyes look worried. The knock becomes persistent, and the door starts shaking. Transition to his imagination through blurriness. He imagines that he unlocks the door, and the door opens quickly. The frightening robbers invade his house ready to beat and rob him. He slowly draws back, and his eyes are fear. He grasps the hat tighter and shrivels up with fear into the corner. The thieves slowly approach him. The face of Moomin troll is full of fear; he peeps out through the hat in his hands. The invaders get closer and closer...

'Knock, knock.' Transition back to the real living room. Moomin troll is still in the same place, frightened, with a cold sweat on his forehead. He wipes it off with his sleeve. Sigh of relief. 'Knock. Knock.' He startles and looks at the door and then at the hat in his hands. He quickly puts on the hat and pulls it over his ears and screws up his eyes. Transition through blurriness. He imagines a postman on the other side of the door holding a letter for him. He opens the door and gets excited about the letter, quickly opens it up and starts to smile. His

⁵ Tove Marika Jansson was a Swedish-Finnish novelist, painter, illustrator, and comic strip author

face is full of happiness, and room fills up with light. Transition through blurriness. He opens up the letter and becomes sad. His eyes are full of tears.

‘Knock.’ Back to reality. Moomin troll is still in the same place. He shakes his head and looks at the door again. Worried look changes to reverie. Gradually, the music changes to a cheerful melody. The room lights up brighter and becomes full of light. He hears the sounds of laughter and a quick knock on the door. He runs to the door, opens it and sees friends smiling at him. They hug him and dance around. The room is full of happiness.

‘Knock, knock, knock...’ Back to reality. Moomin troll is confused. He reaches out to the door then pulls back. Then slowly approaches to the door. Draws his ear closer to the door and listens. After a while his hand slowly reaches the door handle... Credits.

In this story I used Moomin troll as a main character but was not going to use the same Moomin as in Tove’s tales. By “Moomin troll” I meant a troll-kind of character in order to abstract him from a human being. As for the story, it was still about decision making, but I avoided a money theme this time. The benefits of this script included possibilities to play with different emotions such as fear, sadness, happiness, and joy and to leave it open ended. Moreover, in terms of visuals, it required good work with color. Brian Larson marked this attempt successful:

This story has some great visuals. I love the hats, but I am not sure how they affect his actions or fears to what is on the other side of the door. The story seems to be more about fear of the unknown, and the hats suggest a different thread in the story. I wonder if he needs to peek out a tiny hole in the window and see something unrecognizable, like a letter or a beard, so it could be anyone or anything, then his imagination can take off. The hats at the beginning are a great allegory to his emotions, but then they stop being a part of the story. How do you see the hats fitting in this story? In one word, what do you think this story is ‘about’?

Remember, your story needs great visuals and only a mediocre story to be memorable. Keep the idea loose and put in room for good visual storytelling.

So I had to clarify the story I wanted to get to and what was it about. In my explanation, Moomin is lonely and isolated, and the hats are his only occupation. They serve the role of his friends; therefore, Moomin plays with them as he would play with his friends. I show just a regular evening in Moomin’s life, when something new and unexpected happens to him. Moomin, like any of us, thinks of possible outcomes before making a decision, falls into his imagination of possible outcomes, and sees them in the most realistic light. His first imaginings take root in a fear of the unknown (thieves’ invasion), the second comes from a curiosity (unexpected mail), the third comes from exciting expectations (friends/family). The story is about a struggle for a decision.

With this explanation I answered the main questions and at that point I had enough of a story to pass the proposal phase. According to Brian, “The meat of the story was told.” I had a solid framework for the story, and the details did not matter as much at that point; I could keep it loose and figure out the details of action, shots, etc. in pre-production. The emphasis on the intention to work on character animation full of emotions and acting made the piece strong.

The proposal went smoothly, and all review committee members approved my script (Appendix A). However, Tom Gasek advised me to narrow down the film to just two imaginations for Lancelot:

I think this works well but my concern is that the troll has too many dark and bad images in his mind about who is behind the door. I think you can make a short film with only two images of who is behind the door. He can imagine the robbers and then the happy friends. This makes the choices clear, simple and easy to understand. You can spend a good minute setting up the beginning of this film and the other minute with the bad imagination and then a final minute with the good imagination and with the other details like what he does in the end, your film could be about 3 to 4 minutes long. That is long enough and it will give you a chance to do a really nice job. So his choices are fear or life. It's as simple as that... Keep your film simple and clear and spend the time on the animation and expression... I like not knowing who's there at the end...

I followed his advice and narrowed down the story. I finalized the script later on during pre-production stage, and the change also influenced the story line itself. After much deliberation I brought some personal fears and feelings to it. The story became about an acceptance of loneliness. I abstracted from the reality by using an unknown time, place, and creature, who I named Lancelot. I wanted to tell about my experience of being lonely and being capable of living with it. By Skip Battaglia's suggestion I added a secondary character represented by the spider named Spidy, coexisting in the same cabin to bring some humor to this dark story. Spidy's presence referred to a fact that a human is an element of a society and, as a result, surrounded by other elements; however, it does not mean that one is not lonely. Lancelot had Spidy next to him, but he did not consider him as his friend, having no emotional attachment to the spider. However, at the end of the film he realizes that instead of wishing for the imaginary friends, he should content himself with what destiny provides him.

I placed Lancelot in a very isolated area without any notion of where it could be located. One can wonder if this is Earth or any other planet in our universe. Fear was represented through a demon's invasion from some nightmare, and love was represented through appearance of his grandfather, who perhaps passed away a long time ago. As a result, the synopsis of the film turned out as follows:

Little troll Lancelot carries on a lonely life in the isolated cabin in a middle of a desert. He entertains himself by one-actor play where he is the main character, and the audience is a huge collection of mannequin-hat-holders and a spider who shares the same cabin. One day a knock on the door takes Lancelot by surprise. He is confused as to whether he should open the door or not, and he imagines who might be on the other side. In his first imagination his fears take over him, and a demon comes ready to destroy Lancelot and all his company. In the second imagination he remembers his beloved grandfather, whom he wants to embrace tightly and fly up to the sky. And finally, as a reality comes, he has to forget about all his fears and open the door...

The hats and the spider correlate to isolation. They are objects that Lancelot wants to protect as, for example, a flower in animated film “The Hand” by Jiri Trnka.⁶ That is described by the term “objective correlative,” which is mentioned in T.S. Eliot’s essay on Hamlet in 1919:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of arts is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (In J.A. Cuddon’s *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, p. 647).

For example, in scene 9 the demon destroys the spider and sweeps the hats off the shelves, and Lancelot expresses horror and fear. The setting is a dark cabin with blackening air, the colors become contrasting, and the magenta color palette dominates. Most of the viewers reacted the same way emotionally; they were afraid for Lancelot.

The spider also serves the role of the secondary story line, which supports another layer of understanding. However, the main task was to not make it confusing.

Dialog and its absence

Unhinged has no dialog for two reasons. First, I believe that animation is a great illustrative tool, and it does not really need any dialog. It is to be seen and not heard. I wanted to make my animation work wonderfully using the power of visual film language without the need of using dialogue. In addition, it is more challenging to show what the character is thinking or feeling without saying it. For another reason, as an international student I wanted to create a film that would be easily understood worldwide without any subtitles.

⁶ A Czech puppet maker, illustrator, motion-picture animator, and film director

Concept Design

Concept design consisted of a character and a background design. It began in June 2010 and moved into the storyboards and layouts stage in late fall 2010. Originally, I intended to complete all concept design during a summer 2010 independent study with Brian Larson while I was in NYC doing my internship at the Museum of the Moving Image. During this independent study I had to do research on my characters and do as many sketches as possible and discuss them with Brian on Skype⁷ conference calls once a week. Doing my best trying to handle the internship, independent study, and a family visit at the same time I did a satisfactory job of exploring my character and environment design and arrived at a design that had some potential. Although, Brian gave me a B grade for this independent study course, I considered my attempt unsuccessful and took Brian's Character Design course one more time during fall 2010. I did a better job this time, and by the end of fall quarter, I achieved a solid, finished, and detailed rendering of Lancelot and Spidy and prepared their detailed model sheets with turnarounds at the beginning of December, just before I moved into the animation stage.

Before I started doing character and background design, I had to determine what design elements and concepts I should be aware of and formalize the description of the characters and environment, which could keep me focused on needs of the character and film, as opposed to allowing me to settle for a good drawing that was not necessarily a good design. I had to use my sense of design and space and keep all descriptions in mind when I drew, in order to get a growing, evolving, maturing character.

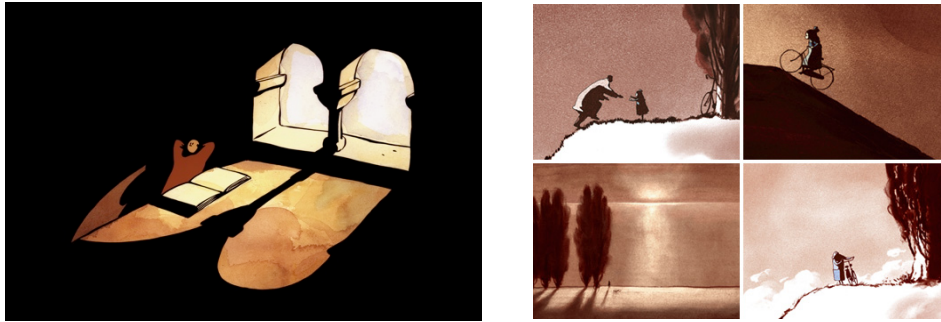
Design and other Considerations

There were many things I considered before making design decisions. In my opinion, design is a combination of color and tone, composition, different lines and shapes, and texture that gives uniqueness and harmony to the appearance of an object and gives a visually satisfying effect. I would use different types of shapes and lines to represent the personality of my character (triangular for antagonist and rounded for protagonist), composition and layout to create a space (relationship between different areas in the scene in order to have enough room for the character's motion), and color and texture to create the mood of a scene and to provide a contrast between a character and a background. The design should help to tell the story, and it could make one scene understood totally different. Plenty of bright colors and light could make it happy; however, dark colors could make it sad and full of danger. Shaky boiling lines and rough strokes are preferable for an uncertain and fearful character, while smooth steady lines are more likely for a peaceful character; bold lines for a powerful character, and thin lines for a weak one. Therefore, the design should relate to the meaning of the object and, moreover, strengthen and enrich it and work seamlessly with the film. During the

⁷ A software application that allows users to make voice and video calls over the Internet

concept design stage, I was trying to think of all these design elements, but in most cases they were innate to the character.

I also had to come up with a style for my film. Initially, I envisioned the film having a simple design. For example, one of my favorite animation directors, Michael Dudok De Wit,⁸ uses simple backgrounds and characters; however, a combination of wise composition and strong contrast between shadows and light makes his films emotionally powerful.



Picture 1. Stills from “The Monk and the Fish” and “Father and Daughter” by Michael Dudok De Wit.

I also always respected Disney’s realistic style of characters, whose personalities come through movement, not design.



Picture 2. Production stills from “The Sword in the Stone,” “The Princess and the Frog,” and “Pinocchio” by Walt Disney Animation Studio.

As a result, I saw my character fitting somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of volume in a character (somewhere in between Disney and Dudok’s styles). Despite my very expressive drawing style, which often has rough and inaccurate lines and color bleeding, I decided to challenge myself and attempt to draw as realistic and accurately as possible. Practically, I did not have enough time to draw very realistically because I had to compete with the whole film production within one year. However, I still wanted to emphasize the character movement in 3-D space and give enough attention to the color and line quality.

⁸ Michael Dudok de Wit is the OSCAR winning animator, director, and illustrator from the Netherlands.

Character Design

The story set me up with four characters: Lancelot, Spidy, Demon, and Grandfather, with Lancelot as a main character. Initially, I wanted to keep Lancelot similar to the original Tove Jansson's Moomins. However, I realized that I needed to add some changes for copyright reasons and to avoid my audience bringing any pre-conceived notions, expectations, or baggage to the film. I had to establish the character and mood for my audience, by no means doing it before the film even starts. I started with the existing designs of the Moomins, and I took them to a different level, more personal, explicit to the film, and able to carry the story I have created.

Lancelot

He looks like an alien with bright green color skin. He has long triangular ears, no tail, big potato-shaped nose, medium-size eyes, short legs, and long arms. His outfit is frayed and consists of a light grey shirt and dark grey pants. He is barefoot.

He is lonely but never bored. He is self-sufficient and can entertain himself with any object by a quick strike of imagination. Although he is free to express himself the way he wants, he is afraid to look absurd and struggles with many inner conflicts. For example, he would not play masquerade in front of a live audience (he does not count the spider as a real audience; the spider is his critic, a smallish consciousness). His friend is his imagination, and everything else is not important for him. He disguises his shyness and naivety by courage. His life is routine, and he does not expect anything unknown, mysterious, or uncommon to happen to him.

He has a big collection of different hats and hat-holders. He likes to dust them and enjoys going through all of them and carefully trying them on. He is very spontaneous and awkward, hitting against all corners on his way. He likes special rooms and a hot sun, but he lives in a very windy desert and a tight space with no window. He is a hopeless romantic and dreamer. He contemplates the sunrise in the early morning, the only time a day he is able to see the sun because of a windstorm for the rest of the day. He reads the only newspaper he has every afternoon and shortly falls into daydreaming and thinking about philosophical themes. Then he cooks a dinner.

He has a meal once a day at 5 pm, drinking only tea for the rest of day. His favorite snack is ginger tea with lemon and dry doughnuts. His favorite meal is soft-boiled eggs and fish. When dinner is served on the table, he chooses one hat reflecting his mood to wear during dinner. (It does not matter where the food and home goods come from.)

Lancelot is a strong protagonist with some weaknesses. He is not brave enough to open the door right away. The audience should empathize with him, and understand his struggle with a decision to open the door. I wanted the audience to follow easily Lancelot's imagination and feel exactly the same feelings that he feels.

Spider ("Spidy")

Spider is a small spider-type creature, quiet and agreeable. It coexists in same cabin with Lancelot, but is not noticed by him. His body is a round, fuzzy, light-grey ball with only two dark eyes and an orange spot around one eye. He has eight legs and moves very quickly. Spider was chosen as a shape varying from the other shapes in the film.

Demon

Demon is a relatively big, intimidating, black, amorphous creature with long crackling limbs and wears a hard-wooden, red carnival mask with two sharp horns on the top that symbolically represents devil. His eyes dangerously glow and could send blasts of fire. He hovers above the surface.

Grandfather

Grandfather is a troll-type of old man. He is a very cheerful, kind, and warm person. He wears glasses, a long beard, and a grey hat and a coat of the early 20th century.

After creating the characters' descriptions, I had to represent these details visually. First of all, Lancelot's body structure had to reflect all his character peculiarities. For example, I had to give Lancelot a big face to make him expressive and hunched shoulders to show his inner conflicts and awkwardness. All these points brought me to a long exploration. I was doing many sketches, trying to get a good variety and different looks, experimenting with any details I did not expect to work. At some point I was set on a design, and afterwards it was difficult to try new things and more experiments.



Picture 3. Revision sheet by Brian Larson with a few of the most potential designs.

In this revision sheet Brian Larson chose some favorites and added some suggestions:

The top guy has potential, but he is so stumpy he may be hard to move around. If you want to have him walk (a great way to show emotion) he needs legs or you need to figure out how to wobble him along. Middle left: just trying to develop him further. The suit might work, but it places him in the present time, makes him more of a disfigured businessman. I didn't add the hair, which looks good on yours, but so hard to animate consistently! Middle right: some real potential in the face, but the body needs more character. The ears may present a problem with all the different hats? This particular hat is too much like a spy hat; he will be categorized as a spy if you use this. Research your costumes more. Bottom: the pig-like dude: I tried to make the nose more human. He still looks like a pig, maybe the body needs work. He has the most empathetic face.

My mistake was that I was thinking too much about the style of the final line at that point, and I was sacrificing the structure in the design stage. I needed to know how those characters would be constructed, so I could redraw them hundreds of times. I was very loose in my sketches, which made it difficult to redraw the character, because the basic shapes and forms were too hard to find and duplicate. In some of my drawings, Lancelot looked like a French spy and had a design that did not match my story. Some of my drawings were too underdeveloped, with blocky and uninteresting forms; others were too human looking, or chicken or even pig-like, and others had good expressions and a nice variety of shapes. However, overall all my drawings were very sketchy and needed to be more developed.

Therefore, Brian directed me to focus on the main points of character design:

1. Focus on solid drawings.

2. Figure out the details in the sketches: arms, hands, clothes, does he have eyebrow ridges on his face? Does he have a neck? Legs? How does he walk? If he needs to gesticulate in the film, he may need more expressive arms. If you are going to rely on facial expression to evoke the emotion from the audience, do we need to see his mouth more? Eyebrows are great for adding expression. What is the basic construction of his face? Does he have cheekbones? How does he look from 3/4 view?

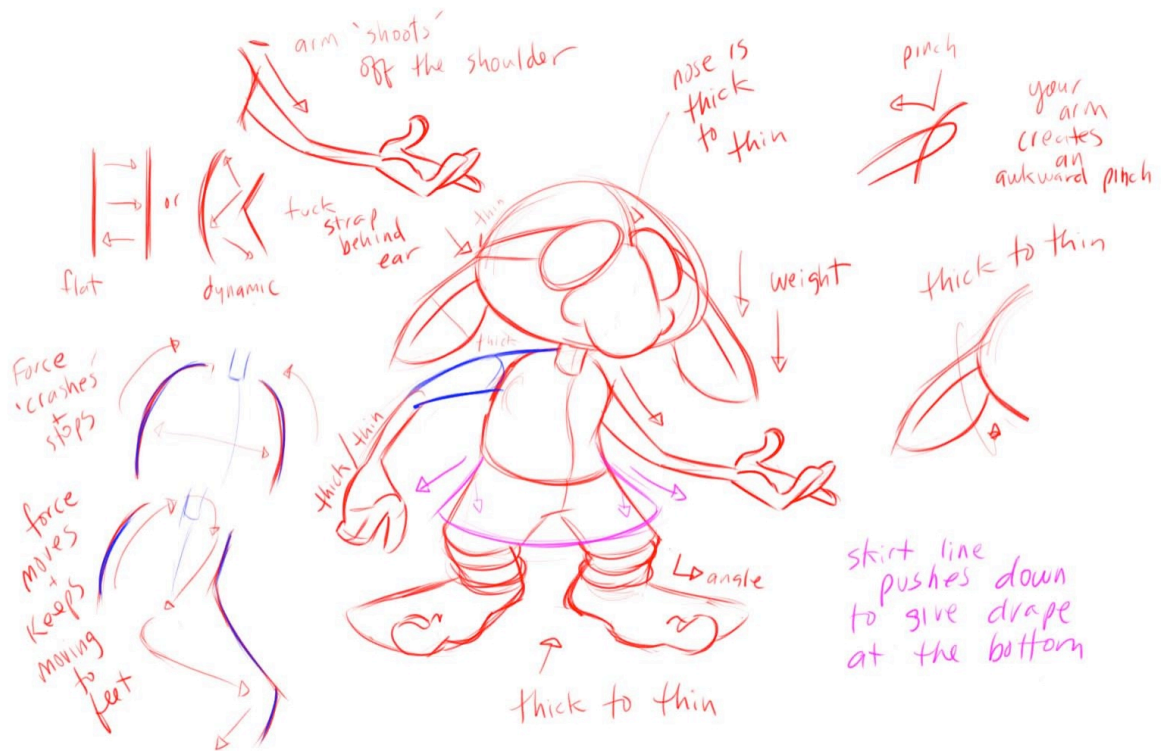
3. Look again at the personality of the character. You need to let your audience respond to him. He needs to look like a troll, but he also needs to gain our sympathy, we need to want to like him. But he cannot look pathetic. How do you resolve this? How does he change over the course of the film? He needs to show emotion (fear, hope, etc.) and move around? His arms need to be long enough to put a hat on his head, but if they are too long in relation to a short body, they look weird, right? So maybe a longer body. Some knees? Is a troll supposed to be a disfigured human? Or a new race of creature entirely?

At the end of my independent study I came up with a chosen design:



Picture 4. Lancelot's chosen design at the end of independent study.

After reviewing this design, Brian provided me with a sheet of suggestions in order to refine, solidify, and make consistent all design elements. I had to be constantly aware of the story limitations, Lancelot's animatability (movement), and how well he fits in with the tone, mood, and emotional demands of the script as well as the backgrounds.



Picture 4. Character revision sheet by Brian Larson.

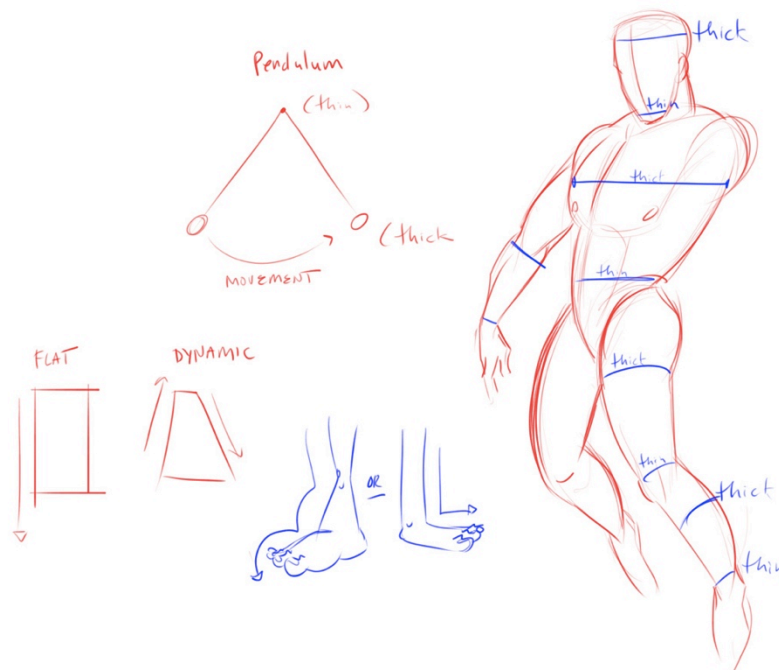
First, use some anatomical logic, how his ears are attached for example, and that the goggle band needs to go either over or under (probably over) his ears, you have it going in to his ear. Look for structural, anatomy in little details like the ear. When you know the anatomy you are drawing each frame, it's easier to keep consistent than if you leave things like 'a little round-ish'. Try 'it bends in the middle and comes to a point' instead. Look at his ears for an example of this. Even his face needs some more consistent construction. Is it round? Oval? Does he have cheeks? How far up his head do the cheeks attach? Do his eyes (or glasses) dip below the point where his ears attach to the head? How big is his nose compared to his ears?

Next, sit the head in to the chest with the neck. It makes a great cradle to move form, as opposed to setting the neck on top of the torso. Also, you have the neck slightly off center; make sure it sits in the middle of the chest. The shoulders: it will be easier if you pull the arms out from the slope of the shoulders so the movement won't look pinched or accidentally allow the shoulder to move up and down the torso depending on how he moves his arms.

Look at the torso; I drew your original off to the left of the page, and my revision below it. Your has a very static construction, the movement (I use the term 'force' here to suggest the inherent tension required for anything to move) does not go anywhere, it just moves back and forth from side to side, trapped in symmetrical borders. But my version, the force is allowed to move through the body, down to his feet, which are anchored and push the force back up

again. This will make animating him MUCH easier as you will be able to see what part can and should move. The example I did just above the two torsos on this page is another example of what I mean. The same principle applies to the skirt (is this a skirt?) I wasn't sure) the lines that define the edges should shoot off and down, suggesting the weight of the fabric, and allowing the middle of the skirt line to drag and drape. Weight moves, static things do not move. That bottom curve also has to suggest the 3-dimensional aspect of his waist as well. Make sure his feet absorb the weight of his body, bend the knees and tuck the heel a little further back. Do you see how the bend in his back actually pushes down on his legs and makes it look like they are bent to carry the bend in his back? Are those rings around his legs? This can be a great dimensional device, but be VERY consistent in how many there are and how thick they are!

There is also a concept of thick to thin. Look at his shoulders to his wrists, his wrists to his hands, his ankles to his toes, the tip of his nose to the end, even his ear from end to tip. They go from thick to thin. This gives weight and angles, and these are much easier to animate and move. Symmetrical shapes are hard to move, and when they are drawn poorly, it is more noticeable.

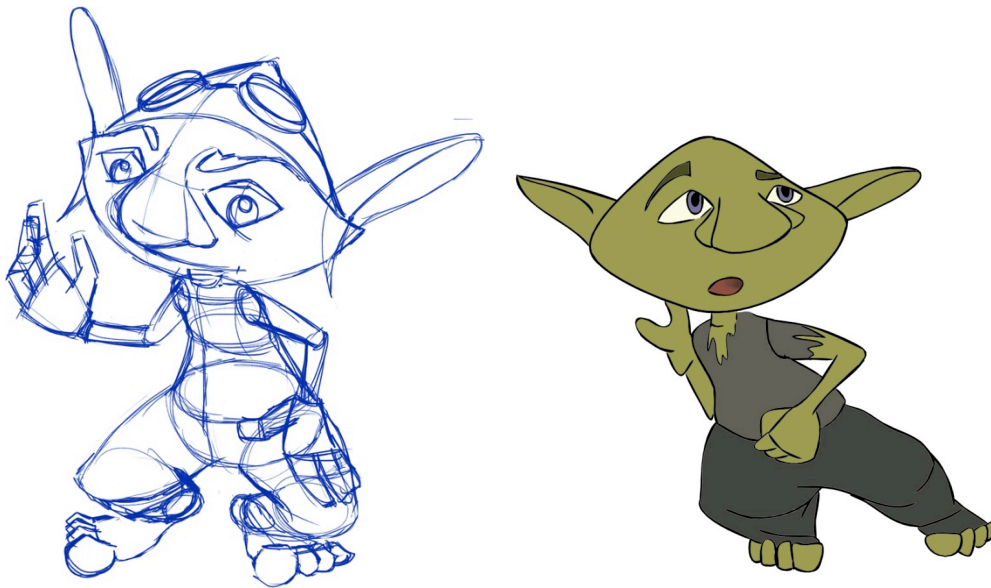


Picture 5. Concept "Thick vs. thin"⁹

So go over this again, and again. Make smart, specific choices about ALL aspects of his design. Make as many size comparison charts as needed so you can re-draw him a zillion times and have it look the same each time. We will do a turnaround to test this, but start here. Know why you make any decision; do not leave anything to chance. Do not use vague terms when you draw, use solid, measured terms. For example, - big hands is not as descriptive as 'his hands are the exact same length as his lower arm'.....

⁹ "The concept of thick vs. thin allows greater visual movement across the silhouette of the form, and this adds tension, intrigue and visual questions, even if subtle. As opposed to symmetrical, evenly spaced forms. They have little movement and come across as 'dead' objects. No visually interesting angles, etc., the human body is based on this concept, as my drawing will show you. Add a little variance; distribute the weight of your characters a little more. Like a pendulum swing, it has a narrow side and a fat side, this gives it movement." (Brian Larson, July 2010)

After a long process of refining, solidifying, and developing the look of Lancelot, I arrived at the final look and created a model sheet with turnaround of him (Appendix B).



Picture 6. Final design of Lancelot in pencil and color.

I did not need the volumetric look I have landed on but knowing the dimensionality of the character helped me animate him. I also removed his hat and elongated his arms as I started to animate, because Lancelot had to try on many hats and be expressive with his arms, since he does not talk.

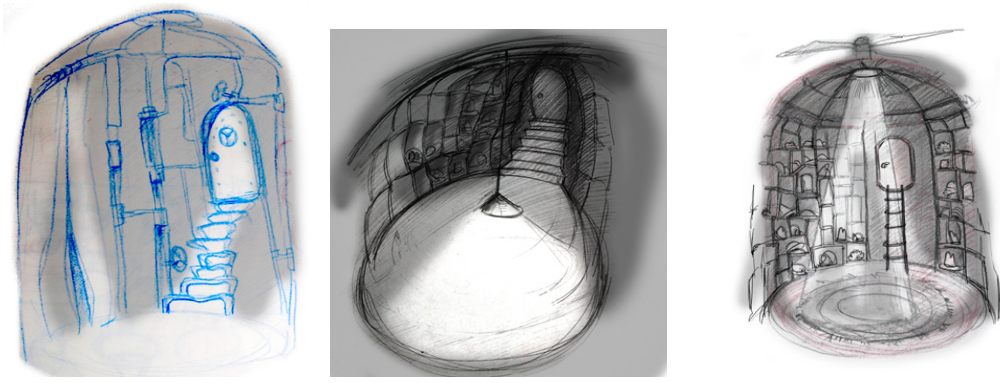
The biggest thing I learned during the character design stage through many failures, attempts, and hundreds of sketches is that the design, character creation and concept development takes time, many efforts, and patience with the details, as well as constant reworking and redrawing in order to make everything look as good as it can and get the concept right. A solid and resolved design is an important reference for layouts and makes the character act consistently in animation.

Background Design

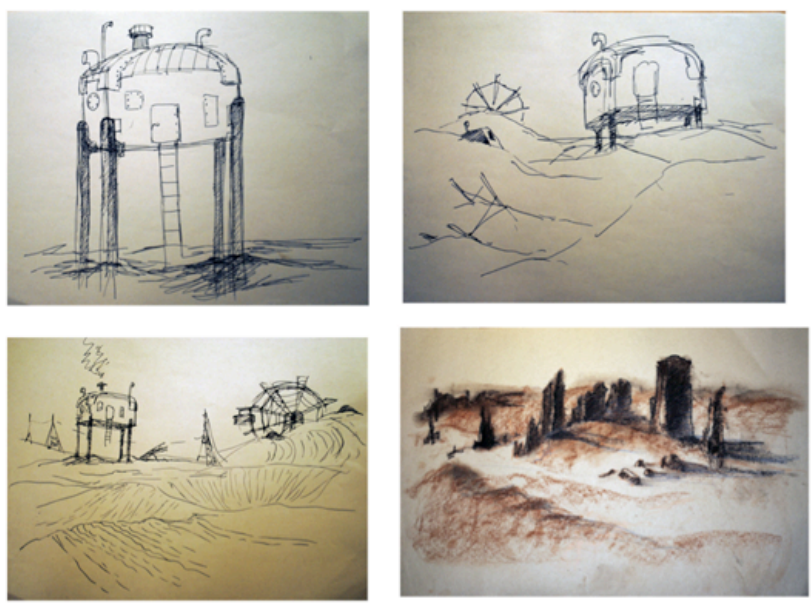
Environment description

Environment is a sand desert with many short pieces of wood scattered around, and a cold, windy atmosphere where the sun appears only during sunrise and a strong windstorm covers the surface afterwards and continues until late night. The only building in the middle of the desert is Lancelot's home, which looks like a neglected space-age cabin. This implies the unknown origin of Lancelot and possibility of his arrival from some unknown planet.

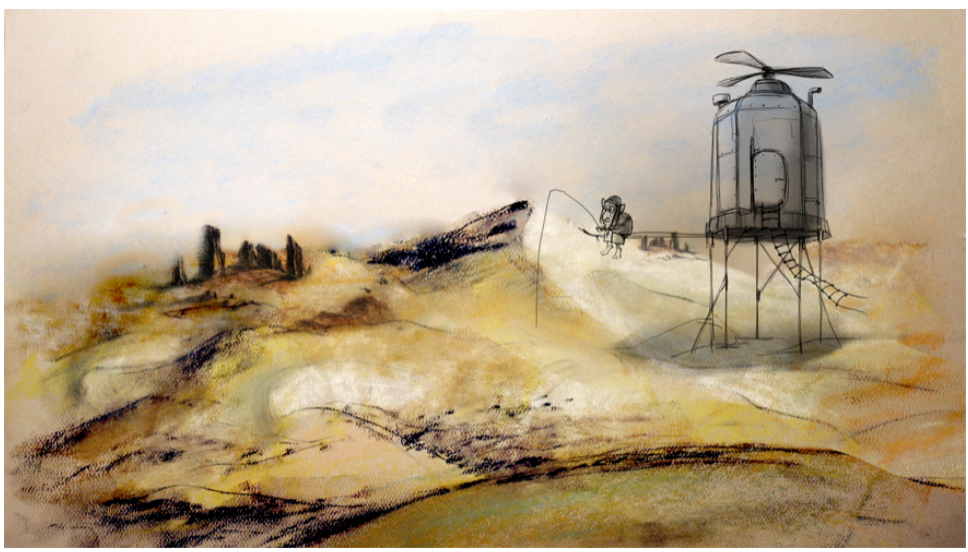
I did sketches of the environment using ink pen in my sketchbook during long hours in the NYC subway on my way home after work. Later, I used them as a reference and did studies using pastel on a large-size pastel paper.



Picture 7. Cabin interior sketches.



Picture 8. Desert sketches.



Picture 9. Final design of the environment.

Storyboards and Animatic

I moved on to the phase of storyboards in the beginning of fall 2010, upon my return to Rochester from NYC and after a one-week break from a tough summer, which I spent in Maryland clearing my mind by reading the “Twilight” saga by Stephenie Meyer. The storyboards stage was one of the most important stages in the “Unhinged” creation process. I intended to use complex camera angles and play with space. The process took me roughly three months. The boards were drawn pencil on paper and scanned and finalized digitally in TVPaint Animation. In my opinion, storyboarding is a flow of visual and compositional experiments, and I prefer to draw with pencil on paper in order to freely express my vision. I explored many different composition elements and angles of the shots in order to tell my story in a more efficient and interesting way. After the structure of shots were somewhat established, I started putting those boards in After Effects and creating an animatic. My main task was to complete the animatic by Animatic Screenings Night, which took place on October 28, 2010 at the SOFA. These screenings were very useful, because I could get my story in front of a fresh set of eyes and get input on plot, narrative questions, and visual development. I received very constructive feedback, and I also asked the viewers, “What was your emotional reaction after watching this film”? Most of them responded, “At first, the fact that there is no one behind the door makes the film really sad, but there is hope for Lancelot after we see him opening the door the second time. It means he is still hopeful to find someone there at last.”

I spent one month afterwards revising my boards and timing and had the animatic ready by December 2010. As a result, I had 13 scenes (77 shots total) and about 40 backgrounds.

The final stage before I delved into the animation was to prepare everything necessary for it: layouts for all shots, which I drew in TVPaint Animation, clean model sheets with turnarounds for Lancelot and Spidy, and the animatic with final timing.

Production

Animation

Animation is one of my favorite parts of the filmmaking process and was one of my primary goals in this film, so I tried to create the best animation possible in the short time frame given. Animation began in December 2010 and lasted until early April 2011. Animation also was the part of production process that I did not have enough time to fully complete. I picked the most difficult shots for myself: close ups, subtle motions, and Lancelot's facial animation and decided to enlist the help of other people to complete the rest of the shots. The decision for choosing my animation assistants was not difficult. I had known Shreyasi Das, SOFA junior, for several years and appreciated her attitude and skills. I gave all Spidy's animation to Shreaysi, providing her with rough key frames. I also was lucky to involve Sean Melony, Shreyasi's classmate for the demon animation. I believe he was the best fit for the demon animation. I also needed help with some shots of Lancelot and risked acquiring it from across the world from Tatiana Okruzhnova, my former classmate from animation school in Russia. I gave her several long shots with broad movement and provided her with the key poses. It worked out well, and with some corrections we got the look I wanted.

Technique

I used a pose-to-pose style of animation, the technique in which key poses (extremes, important in-betweens and breakdowns) are created to establish the flow, timing, and placement of characters in a shot. I started from drawing pencil-on-paper thumbnails in order to create arcs of motions; the rest of work was done digitally. From shot to shot I was drawing key frames, checking the movement, and then adding in-betweens.

Overall, I did not follow the rule of animating precisely on twos or threes, I could hold a frame as long as it needed. I tried to pay attention to all principles of animation: arcs, follow through, and overlapping, anticipation, squash and stretch, secondary action, etc. I still feel that I could push the acting further in some shots or do it more delicately in others, but, unfortunately, the time frame and upcoming deadline did not allow me to polish it to perfection. For example, I could have elaborated on Lancelot's acting in the shots where he plays masquerade. The most difficult part for me in animation was animating Lancelot from frame to frame on model, moving him in complex space, and drawing his facial expressions on close-up shots.

Software

Brian Larson suggested that I use TVPaint Animation software, and after reviewing my budget, I ordered TVPaint Animation Professional Edition¹⁰ from France and was glad to receive it just in a couple of days. TVPaint Animation is a pixel-based drawing program with a strong emphasis

¹⁰ Pixel-based animation software imitating traditional drawing and animation techniques

on animation and special effects. With the ability to assign almost every function to a hotkey, save brush presets, and create powerful scripts and macros, I was able to optimize TVPaint Animation's interface to suit my workflow. Moreover, it makes the animation process very similar to one on paper, but even faster and more convenient. My favorites were its blue, red, and black sketching pencils for blocking and corresponding erasers. Also, TVP Animation has a very flexible light table feature that allows optimizing the onionskin property according to needs. However, my animation assistants used different tools for animation. Shreyasi used Toon Boom,¹¹ Tatiana used pencil on paper, and Sean used After Effects.

The other important thing was to set up a file-sharing mechanism because I had been widely sharing files with my team. Among all recent file-sharing service providers, I chose Dropbox¹² for its user-friendly interface. I upgraded it to 50GB space to fit all space-consuming image and movie files, and it turned out to be a great and convenient tool that my team and I used often during the production process.

Coloring

Creating a color script was very valuable for this project, because I intended to use full color and represent the mood through different color palettes. Breaking the order, I created a color script after I completed the main part of the animation. For this I used Photoshop, which allowed me to explore many different color palettes without redrawing the image. I created several small paintings for each scene with no details representing the main color palette. I attempted it several times, and I did not consider the result very satisfying; however, it was still useful as a reference during the coloring stage.

The desert shots were painted with mostly monochromatic palettes of washed sand and greyish sky colors. I wanted an isolated atmosphere for these shots. The colors changed dramatically as the camera moves inside the cabin. The indoors is rich on colors: maroon walls, yellow light, and the colorful collection of hats. These colors represent the inner world of Lancelot, full of his imaginations. For the purpose of creating a feeling of being in a theatrical environment, I used contrast colors, dramatic light, and a dark, cool, first plan as a curtain for the action. Later on when Lancelot realizes his loneliness, the colors change from vivid to quiet colors of the dusty cabin interior. Then the colors change dramatically as we move into Lancelot's imagination. The first dark imagination of the demon is full of cool magenta colors and it puts everything into black substance at the end of that scene. Then we return back into reality and the dusty cabin interior palette. As soon as we move into the second Lancelot's illusion, the colors become bright and cheerful. The Grandfather's scene is the brightest scene in the film and had to reflect the level of Lancelot's

¹¹ Vector-based animation and storyboarding software

¹² Online storage and file-sharing service, free up to 2GB

happiness in meeting him. I used colorful yellow, red, green, and purple balloons and a warm yellow light for the background of that scene. Again, when imagination finishes, the colors abruptly change to the cool and dark colors of loneliness. By using this sharp contrast, I wanted to separate imagination from reality and show Lancelot's deep emotional experience. In the scene where Lancelot finally decides to open the door, I used a bizarre turquoise color for the surreal environment around him to highlight his fear of the unknown. At the culmination point when he opens the door the warm sand colors fill the screen and cabin, the color palette changes back to warm tones. The bright light from outside beautifully frames Lancelot's silhouette in the doorway. In the final shot the colors return back to the desert color palette as the story loops back to the beginning.

By exploring the color I realized how much it helps to tell a story, especially to reflect Lancelot's feelings. My first attempts with color scripts occurred too vividly and threw off the balance of the story instead of enhancing it. Therefore, I had to be really careful and make sure that all my color palettes would work consistently with the film.

When I moved into the actual coloring, I realized that I needed assistance from my classmates in order to complete the project in time. It was easy to find people to color Spidy and some shots with Lancelot, because their shading was flat and consisted of several colors; however, it took me some time to find people with similar painting style to mine to color the backgrounds. I found both background artists accidentally. One time I arrived unusually early to the grad lab and found first-year grad Lyndsey Nichols working on her one-quarter film. Immediately I noticed her beautiful watercolor backgrounds on the screen and asked her if she was willing to help me, and, fortunately, she was. The other background artist, freshman Laura Durkan, was referred to me by Vijay Kumar, who happened to see her works somewhere online. I completed the master backgrounds myself and handed out the rest to the background artists, providing them with the reference. They did a beautiful job, and it took me only a slight effort to make their paintings look the same style as mine.

Postproduction

Compositing

The compositing stage did not take long and was done in Adobe After Effects CS5. Composition format was HD NTSC, 1920 x 1080, square pixels. After exporting all image sequences from TVPaint Animation, I imported them into After Effects, added special effects, and transitions. I also used AE expressions to animate some objects (for example, a swinging lamp), as well as for some special effects (light flickering, camera shake), and 3D space for camera panning in the opening shot to create a multi-plane perspective. Some of the special effects were done in Maya and composited later in AE. In my workflow, I was compositing each shot right after I finished animating it and placing it into the animatic, so the compositing stage could not be separated from the animation stage. At the end I reviewed the video clip multiple times, refined timing, and changed the juxtaposition of some shots. The video was exported out of After Effects uncompressed, and the final QuickTime file was about 30 GB. Then it was imported into Final Cut Pro for synching with the sound effects file and music score. I did not synch sound in After Effects for sound quality reasons. Then I sent the project from Final Cut Pro directly to Compressor and used “best quality DVD up to 90 min” settings to render a MPEG-2 video file, which turned out to be 321 MB, and an ac3 audio file Dolby Digital Professional (10 MB). Although my film was created in HD format, for all subsequent screenings and festivals I could only use SD DVD, because in practice many projectors and Windows-based computers do not play HD DVD properly. For the SOFA screenings I exported an uncompressed video with sound out of Final Cut Pro and compressed it with h264 codec using QuickTime 7. The resulting QuickTime file was about 223 MB and running time was 7 minutes, 30 seconds.

Sound and Music

My composer was Stephen Bullen, who studied Music Composition at the University of Rochester. I had heard his work in Molly Agnew’s thesis film during the fall 2010 SOFA screenings and really liked it. I contacted him in the beginning of 2011, and he agreed on collaboration, despite the fact that he was moving to Santa Monica for an internship at a professional studio. According to our agreement and budget, Stephen was going to create a music score with two opportunities to make changes afterwards and a sound effects track. We corresponded through Skype, phone, and emails for several months starting in March and discussed the animatic in its various stages.

I provided Stephen with my understanding of music for “Unhinged.” I wanted a minor sounding music. Among a large variety of musical instruments, the cello was the best fit for its nice pizzicato. In combination with a vocal performance, it gave an extraterrestrial isolation feeling to the environment in “Unhinged.”

The first music score draft turned out too orchestrated and better suited to a live-action film more than an animated short. Then there was a month of back and forth between Stephen and me, long night Skype meetings where Stephen was playing cello and piano, and we could discuss the music cues interactively. There were six music cues overall. After each Skype conversation, Stephen was polishing and finalizing the music cue, and composing the rest was a similar process.

We had several troublesome moments. The music had to reflect each costume in Lancelot's masquerade to light up the roles acted by Lancelot. The quick pacing made it difficult to have them all seamlessly connected in one solid piece. For example, Zorro's part needed Spanish guitar music, Pierrot needed an awkward circus theme, the Master of Ceremony part needed fanfare.¹³ In addition, the spider needed its own music line as well, despite its quiet being. Also, my concerns were culmination points and opening and concluding cues. After many discussions and several reworkings, we could get the music the way I wanted.

Professor Dave Sluberski helped me with sound post-production. We spent a good amount of time at his home sound-editing studio, cleaning up and mixing the sound. I was very satisfied with the result and believe that the soundtrack turned out to be one of the strongest aspects of "Unhinged."

Credits

I had approximately two weeks before screenings, when I began the end credits. I got the help of my friend and classmate, Shuang Chang, for credits illustration, and she came up with nice and spicy drawings of the hats that I placed next to each participant's name. I created almost classic-looking white words on black background credits with small illustrations, because I believe that credits should not distract the audience from the main image of a film.

Title

The title was a big obstacle in my way. It was hard to choose an appropriate word that would include the story idea. I was changing titles one after another, and almost at the end of the animation stage, Brian came up with the nice suggestion of "Unhinged." Here is the list of the preceding titles:

"The Knock"

"Knock, knock, knock"

"The Door"

"Solo"

"Unexpected, long-awaited"

"Unhinged"

"Unhinged" was chosen for a final title because of its double meaning: being mentally unbalanced, which relates to Lancelot's state of mind, and being off the hinges, which relates to the sign at the door.

¹³ I used well-known characters to name the roles played by Lancelot in his masquerade

Critique reception

“Unhinged” was completed and presented at the SOFA Screenings on May 16, 2011. Professor Mark Reisch was the respondent for my thesis presentation and provided very constructive analysis of the film (Appendix F). There was not much critique from the general audience.

Soon afterwards I left the United States and returned back home to Russia. I started to freelance at the Alexandr Petrov Animation studio, and, therefore, had an opportunity to present my film to Alexandr Petrov¹⁴ His criticism was mainly about the animation. According to him, the animation was limited and could have been more plastic; besides, the character design allowed more space for acting. The shots with masquerade could have involved more acting and fantasy, and the environment could change according to the costume and role Lancelot played. Alexandr Petrov also noticed some inconsistency in style and colors, and a wide variety of camera angles confused his perception of the space; therefore, he suggested choosing 1-2 master camera angles and sticking to them. Furthermore, he perceived the spider as a distraction, perhaps because of its abrupt movement and relatively big size. However, he admitted that the spider makes the film less depressing. According to Alexandr Petrov, Grandfather is an unfinished and flat character. He suggested adding volume to its figure and a more fantasy-looking style. He liked the surreal part and suggested pushing it much further, and, finally, he really liked the desert shots.

In August 2011, Belarusian Animation director Mikhail Tumelya¹⁵ was visiting our studio on his way back from Sochi Film Festival 2011, and I was also lucky enough to get his feedback for my film.

First of all, there are some problems with consistency in style. Lancelot and Spidy do not fit each other in terms of style. The desert shots are most harmonious. As for timing, in my opinion, you could speed up the first fearful imagination part. The demon could attack quicker; moreover, the second imagination should be even faster as we already aware what it is and expect the resolution. I see a problem with over timing Lancelot’s reaction to the knock: when we hear a knock on a door we usually run to open, but Lancelot hesitates too long. Perhaps, you did not show clear enough his fears of opening the door. As for acting, the spider is an outsider and lives in his own world. You could have shown more clearly that Spidy and Lancelot are detached and just coexist with each other. Other than that, everything is done properly: Spidy gets killed, Lancelot gets frightened. And, finally, I think you could make the resolution much more dramatic.

Overall Mikhail Tumelya’s feedback was approving, and I was flattered that he took the DVD as an example for his students of both animation and screenplay.

In September 2011 I traveled to Saint Petersburg and visited the animation studio “Melnitsa.” I showed “Unhinged” to Konstantin Bronzit,¹⁶ well-known Russian animation director. He asked me

¹⁴ Russian animation director and artist, Academy Award Winner for “The Old Man and the Sea”

¹⁵ Belarusian animation director

from which point of view he should give me feedback: an animator's or an animation director's? I chose the latter and received the strictest critique I ever had. His main criticism was that the story was not conveyed effectively, and he did not understand it his first time watching the film; he especially was confused with the masquerade part and, furthermore, why Lancelot had been acting weird in front of his collection of hat-holders. He suggested that I study more closely the Stanislavski's System,¹⁷ because all well-written scripts follow the structure described in this system. Konstantin Bronzit told me that according to symbolism I should not have used a theatrical set up for showing isolation and loneliness. It is more commonly used for representing such traits of character as unsupported ambitions and vanity. He said that in order to represent loneliness it is enough to show Lancelot in need of one friend, because even having only one friend will solve his lonely being. For example, Lancelot could have just searched for recognition from the spider, or I could have involved Lancelot in a more simple everyday routine that would convey his loneliness, as it was represented in "Wall-e".¹⁸ (Bronzit used Wall-e's example as a similar story line to mine.) For example, Wall-e found a golden ring in a box and threw away the ring and saved the box, because gold did not have any value for him. However, Lancelot could have played with his reflection, and such innocent occupation would have revealed Lancelot's inner world and his loneliness. There is no need for so many mannequins representing Lancelot's audience to make him not feel lonely, because one could be lonely in a crowd. Using such a big audience of hat-holders guides the audience in the wrong direction. We start to think that Lancelot seeks glory and fame and a lot of attention. Overall the plot rises too many unresolved questions: Who is Lancelot? Where does he come from? Where does he live? Does his cabin fly? Who is that spider? Why does Lancelot play so many roles? In terms of character design, Lancelot is out of date (thin arms, huge bottom). It comes from the 1970's style. Contemporary artists do not draw like that. My reasoning for using old-style design was countered with, if I do use it, then it should correspond to the environment; however, Lancelot's design does not fit the surrounding light-weighted, painterly environment, like using 17th century furniture in a contemporary room. The same thing applies to the 3D wind effect, which does not fit the painterly background; I could have hand drawn a wind even though it would seem too primitive.

The critique is always hard to receive, despite the fact that I am always open for it and believe that it gives a different level of understanding. In my defense, I would like to state that in "Unhinged" I portrayed my understanding of being lonely through symbols that were close to me. Furthermore, if I had followed all Bronzit's suggestions, I would have portrayed his story, not mine.

¹⁶ Russian animation director, Academy Award Nominated for "Lavatory - Lovestory"

¹⁷ Influential system of dramatic training developed by the Russian actor, producer, and theoretician Konstantin Stanislavski. It requires that an actor use his emotion memory to identify with the character's inner motivation.

¹⁸ Computer-animated science fiction film produced by PIXAR Animation Studios

Conclusions/Experience

The experience I gained during this project is invaluable. I started this project as a novice with some knowledge in animation and filmmaking but with high ambitions and big goals for creation of a professional short film. During all stages of “Unhinged” creation, I realized how much I still have to learn and catch up in knowledge and skills. At the end, I realized that it was not the final stage of my education period; on the contrary, I was standing on the first step of a long journey to become a professional in this unique and fascinating field. I realized that in order to create a great film, the following aspects are critical: putting much effort into the story and concept development stages and having a team to maintain the production stage at a high level. I realized the significance of setting up real goals and managing time properly. Now, when I look back at my project, I see that a combination of the time factor and the amount of work limited me from doing my best character animation and acting and, consequently, telling the story through it. Admittedly, I did my best according to all existing factors; however, I could simplify my life and benefit from setting up a less epic goal.

Furthermore, I discovered the biggest obstacles in my workflow: my tendency to draw expressively, my impatience with details, which required often going back to refine the line and redrawing more accurately, and my struggles with the character design stage. I believe that I did overcome those obstacles and improved my skills significantly.

Fortunately, amongst all my findings I discovered some skills I thought I previously lacked. For example, I always feared coloring, which is noticeable in my previous works, where I used a minimum of shading for my characters and backgrounds. I am quite proud that in my thesis film I used a full color, painterly style for backgrounds and several color tones for characters. Ideally, I would have done a more painterly style of character shading if I had more time.

Overall, I obtained a better understanding of the filmmaking process, improved greatly in all aspects of it and remembered all my mistakes and inventions, and I will use all this experience in my future animation career.

Appendix A

ORIGINAL PROPOSAL (SUBMITTED MAY, 2010)

Working title: "Simply Open the Door"

Synopsis

The Moomin troll only has many different hats in his life in the lonely place where he lives. They are his hobby/occupation/friends. Instead of reading a book, he plays with hats. He doesn't have anybody else with whom to play. I show the regular evening in his life. At that moment, something new happens with Moomin. When we make a decision, we always think what could happen. Some possibilities in our imagination come from fear of the unknown (thieves' invasion), and others come from the curiosity (new letter), and some come from exciting expectations (friends/family visiting). So, the story is about the power of a simple decision. I want to leave the story open ended in order to give people the opportunity to make their own decision.

Rationale

My goal is to create a short animated film, 5-6 minutes long, about the power of a simple decision that could dramatically change a life. The simple decision of whether opening the door or not makes the main character struggle with his emotions. I want to work on character animation that is full of emotion and acting. I want to use the hand-drawn animation technique and full coloring. I intend to draw realistically in 3D perspective, but also to play with different kinds of metamorphosis in order to show transitions between reality and imagination. I want to work on film language, not just timing and zooming in and panning, but also more subtle use of film language, which is usually understood by the subconscious level by the audience. I want to represent my idea through rich imaginary visualization and play with the subtleties of camera movement and timing. I was influenced by works of Italian writer Gianni Rodari, Finnish writer Jansson Tove, animated films "Anna and Bella" by Borge Ring, and "Street Music" by Ryan Larkin.

Treatment

An evening in a desert and the sun shows its last rays. There is a sequoia in the middle of the desert. A huge, absurd house-castle is squeezed into the sequoia's branches. A warm light spreads out from the one little window of this castle. That is from a living room where one Moomin troll is sitting on the floor and counting the hats. The living room is huge but it is filled with different types of hats. The room is richly furnished, but poorly lighted. There are many different pictures on the walls where different Moomin trolls are illustrated in different hats. In some pictures he is with other Moomin trolls, probably his family. In the others, he is alone, which are a series of pictures that he wears different hats, one higher than the next. The fireplace is lighted. The patches of light dance on the Moomin troll's face. The Moomin troll tenderly places hats from the one pile to the other. He tries every hat on. He expresses different emotions on his face according to the appearance of a hat. For

example, he puts on a cylinder and becomes serious. He puts on a cowboy hat and whistles. He changes hats one by one. The atmosphere is warm but lonely.

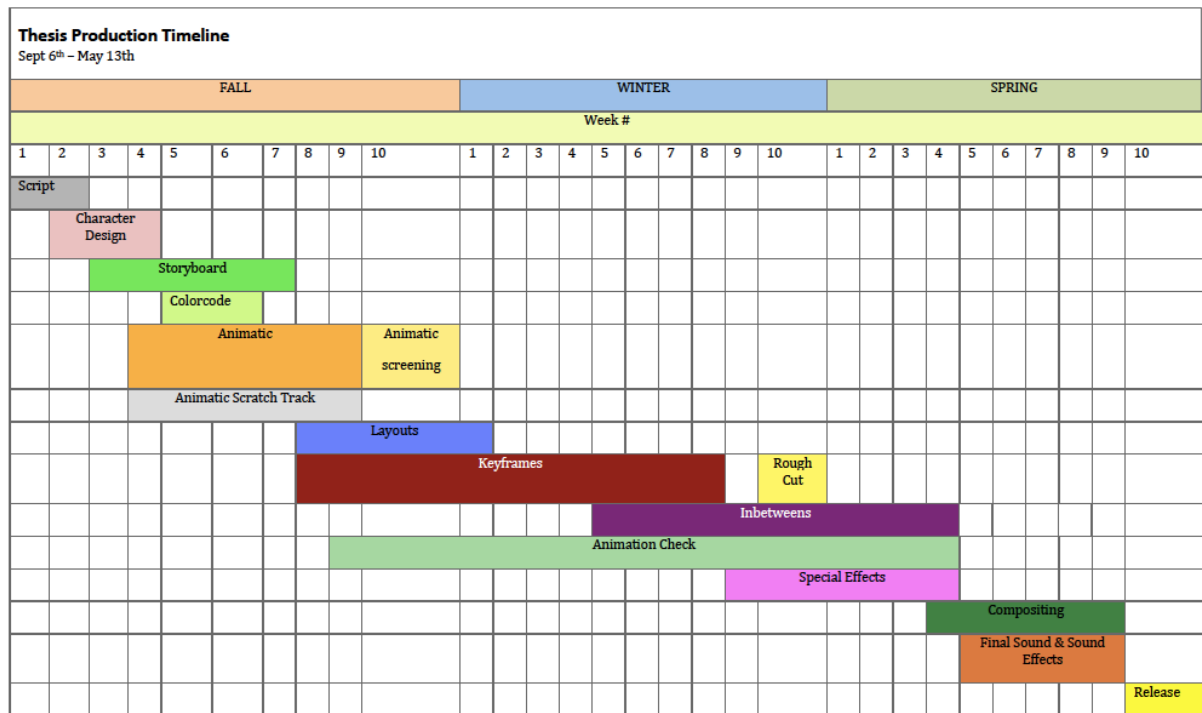
Suddenly, he hears a knock on the door. It is unexpected. He drops a hat. He looks at the door. He procrastinates opening. He keeps staring at the door and automatically picks up the dropped hat. Zoom in to the face. His eyes look worried. The noise of persistent knocking becomes loud, and the door starts shaking. Transition to his thoughts (through blurriness). He imagines that he unlocks the door. The door quickly opens. The frightening robbers invade into his house and stop at the entrance ready to beat and rob him. He slowly draws back. His eyes are full of fear. He clasps the hat closer. He shrivels up with fear into the corner. The thieves slowly approach him. The face of the Moomin troll is full of fear. He clasps the hat to his breast. They get closer, and closer...

Knock, knock. We hear the knock and move back to the real living room. The Moomin troll is frightened. A cold sweat appears on his forehead. He wipes it away with his sleeve. Sigh of relief. Knock. Knock. He starts. He looks at the door and then at the hat in his hands. He quickly puts on this hat and hides the ears in order not to hear the knock. He screws up his eyes. Transition through the blurriness. He imagines a postman on the other side of the door holding a letter for him. He opens the door and gets excited about the letter. He quickly opens up the letter and starts to smile. The light becomes brighter. His face is full of happiness. Transition through the blurriness to the other imagination. The colors darken. He opens up the letter and becomes sad. His eyes are full of tears.

Knock. Back to reality. The Moomin troll shakes his head. He looks at the door again. His worried look changes to reverie. Insinuatingly, the music changes to a pleasant melody. The room lights up and becomes full of light. He hears the sounds of laughter and fast knocking at the door. He runs to the door, opens it, and sees friends smiling at him. They hug him and dance around. The room is full of happiness. Knock, knock, knock... Back to reality. The Moomin troll is confused. He reaches out to open the door then pulls back. Then, he slowly approaches to the door. He draws his ear closer to the door and listens. After a while, his hand slowly reaches the door handle...

End.

Thesis Production Timeline, September 2010 – May 2011



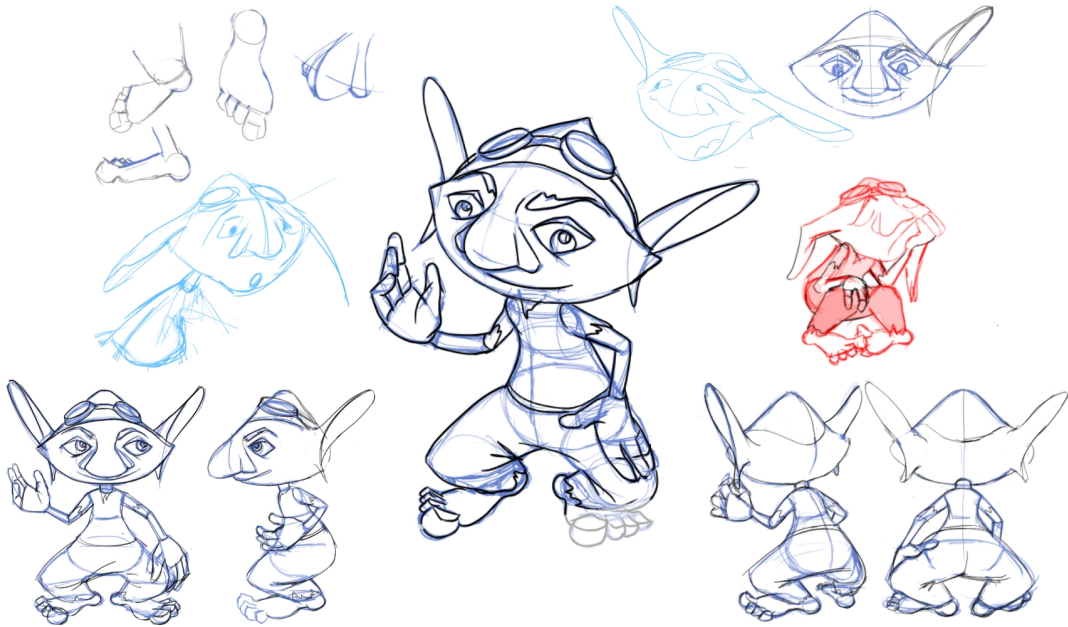
Thesis Production Budget

Categories and Items	Cost		
Work Station			
Animation lightbox	\$239		
Drawing Supplies (pencils, paper, paint)	\$250		
Software			
TVP Animation 9.5 Standard Edition 1-seat License, student discount	\$335		
Adobe Creative Suite, Student discount	\$359		
Sound			
Sound Effects	\$100		
Composer's compensation	\$300		
Voice talent and Musical Instrument Performers compensation	\$300		
Release			
Blu-ray discs + regular DVDs + cases	\$50		
Print DVD Covers	\$50		
Print promotional Cards	\$100		
Festivals			
	Entry fee	Shipping and insurance	
Chicago International Film Festiva (student entry)	\$20	\$15	
Ottawa Animation Festival	\$0	\$15	
Sundance	\$35	\$15	
Hiroshima	\$0	\$25	
Monstra/Lisbon Animation Festival	\$0	\$25	
Tribeca (student entry)	\$0	\$15	
Annecy	\$48	\$25	
Pisek	\$0	\$20	
Total			\$2,336
Contingency	15%		\$350.40
FINAL TOTAL			\$2,691.40

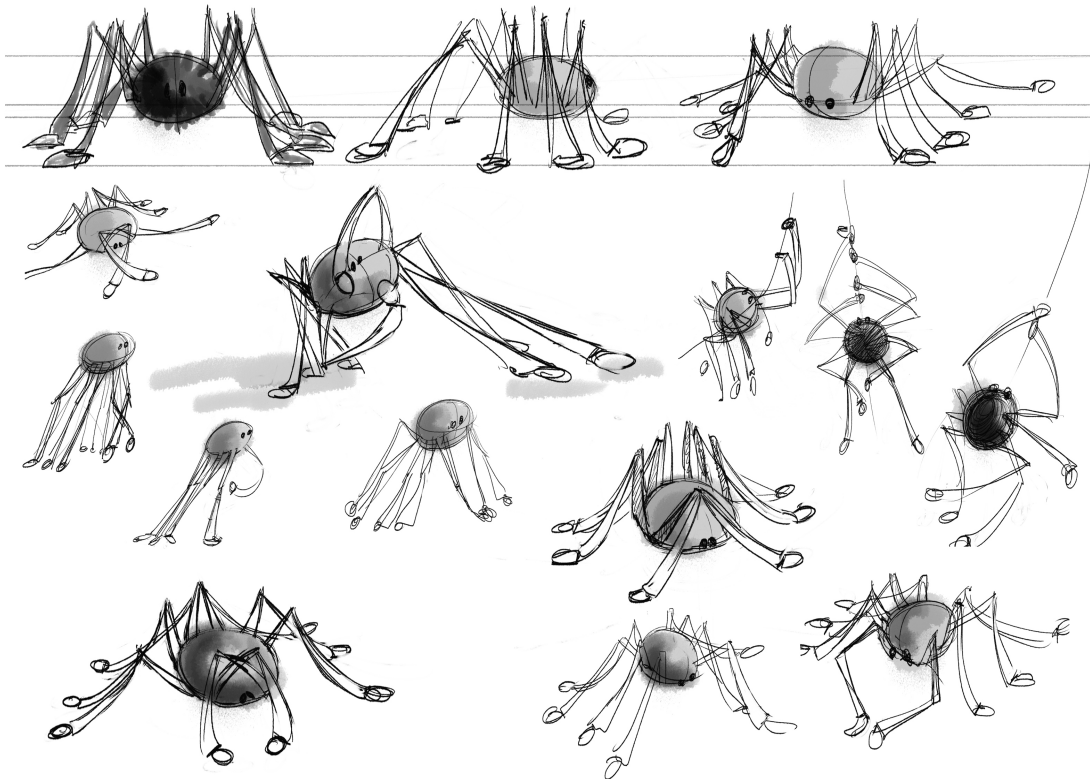
Appendix B

LANCELOT AND SPIDY MODEL SHEETS

Lancelot

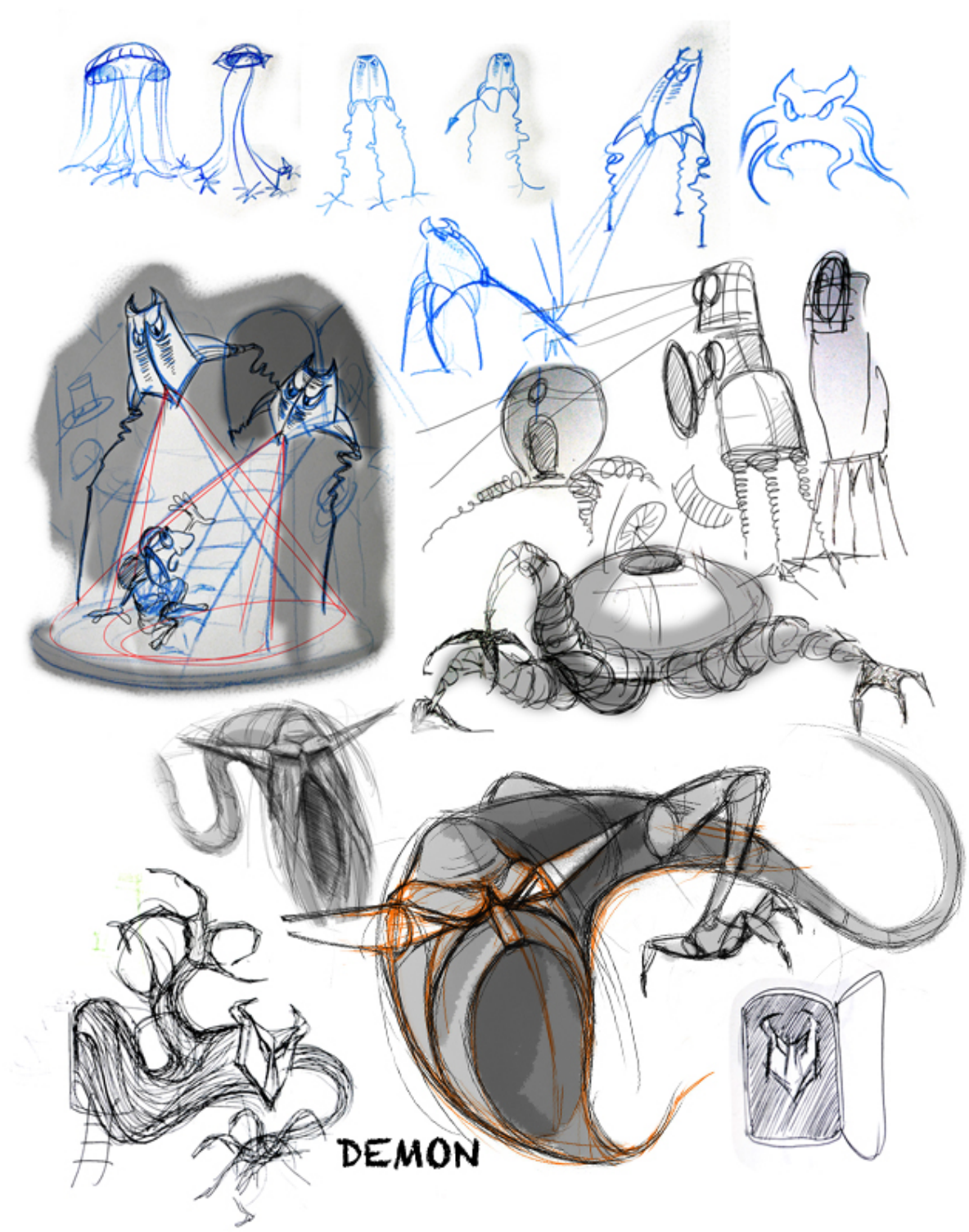


Spidy



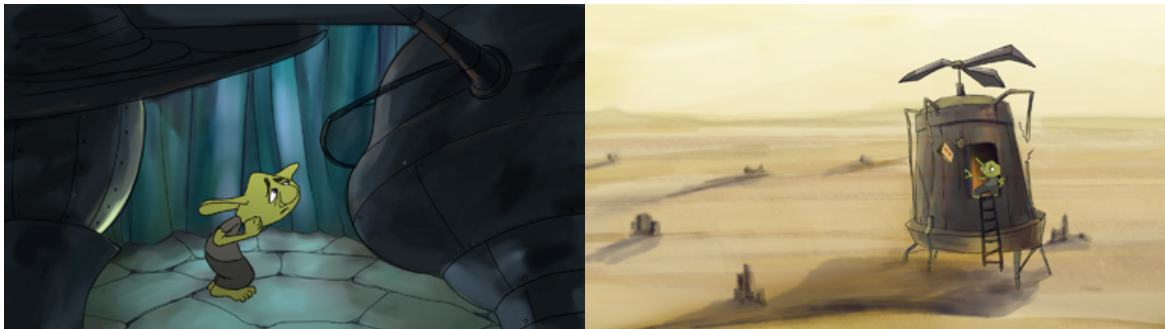
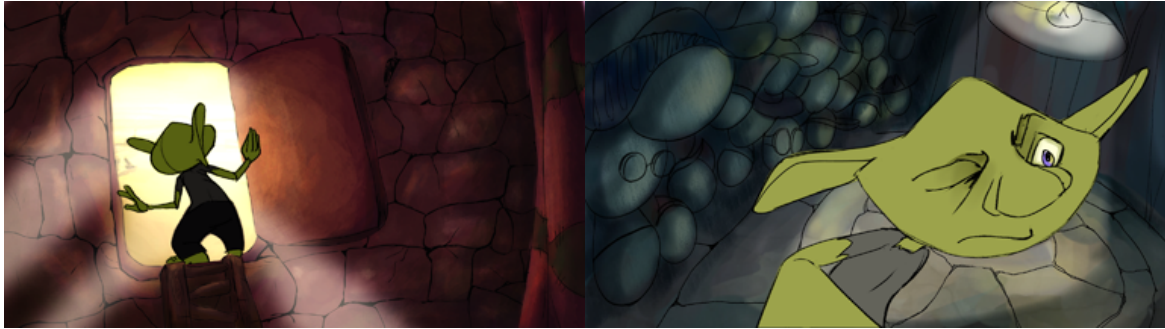
Appendix C

DEMON CHARACTER DESIGN SKETCHES



Appendix D

PRODUCTION STILLS AND POSTER



Appendix E

STORYBOARD EXCERPT



Appendix F

Mark Reisch's response, SOFA screenings, May 2011

This is a fantastic and beautiful story about a creature who is in a room in the middle of nowhere. He has many outfits and keeps himself entertained by imagining he is different characters.

As the film progresses, there is a knock at the door, and it isn't until this time that we actually become immersed in his **inner** reality.

He goes into hiding and the walls morph into a medieval stone and wooden spikes. From here on, we are in his world with him.

The door swings open and we see a ominous demon that ruins his hat display, kills his spider and envelops him as well.

We think he is gone until another **knock** which brings him and us back to reality.

This time he focuses on a picture of someone important in his life, and we are again transported to a reunion with this other figure, only to be slammed back into reality with another knock.

So this relentless knock, what could it be? Should he answer it? Is it going to be friend or foe?

He finally gains the courage to find out. His journey is extended in his mind as the stair case is elongates adding to the tension of his quest for answers.

When the door swings open he is faced with nothing but a vast desert and discovers that his KEEP OUT sign has broken and is making the knock in the wind.

He goes back in, but checks again just to be sure.

We open with the sign KEEP OUT. This is someone who wants to be alone, he is in the middle of the desert by him self, cut off from the rest of the world what ever that may be.

The door is not locked so he is free to come and go as he pleases. This is not a prison but a **choice** that he has made to be there.

How many times have we chosen to be alone and not interact with others because of fear, anger or because someone else has hurt us? We alone **can** make those changes by leaving the sanctuary of what is safe.

By checking a second time he is shows to me that he *WANTS* someone to be there. Perhaps in Part II we can see him leaving his sanctuary and reconnect.

I found it interesting that after the discovery that it was the sign making the noise, which he didn't take down.

I wonder if it is because he is now going to use it as another level of pretend that he can incorporate in his imagination?

The number of hats cannot go unnoticed. They help him transform his imagination to different places and events.

The dedication to your father has a familiar popular style hat and I wonder if it was something that he always wore? And along those same lines, the idea for this film and so many hats was this something in your childhood that you did?

On a technical note, some of your layers are too transparent, like the steel light shade and as he is pacing, you can see him walking through the head mannequin.

Overlay of blowing wind was distracting, I would keep more to the painterly / textured wind.

And on a final note,

The depiction of hats representative of the personalities of some of the faculty involved in this film did not go unnoticed:

We have :

Gayane – a warrior helmet showing that she is victorious in her quest for thesis completion.

Dave Sluberski – a wizard hat depicting the magic that he created with sound.

Skip Battaglia – a Mexican sombrero depicting that Skip is pretty easy going and ready for fun.

Tom Gasek - a roman warrior strong and sure, not afraid to tell it like it is.

And, finally, Brian Larson – Darth Vader. ... Darth Vader. I am not even going to come up with a suggestion for that one, I will let you draw your own conclusions.

He's not your father is he?