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Bessi

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Rochester Institute of Technology
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MFA thesis
School of Film and Animation
12/12/2010

Bessi

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Brian Larson

Committee:
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Abstract

This paper Accompanies my animated short film entitled Bessi. In this paper I will describe the creation and motivation for the story of Bessi. I will also discuss my visual style and the roots from whence it came. I shall tell the reader of the techniques I used to achieve the ascetics I wanted. I will describe all the issues I had in the creation of the story and the problems I encountered as I animated. I explain the animation style I chose and why. I also discuss the animation techniques I used and why. I shall tell how my animation was received and the problems that were evident. Finally I lay bare my failures with this film and what I could have done to make it better.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost I would like to thank my grandparents, Donald and Marjorie Rings, for without them I would be so deeply in debt that I would be working my way out of it for years. Next, I would like to thank my parents for all the support and for telling me I could do whatever I wanted, and then being happy when I decided I wanted to make art a career. I would also like to thank every art teacher I have ever had from elementary school on, and thanks to all my classmates who help me throughout my time in school. A big thanks to Rob and Mike Beshures for my music. Finally, thanks to my Advisor, Brian Larson, and my committee members Skip Battaglia and Jim Downer who all gave me great advice for my animation, and stayed more optimistic than I did about my animation on many occasions.

2. The Start Of Bessi

During my time at Bowling Green State University undergraduates were only required to make one short animation for the degree in digital art. At that time I was told I couldn't kill my character at the end of the animation as I had intended. I was told it was the lazy way out and, at that time, maybe that was correct but ever since then I have wanted to make an animation where the only way to end it is by killing the character....not in a tragic or sad way but for the final laugh. I believe that is why my mind latched on to this idea for the story.

The idea for *Bessi* began as all my best ideas do, from a drawing I made in Acting for Animation class. I found that while my mind is occupied with listening I can create some pretty interesting things. Here is the original drawing that started me thinking about this story. It started with only the man in the drawing, and then I asked myself 'what is the story behind this guy?' The story I settled on was that this man is a retired professional wrestler who now raised alligators. Then I let this drawing sit in my sketchbook without looking at it until the day before my first meeting with Brian Larson to discuss story ideas. We discussed several of my ideas including a story about a moth



firefighter, and I can not remember the third idea now, so I shall assume it was not the brightest of ideas. We settled on the story about a farmer and his cow.

2a. Story Creation

Many of the underlying ideas for the story arc in *Bessi* came from my home life. I grew up on a small farm in Ohio and both my parents are large animal veterinarians. We had dogs, cats, sheep, goats, horses and pigs. My sisters and I grew up showing sheep since we were little so when the time came that I could join 4-H and start to make some money from showing livestock, I was excited.

The fair finally came, and I showed my lamb. I don't remember the show, but since I was smaller and lighter than my lamb I assume it did not go too well. The culmination of the fair for me was the auction of livestock projects and suddenly it dawned on me; this lamb that I had picked out, helped raise, and had worked with was going to be slaughtered. I cried as I stepped into the sale arena, I cried as my lamb was sold, and I cried as it was taken to the pen with all the other lambs that had been sold already. I moved on from this and I showed market animals in 4-H for another 9 years, but never again did I forget what the point of market animals were; no longer did they get names. That is not to say I didn't care as I watched my animals sell, but I understood the difference between pets and market animals. This is a universal truth for all livestock owners, whether they are farmers or 4-Hers and it must be learned early on in your livestock career .

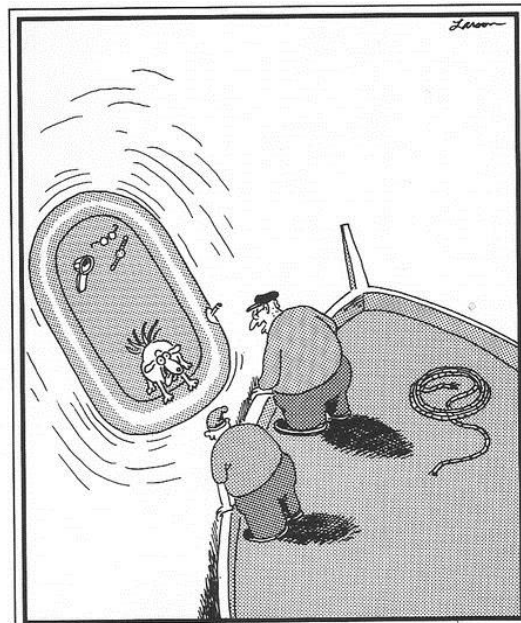
This helped me to think up the final reveal to my story; it is just like my first market lamb. I wanted the audience to feel what I felt be me in that story. Throughout the entire length of my film the farmer understood why he was carrying and caring for the

cow even though the audience did not yet know the outcome. The farmer saw the endgame in the situation.

2.2 Visual Influences

My visual influences span all types of work from illustration to sculpture, and could fill this entire paper by itself if I were to allow it. Therefore, I have condensed it down to my most significant and most prominent influences.

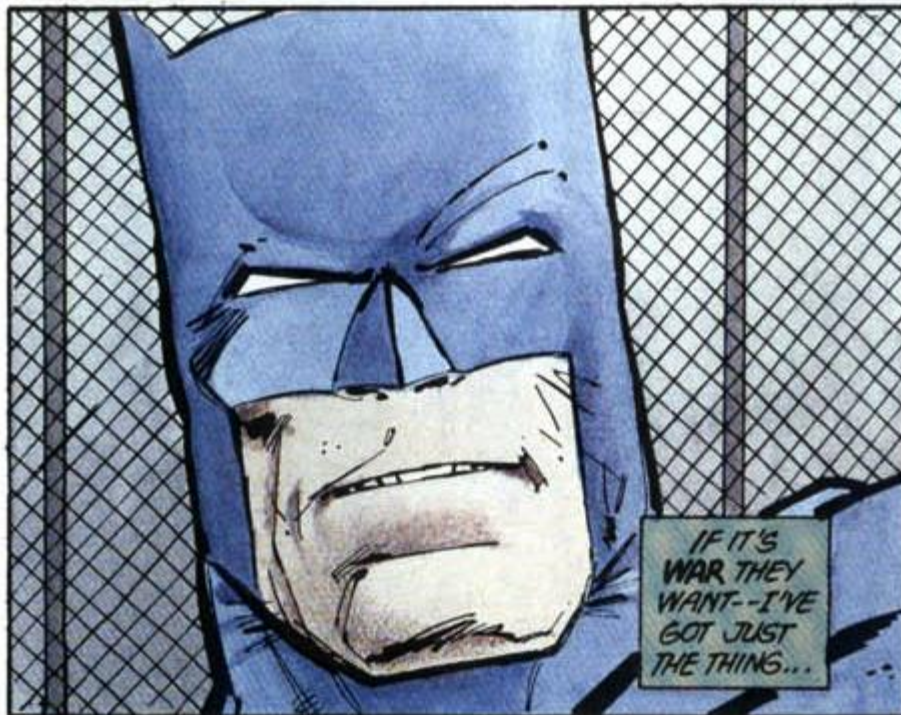
I am sure my childhood influences began in the same manner as most animators of my generation...Saturday morning cartoons. These included the animators of Disney films and cartoons, Looney Tunes, and all the 90's cartoons such as Rugrats, Courage the Cowardly Dog, Cow and Chicken, and many others. It was also strongly influenced by cartoonists such as Gary Larson, and Bill Watterson. Both their artwork and their writing have had a huge impact on my sense of humor and artistic style. The Farside that I have attached is one of my favorites and encapsulates my sense of humor pretty well.



"Hey, boy! How ya doin'? ... Look at him, Dan. Poor guy's been floating out here for days but he's still just as fat and happy as ever."

One of my strongest influences was discovered by me came while in high school, when I discovered illustrator Ralph Steadman. His work has had a huge impact on me and for a long while my work was very reminiscent of his. His work is what pushed me to begin to work with pen and ink, a method I have continued to use ever since.

During my undergraduate matriculation at Bowling Green State University I got into graphic novels and the accompanying beautiful illustrations. The most impressive part of the novels were the dynamic drawings in every panel. My favorite comic style is Frank Miller's The Dark Knight Returns. I love the use of ink and watercolor and the roughness of the line. I immediately began to paint my illustrations I made from that point forward and I have not stopped since. Below is a panel from The Dark Knight Returns.



My Character design before coming to the Rochester Institute of Technology was quite detailed and would never have worked for drawn animation. There was just too much to them and I could not possibly draw them fast enough. I began to look very critically at character designs I thought were successful and what made them that way. I watched lots of animations but always tended to like things closer to the style of Bill Plympton and Patrick Smith. Patrick Smith's characters have a great style to them yet are simplistic in their design. This led me to simplify my characters so I could animate them more quickly. This all culminated in the creation of the characters for my thesis. My characters were simple and well designed, and were all clearly different in their silhouette so they were easily recognizable on screen. I always thought the farmer design should be a larger- than- life character, which is why I choose to make him so large and powerful in my animation. I wanted the cow to be cute and small so that the farmer's character would be seen as the cow's protector. The alligator I wanted to be large and powerful because there are always comparisons drawn between pets and owners and I wanted to reinforce the pet owner relationship to that of a livestock owner.

Character design was my favorite part of the entire animation pipeline. Even though I had an idea of what the farmer/wrestler would look like I tried many variations on him. I began the character creation in the summer. I tried to do two different variations of the farmer, the cow, and the alligator each day for about a month, trying to nail down the style my whole animation would take.

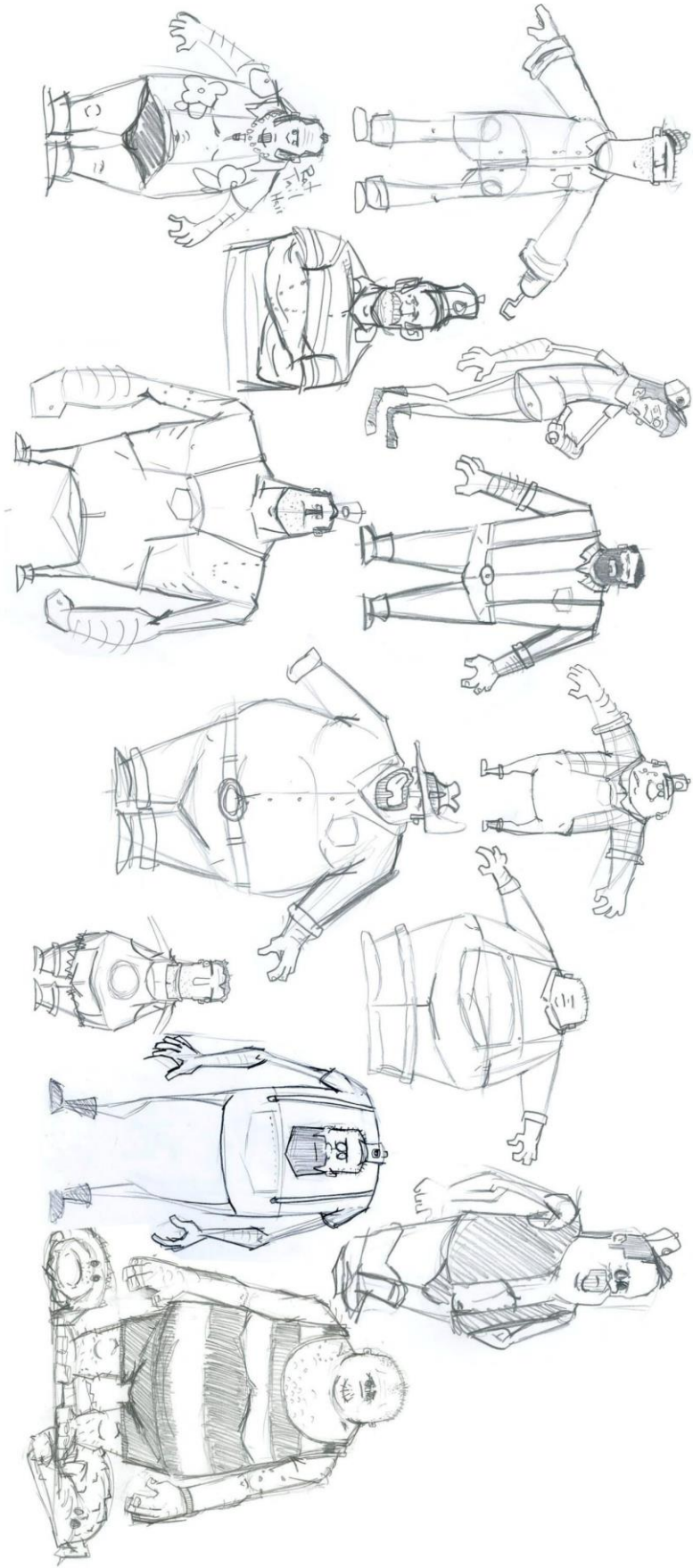
I like to create the characters first and design everything around them. I do this because I feel the characters are the most important part of animation, since it is what the

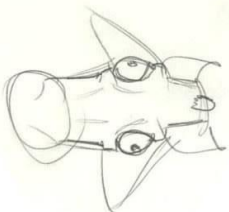
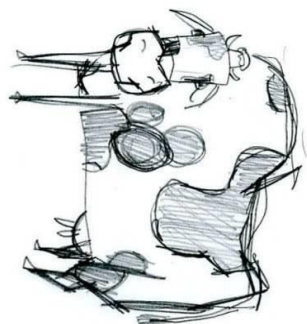
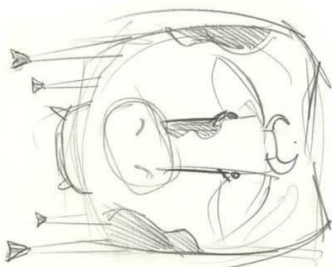
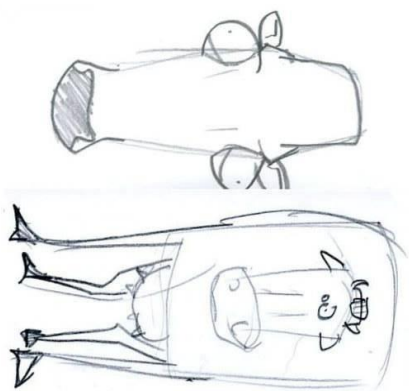
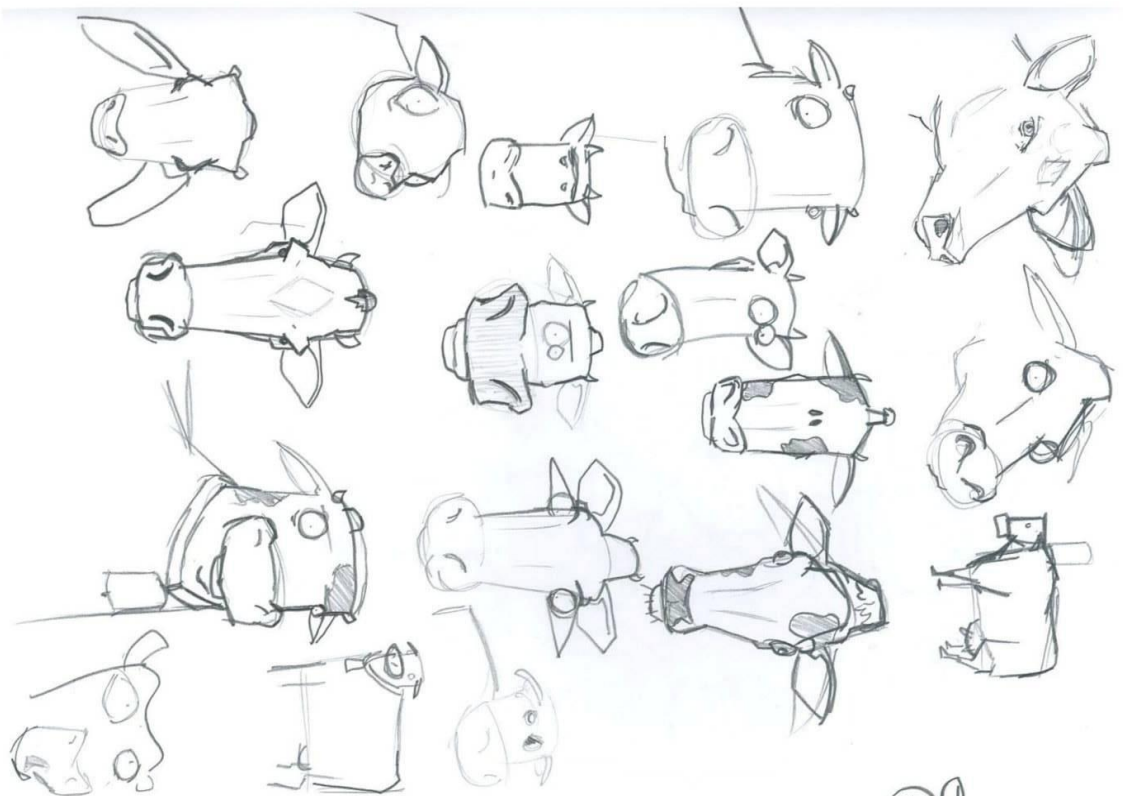
audience will connect with and leads to a successful story. Also, character design helps in setting what visual style will be used.

When I start drawing characters I always start with the eyes of a character and work around them, creating the nose and mouth. This has been my work flow pattern for years. I have always found the face to be my favorite part to design. I also find that the face dictates what the body will look like. I also really enjoy designing characters' hands. The hands are important because it is a good way to express emotion and again, allows the audience to connect with the character.

Here are the just some of the designs I created for Bessi.







2.4 Backgrounds

The backgrounds for *Bessi* were all hand drawn and inked, then painted with watercolors. I chose to do them traditionally on paper for several reasons; I can draw better on paper than I can on a computer and with less effort. Also the line I can produce on paper seems much prettier than that of the line on the computer. I did not want to put an excessive amount of effort into the backgrounds because I wanted to focus more on the character animation and storytelling. The second reason is that even though beautiful paintings can be made on the computer, they all have that look that just screams computer art to me unless they are meticulously painted. I did not want such a digital look to my work. Had I created and painted the backgrounds on the computer my lack of expertise in digital painting would have definitely yielded a look I was striving to avoid. The final reason is very simple; pen and ink with watercolor is probably my favorite way to work for anything that is not animating, and if it were not so time consuming I would animate in it as well. I have worked with pen and ink and watercolor since I was in high school and I feel I can get the best results using this combination.

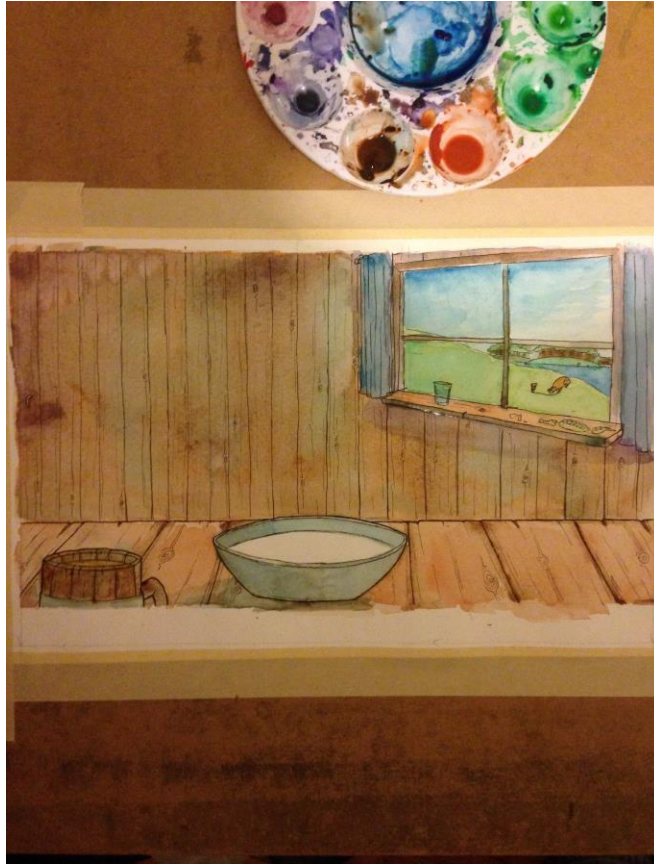
I tried to make all the backgrounds before I started the animating but then I had to throw all but two away because as I got more into the storytelling I changed many shots. This led to me to use only very rough versions of the backgrounds as I began to animate. This allowed me to create/alter the background as I animated and I didn't waste time on the backgrounds until I was sure I'd be using that shot. I created all the rough layout for the backgrounds in Tvpaint then brought them over to Photoshop. I used guides to measure the significant points of the backgrounds. I then measured them out on the paper and created the detailed backgrounds. The main problem that arose from creating the

backgrounds second was that it led to overlap and animation not lining up correctly with the backgrounds, but as I finished the final line it was easy enough to correct

The creation of the backgrounds was used as a break from the grind of animation. I found it quite relaxing to work with a single frame image after all the animating. It was very nice to sit back and be able to make the line exactly the way I wanted it and not feel I was wasting time if I spent a long time on one single image.

Here are a couple of examples of the backgrounds in process.





If I was working on a background I deemed essential or thought that I might have camera movement in it I worked on a large 16 in x 9 in sheet of paper. All the other, less important, backgrounds were done at 6.75 in x 12 in. I wanted to do them all big but after the first round of backgrounds had been thrown out I decided to do them smaller. This allowed me to more quickly make changes in the backgrounds, if changes were required.

I tried to play with the color in the backgrounds a bit, using blues and purples for the shadows instead of blacks because I wanted everything to be cheery and airy throughout my animation. Also, I wanted the line work to show through the watercolor.

Coloring the Animation

Coloring is the most tedious part of the project to me. In my project the coloring came down to just mindless filling in the lines so I decided that I would animate shadows to try and make the experience of coloring a bit more interesting. There were both positives and negatives to this process. Overall, I think it added a greater depth to my animation that I could not have achieved in any other way with 2-D animation. It was, however, extremely time consuming and made me a little bit more jittery than I wanted on some of my holds.

Here is an example of the color I used.



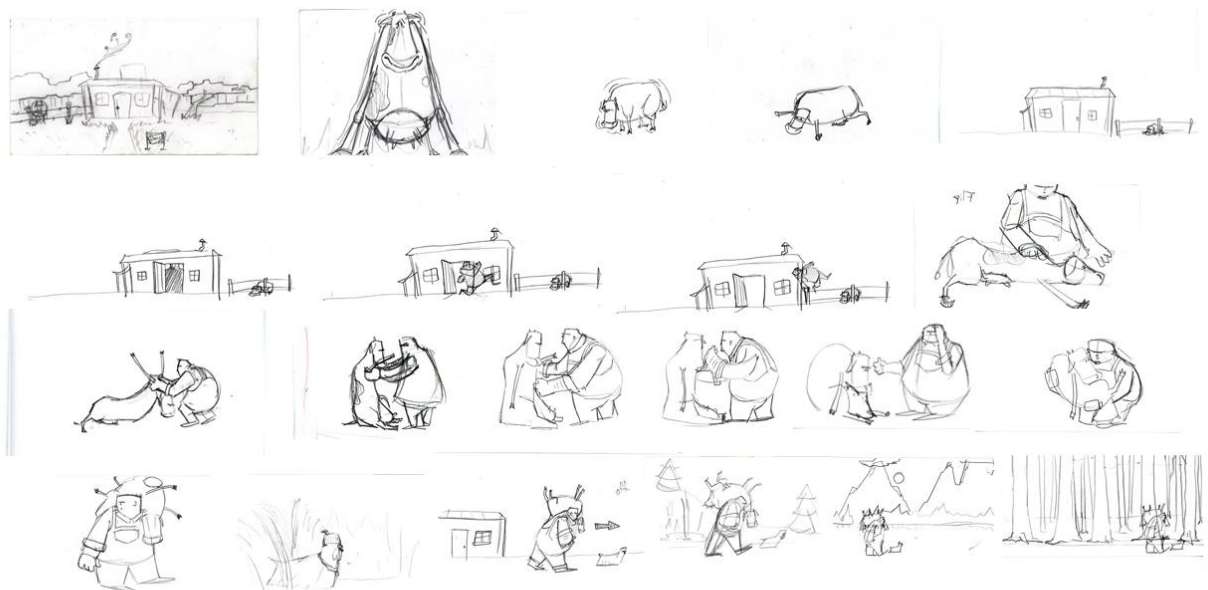
3.0 The Story

The story was a difficult part for me. It started as a much larger project. The story was going to be the “Odyssey in the Bayou”. It was going to have close to 20 characters and I really thought that I would be capable of doing it all myself. But thankfully my advisor, Brian Larson, talked me out of it. He drew a triangle on a piece of paper and

wrote story, style, and length at each point of the triangle, and said "you only get two." I choose style and story, and began to fix my story to a workable situation.

The planning for this animation was a very long and painful process for me. I was not one for storyboards and animatics before this project. I figured "why spend the time when only I need to know where the story is going". I figured this would get me into the animation faster and I would come out with a better project. That idea did not last very long and I quickly regretted it.

I began working on my story by drawing on index cards, trying to get a very basic storyboard together. I knew some of the jokes I wanted to use and I knew the ending but the beginning and middle were nonexistent. The basic storyboard was quite a time consuming endeavor. I would draw, then throw away, then draw and throw away more. I finally finished the rough boards and started on my second pass through. I did several more passes on the boards roughing out the actions a bit more each time.



Scans of storyboards in early middle stage

Over the next couple of months I repeatedly cut my story down, throwing away all the characters I had at first envisioned except for the Farmer, Cow, Alligator, veterinarian, and a dog/ Child. Eventually the dog was cut out also. Finally, I had a story that I thought was cohesive and effective.

I scanned the storyboards and began to put them on a timeline in after effects to make a rough. I started on backgrounds and testing out how the characters would move. I drew about 75 percent of the backgrounds and inked them. They were then inserted along with the rough animation I had finished into the animatic and rendered out as a copy of my months of work.

I brought the animatic to my committee meeting and showed it to them. As I watched the committee I knew what I'd done was largely unacceptable and my committee agreed, even though nothing like that was said. This meeting took place on one of the last days before winter break, so over break I knew I had to fix it.

I resigned myself to the fact that I was going to have to throw away much of the work I had done, and like a terribly drawn phoenix I was erased and started again. I still figured the story line was pretty good but that it needed to be more thoroughly thought out. I was also still happy with the design that I had but the shots I had chosen needed to be redone. The first step was to roughly block out each new shot. I started at the story's beginning and worked straight through until I had something that was more fluid and dynamic. The original animation had very flat looking shots, very reminiscent of platform video games such as *Mario* and *Sonic*. I pushed the shots to be more dynamic which in turn made the animation more fun and looser/free-flowing. It is hard to be fun and loose in the profile of a character but when I forced myself to draw in angles that I

was not as comfortable with the animation ended up more free-flowing and, overall, turned out better.

4. Animation

During my undergraduate studies I focused on 3-D computer animation but I found it so limiting. There was just too much to learn to be able to produce a high quality image and animation while working alone. When I had the opportunity and the resources to begin to work with 2-D animation I seized the opportunity.

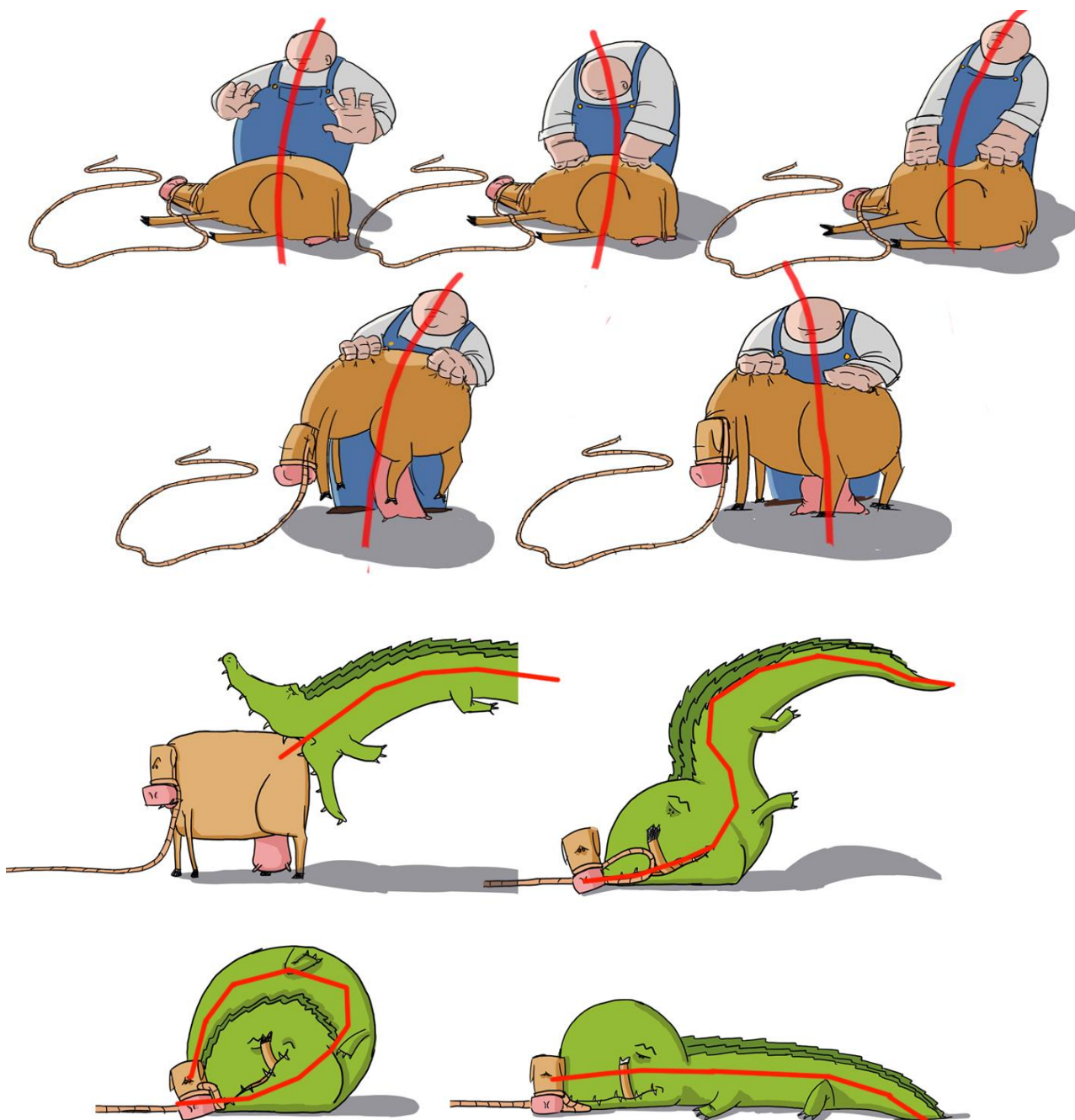
In my Introduction to 2-D animation class, the instructor, Jim Downer, would show us a few animated shorts at the beginning of class. We would go through parts of the animation frame by frame, looking at all the beautiful smears and multiples and dissecting the timing. One day he showed us "Puppet" by Patrick Smith. That was my first exposure to variable timing. The use of variable timing so impressed me that I did wonder why it wasn't used everywhere. It seemed like the perfect way to be economical with your time in animation while still making a great animation.

Over the next two years I played with variable timing and tried it in my stop motion. It worked somewhat well but it left something to be desired in most of the stop motion work I used it on. The shots I it on came out a bit to jerky in places and in others long holds would seemed to make the animation die. I tried it in my 3-D computer animation but it was poorly received. It looked too much like I just turned in blocking for a scene. I used it in my 2-D work with what I felt was pretty good success. Based on my limited, but successful, experience with variable timing it became the obvious choice for how I would approach the animation of my thesis.

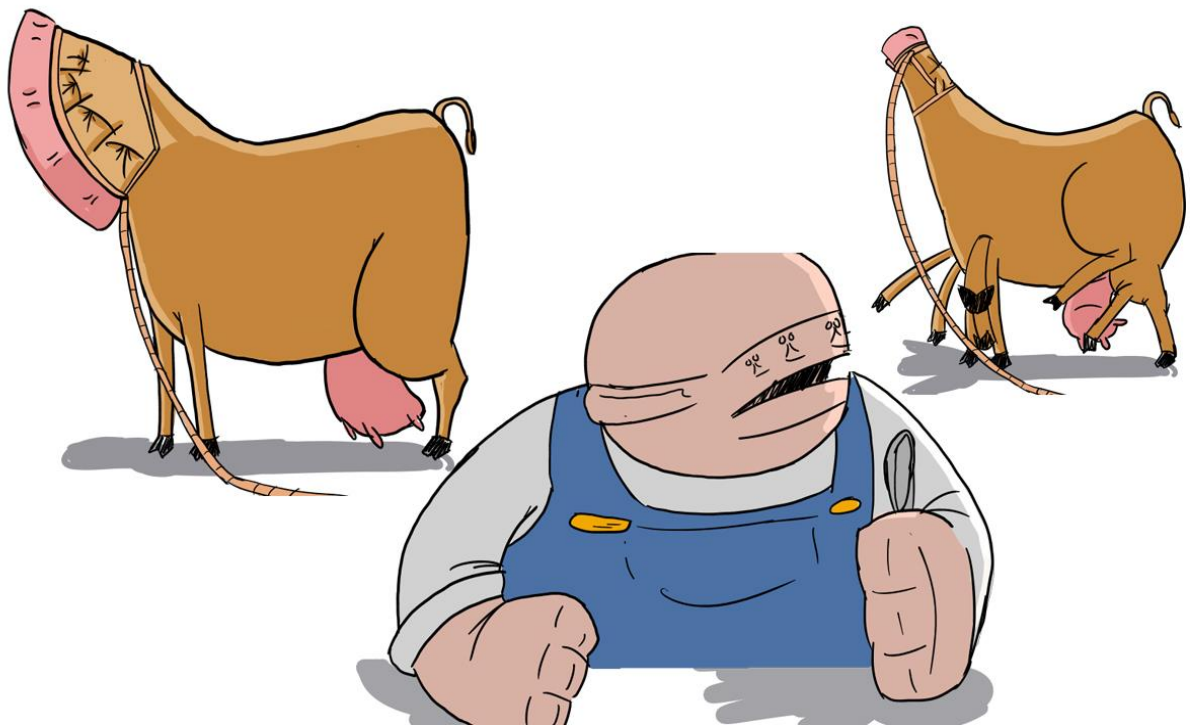
When I started *Bessi* I had planned on doing all the animation traditionally, on paper. That did not last very long though once I started to animate. I found that when I was working at my house I had a problem concentrating on the work. After about a month of animating on paper I switch from working at home to working at RIT. With this switch I found that I was able to work faster and more effectively, especially if I just worked on the cintique that RIT provided for the graduate students. This was a great switch for me and I began to really make progress with my animation.

The other thing that truly changed my animation from undergraduate to graduate level was the use of counter arcs. When I came from my undergraduate program I thought I understood the principles of animation and believed that I used them correctly. To some extent I did understand the principles but when I started to push the poses trying to make them more dynamic the animation seemed one hundred times better. How do you see change in animation? By showing the difference in poses. If the character is going to lean right, show him leaning left first. I noticed as I went frame by frame through the animations I thought were successful that my favorite parts of the animation used this technique. I incorporated counter arcs into my work and began to push my poses even farther so the counter arcs were even more dramatic. This resulted in a better animation and grew into the snappy timing that I used for *Bessi*.

Here are some examples of the counter arcs in my work.



Another animation technique that I utilized quite a bit was smearing and stretching the drawings to emphasize the movement of my characters. I like to use a combination of multiples and smears. I like using multiples mainly for faces and extremities while using smears in the body. I like using multiples on the extremities because it makes for a more interesting silhouette of the character and is slightly more readable. I use smears in the body because the silhouette of the body does not change much unless you make huge moves with them. I enjoy using smears for the sense of timing they create. This technique seems to work quite well with the poppy, quick animation that I prefer.



5. The Final screening

The lights went off and the room grew silent. My animation started to play and I looked down at my feet, unable to watch my animation one more time. By this time I could follow it solely by the sound after having spent the last week doing nothing but trying to time the sounds correctly to the animation. When the first laughs came, my stomach began to unknot and by the end I was beaming like a proud father. The story that all started because I was in a hurry and needed ideas to present had turned out quite well. You never know until you screen it to a whole room what the reactions to your piece will be, but when the whole audience was laughing I knew I had done what I set out to do and that I had created a successful animation. My animation was better received than I ever hoped for. It was by far the most successful animation I had ever created and my favorite piece of art I have ever made.

Pretty much all the work I create is made to be funny, whether it is an illustration, an animation or a sculpture. I want to make people laugh and be happy. There are enough terrible things in the world to make people sad so why should my work add to it? In the creation of my thesis I wanted humor in every shot I created and laughs to come throughout my animation. I got the laughs I wanted and that is what ultimately made this project successful in my eyes.

The animation and design of my thesis project were the best received parts of my animation, as I hoped they would be, because it was the part going into this final project that I was most confident in. It seemed that every time I would get discouraged with my animation someone would come up to me and tell me how much they liked the character

design, the backgrounds, or the animation and that would re-energize me and I would press on with my work.

A couple of scenes received the most comments during my final critique. In particular the walking journey scene (where the farmer is carrying the cow toward the veterinarian while the background changes around him and he slowly begins to tire, finally dragging the cow) received critical comments. These three cycles were part of the first animation I did for the project and helped me to figure out how I wanted my farmer to move and helped to decide the timing I would use for my thesis. One of my classmates pointed out that having a character walk across the whole screen was something that most animators wouldn't do because who wants to watch a walk cycle move across the screen? He said, however, in this instance it was entertaining to watch and was appropriate in this context. Now I had never heard this rule before but in all likelihood even if I had I wouldn't have changed anything. Rules are made to be broken. I admit if it had been only one walk cycle as I had originally envisioned, it would have bored the pants off everyone, but by exaggerating the movements and creating three extremely different walks it succeeded in doing what I wanted.

Another part of my animation that was very well received was the way I chose to animate the udder on the cow. It was the easiest decision I made in my whole animation. I know how a cow's udder moves but I wanted laughs and I knew making it movement so exaggerated that I would get them. I just had no idea how successful it would turn out to be.

It was not all sunshine and rainbows as I stood in front of everyone. A couple problems with the story cohesiveness were brought up which I was expecting/anticipated. They all tied into the same issue with my storytelling. Did the Farmer know where he was headed or did he just happen upon the veterinarian? Early on, at the start of my animation, I decided that it wasn't important to show the audience that the Farmer knew where he was heading because to explain that he knew where he was heading was going to break the cardinal rule of show, **don't tell!** I can easily see how it was a bit of a surprise to the audience that the veterinarian was just there. I meant for the audience to understand that the farmer understood where he was going the entire time. There are several ways I could have made it a bit more apparent. I think the problem began with the farmer just picking up the cow and lumbering away into the distance. It again reared its ugly head as he crossed the screen carrying the cow. Perhaps if I had put a trail leading through the shots the audience would have understood that he knew where he (the farmer) was going or at least, was following a path to somewhere. This would have helped, especially in the shots where the cow rolls and bounces down the hill because it seems that he rolls down an impassable area, and a pathway would have made it clear he was still headed in the correct direction. The other issue that was brought up was the wipe transition between the cow CPR shot and the farmer running, carrying the cow in the distance down the path. It was supposed to be understood that it was a pan across to show the farmer was beside the path, but it came out as a quick wipe which added to the confusion with the story. Again, a sign or something like directional arrows could have cleared this up but I did not want to just write veterinarian on a sign and telling the audience what was coming.

Here are the scenes that caused all the problems. As you can see, just a simple path or some way to tell the audience where the farmer was going may have worked out a bit better.



6. Problems and What I Learned

Here are the problems I had with my animation even though they were not brought up at screening. The main problem that I struggled with throughout the entire project was the ending. I knew what I wanted it to be in my head but found it very difficult to transmit that the alligator was the farmer's pet and the cow was the alligator's food without just writing Alligator Farm somewhere in the animation. The other option I toyed with was having a collar on the alligator reading 'Bessi' so that the audience would understand that Bessi was the alligator, a pet, and not the cow. When I sent this around to other animators I respected there still was a bit of confusion with the ending. I even tried showing the farmer wrestling with the alligator in front of a crowd, trying to show alligators were the farmer's livelihood but again there was confusion so, in the end, I just had to use a sign to tell the audience.

The other problem I struggled with was staying on character model with the cow. I assumed few would notice it on just one viewing but the cow grows and shrinks a bit throughout the entire animation. I fixed the parts I could and trusted to my large actions to hide most of size change. It worked pretty well but it is something that bothers me every time I watch it.

The final problem I had with my project was the sound. Even though I understood the importance of the sound in a successful animation I still managed to only leave a week at the end of my animation for sound effect. I don't understand how the addition of sound came down to the final week. I had laid out an entire month for it on my calendar but "*The best-laid plans of mice and men / Often go awry*". Luckily, I had some great musicians who cranked out the music that saved me from pulling my hair out.

The music really pulled the sound together and saved me from having to do sound effects over the whole animation in such a short amount of time.

Overall, I was very happy with how my animation turned out. It got the laughs that I wanted and the imagery almost turned out like I had pictured it in my mind. Perhaps on the next animation I will get even closer to what I picture in my mind. That being said there were several things I learned from my own failures on this project. The first and foremost thing that I learned from my thesis was I have terrible time management skills. I really wonder how much better my project would have been had I actually begun to take it seriously in the first half of the year, but all I can do is press on with my animation and remember for future projects that I need to manage my time much more efficiently. The second most important thing I learned during the creation of this project was the importance of translating the storytelling to animation. Without understanding what I was capable of creating I would have turned out a half finished project that was much too long.

“In the middle I want to be at the end, at the end I want to be in the beginning, and in the beginning I want to be in bed.”

— Jarod Kintz, *This Book Has No Title*