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Fox Fire

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A Reflective Essay on the Animated Short: “Fox Fire”

“Fox Fire” is the final title for my Capstone Project, a roughly three-minute animated short created primarily in Adobe Flash. The story begins with a young boy’s trip to a Japanese summer festival. He receives some spending money from his mother and heads eagerly to the goldfish-catching booth, but soon realizes that the game is not quite so easy to master. Meanwhile, a mysterious young girl dressed in a fox mask sits next to him, catching goldfish after goldfish. Though he feels a bit bitter, the mysterious girl also intrigues him. While watching her, his eye catches sight of a flickering light in one of her goldfish bags – what could it be? Zooming in, the goldfish part to reveal an eerie blue flame. The boy is entranced as the flame dances and slowly morphs into the silhouette of a fish. It swims toward him, slowly gaining speed, when at last it unhinges its jaws and engulfs the screen. The boy snaps back to reality just in time to see the festival lanterns flicker out and the masked girl sprint off into the darkness. The boy is now alone in a vast expanse of blackness – and the adventure begins.

Inspirations

When I first began contemplating the various techniques in which I might complete the Capstone Project, my mind immediately went to animation. Though my major is Illustration - the study and craft of still images - I have always had a great respect and admiration for animated art. Like many children of my generation, I grew up watching films produced in the golden age of Disney films. Every summer, while visiting my grandparents in the United States, I would see a

single movie – Disney’s new release. My two favorites have always been *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*. In addition to this, I loved watching Japan’s animated masterpieces, such as Hayao Miyazaki’s *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*. Later on in my childhood, while taking a summer animation class for kids, I realized the intense amount of work devoted to each of my favorite animated films and gained an immense amount of respect for animators while dabbling in the art myself. Then, while studying Illustration here at Syracuse University, I learned that all professional animated films are derived from a series of preliminary works – the works of an illustrator. Over these four years, I have often found inspiration in the beautiful conceptual art that inspires animated films. Though cartoons are not commonly viewed as “high-art”, the wealth of talent within certain production teams is jaw dropping. Flipping through Disney’s “making of” art books in the Limited checkout section of the university library, it seemed to me that artists who work in animation have just as much – if not more – technical skill than any fine artist. This great respect for animators and concept artists lead me further toward choosing animation as the primary medium for my Capstone Project.

When I first started working on this project, I intended on animating a story based on my childhood in Japan. The rough story involved a young girl revisiting her hometown, being sucked into a land of memories, and reliving the best of her childhood adventures. I was hoping to conduct a study abroad in my hometown of Haginodai, Japan. This venture, I hoped, would allow me to obtain first-hand reference photographs for the animation, create background paintings

on site, and perhaps give the project a greater sense of personal meaning and depth. However, as the project progressed, it was becoming clear that I would not be able to fit a trip abroad into my busy class schedule, nor would I be able to obtain sufficient funding; I realized that it was time to rework my idea.

“Fox Fire” was my second story idea and was heavily influenced by my roots in Japanese culture. Much like children in Western cultures are familiar with tales of the “Boogey-man”, the “Tooth Fairy”, and other such characters of fantasy, Japanese children are well versed in the folktales of *yokai* (mischievous creatures), *tanuki* (trickster raccoon-dogs), and a wealth of other mystical creatures. These folktales have been around for centuries, some borrowed from Chinese folklore and others invented by the Japanese.¹ Yet even today, Japan’s modern pop culture is steeped with tales of yokai. For example, when I was younger, one of my favorite television shows was *Ge Ge Ge no Kitaro*, a cartoon franchise centered around the adventures of Kitaro, a boy who works with several of his yokai friends to keep peace between the supernatural and human worlds. In hindsight, this television show coupled with my lifelong love of scary stories was likely another heavy influence on the creation of “Fox Fire”.

Conceptualization

During the process of refining the story, I began work on the preliminary conceptual artwork for the short. I strongly believe that the preliminary steps - drafting designs for characters, environments, and other elements of the animation – are the most important step in the creation of an animated short. Conceptual

¹ Smits, Gregory J. "Yôkai: Monsters, Giant Catfish, & Symbolic Representation in Popular Culture."

work forms the foundation for a successful animated short. It promotes a cohesive look and a set of stylistic “instructions” to which artists can refer back to along the lengthy path to completion. The process of brainstorming and sketching is also a great way of flushing out “the first ideas”, which are usually the most clichéd and uninteresting. My personal brainstorming process simply involves sitting down with a pencil, a paper, and drawing whatever comes to mind. It’s much easier to distinguish between good and bad ideas when they are put down on paper and can be viewed side-by-side. “Happy accidents” also often occur during this exercise, where pieces of sketches inspire ideas that may never have arisen from brainstorming without drawing.

I had already decided during the writing process that the main characters would be a boy and the mysterious fox-girl, so the challenge of character designing was to come up with characters that looked interesting while still fitting their respective roles. When I think of great character design, Sylvain Chomet’s *Triplets of Belleville* pops to mind. Every feature of the characters in this film – from their facial features to their clothes to their very proportions – speaks to *who they are*. Though Miyazaki and Disney films are beautiful as a whole and have many wonderful qualities, certain characters become nearly indistinguishable from one another when stripped of their “accessories” – things such as hairstyle, hair color, eye color, skin color, and clothing. Characters like Wendy from *Peter Pan* and Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* become almost like a single paper doll, dressed in different clothing for each of its roles. My main goal was to avoid this phenomenon and create characters with distinct personalities. For the protagonist

boy, I created a character that appears young and innocent, but also can be seen as slightly spacey or dopey. His innocence comes across through the childlike features of a large head and wide eyes, while the dopey quality is conveyed through slumped shoulders, big ears, and a blank stare. For the character of the Fox Girl, I drew influences from Japanese legends of *kitsune* – magical fox demons – and the various *noh* theater masks that have been created to represent them. I drew up a shrewd and untrustworthy looking character that may also have traits of childishness or naïveté. With an unchanging and deceptive grin painted on her mask, the design of the girl’s face is made to be unsettling. Not only is the audience unable to see her “true face”, I believe that the static and unnatural quality of masks disturbs people at a core level. At the same time, this character still has the proportions and features of a little girl, which should hint that her trickery, though reckless, is not intended to cause serious harm.

A secondary goal in character design was to create characters that looked stylistically “Japanese”. I pulled a lot of inspiration from contemporary Japanese “anime”, keeping eyes large and noses and mouths relatively small. Additionally, the aesthetic of large black eyes, big round faces, and small bodies draws heavily from the influences of Tatsuo Sato’s art film, *Cat Soup*. The details in clothing worn by each character were carefully researched with the help of my own personal memories from Japanese festivals. In the final designs, the female characters are dressed in traditional summer *yukatas* (light-weight cotton kimonos) coupled with an *obi* (a wide sash, tied around the waist and into a bow). The boy character is shown wearing a *jinbei*, another light cotton outfit frequently

worn by boys during summer festivals. In the initial character designs, I also included more finished elements, such as coloring, shading, and texture within the clothing. These finishing touches, however, never made it to the final product due to time constraints as well as various stylistic judgment calls, which I will discuss shortly.

Conceptual paintings for “Fox Fire” were created in tandem with the final character designs and storyboard. One of the greatest influences for my conceptual artwork was the film *Alice in Wonderland*. Mary Blair, who had an immense talent for color and shape, did much of the conceptual work for this film. Some things that I found particularly unique about *Alice in Wonderland* were the scenes within “wonderland”, which were heavily stylized and consisted of a lot of undefined black space. Not only did this give the movie a unique look, it was easy for me to draw parallels between that look and what I was trying to accomplish. A secondary influence was, without a doubt, Tatsuo Sato’s *Cat Soup*. This eerie film’s undefined backgrounds give the film a surreal and unsettling effect, which I also attempted to incorporate into “Fox Fire”. I chose to do these paintings in acrylic. Because of their quick drying time, acrylic paints are often used to create artwork with flat shapes. There is a nice “moodiness” to the finished paintings that I think was very successful. I feel that the paintings also accurately represented the vision that I had originally had in my mind, which for me is another measure of success. The character designs and conceptual paintings were the “idea making” parts and also what I considered the most “fun” parts of the project – so they were finished fairly quickly.

Storyboarding this short was one of my greatest struggles in finishing this project. The storyboard is essentially a blueprint for the finished product. It dictates what scenes need to be produced, which camera angles will be used, the flow of the narrative, and the backgrounds that will be required. Therefore, it requires a lot of careful consideration. The storyboard for “Fox Fire” was in production for a long time and continued to fluctuate even through the animation process. The finished storyboard consists of about 70 images, not all of which were used. Similarly, the final animation includes scenes that were not included in the original storyboard. To create the storyboard, I began by sketching a loose outline of each scene, based upon the written story that I had drafted earlier. I tried to incorporate a varied amount of camera angles to create visual interest and meaning. For example, when the boy character first finds himself in the dark expanse of the supernatural world, the camera zooms out to a long shot. This gives a sense that the character is helpless, lost, and alone in his surroundings. After the initial sketches, I began sketching onto the final storyboard papers – printed templates that I had made in Photoshop – followed by the charcoal finishes.

The four background paintings I completed were done under the instructions of illustration professor Bob Dacey. Because “Fox Fire” is set in a Japanese summer festival, also known as a *matsuri*, I began collecting reference photos online. The style of background paintings that I had initially envisioned was similar to Mary Blair’s concept paintings. Because I wanted to create something similar to the dark and atmospheric background of *Alice in*

Wonderland and *Cat Soup*, I looked for reference photos with the eerie “orange glow” lighting created by the lanterns of summer festivals. Once I was satisfied with my collection of reference materials, I did several color studies with oil paints. As recommended by my professor, I limited the color palette to dark browns, oranges, yellows and reds – all warm colors – to achieve the desired atmospheric effect. While creating these simple studies, I found that the complex angles and perspective needed to make the scenes seem real and believable would be difficult and time consuming to construct purely from imagination. This was the point at which I made the decision to utilize Google SketchUp, a free 3D modeling software that allows the user to create simple objects and environments. The most useful feature of this program for me was its ability to view the 3D environments from any angle. This allowed me to create a summer festival “set”, pan around it, and take numerous screenshots as reference for my background paintings, thus eliminating the need to measure out complex perspective lines. The only downside to using SketchUp, in my opinion, is the stiffness that can come from using computer-generated models. However, making slight alterations and exaggerations in the lines of the final drawing can easily compensate for this effect. What I had not realized throughout these early stages was that my characters would not be able to mesh well with the style of the backgrounds that I was trying to create. Mary Blair’s paintings, although skillfully designed, were comprised purely of shapes and blocks of color. My character designs, on the other hand, were heavily line-based. As a result, when placed in the shape-based backgrounds, my characters came to look like “cut-outs”, as if they did not belong

in the same imaginary “world” as the background paintings. Upon realizing this fact, I scrapped my ideas and began to look for new sources of inspiration. After some time, I stumbled upon the background paintings of Disney’s *101 Dalmatians*. The process and style used for these backgrounds was groundbreaking due to their use of the Xerox machine. The artists would draw the backgrounds out and Xerox the finished drawings onto cels, whereas they used to ink them by hand.² Likewise, the coloring styles they used were modern and vibrant, using graphic cutout shapes as opposed to painterly renderings. Very often they would also have monochromatic or nearly monochromatic backgrounds, which conveyed the mood of each scene beautifully. These works served as the primary inspiration for the environments I created. My process involved creating a detailed drawing of the matsuri (using SketchUp images as reference), scanning the drawings into Photoshop, enhancing the contrast of the drawings, and coloring them with angular shapes of color. Placing my character designs into the finished paintings, I was glad to find that the two meshed well. Also, this method allowed me to retain many of my original concepts, including the desire for a strong sense of atmospheric lighting, and color.

The Animation Process

After all of the preliminary artwork was completed, all that was left was the arduous process of animating the finished movie. With each scene taking me roughly one to four hours, depending on the complexity of movement involved, this was by far the most time consuming and difficult stage in this project.

² Richards, Rob. "101 DALMATIANS:The Dilapidated DeVil Mansion."

Unfortunately, I also found it to be one of the most monotonous stages in creating “Fox Fire”.

Rather early on, I had made the decision to use Adobe Flash as my medium for animation. Though my original intent was to draw the animation by hand, scan the drawings in, and play through them via Flash, I realized quickly that this would not be feasible in the timeframe that I was provided. Therefore, the decision to draw directly into the Flash software was mainly a result of time constraints. The process I used to create my final animations began by importing my character design sheets into Flash and tracing over them. Because Flash operates in a different format than Photoshop (vectors instead of raster graphics), it is not advisable to use artwork directly imported from Photoshop, which is why I chose to recreate each character in Flash. Having images of my characters from all sides became very important in establishing consistency between scenes. I would start a new scene by pasting in the original character design and drawing next to it, thereby keeping proportions and features of characters uniform throughout the short. I would then roughly sketch out the key frames in order to get a general sense of the character’s movement and timing. Animations are comprised of key frames and in-between frames, each frame being a single image. Key frames are the images that dictate critical points in movement, and in-betweens smooth out the transitions between each key frame. Once I felt that my animation sketch was satisfactory, I would draw the final key frames on a separate layer, followed by the in-betweens. The entire animation was done at 12 frames per second, which is half the frame rate of feature films, but still considered

acceptable. If, at any time, I felt that the animation of a scene needed tweaking, I would do so. Because this is a work-in-progress animation, nothing can be considered set in stone. Tweening, a function of Flash that generates in-between frames for simple movements of an object, such as having something slide across the screen, was put to use where I felt that it would be most economical, yet not distracting or unattractive. For instance, I used the tweening function for all of the camera zooms, and fading effects. In rougher, unfinished portion of the animation, tweened objects can be seen as a “sketch” of sorts.

Earlier, I had referred to “happy accidents” that occur throughout the creative process. Flash’s ability to simulate line weight was one such “accident” that I chose to run with. When someone draws in Flash, the software takes the line that has been drawn, smoothes it out, and tapers it at each end. This is supposed to create visual interest and the illusion that an image has been hand drawn. I first started drawing the animation in stark, black lines with the intention of coloring them in later on. However, the look of my line drawings began to grow on me; they were somehow reminiscent of ink brush drawings. My advisors also seemed to enjoy the aesthetic of flat colors and line drawings. This was the point at which I chose to omit the background artwork completely from “Fox Fire”. It was disappointing to lose work that I had done, but I have learned that sometimes an artist has to sacrifice ideas that he or she loves in order to preserve the strength of the overall vision.

Post-Production

The post-production stage was very little work in comparison to the pre-production and production itself. Adobe Flash has a system for creating separate scenes, which eliminated the need for me to do much editing. Unlike with live-action films, animations don't produce a lot of excess footage. For example, with a live-action film, a director might do several takes of one scene or shoot extra footage "just in case". Because the animation process is so highly structured and the animating process so arduous, such tactics are eliminated. All I needed to do for "Fox Fire" was export the matsuri scenes, the trance scenes, join them together, and add sound.

Soundtracks are not my specialty, but I felt that the animation needed some kind of music to uphold and enhance the drama of certain scenes. Throughout production, I had in the back of my mind, imagined "Fox Fire" with a very minimal track of sound effects, such as gongs, white noise, and footsteps. I was thinking that this would contribute to the eerie effect of the short by emphasizing the pure "nothingness" of the scenes being played out on the black backgrounds. Similarly, I considered the possibility of having the scenes that take place in the "normal world" have a much more generic and upbeat soundtrack, such as traditional matsuri music intermixed with crowd sound effects. This would create a nice juxtaposition and clear divide between the lighthearted sequences and the dark, eerie sequences. In the end, I would up achieving this "divide" between the two types of scenes in a different manner, which was by dropping traditional matsuri music into the dark scenes while leaving the light

scenes silent. This had the effect of enhancing the drama and chaos of the dark scenes while playing up the normalcy and safety of the light scenes. I am pleased with this final effect, which was an accidental discovery made from taking sound clips and dropping them into different portions of the short.

Technical issues did not pose a major problem until the very end when it came time to render the short. Flash is only capable of exporting the short in a limited number of formats (.swf, .mov, .gif, etc.). Each format is only playable in certain types of media players. Generally, .mov is an acceptable file format to use, because it is playable on both PCs and Macs in a variety of different players; the viewer will have few hassles in playing it. However, upon export to a .mov file, the quality of the animation plummeted. In the end, I chose to settle for the lower-quality .mov file format, because it's better to view something in low-resolution than nothing at all. This was, perhaps, one of the most disappointing and frustrating aspects of this project. After devoting so many hours to a project that I could be proud of, it was tough to see it shaved down to such poor quality in an instant.

Conclusions

My favorite scenes in the "Fox Fire" short ended up being the underwater animations, which were some of the most complex. I was very pleased with the fluidity of motion and believability of the character's weightlessness. If I had an endless amount of time and funding at my disposal, firstly, I'd like to bring the line-animation to full completion. Afterwards, I might like to experiment with adding textures to the animation. One idea I'd like to toy with is to scan origami

and overlay it within character's clothing. I have long been a fan of the animated series *Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo*, directed by Mahiro Maeda and produced by studio Gonzo. As one might imagine, the story is based off of Alexandre Dumas' *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*. However, the story takes place in the distant future, with a sci-fi aesthetic that is also oddly reminiscent of 19th century France. What's most interesting about this series is its avant-garde and lavish use of textures within every element of its animation. To attempt a similar, but perhaps less over-the-top aesthetic in "Fox Fire" would be an interesting experiment for me. Additionally, it may be interesting to experiment with the absence of line-work, much like the style presented in my conceptual paintings. As I stated before, the "moodiness" of the conceptual paintings was very successful; it added another layer to the emotional impact of the story. If I could translate that feeling over to the animation, I think that "Fox Fire" may be more successful in drawing the audience into that world. And lastly, it would be wonderful if I could figure out a way to export the animation without any loss of quality. For the overall success of the project, I would like to thank Gail Hoffman and Yvonne Buchanan, my two honors readers, for their support and advisement along the way. Also, I would like to thank Bob Dacey for helping me complete the background artwork.

If I was to do any other animation work in the future, it would likely look completely different from "Fox Fire" due to the shifts in my interests and influences. Currently, I find myself fascinated by what seems to be a movement of Japanese animated films inspired by Takashi Murakami's glossy, plastic,

“explosions of color” pop art. These films include Mamoru Hosoda’s animated works: *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* and *Summer Wars*, as well as Koji Matsunari’s recently released *Welcome to the Space Show* and Studio 4°’s *Genius Party* anthologies. If I was to continue to create more animated shorts in the future, I would like to try my hand at something in the vein of the aforementioned films.

So, what was the purpose of all of this work? How does it impact the students of Syracuse University and our society at large? Well, perhaps it doesn’t. I like to think of my artwork as pieces of candy. Sometimes they’re sweet fun and sometimes they’re bitter truth, but they’re never anything more than a blip in the course of a person’s life. A portfolio reviewer once told me that my artwork should have “impact” in the world and “make a difference” – but he was mistaken. There is nothing wrong with a pretty dress, a Saturday morning cartoon, a delicious piece of candy, or a meticulously crafted and ephemeral piece of artwork. In an age full of media bombardment, to even elicit such a momentary reaction may be considered an achievement. What’s beautiful is not necessarily the dent that a piece of art may leave in a person’s mind, but the transient appreciation and emotional reaction that it can stir up within its viewer. If “Fox Fire” and its related works can come to do this – I will consider it a success.

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Summary

This Capstone Project involved the creation of “Fox Fire”, an approximately three-minute animated short, and all of its preliminary artwork. The purpose of this project was to create an entertaining piece of work while enlightening myself and broadening the strength of my artistic skill. At a young age, I developed an interest in animation. This interest has continued to grow throughout my life and I am constantly looking to expand my knowledge on the subject. More recently, my interests have started to lean toward the illustrative aspects of animation. In some ways, I think that is why I chose to become an illustration major. That is why this Capstone project has a heavy focus on the conceptual art that leads up to the final “Fox Fire” animation.

The very first pieces of work that I did for this lengthy project were sketches – I always begin by sketching. These drawings were a very rough brainstorm of my ideas. It is important to push the boundaries of these initial ideas in order to find concepts that are worthy of progressing to the next stage of development. After digging up satisfying results through sketching, I began working on character designs and concept paintings. Throughout the production of an animated feature, animators will use character designs – sometimes also referred to as “character sheets” – in order to maintain the consistent look of a character. These sheets usually consist of a character drawn from four or five different sides, showcasing all aspects of the design. The character designs for “Fox Fire” have influences in “anime”, film, and traditional Japanese culture. They were drawn directly into Adobe Photoshop via the Wacom tablet with

reference from sketches. These drawings were then colored and filled with textures, which I also crafted in Photoshop.

Conceptual paintings are used in determining a wide range of things, including: color palette, lighting, and potential camera angles. The style of my concept paintings was heavily inspired by the artwork of Mary Blair and her mentor, Eyvind Earle. Both artists worked at the Disney studio on films such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Sleeping Beauty*. They are known for their brilliant use of color and their flat, graphic style. What I chose to depict in the paintings were images that I had been floating around in my mind since the idea stage of the project. The pieces were all done in acrylic paint, which is a water-soluble paint that dries very quickly. For this reason, it is popular in creating artwork that includes a lot of flat colors. The surface used was plain, household cardboard – because another advantage of acrylic paints is that they can be painted on almost anything.

The storyboard is comprised of approximately 70 drawings. Because of fluctuations in the story that occurred during the animation process, the storyboard is not a completely accurate depiction of the work-in-progress animation. Each scene was done in charcoal on a simple printed template. The template was used in order to maintain an accurate and consistent size for the all of the storyboard images. The camera angle I decided to use in each scene was inspired by the “mood” that the scene was meant to convey. I also tried to choose varied angles in order to create visual interest.

Background paintings were created by taking advantage of Google SketchUp, a free software for 3D modeling. The models I created in SketchUp were useful as reference for the background drawings that did. Similarly, the storyboards were very useful in allowing me to see what backgrounds would need to be produced. My final drawings were scanned into Photoshop and edited to have a greater amount of contrast. Lastly, I colored the drawings using flat blocks of color.

The entirety of the animation was created in Adobe Flash through the use of a Wacom drawing tablet, which is a tool that allowed me to draw directly into my laptop. Adobe Flash is computer software commonly used in the cartoon industry to create simple animations. One of its most useful functions is in “tweening”. Tweening is a timesaving process in which the software generates frames for simple object movements, such as a single object sliding across the screen. This is how I created camera zooms, fading effects, and various other rudimentary movements. Another useful option that Flash has, much like Photoshop, is the ability to work in layers. Layers allow the user to maintain and edit various elements of the animation separately. I found that layers were very useful in the process that I used to animate my characters. First, I created a “sketch” layer, in which I would draw a rough version of the animation. When the movement of the sketch was satisfactory, I drew the final animation directly over the sketch in another layer. As I worked through the animation process, I stacked and tweened numerous different objects, which allowed me to create more complex and elegant effects. However, at the core, all of the animation in “Fox

Fire” comes from my imagination. Though many animators use actors and film clips as reference for movement, some animators also work from scratch.

Essentially, I sketched out the movements with careful consideration as to how a person would make each movement; and if the timing or anatomy didn’t feel right, I tweaked them. I believe that my knowledge of anatomy was very helpful during these steps.

Upon completion of this animation “sketch”, I exported the clips from Adobe Flash and into iMovie – a relatively simple program used for home editing of video clips. In iMovie, I merged the “real world scenes” and the “supernatural scenes”, which were done in separate Flash files. As a final touch, I edited in traditional Japanese festival music, courtesy of the Tsukasa Electronics website.³

While the animation portion of “Fox Fire” is still a work-in-progress, I would like to continue work on it in the future. I believe that it has a solid foundation of work and may grow into something wonderful. For now, I hope that audiences will see “Fox Fire” and be intrigued by the process that goes into the production of an animated short.

³ "O-Matsuri." *Www.TKS-ele.com*.