

BUILDING GROUP DYNAMICS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Peter Hriso

Assistant Professor of Digital Media
East Tennessee State University
College of Business and Technology
P.O. Box 70552
Johnson City, TN 37614
Tel: (423) 979-3158
Fax: (423) 979-3160
Email: Hriso@etsu.edu

Gigi Alandt

Tel: (423) 218-4131
Email: galandt@comcast.net

Track Two: Academic Code

BUILDING GROUP DYNAMICS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT

Current trends in computer animation have made successful and effective teamwork a necessary job skill. Developing animation has always required a close collaboration between artists, technicians, writers, directors, and musicians. With any team small or large there can be difficulties. Personality conflicts, problems keeping everyone in sync, unequal contributions, distractions, delays, and setbacks can demoralize any team. Challenging students to take part in competitions outside the classroom can help build the necessary skill sets in learning how to work together in a real world environment because the best activities combine teamwork with basic problem solving. This paper describes our approach in having students come together to participate in an international student animation competition. The animation competition took place in a four-day production model featuring competing teams of student animators challenged to complete a 30 second animated public service announcement. This paper addresses how students prepared for that competition and the benefits in competing in the team oriented contest.

INTRODUCTION

Computer animation is one of the most rapidly growing areas of creative and technical development. Computer-generated animation sequences in television, movies, video games and scientific and medical visualization are some of the more visible applications of computer animation. As a profession, computer animation is a continuously evolving field. Creative and technical expertise remains in demand. The industry employs the talents of a wide variety of artists, technicians, writers, directors, musicians, producers and management to produce their products; animators only make up a small portion of these production teams. All these individuals must work as a team during the long, arduous process of production to develop their products on time and on budget. A career in animation requires more than strong artistic skills and a solid familiarity with the latest computer animation technologies. It also requires the ability to work and effectively communicate in an interdisciplinary environment. Traditional education environments concentrate on the technical and artistic aspects of teaching where students focus individually on specific assignments. This leaves little time to teach the interdisciplinary team skills required to make students successful in the computer animation environment. Challenging students to compete as a team outside the classroom environment can help build the necessary skill they need to learn while developing the communication skills required to survive in today's computer animation industry. This paper addresses our university's interest in encouraging students to participate in an international

student animation competition. This paper also describes how our students prepared for that contest and the benefits in joining in the team-oriented animation competition.

ANIMATION HISTORY

Early animation was most often created “straight ahead” meaning the animator drew the action incrementally, frame by frame, until the work was completed. Considering that there are 24 frames in one mere second of film, it is easy to calculate that an animated film of any substantial content requires a lot of time and effort to create.

Emil Cohl, recognized as, “The First Animator” and Winsor McCay, credited by many as the father of character animation, are renowned for their individual efforts to exploit the creative properties inherent in the animated process; each assumed responsibility over the entire production of a film, including design, animation and the photography. In his pioneering film, *Gertie the Dinosaur*, McCay single handedly animated over five thousand drawings. As an independent animator Winsor McCay had sole authorship over his work taking as much time necessary to complete a project reportedly spending up to a year to produce a five-minute film. (Crandol, 1999) McCay’s aim however was artistic, working towards developing the unique properties of animation and molding it into a new form of artistic expression. As public appeal for the animated cartoon blossomed, producers in the burgeoning field of movie making aimed to capitalize financially on the unique nature of the animated film. As a business enterprise, the time intensive labor demands of making an animated film would require streamlining techniques to successfully and efficiently serve mass audiences.

John Randolph Bray, the first entrepreneur of animation, transformed the art of animation into an industry. J. R Bray reformed what was essentially a one man operation into an assembly line production. Bray implemented efficiency and organization into the production process by dividing the labor; each stage of the production including animation, inbetweening, clean-up, and inking became distinct tasks accomplished by a specialized staff.

Animation quickly developed into a commercially viable product as the streamlined techniques became an established system. Studios began populating the scene around 1913. The studio’s primary objective stressed efficiency for the rapid and cost effective manufacturing of animated cartoons.

Yet cranking out cartoons cheaply and quickly is not what has allowed animation to succeed as a mass entertainment medium nearly a century long.

“The strength of any studio lies in the artistry and skill of its technical departments [...] Animation, like all film production, needs the expert collaboration of many artists and technicians.” *21 Years Halas & Batchelor Cartoons Films Ltd. London 1961 (no pagination)*

Through positive alliances of artistic and technical talent animation has endured and evolved into a sophisticated medium of communication. The most renowned team within the studio setting is Walt Disney’s, “Nine Old Men,” a group of highly gifted individuals whose combined efforts elevated the artistic and technical quality of animation. Likewise, the Warner Bros. studio assembled a remarkable cadre of artists, animators, writers and directors acclaimed for their acute and unrestrained comedic vision that catapulted the genre into outlandish territory with hysterical results.

Animated filmmaking within the studio setting represents a large collaborative enterprise. By no means is it impossible for independent artists to produce noteworthy work as history has established; many continue to do so today. Yet to prepare students for the industry side of animation, from which most employment is attained, it is essential they are challenged to develop a sensibility for teamwork.

COMPETITION APPLICATION

Every two years the KAFI (Kalamazoo Animation Festival International) sponsors an event called the Cartoon Challenge. The KAFI solicits teams of five members each from universities and art institutes to apply for entrance into their animation competition. Applicant teams from each university must develop an animated demo reel that composes visual animated work from their respective school. Each individual team member applying for the competition must explain why their group should be chosen to participate in the event. Also, team members must fill out an application form and submit individual professional resumes. This experience alone was something that many of our students had yet to experience in their academic career. Drafting a professional résumé for the purpose of applying and obtaining a position into the competition gave the students a similar experience into applying for a professional position into the computer animation industry. KAFI official’s select only ten teams to compete based upon the quality of the entries. The initial challenge to collaborate as a team required putting together a winning application into the competition. Achieving an entry slot into the competition was an award itself for the student teams. In the process, students learned how to put together a professional demo reel, fill out an application and develop a professional resume.

Developing the individual demo reel proved a particularly dexterous task. Each student was required to individually animate a sequence conveying why their team should be chosen to participate in the competition and how the experience would benefit them personally. The challenge required developing an animated sequence (see image 1) that could be coordinated with their team members' animation footage. It required each member to rely on the direction, skill set and ideas of their team mates in order to put together a cohesive application.

Image 1



This was the initial phase of their development as a unit, trusting each other to put it together correctly in time to meet the deadline. Fulfilling these submission procedures while juggling school work taught the students to manage multi-tasks and rely on one another for the completion of a successful application.

COMING TOGETHER AS A TEAM

Teamwork is a key element behind successful development and rapid implementation of innovative technology solutions. Its role has been proven in carrying out a number of organizational tasks (Stout, Salas, and Fowkles, 1997). The primary challenge of the animation contest was to function as a corps, delivering a product at the end, an animated Public Service Announcement (PSA). This would be a new experience for many of the students. Projects within each academic discipline are generally inwardly focused, and students are not challenged to work collaboratively with others. Each student team member always worked on their assignments individually and up to this time in their academic career had not worked on a team project.

“Before doing this event, I had never really had to work in a formal group setting. During the whole process, I began to realize the importance of teamwork. Before, I had to rely on myself to perform many of the tasks needed to complete a work, but with a group each person had their stronger talents they could contribute to the work.” –Student Participant

The students prepared themselves by meeting once a week for 10 weeks before the start of the animation competition. The students were aware the contest required producing a PSA though the topic remained undisclosed until first day of the competition. They would have four days to develop a story idea, design a storyboard, and composite the individual work assignments into a completed 30 second animated announcement. Never having produced a PSA, the student team was unfamiliar with the technical requirements of putting together this product. The short turn around time allotted to completing the project simulated the stressful work environment in the computer animation field. This situation of working as a team under a tight deadline was an experience that the students had yet to realize.

The team first decided to investigate each other’s skill sets to determine what role each member was qualified to perform. In addition, they wanted to familiarize themselves with the procedures involved in developing a Public Service Announcement. To accomplish this, they developed their own 30 second PSA.

“For the months before the competition, we met as a team and tried to complete a ‘trial-run’, which mainly involved coming up with an idea for a commercial ad we thought would be similar to what would be presented at the competition.” – Student Participant

The team settled on a topic based upon the harmful effects of smoking. Each student proceeded to develop individual ideas and storyboards for the chosen theme, (see image 2).



Image 2

Meeting one day a week, they discussed story ideas and character development and unique methods on how they could enhance each others designs, (see image 3, 4 and 5).

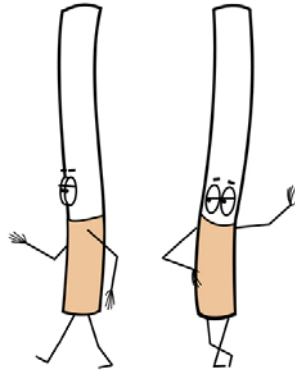


Image 3



Image 4

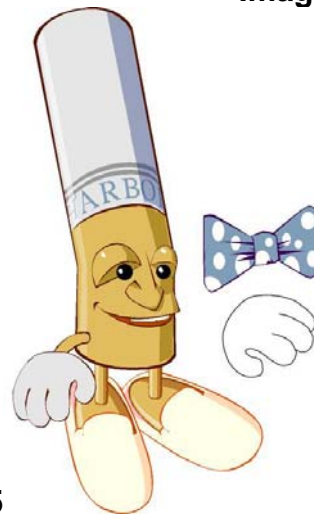


Image 5

Students evaluated how they could produce their PSA efficiently in the limited time scope dictated by the competition. They realized individual roles for production would be needed for their workflow: environment artist, character designer and animator, sound designer, storyboard artist, character animator and a project manager who would also be their spokesperson.

Progressing through each stage of the development process (see figure 1) the students learned what was demanded of each other and who was better suited to a particular development area. They also learned to handle multiple-roles; at times, all the members would need to pitch in to complete any portion of the production cycle.

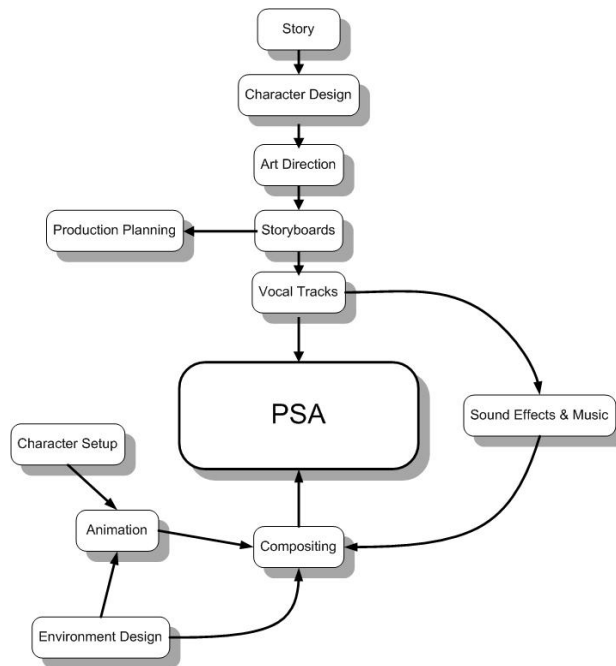


Figure 1

Each team member tried different tasks as a manner of gauging their individual strengths and weaknesses. They also realized that specific roles needed to be fulfilled beyond the animator's position to complete the project. The team needs a writer, an animator, a musician and sound effects artist, a layout and background artist, a storyboard artist and a technician to handle the compositing processes required to bring the entire project together. The team learned to rely upon each other to fulfill these roles and in doing so learned to communicate and work together.

One key position the students became acquainted with during their mock production is the role of the project leader. This individual would be responsible for driving the projects timeline and making sure deliverables were received on schedule. With any assembly-line production there are steps that must be accomplished before progressing to the next stage of development. For example, an animation needs to start with a concept; a formulized idea of what is going to take place. A storyboard is then designed and developed to visualize the concept. The exercise revealed who was capable of following through deadline responsibilities. Initially, no one maintained the production schedule. By developing their own PSA the students recognized they needed to delegate a leader who could organize and administer a timeline as well as manage the workflow produced by the other team members.

CONCLUSION

We first took students to the KAFI animation competition in the spring of 2005 and received positive feedback from the participating members. Course structure doesn't always allow time for students to collaborate in group projects as a team. The competition engaged students in a project where they could experience a "real world" situation.

"Above all, I learned the benefits of a team effort. Five people together can do much more than they ever could separately. I also gained a new appreciation for animation. It is VERY time consuming and every cartoon I watch now is all the more impressive. Dedication is unquestionably the best trait an animator can have." –Student Participant

From our experience, we believe having students participate in team oriented competitions provides them with an increased appreciation of working collaboratively and an improved ability to communicate in a team setting. Students also gain valuable insight competing against individuals in their field of discipline; an awareness of how their abilities measure up to students in rivaling programs.

"I was able to compare the skill levels of students from other schools around the country and Canada to what I've seen here. It was helpful to know where I stood." -Student Participant

As the computer animation industry continues to utilize collaborative skill sets to achieve success and accomplish production demands, likewise, educators must do the same and seek out new methods in challenging students to learn to work as a team.

REFERENCES

- Canemaker, J. (1982). Treasures of Disney animation art. New York: Abbeyville Press.
- Crafton, D. (1982). Before Mickey: The animated film 1898-1928. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Crandol, M. (1999). The History of animation: Advantages and disadvantages of the studio system in the production of an art form. Retrieved October 2, 2005 from <http://www.digitalmediafx.com/Features/animationhistory.html>
- Jolliffe, Lee B. *Industry's Team Approach to Classroom Projects*, Journalism Educator (Summer 1991).
- Solomon, C. (1989). Enchanted drawings: The history of animation. New York: Alfred A. Knoph, inc.
- Stout, Renee J., Salas, Eduardo, and Fowlkes, Jennifer E. 1997 *Enhancing Teamwork in Complex Environments Through Team Training*, Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama & Sociometry, 49 (22 December 1997).
- Walker, J. (2003). *The Studio system*. Retrieved October 2, 2005 from The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College, The Animation Research Centre Web site:
http://193.62.44.4/arc/archive/hb_studiosystem.html
- 21 Years Halas & Batchelor Cartoons Films Ltd. London, London: John Roberts Press Ltd 1961