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TOMORROW'S ANIMATORS



When JMC Academy decided recently to expand and update their animation programs, bringing the right people on board to contribute ideas and expertise was a major step. A new teacher, Jeff Pratt, comes with many years of experience both as a professional animator with Pixar and as a teacher in the US and England.

Jeff's working life actually began in mechanical engineering. He earned his degree at Purdue University and began working for NASA as a Space Shuttle Systems Engineer at Kennedy Space Centre. After developing an interest in animation he left NASA to study graphic design and computer animation. Landing a job at Pixar following graduation, he worked on projects including 'Toy Story' 1 and 2, 'A Bug's Life', 'Monsters Inc' and as a modeller and rigger for 'Finding Nemo'.

LEARNING CURVES

Apart from the fundamentals of animation itself, what Jeff says he brings from his 10 years at Pixar is an animator's understanding of production and the production process, plus

inspiration from the people he encountered while working there, who in turn shared with him the things and people that inspired them in their work.

Teaching had attracted him even while he was studying at art school, and he kept it in mind while working at Pixar. He eventually became an animation teacher at Expression College near San Francisco and then went to work at Escape Studios in London, where he developed and taught animation courses.

'Toy Story 1' was another learning phase but not just for Jeff. "As Pixar's first movie, seeing how the filmmaking process evolved and figuring it out as they went was beneficial because all the artists involved could watch the characters and story develop together, from early concepts to finish. It was a similar experience with 'A Bug's Life'," said Jeff. "It's valuable to see those early stages and watch aspects of the project change. Later, of course, Pixar's production process changed and grew more efficient over the years.

CONVINCING

"Having specific tools for realistic fur, hair, and cloth, and attributes like subsurface scattering to improve human characters' looks was something artists never considered at that time. Rigging software now produces far more believable results in terms of anatomy and movement of skin over bone, for example, and muscle systems below the surface. That was probably Pixar's biggest challenge for its earliest movies. Human characters were still not fully convincing, partly because the tools and techniques weren't as accessible yet."

Rendering and textures are also continuing to improve, he noted, and even the improvements in user interfaces are making a difference. But all animators need to have particular skills regardless of whether they are working in stop motion with clay, hand drawn animation, 2D or 3D animation, and these are what Jeff aims to give students as a teacher. "You need to know how to act and perform. Also, looking at

RIGHT & ABOVE: Jeff Pratt worked on several of Pixar's earliest movies including 'Toy Story' 1 and 2 and 'Monsters Inc'.





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composition, art foundation skills and visual communication are what help an animator compose his shots," Jeff said.

TEAMWORK

"As a prospective employee, student animators can also benefit from experience working in a group project environment, participating in teamwork and meetings, delegating and meeting deadlines. The value of collaboration is important for animators to understand. At Pixar, the animation team's dailies sessions always included the editor, who could tell them what he needed for his edit. He might ask, for example, for five or ten more frames at the beginning or end of a scene to allow room to cut, or ask us to recompose a shot to work better with his cut to make sure the audience is looking in the right place.

"Whatever the editors do impacts significantly on what an animator's character does, so we have to work continuously with them as well with the director. We have to communicate with modellers and riggers to ask for changes to be able to get a better performance out of a character. It's not a part of every animation course but it is quite useful to have rigging instruction in your education and the basics of film editing – not so you can edit or rig a model yourself, but to understand and collaborate with the whole team."

TELL A STORY

Helping students with their show reels, the key to getting work as an animator, is a part of teaching Jeff takes seriously. A good show reel shows mastery of movement, evidence of the twelve principles of animation, squash and stretch, overlap, follow-through and so on but the ability to tell a story, invented or traditional, is also important. "Some of the best animators I know are great storytellers and tell great jokes. Making a character look as though he's thinking is critical to making him feel alive, as well as revealing a sense of humour. Control over timing and pace has to be evident over the whole reel, plus specific timing for each piece of it."

In establishing the new curriculum, Jeff said that addressing technology will be a challenge because the tools keep changing. However, most animation software has common themes and approaches. By choosing one major piece of software and using it as an example, Jeff and his colleagues hope to give students confidence and familiarity with the way the products work. "There will always be some new development emerging. Keeping up with new tools is part of every industry so as a teacher, you try to show animators how to learn these for themselves and be flexible," said Jeff.

INSPIRATION

To show students how to tap into character reference, Jeff likes to show what inspires him. "Old silent movies by artists

like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton make good learning material. I've found. Watching films of Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers and Gene Kelly for their motion and movement is a good resource. When I show students classic Disney movie clips, we discuss why a certain clip makes a good – or bad – example, and break down and analyse the performance. This helps give them ideas for what to look for as their reference. Miming and acting classes can be good background reference for animators to help them understand body mechanics."

In principle, animating faces isn't much different to other parts of the body for the broader movements, however, tiny movements can make a substantial difference. What Jeff finds is harder to teach is how to observe the subtleties, for example, in the muscles near the eyes. The timing of facial movements is subtle also, in the eyebrows and mouth, and ways to include asymmetry to improve a character's face.

CHARACTER HISTORY

Animators have methods for keeping characters consistent throughout a production, whether a single or a team of animators is working with each character. One is compiling a library of poses and cycles for a character that they can all use. Another is holding dailies sessions where the artists get together to see what the others are doing.

"A good, basic technique is developing a complete back story or personal history for each character. This way, if a group or an individual animator is responsible for that character, the details from his age to his financial situation, ethnicity, religious background and so on are always there for them as clues for his behaviour in any given scene."

INDUSTRY DRIVEN

Jeff considers that games and character animation need quite different skill sets and that it's better to study them separately. "Character animators don't typically concern themselves much with rendering and modelling, whereas a game artist has to keep efficiency in mind. Textures and performance cut into efficiency, which is why game characters may rely on motion capture for their performance, for example."

Jeff at the Sydney branch and department heads from the Brisbane and Melbourne locations, will be working together to create industry-driven courses teaching skills that will help students secure jobs. "Courses will ideally be based on enough of the principles and philosophy to allow them to animate anything," he said, "and include enough practical exercises to competently handle the technical side and produce material to put together a strong show reel." PTA

ABOVE: Apart from the fundamentals of animation itself, Jeff says he aims to bring students an animator's understanding of production and the production process.