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Plenty of Fish: Irony of Animation

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PLENTY OF FISH: IRONY OF ANIMATION

by

Brett Morón

B.S., Southern Illinois University, 2014

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts.

Department of Mass Communication and Media Arts
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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Approved by:

Mr. John Reid Perkins-Buzo, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

BRETT MORÓN, for the Master of Fine Arts degree in MASS COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA ARTS; presented on APRIL 1ST, 2016, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: PLENTY OF FISH: IRONY OF ANIMATION

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Mr. John Reid Perkins-Buzo

Along with the trends in media, animation is rapidly changing. With these changes it becomes harder to identify what is truly a unique or original idea in this media art form. Parody, a common component found in animation can be the very foundation in regards to the creation of a cartoon or an animated art. But is it the animator's or creator's key goal to make a parody or are they trying to create a unique story that deviates from a traditional tale? Are the passions behind them to be comical, creative, or both? To find out, I decided to make an animated piece myself. This being the primary goal, the secondary was strengthening my skills as an animator and an artist.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Project Intentions

Growing up watching Saturday-morning cartoons, animation has always fascinated me. What intrigued me even further was the wide audience it gathered from both kids and adults. Although I am a large fan of most forms of animation, hand-drawn or frame-by-frame animation impresses me most. I've explored multiple methods of animation, but I never really operated in programs such as Adobe Flash or Animate. However, my drive toward creating a compelling short narrative pushed my curiosity forward. My idea came to fruition as a 2D animation based around a silly phrase as its punch line: "- there are plenty of fish in the sea." Thus, the title of my work, "*Plenty of Fish in the Sea,"* was born.

I originally intended to emphasize the idea that parody plays a substantial part in the inspiration behind animation. As I attempted to demonstrate this in a montage sequence through my animatic, though, I realized this project has grown into more than simply a project, thesis, or even a dissertation. Underneath this 2-minute animated short was a short narrative story I really wanted to tell. To sum up the experience as a whole, the intention for this project was to strengthen my skills both as an animator and a visual story teller.

Inspiration

The leading force behind this creation is an admiration for independent animators who strive to create their own content. Some animators evoke emotions through colors.

Some might focus on a comical approach, and others use simple character designs that are given a wide array of expressions.

References & Academic Articles

When I had originally put ideas together for my defense I looked at an academic article called, "On Styles of Theorizing Animation Styles: Stanley Cavell at the Cartoon's Demise." Cavell, an American philosopher and professor at Harvard once said that "cartoons are not movies." While nothing could be further from the truth, the author further elaborates Stanley's views regarding animation (Pierson, 2012, p. 17-18). I managed to find a great excerpt from this article:

> A subtle but widespread problem with this line of thinking is that animation effectively gets collapsed into one category or the other, a kind of passenger in the larger vehicle of film history. It becomes easy to forget that animation itself has a history because it is not thought to be a historically variable form of its own— only an existing option for film technology (Pierson, 2012, p. 17).

I appreciated this article as it gave me a sense of scope as to how animation can be viewed to others; as a means of technology. Even though it can certainly be viewed by others as an entirely new medium to tell a story, it would be people like this that my film would appeal to.

After realizing that I wanted make a narrative short. I quickly gathered articles that focused on various methods and research regarding narrative storytelling. One of the articles that I stumbled across was called, "Narratives at Work: Story Arcs, Themes, Voice, and Lessons that Shape Organizational Life." The abstract here explains how certain factors can influence an individual's creativity, especially during transitional periods in their life. (Yost, 2015, p. 163). Here is an excerpt explaining Paul Yost's research:

The purpose of this research is to explore elements that make up career and work-related story prototypes with a focus on story arcs, themes, narrative voice, and lessons learned that are implicit in the work-related stories that people tell. (Yost, 2015, p. 164).

After reading this info. It gave me an idea as to why I wanted to tell a story for my project. This gave me clarity because I originally didn't have any intentions to type a short story.

At the beginning of the academic article, "The view from termite terrace: Caricature and parody in Warner Bros animation," Donald Crafton analyzes multiple Warner Bros cartoons and their view on parody and caricature. One of the first parodies he mentioned was about how the animators would often draw caricatures of studio executive and producer of Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies, Leon Shlesinger (Crafton, 1993, p. 204). The following statement sums up the purpose that parody can play in a cartoon:

But 'fun' is not neutral ideological turf. It may divert analysis and defuse 'serious' interpretation, but a closer inspection always highlights fundamental relationships about economic power and social control. However ostensibly harmless it may seem, caricaturing the boss and his milieu inevitably makes a statement about the animation staff's self-representation as employees, as members of the film industry, and as jesting outside observers of Hollywood society (Crafton, 1993, p. 204).

This article shows how to employ parody into animation can be a means to emphasize important social issues, but in a comedic light. While I full-heartedly agree with this belief, I do not think that all animation, especially that of the present, is created with the sole purpose of telling a joke. This is something that I soon learned as an animator. Like any artist, I think that it's an animator's goal to create content that pleases themselves and others to show their own worth. My intentions for *Plenty of Fish* was for others to see the story that I designed to be told.

To express exactly what I was trying to capture as an animator and story teller, I looked into Kathryn Comer's "Illustrating Praxis: Comic Composition, Narrative Rhetoric, and Critical Multiliteracies." To paraphrase her abstract, she supports narrative methods as a means to critically engage viewers and listeners (Comer, 2015, p. 75). I drew inspiration from this idea since I knew that I wanted to entice and keep audiences interested with my plot as well.

In order to tell my short film, I brainstormed and studied a multitude of knock-knock jokes, metaphors, phrases, and expressions like "I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse." I chose the phrase, "there are plenty of fish in the sea." I felt as though this phrase could really go well with a parody of the typical animated "girl meets guy, girl falls madly in love with guy, guy falls madly in love with girl and they all live happily ever after" love story. A number of animated features fall under this category — The *Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin* and more.

In the book, "Demystifying Disney," the author takes the time to show the change in Walt Disney going from an ambitious animator to the owner of his own company (Pallant, 2013). The transition helps me to see how this company continued to make these typical love stories/musicals; it made them a lot of money. With a mission in mind to tell my own creative spin on the tale, I wrote my script and created my storyboard.

Typing the Script

Celtx. When typing scripts, I typically use the free-trial version of a program online called Celtx. This program has consistently been very useful and reliable to me. Using the program helps quicken the writing process because it already places everything in the proper script format (see Figure 1).
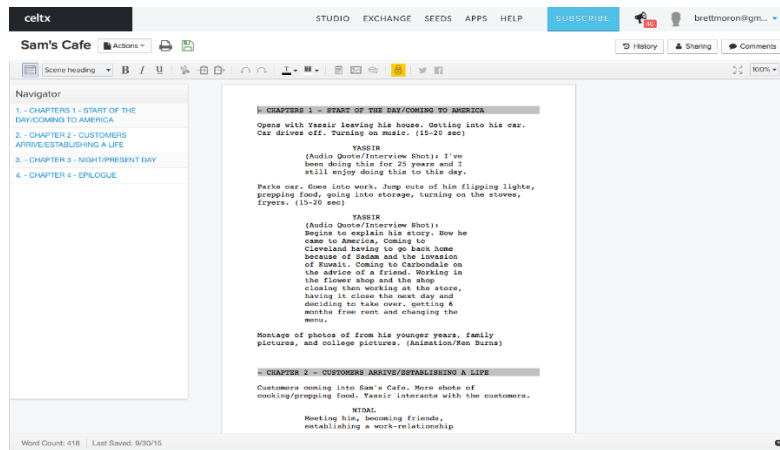
Figure 1. Through Celtx, I am able to break down my script chapter-for-chapter and select them via the navigator.

After typing my script, I gathered a list of various shots and actions that could potentially be used for my film, and typed them out the Celtx's script editor feature. After typing the script, I prepared to create my storyboard by searching for premade templates via the web (see Figure 2).
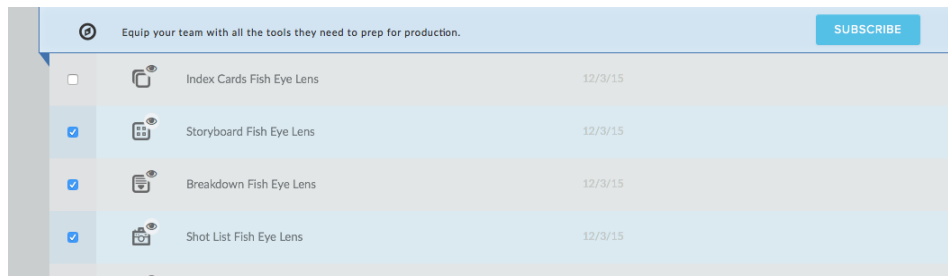

Figure 2. Celtx offers a great micro-managing tool/option where I can look through scanned storyboard images, shot lists, plot outlines, and index cards

Storyboard

Template. With over 40 different shots in mind — not including inserts — I found the best template to work with in situation with an abundant amount of shots would be a six-shot-per-page template (see Figure 3). Plotting out the storyboard, I intended to

keep my characters simplified and drew them as rounded geometrical figures with nubs

for both the hands and feet to make sure the drawing process would go by smoothly.
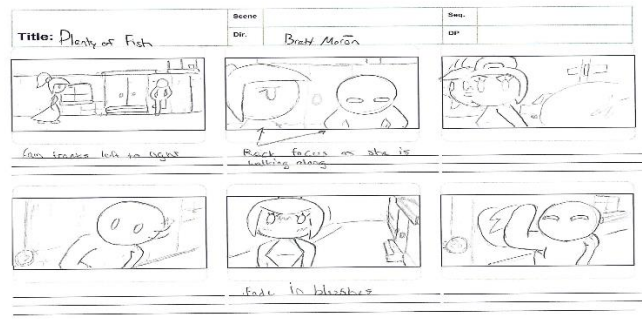

Figure 3. This template was preferred because it leaves enough space to create each shot and place action descriptions below.

Not every drawing reflected their final appearance in the animatic. To

compensate for this, I scanned my storyboard and additional shot inserts with a copier.

Photoshop. After scanning the storyboard, I was able to take the images into

Photoshop and begin framing the scans. I decided I wanted to keep them in a standard

HD format, 1280x720. The original storyboard scans were imported in a separate

project, as shown in Figure. To save time, each scan was layered on top of one another

in numerical order. This was easier than importing each scan into its own separate

project. I cropped the shots from each of the scanned storyboard panels so they could

be placed in separate project windows with the proper 1280x720 canvas size (see

Figures 4 and 5).
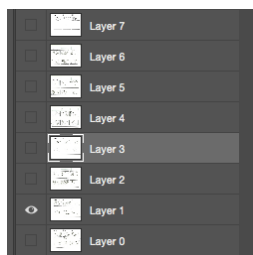
Figure 4. Always work in Layers! One page scan per layer; be sure to keep them in numerical order and lock or hide the layers you are not currently using.
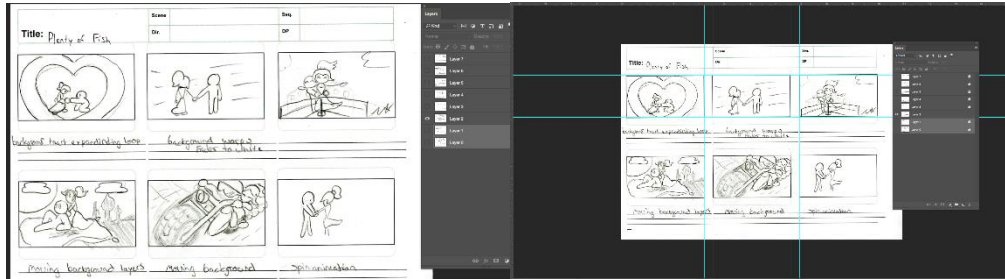
Figure 5. Once the layers were locked, I proceeded to create a grid and began cropping each of the individual frames.

Unfortunately, not every storyboard was perfectly aligned when it scanned. This led to some of the images needing to be cropped and resized in the separate 1280x720 project file. When fit to the project's 1280x720 canvas size, I exported each shot as a JPEG image so they could be ready to be imported into Adobe Animate. Despite a couple of issues, the shots were given the proper aspect ratios and renamed with the number corresponding with their order in the shot list.

CHAPTER 2

THE ANIMATIC

The next step in the production was to add additional actions to any shots which required them to make the animatic clearer and more concise. Unfortunately, in the middle of doing this, the hard drive that had all my material on it was misplaced. I detail all the difficulties this caused my project in Appendix A. However, having worked with Adobe Animate for a semester prior, I had no time to waste gaining knowledge and experience in Adobe Animate. While there are numerous shortcuts and tutorials with Adobe Animate, I adapted and created a system that worked best for me.

Wacom Cintiq 12WX. This device allowed me to trace over each of my scans within Adobe Animate. With a 12.1-inch display screen there was enough room to bring my scanned images over and make the proper clean-ups for each of them.

Adobe Animate. Used by well-known studios like Nickelodeon and Titmouse Inc., I used Adobe Animate to retrace and add additional animations. To start, I worked with the 1280x720 format at 24 frames per second (fps). At the time, this decision for the frame rate was not an important one, but I made this choice because I just wanted to focus on creating the animatic that told my story.

Once I set up, I imported the selected scanned shots or images within their project and placed each of them in a separate layers labeled "background" or "original scan." There is a feature in Adobe Animate that allows you to work with multiple scenes in a single project. However, I decided not to use it because I didn't want to overwhelm

myself since there was already a hefty amount of shots that required retracing, tweens, and additional drawings.

Retracing

Although I could have taken the cropped/framed scans that I had and placed them into the animatic, I thought some of them were lacking detail or were too poorly drawn. As a remedy, I embarked on a very time-consuming process of retracing my drawings.

Pencil Tool. I stayed away from using any brushes when tracing over the scans. I mainly used the pencil tool with a stroke size of around 3-5 units depending on whether I was tracing characters or background. Another practice that I quickly learned when working with the Cintiq was to always have the right pencil mode enabled (See Figures 6 and 7).
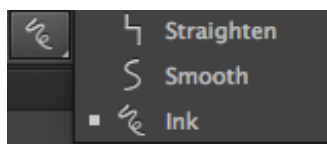

Figure 6. I had to make it habit to work and select between smooth and ink pencil modes. Ink is more free-hand choice while smooth offers more refined, clean curves to my drawings.
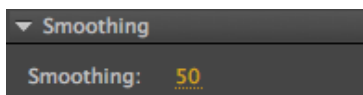
Figure 7. When selecting the smoothing or straightening tool, I can adjust the sensitivity in this box to prevent myself from only creating squares and circles.

Onion Layers. An improved feature that I immediately noticed with Animate was colored onion skinning. Programs before Animate such as flash could prove rather difficult in determining whether or not you were working with the frames in front or behind as they were not color-coordinated. The new feature makes it much easier for animators to follow what current frame they are drawing in (as shown in Figure 8 below).
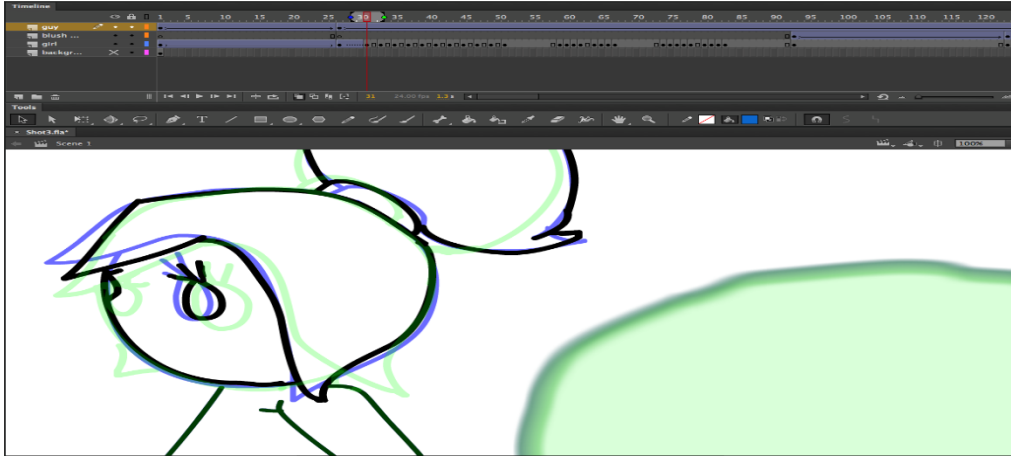
Figure 8. With the new color onion skinning, I can differentiate between past and future frames. For this instance, green represents the future frame and blue shows the previous one.

Results

I retraced each frame with the scanned shots kept in their separate layers (see Figure 9). The task was difficult because I wanted some of the images in the animatic to display particular camera or character movements such as pans, tilts, head turns, and changes in character expression. What made this task daunting was that involved a great deal of cleaning with any of the drawings that were too light or smudged (which ended up happening over 20 shots). With the frames retraced, I then hid and locked the background/scanned layer.

Original Scan   *Retrace*
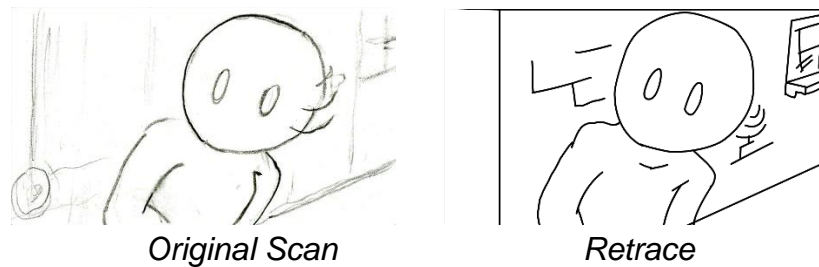
Figure 9. An example of one the many retraced scans. Not every shot required retracing. Some original scans were traced hard enough that they could easily be detected and converted into vectors—simple shapes in Photoshop.

Layers, Symbols, and Creating Tweens

An important addition to my animatic was the ability to apply motion to my characters in particular shots, especially those involving moving backgrounds. This would involve tracing the characters in separate layers than the background, and then converting the images into a symbol.

Layers. It was important for me to keep my projects as organized as possible. Similar to Photoshop, the easiest way to accomplish this was to manage and label my layers. When the characters and the backgrounds were placed in separate layers, it was time to create symbols and tweens for the characters and objects in each shot.

Symbols and Creating Tweens. Animating an object/character that has multiple frames of animation and then requiring them to move from left to right or up and down when adding motion tweens. When converting the drawing into a symbol I need to rename it something clear, concise, and easily identifiable in the project's library. By creating symbols and then placing the animated frames within the selected symbol's timeline (as shown in Figure 10 below).
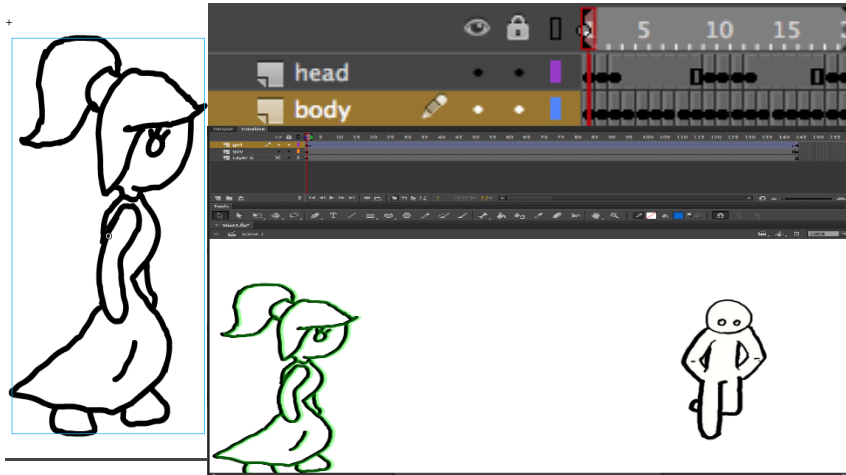
Figure 10. Working within the symbol, I am given an entirely new timeline to add or remove frames, which allows me to give our girl here a walk or run cycle.

Classic Tweens. When creating the tweens in between two selected frames, I chose the classic tween over the motion tween because I wanted better control of the symbol's movement in terms of timing and pacing. With motion tweens, I would be unable to swap symbols or set the frame number of a graphic symbol to display in a property key frame. Whenever I apply a tween to figures or objects, Animate auto-creates a symbol for them.

After the images were retraced and organized, I exported each of the project/shot files as JPEG images and .MOV video files. Once exported, they were placed into Final Cut Pro X.

Final Cut Pro X. The exported shots were lined up into a timeline on Final Cut Pro X. I worked with this program because it is the editing software I am most familiar with. In this program, I was able to import the audio I had gathered to accompany this short piece (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Fortunately, Final Cut Pro X operates likes most editing software where multiple tracks of audio can be placed anywhere fit on the timeline.

This part of the process required the least amount of time. However, in order to complete the animatic, I needed to grab the sound effects that I believe helped guide the direction of my story.

Audio Mixing

Deciding what audio to use for my animatic was not an easy task. The factors that weighed heavily on this included whether or not to create and record the sounds myself or use various royalty free audio samples.

One of the first decisions I made when writing the script for *Plenty of Fish* was to leave out dialogue. It has always been my belief that a voiceless short story could be way more emotional. The lack of voices can also place a stronger emphasis on visuals. Although I made this decision, I knew that my main characters needed some level of audio to express different feelings such as humor, sadness, and laughter.

Other audio choices that were made included picking old Hannah Barbara-style sound effects. These were used for any scenes involving snap-like moves of characters turning their heads, moving arms, bodies, and any other object movements. This gave

my animation a needed light-hearted innocence. In a way, I was trying to pay homage to the traditional cartoon animations like *Looney Tunes* or *Tom and Jerry*.

I placed the audio into the timeline, re-edited any changes to the video, and finally managed to export the project as an animatic. However, it was not smooth sailing after that.

CHAPTER 3

BRINGING LIFE WITH COLOR

I began the animation scenes by repeating the process from Chapter 2, but placed way more attention to details regarding layers and closing any gaps in shapes or other vectors (see Figure 12).

(Before)   (After)
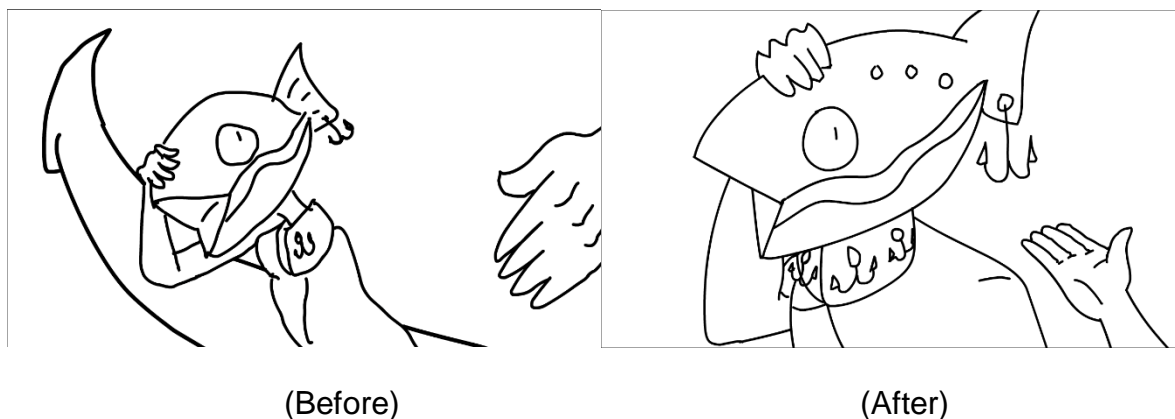
Figure12. In a few instances, especially insert shots, I wasn't able to find the original scans. Fortunately, I was able to recover this particular shot (on the left). This led to framing changes simply because I had based them off of memory.

Closing Gaps

This time while retracing my drawings with the Cintiq, I closed any gaps in shapes to help out with the next step, coloring each of the panels in with the pain bucket tool (see Figure 13).
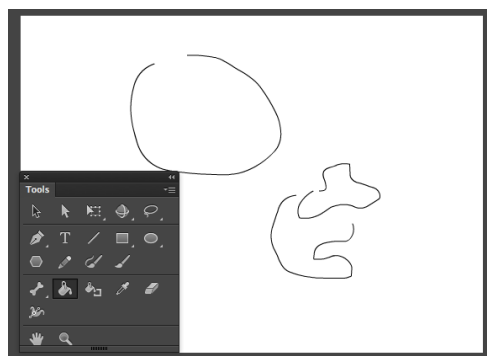
Figure 13. It is imperative to close or connect these gaps in Animate. If left untouched it could result in the Paint Bucket Tool being unable to fill the shapes or designs.

***Adobe Animate's Paint Bucket.*** Using this tool can be a little tricky at first. When working with the paint bucket, I made sure use the "close gaps" feature (see Figure 14). This tool didn't always fill in the gaps though and required me to retrace over the shapes, select the paint bucket, and hope that they finally auto-filled.
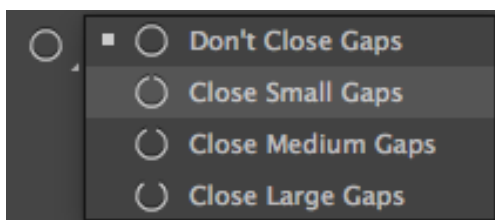
Figure 14. A blessing and a curse, I can't say that I really know what allowed this tool to work at times. However, when a drawing/shape didn't fill, I selected "Close Large Gap."

Color Selections

The decisions behind my color selection were heavily inspired by art in TV shows today that use brighter and lighter color spectrums. An examples of this would be the show *Steven Universe*. Shows like this offer wonderful visuals through the use of striking color palettes. With these conscious thoughts, here were my results (see Figure 15).
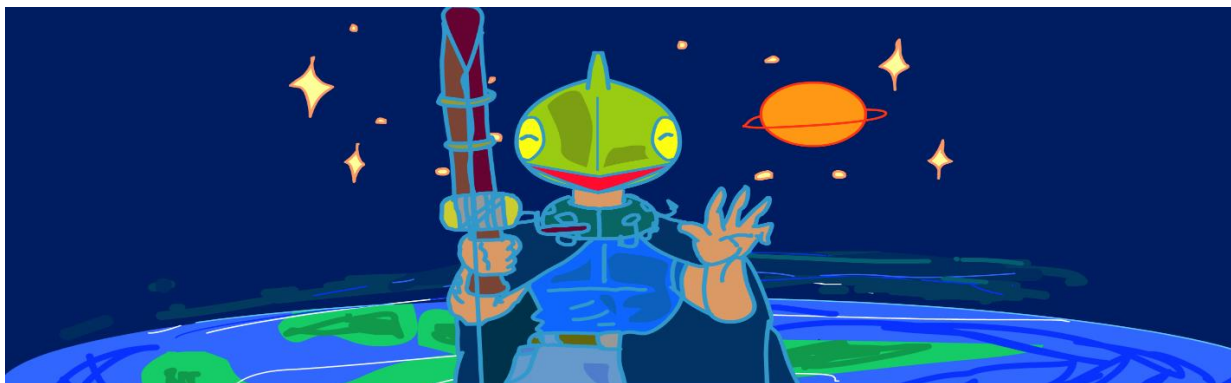
Figure 15. I was very pleased by the results of this shot. Although I did not directly add shading and lighting to every object, I wanted to experiment with the outlines of characters. By avoiding the solid black outlines, I felt as though I had created somewhat of an illusion to lighting.

Additional Tweens & Smear Attempts

When creating my animatic the second time through, I wanted the actions to appear

snappier. My attempt at creating this was through motion smears (see Figure 16).

Motion smears appear only on particular frames of a motion that hyper-exaggerates any

of characters features to seem stretched and emphasize a great deal of movement.

Figure 16. Although these are not the greatest smears, they serve as a great guide in the animatic in terms of speed and pacing.

The Finishing Touches

Despite the loss of a hard drive (see Appendix A), I still managed to finish

retracing the frame, even coloring them this time around too (see Figure 17). Given new

life, each project file is ready to be exported again and place back into the animatic

timeline in Final Cut Pro X.
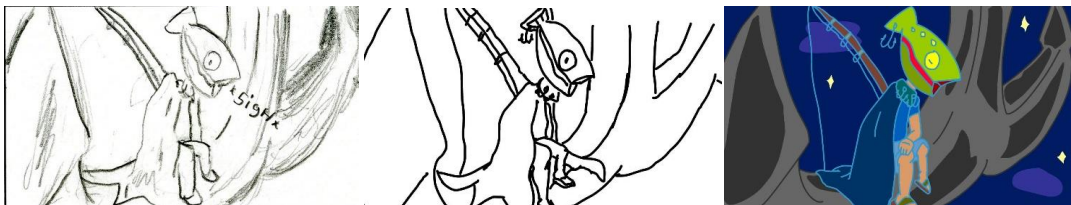
Figure 17. (From left to right, my original scan, first retrace, and final piece)

CHAPTER 4

CLOSING THOUGHTS AND FUTURE SUBMISSIONS

At the end of the day, I was very pleased with the results of my project. I didn't only acquire helpful tools and skills to become a better animator, but I created something far beyond what I had originally intended. With that, I wonder if many other animators have felt the same way with their work. Can that be considered the irony of animation; that something completely new came out of their work than what was originally intended? Making the transition from telling a joke to creating an animated short was something that I did not predict either. I'm glad this happened though as I believe many artists can offer originality in their work when they create something they truly feel passionate about.

Revisions & Future Submissions

While the first hurdle of this project is finished there are many tweaks and edits that must be made before I would even consider submitting my work into any festival or event. This would include adding additional frames of animation to make the actions easier to follow. I intend to pursue submissions to festivals and events.

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APPENDIX A

LOSS OF A HARD DRIVE *THE TRUE IRONY*

To summarize this portion of my process report; do not leave a hard drive unattended in a public computer lab. Unfortunately, this is a lesson I had learn the hard way. After completing my animatic and presenting my work to my chair, I continued to work on my flash projects; getting ready to make the steps of adding color to my work.

Up late one night, I thought I had packed up everything when I left the computer lab I had been working in for the entirety of the semester, however this was not the case. When I tried to work on my flash files the following day I was unable to find any trace of my hard drive. This was not news anyone would want to wake up to. What made matters worse was the fact that did not have any backup files of my work prior to the first couple of shots as Adobe Animate files. The true irony here is my own naivety, which can be compared to a character that would only exist in a cartoon world. This was the very theme I was trying to stay away from.

Searching through every single lost and found on campus, I was not making any headway on finding my lost hard drive. I was truly convinced that in my forgetful state, I had left it at the computer lab where someone found an opportunity to grab a free external storage device, a whole terabyte's worth. While I couldn't spend too much time dwelling on this loss due to work flow and time constraints, I still decided to fill out a missing claims report to the police; in hopes that it might turn.

The next day, I purchased a new hard drive and started anew; following the steps that I had taken to complete my work from the previous chapter. A long road to recovery was in the for-seeable future.

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