Assignment for Animation Direction 2: Stop Motion Film

14/01/12

The entire work for this term will be based on one assignment:

Create a short stop-motion film.
You may work in pairs or, with special permission, small groups. The outcome should be as professional-looking as possible. Familiarize yourself with recent award-winning stop-motion films to get an idea of the gold standard and aim as high as possible.

Why stop-motion?
Stop-motion allows you to try your hand at every aspect of directing, in miniature: character design, set design, animation, lighting, sound, and compositing. You have complete creative control over the process and each one will inform your later decisions in 3D.

Parameters:
Animation should be under 30 seconds. You can add a bit more of a header/footer if necessary. You must include at least one character. It need not be a humanoid but it should be able to demo some nice animation principles and timing.

Characters: You will need to build, from scratch, a pose-able puppet. You may not use an existing model such as a store-bought toy or Lego or dolls. Keep it simple. You can build a flexible wire armature and cover it in Plasticine or paper mache, for example. Think about how the character will stand upright by weighting the feet or using magnets. Think about how you would animate the fingers, eye direction, blinks, and facial expressions, if required. Plan for the contingency of having to repair the puppet should it break.

Set: You should have only one set. You may make a case for a second set if absolutely necessary but I'll have to consider it on an individual basis. A set can be very minimalistic. It's not necessary for it to be elaborate. If you keep it simple you may leave yourself more time for puppet making or animation.

Planning: This is absolutely essential in stop-motion. You should create and maintain a production schedule and be able to demonstrate your progress at any stage of production. You should design your characters and sets in 2D, digitally or on paper. The set design should include indications of light and camera placement in a top-down view.

Include an animatic as part of your planning process. This can be a series of hand-drawn sketches timed in Flash, Digicel Flipbook, etc. Alternatively, it could be shot in combination with your characters & sets as a lighting test.

Shooting: Cameras and tripods are provided however you may use your own equipment.

Resolution should be 720p. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/720p). You may shoot at 12 fps but in your final composite you should up-res it to 24 fps (i.e. each frame will be repeated 2x). Alternatively, you may shoot each frame 2x. Please familiarize yourself with basic camera techniques and with the operating instructions for the camera you will be using. Aim to make use of high-level techniques such as depth-of-field, gobo effects, and camera moves and transitions.
Shoot wider and at a higher resolution than you need so you can add post-effects such as push-ins and shakes. Don't forget to add padding in your timing if you plan to use dissolves. The more you educate yourself now about the shooting possibilities, the more creative power you'll have. You may experiment with green screen but build extra time into your schedule for testing this out as soon as possible.

Lighting: You will have to provide your own lights and find a way to shield your scenes from the inconsistent sunlight from the windows. Your piece should be well-lit, meaning the style of lighting is appropriate for your mood and subject and is as professional-looking as possible, i.e., **no** unintentional colour-casts, completely black shadows, blown-out highlights, shadows of off-screen items like your head or the lighting rigs. Your lighting can be an integral part of the style of your piece. The possibilities are endless. You can animate shadows if you have a means of moving or dimming the lights. You can create spots with just some rolled up black material. You can up-light from below the floor or use Christmas lights or dollhouse lights. Light really helps tell the story.

Sound: There should be some kind of soundtrack. I urge you to try your hands at simple foley work. It is fun, creative, and adds so much to your project. You can download free sound effects but making them yourself would not take very long. There should be at least be music, preferably something with a Creative Commons license. If you plan sync sound such as spoken dialogue or moving in time to music remember you need to break down that part of the soundtrack first and follow the written timing breakdown while shooting.

General notes: You will not be given more than the most basic information on all of these areas. Self-directed experimentation IS the basis of this project. Seek out and pool information. Help each other. Ask me to find specific resources for you after you have exhausted your own search. You cannot help but learn a great deal from a project like this. It is my wish for you that it is both a positive and memorable experience and you emerge with a great short film. I'll bring the popcorn!

- Please see our outline for the milestone deadlines for this project.
- You have 6 major milestones for this project to keep you on track.
- I'll make you rubrics for each step of production.

I'm sure there will be questions. Please don't hesitate to ask!

Resources:
More resources will be coming your way. Here are some to get you started.

Local stop-motion animator **Stephanie Dudley** blogged every aspect of making her award-winning film, **"Little Theatres: Homage to the Mineral of Cabbage"**. You will find information on building puppets, sets, lighting set-ups, cameras, animatics, compositing, and more. Everything you need to know is here, including **local sources** for materials.
Here's a page on Toronto stop-mo resources.
http://www.forkstudio.com/blog/?cat=23

Light boxes are great for shooting well-lit, shadow-free scenes. You can buy a set up or make one yourself.
Buy:
http://www.thinkgeek.com/electronics/cameras-photography/a205/
DIY:
http://www.instructables.com/id/Light-Studio-for-Photographers-Tabletop/?ALLSTEPS

Some helpful info on the basics of lighting small things:
http://www.adafruit.com/blog/2010/08/25/how-to-take-great-photos-of-your-projects-the-adafruit-photo-tutorial-by-johngineer/#more-6590