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Senior Integrative Project Thesis 2008

Strung Up is a 3D animation dark comedy in which a magic doll strives to elongate his short life. The piece is a short film, created in Autodesk Maya, about three to four minutes in length. The piece provokes members of the audience to think about their own mortality as they watch this living doll fight a downhill battle against his own fate. It involves two animated figures, a magical doll and it's creator. The setting is the workbench that the doll maker is making the doll on.

The scene fades into a shot of a man working on the finishing touches of a doll. The toymaker spins the doll about, taking a look at it from all angles, and then pulling the doll's drawstring. However, right as he pulls the string, he looks up at the clock and notices what the time is and quickly leaves the doll on the bench and exits.

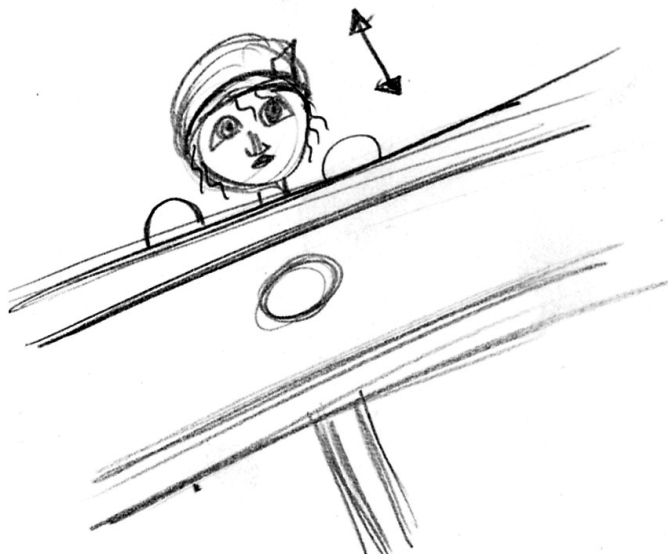
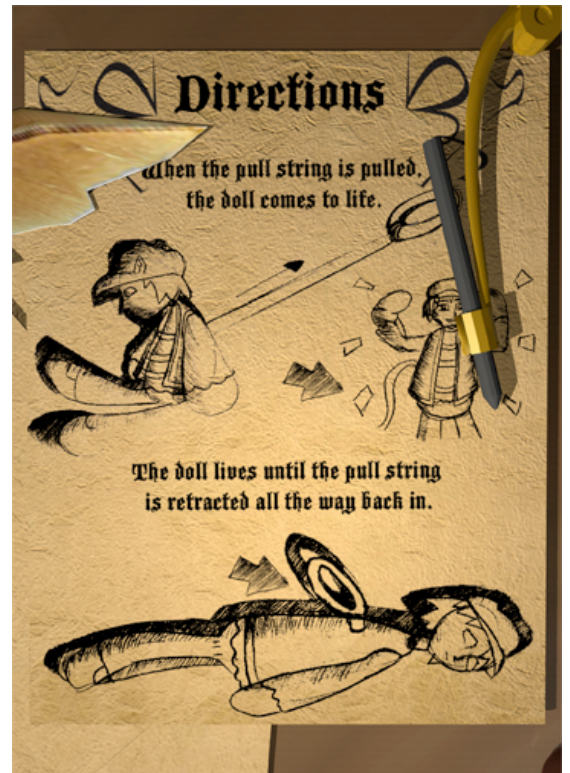
As the man is leaving, the doll comes to life. It checks its



self out. Thrilled with this new prescience, it starts to explore. The doll walks around, looking at all of the things on the desk as it comes up to a piece of paper. The paper is a set of instructions of how the doll works, and the camera focuses on, the words “the doll lives until the pull string is retracted all the way back in.” The doll then looks behind itself, and it sees a slowly approaching ring attached to a string.

The doll tries to run away from the string, and comes up to a pile of tools. The doll gets an idea! The

doll tries looping the string around a hammer hoping to weigh the string down, to stop it from retracting. However, the hammer ends up being dragged by the string and the doll runs away from the string once again. This time the doll stops at a bookend and gets another idea. The doll places the loop under the bookend. Satisfied that it had stopped the string, the doll goes to walk off, but the string becomes taught and starts to drag the doll back to the bookend. The doll quickly gets the pull string out from under the bookend.



The doll looks at the string and realizes how short it now is and frantically looks around for something to help him. Eventually he looks over the edge of the workbench and

then jumps off, looping the pull string around the drawer handle of the workbench. As the doll falls, some of the string is pulled back out. The doll then quickly climbs up his pull string and gets back onto the desk.

The doll comes up to a spool of string and gets another idea! The doll starts to tangle its string. A large knot occurs in the string. The doll waits to see if this plan works, and the string stops when the knot hits the back of the doll. The doll lifts its arms in celebration shortly before it falls over.

In the film, the doll came to life, and realized that the threat to his life is his own pull string. When pulled, instead of making the protagonist talk,



it brought him to life. In the end, the doll succeeded in stopping the pull string from being pulled in, but since the pull string is stopped, the protagonist still falls dead. Through his own efforts he accidentally ends his own life instead of saving it.

I have a few goals with this piece. First of all, I hope to have a very tragic and sorrowful impact, however, I still want it to be a bit light hearted. I want people to relate to the character and his situation. I want people to be moved by the little dolls foiled attempts, and to relate it to similar problems in our own lives. Just because we do not have our own pull strings,



doesn't mean that we don't have them in some other form or problem. Second, I hope to make this simply enjoyable and entertaining for the audience. It is my belief that a good story is worth telling. Anyone young and old can watch this animation and gain something from it, whether just the comedy factor or the metaphoric theme. Third, I like the idea of a losing fight against death. It is a struggle that all of us have to go through at some point or another. This country fears death too much, and it is a very important part of life. It shouldn't be shunned away it should be embraced. The thought of this struggle with an object that has an artificial life seemed to be an interesting way to bring that out.

I also hope to use this as a stepping-stone into my future. I would love to work for an animation firm and animate for the big pictures such as for Pixar and Dreamworks. I hope that this piece can win some animation festivals and become a powerful portfolio piece.

There are many influences for this work. One would have to be *Toy Story* and many other Pixar films. Pixar films are just great original stories that have a good plot and are easy to understand. The Fable of *Pinocchio* has a very similar tone and subject matter to my piece, so I often read through the different versions of that to inspire myself. In *Pinocchio*, the character is constantly being misled into doing the wrong thing, and is trying to become a good real boy. In *Strung Up*, the character is constantly trying to save his own life, but his own attempts are fruitless, and when he does succeed he ends up killing himself instead.

Tragedies like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and to a smaller extent, Japanese love suicide stories have influenced me as well. Although there is no love as a

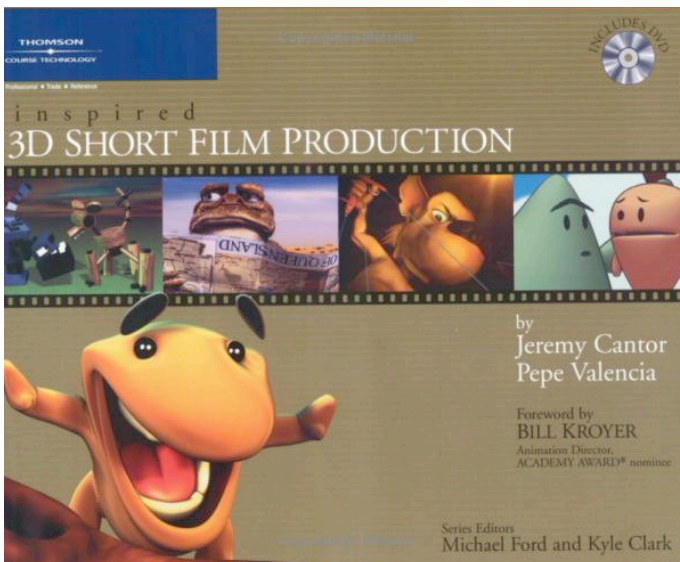
driving factor to this tragedy, the effort of trying to save its own life is more than enough to set up just a connection between the viewer and the doll.

One animation that influenced me a lot was an animation called Kiwi! created by Dony Permedi. This is an animation that has a end similar to mine. In this animation a kiwi bird is nailing trees to the side of a cliff, and in the end the kiwi bird jumps off the cliff to simulate flying, since the kiwi cannot fly. In the end the kiwi fall through clouds into nothingness leaving the death of the creature out, however, it does not need to be there for us to understand what is going to happen. This working toward an end idea really inspired my character's attempts to save his life; attempts that end in his killing of himself.

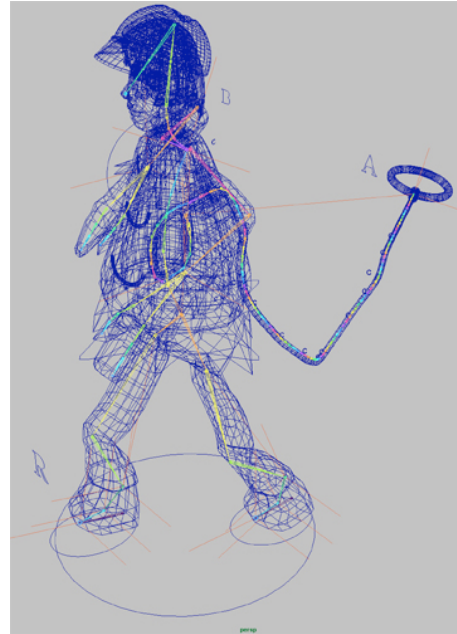
The process of creating this project started with a very simple storyboard. The storyboard started with a very plain, characterless doll who went through similar situations to try to stop his pull string (the most major difference was that when the doll stopped the string, he didn't die!) After some critiques and some studies of pull string dolls, I came to the conclusion that the doll must die. First of all, the story was not as powerful without the death at the end. Second, stopping a pull string stops the talking in

the doll. So it only makes good sense that this pull string follows the same rules.

I started reading a book called *Inspired 3D Short Film Production*, by Jeremy Cantor and Pepe Valencia, which has a lot of good tips and how to organize yourself well for a 3D short film. As the



book points out, there are a lot of story elements that help create a story or animation, the hero's journey, establishing the antagonist and so on. This also helped me time manage and set up my schedule. At the same time I attempted to develop the doll's character, and couldn't come up with a design that I liked. I wanted a simple looking character for the piece, but I wanted a character that had energy and style as well. I didn't want simplicity to take away the spark of energy and life out of my character. I decided to take a detour and tried making some simple dolls. I thought constructing one would be a good way of understanding how they worked and to get a feel for how I should model them. And I thought it would be a good way to work at designing the character. Although very little of the design stayed in the end, I believe that these did help me with the general idea of how a doll should move and look.



Finally I had an idea to create the doll's creator before continuing work on the doll. It was a good idea and it created a link of logic to what the doll should look like. A lot of creators make self-portraits or use themselves as models, so why not for a doll. Certain religions believe that people were created in the likeness of their creator, so it was a logical step that many would be able to relate to. The creator's design had a bit of a young Geppetto feel to him. The doll's design came out quite easily



after that. I ended up decided on making the face of the doll less simplified in earlier versions and tried to give the doll its own kind of style, however it still had that simplicity that I was striving for. After getting the doll's design finished, I worked on the improved storyboard, which finalized most of the action in the piece.

After that it was time to start modeling the doll. A lot of the things I learned in Elona Van Gent's, character workshop class were applied to this modeling the doll. I started modeling with the face and followed with the body and clothing. I rigged a skeleton for the model, and attached the skin so that it could move more naturally in the animation. I then textured and created a test animation of the character. For the most part, it was very successful, but doing it showed me a few problems that needed to be fixed. For example, the clothing was a bit too detailed as a model, so I plan to go back and alter it. Next I made a time test of the action by videotaping myself, to time everything out. I then created 3d stills of my character in action for a 3d storyboard. After that I started animating, creating low quality renderings of the animation, and put them together into a large low quality animation to see them together. This continued



from early February to mid March, when I then started to render full quality animation stills. These images were then strung together to form the animation. Sound was then added using Sound Studio Pro and Final Cut and the animation was finished.

After finishing this project, I have learned a lot about the process of creating a 3d animation. I first learned that I needed to put more effort into my storyboards. Although

with 3d, I have the luxury to change camera angles without as much work, however the quality of the storyboards are not up to the professionalism that they should be. Secondly I should have modeled out a test animation of the doll's creator. I saved myself a lot of grief with the dolls animating by doing this and I sense I didn't do this with the creator, I had a problem that in the end I didn't have to fix, and had to try to hide it. Lastly, I would have started animating earlier, to have more time to really polish some of the movements, walk cycles, and the string. However, now that I have done this project, I feel that I can take on a bigger project. With this project in my portfolio and the skills I have learned, I hope to get a job at one of the animation studios so I can reach my goal of making an animated box office hit!

Do we spend our time trying to cheat death, or do we enjoy our time while we have it? Is death something to be feared? Or is it something to be embraced? Maybe it should be both or neither? One thing is for sure though; we do not have the luxury to have our strings pulled a second time.

