

Gary Blackburn  
Thesis Paper

Gary Blackburn  
Thesis Paper  
April 2009

*Moving On* is a 3D animation that tells the narrative of a 75 year old widower, Murphy Zigman, who struggles to cope with the death of his wife, Marianne. The film recounts the day when Murphy realizes that he must move on with his life and live somewhere else. As the story unfolds, a series of mysterious events engulf the house in chaos and Murphy must figure out what's causing them. The theme for *Moving On* comes from the decision a family has to make when a loved one is unable to live on their own and is dependent on someone to be around for help. I chose this theme because of its universal qualities. The viewer should be able to look at Murphy and realize how painful it must have been for him to make such a difficult decision on his own.

In most films, careful attention is placed on how well an actor can capture the role of the character from the original story. There are a few advantages to creating a cast for an animated film. First of all, the characters are generated from hundreds of drawings and then sent to the computer to be modeled. Before we see them on the big screen, the artists have gone through hundreds of renditions until they have found the one that best fits the story. Second, the characters are able to remain very stylized so that they fit well into the setting compliment and sustain that quality throughout the entire film. A great example would be the main character, Remy, from *Ratatouille*. Remy doesn't have the grotesque body proportions of his big brother, and he's definitely a lot smarter. Instead, Remy's distinct features make him sharp-witted and allow you to believe that he could live with humans more than his family can. Lastly, 3D characters have an easier time role-playing than live actors. They are designed precisely to fit into their roles, I think it

would be very difficult to believe a 3D character if they jumped out of their intended role and acted like someone else. I could never see Murphy play as anything except a sorrowful, dejected, widower, because I would not be able to take him seriously.

The only disadvantage to using 3D characters is the reliance on the skill of the animator. The quality of animation can easily make or break the film. The characters lose all credibility if they move like broken records.

Various masters in the animation industry like Milt Kahn and Richard Williams refer to the principles of animating as the “magic” behind animated film. They call it magic because the characters and the world they live in can be just as believable as live action films. There’s also room to go beyond into the realm of disbelief by turning the plot upside down and adding in something fantastic. In the first script for *Moving On*, Murphy moped around the house. He looked at a nursing home brochure, wrote a letter to his wife, stared at her picture, then sulked for a while in the dining room until his son came to pick him up. I felt like this plot was just a normal slice of life that could happen to anyone. I saw this and thought the story could use something that was mysterious and unexplainable. I needed to develop Murphy as well. Since he was unable to move on after Marianne’s death, he developed these irrational habits, including cooking dinner for Marianne even though she wasn’t there.

A good animation needs characters that are not mere, ordinary people. It needs a story that is more interesting than real life. A great story has the audience on the edge of their seats, guessing what might happen next. When I realized how little I was developing Murphy and Marianne’s characters in the beginning, I knew that I had to sit down and start writing a few short stories about their past. These helped to flesh out an enormous

amount of plot and all I needed was a nice twist that even Murphy wouldn't have seen coming.

A great storyteller wants the reader to take sides with the characters and see them through to the very end. In "Moving On," I wanted both Murphy and the viewer to make his final decision to leave or stay, but I also want the viewer to question that decision at the very end. In real life, no family is ever completely sure that they've made the right decision and I wanted to make this evident in the story. The ending for *Moving On* was ambiguous. Murphy's plan to leave backfired and it made him question whether or not it would have been the best decision.

While revising the story for *Moving On*, I referenced episodes from Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* from the 60's. Serling sets up the story by establishing this practical, everyday world and then, slowly, he breaks down the barriers of what's real. The characters, faced with the unreal, are forced to do something heroic and daring, and they wake up, believing it was just a fragment of their imagination playing tricks on them.

Murphy is engaged in activities that reveal the depth of his struggle to cope with his wife's death. In one scene, Murphy sits down at the dinner table to a three-course meal and enough food for two people. The camera slowly zooms out, revealing that he's alone and hasn't let go of his wife completely. Throughout the story, it should feel like Murphy is slowly letting go of Marianne, but also holding some objects close to him. After writing the final letter to his wife, Murphy gets ready for bed. Before he lies down, he grabs his Marianne's picture off the lamp table and has a moment where he smiles but really wants to say, "I miss you." In the next shot, Murphy is asleep with his hand resting near the picture.

The visual effects for *Moving On* were inspired by a plethora of ideas and resources that ranged from conversations with people, photos of my own grandparent's house, and observations of works done by old master painters and musicians. I asked people to describe what their grandparents were like and what how they decorated their homes. I generated a long list of details that I could bring to Murphy's house. Caravaggio's paintings were also apart of my preliminary research in regards to theatrical lighting and its effect on the film's mood. "The Incredulity of Saint Thomas" (1602) was a painting in which was able to capture an intense moment of discovery in biblical history. Caravaggio used light to illuminate his characters in a way that made their pose dramatic. In *Moving On*, I used light to bring attention to the suspicious expression on Murphy's face when he saw the broken picture in the study. When Murphy wrote the final letter to Marianne, the desk lamp brought attention to his moving hand. Jan Vermeer's work influenced the composition for my scene. He places objects in the scene and gives them meaning. The people in his paintings become almost secondary in that respect. In *Moving On*, the pictures on Murphy's walls represent the past when Marianne was alive. I paid close attention to the position of Marianne's portraits throughout the film. To establish the feeling that she's watching Murphy, Marianne's picture is in almost every shot of the film.

*Moving On* was made using Autodesk Maya 2009. Using concept sketches as references, I modeled Murphy, Marianne, and the house from the ground up. This was where creativity and my proficiency in Maya went hand in hand while creating the assets for *Moving On*. While modeling Murphy and Marianne, I observed elderly people in coffee shops and cafeterias and noted their walk patterns, facial expressions, and any

mannerisms that seemed interesting. I used video tutorials and professors as aids while creating the rigs that would allow me to animate Murphy and Marianne. Rigging characters involved a lot understanding of the program and patience when technicalities arose. This part of the process took a few weeks before I could understand what I was doing wrong.

When I began Animating Murphy, a new range of possibilities opened up when I saw how much control I had over his movement. One example would be having him fall on the ground during the climax of the film. I did it to see if I could actually accomplish a nice clean fall and it worked. I was also able to optimize and speed up the time it took to animate him throughout the entire film. I discovered that I could copy his walk cycle, tweak it, and place it in another scene.

Setting up Murphy's House was a long decision making process. I gave close attention to lights and created several lighting rigs as tests to see which worked best. I referenced interior designing and furniture designs while modeling the house. Props were added when I saw how they could develop Murphy and Marianne's characters. The animation process motivated the placement of some objects, including the records inside the cabinet, the rocking chairs, paintings around the house, and the grandfather clock.

3D modeling and animating for this film was a learning process in itself. Before I started this project, I ran into a friend who introduced me to a book titled "The Animator's Survival Kit" by Richard William. It gave me plenty of direction while creating walk cycles and stylizing them to give the characters personality. The book also offers instructions on how to portray rudimentary movements and real life physics in the animation to make the characters and their environment more believable.

The best part about working on *Moving On* was watching the plot develop. Before I knew it, my film was this story of romance and mystery. Initially, the story was really sad. There was no hope for Murphy and he seemed like he was going to commit suicide because he was unable to survive all the grief. I learned a great deal about storytelling and how to avoid plots that are too practical and cliché.

Since *Moving On* is an independent film, I was able to experience firsthand the artistic process in animated filmmaking. Now that I'm finished with *Moving On*, I feel like I've matured enough to know where my strengths and weaknesses lie in the Computer Graphics field. I plan on developing my skills with motion graphics by researching traditional, hand drawn animation and applying those principles to back digital animation.