

REKORD: An Animated Short

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Introduction

Through animation exhibiting striking movement, style and color, I tell the tale of a speed trial race car driver and his unexpected journey to another world. REKORD is an animation that present ideas about the human experience through themes of speed, existentialism, human feats of passion, strength, beauty, life, and or course death. Animation, as a medium, allows an artist to achieve new heights of visual interest, story, and meaning. I trust that the whole process of thinking and planning and then finally executing will be apparent in my final work. My story highlights the strengths of animation including transformations, limited themes, character, and stylistic impact. My aim is to create a story that audiences will care about, present ideas they will think about, and create visuals they will be impressed with.

The Story

REKORD opens on the beginning of the land speed record attempt. As the driver is announced he bursts forth to the applause of the on lookers and jumps into his car. He then takes off down the road, changing gears and picking up speed. The landscape flashes by as he speeds under overpasses on the Autobahn. As he approaches top speed suddenly he senses a change in his surroundings. A dark cloud passes overhead, the countryside begins to fracture and rise into the sky. The whole world is crumpling around him! Then the road also disappears and he evaporates in a blinding white light... He awakes in a strange place; another world whose features are rugged and sparse. He wonders through this "Other-World" lost with no chance of escape. Later we realize that the driver was the victim of a fatal crash. Is the world he sees a figment of this comatose mind, the afterlife or something else?

Inspiration

Much of my inspiration for the story came from the 1930's European race car scene and specifically from the life of German Auto Union driver Bernd Rosemeyer as explained by the very thorough Aldo Zana and his analysis of Rosemeyer's final race (Zana). Rosemeyer died in a speed trial race pushing his machine to go just a few kilometers faster than the rival company's car. What does it mean to risk one's life for just a few more kilometers per hour?

This particular time and place in racing history has many defining features. First, holding a land-speed record was a great accomplishment in the 1930's. The political climate at the time made record seeking a matter of national pride and was held a much bigger role than such things today. Race car drivers could be national heroes in the 1930's! Also, race cars and car engineering in general was of huge importance to the Germans, and the cars they created for speed trials were a perfect combination of form and function. The cars of the time consisted of precisely tuned yet incredibly power engines wrapped in beautiful and exotic streamlined exteriors. They were practically wheeled sculptures than sped along at 250 miles per hour. As if the national pride and the cars themselves weren't enough to capture your imagination, the German speed trials were held on public roads; the Autobahn. Usually held on dry lake beds or along beaches, the Autobahn was the only roadway long and straight enough to hold the dangerous speed trials. Although, some might say the road was too narrow a target for most drivers that those speeds. Any slight miscalculation could send you hurtling end over end off the road.

The Process

In creating the short animation I first followed a relatively straightforward process, which tends to leave you with a neat string of other processes that are not so straightforward. First, I set out to outline the key elements of the story line. This involved creating many thumbnail drawings that set out the action and setting and how each shot would transition into the next one. I then used these thumbnails as a guide to create rough storyboards. I scanned the storyboards to create a rough animatic, which is a moving animation using the storyboard stills. This gave me a first glimpse into how things would flow and what elements were missing. I then went back to the making thumbnails and rough storyboards. I worked in this cyclical pattern until I was more or less happy with the elements in the story. Much still needed to be more closely considered or changed for the final animation including staging in some shots and also the color palette. Thumbnails were scanned and digitally colored to create a loose color storyboard, which at least added one more layer of understanding to what the final piece would look like (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Storyboard panels like these as well as much rougher thumbnail drawings served as a guiding light in the vast and sometimes foggy world of animation production.

The final animatic is created using a variety of techniques. I feel this has allowed me to really explore different methods for storyboarding and at the same time this approach allowed the justification for tweaking the shots. I could simply sketch out a new scene and throw it into the sequence without worrying about rendering the drawing fully. This kept the process free and fluid. There's always time for making things look sharp and finished later.

As far as the actual process of animation went, some background elements and in some cases the actual detailed movement of the character were overlooked at first but were then picked back up and flushed out during principle animation. I feel it is a boon to leave some shots looser at first while really tying down other parts of the animation right away as visual anchors for further creation down the road. The character and other moving elements in the piece were created in several ways including by hand drawing on paper, drawing on the cintiq (pressure sensitive graphics tablet), or created strictly as masks and shapes in After Effects. The animation was then colored in Photoshop and exported as .PSD files for sequencing, timing, tweening, lighting, and final compositing in After Effects. Backgrounds were also painted in Photoshop using the shot layouts and storyboards as a guide and following a specific color palette (Figure 2). Any special effects, such as vignettes, blurs, camera shakes, or speed streaks were added in After Effects as well.



Figure 2: Landscape painted in Photoshop with smoke created in After Effects.

The Look and Feel

It was important that my animation be very beautiful in terms of composition and color as well as movement. With the storyboards and animatic as a guide I then commenced with principle animation for the project. The technique I used for the animation came from my experience with advanced After Effects character rigs I was exposed to while interning at a post production house near Detroit. They use After Effects for the staging and character animation. This opened my eyes to After Effects as more than just a tool for motion graphics. Around the same time Dreamwork's "Kung Fu Panda" hit theaters (Figure 3). "Kung Fu Panda" is a 3D animated feature but its opening sequence is 2D. I was very impressed with the 2D segment and found that it was in fact created mainly in After Effects with a lot of hand drawn assets and completely hand drawn sequences were all tied together into a piece that look very computer generated and 3D. It was the polished crisp look of CG with the life and vitality of hand drawn. This was the look I wanted for my animation.

That being said, while creating the various shots for the animation I kept in mind other important elements besides the movement of the animated elements within the frame. The work has various schemes, which help unify the story or help to convey a certain mood to the viewer. For instance there is a camera scheme that keeps the main character framed from below, in a more powerful role, during the time he is driving, while framing him from above, casting him as a less powerful light after he moves to the Other-World. Also, in the real world the movement of the driver and car tend to go from left to right. However, this movement is reversed once he is in the Otherworld. He moves from right to left. The pacing of the shots varies as well, quick while he is in the car, slower once he is in the Otherworld. Color and style are also something I played with; saturated, lively colors in the real world and more contrasted, stark tones in the Other-World. I feel this will help to keep the viewer on track and help to define the form of the piece.



Figure 3: A still from Dreamworks "Kung Fu Panda" (Dreamworks)

I understand that the visuals of an animation are only half of the audience's experience. The other half is the audio. With the help of my collaborator, Sam Zettell, a sprawling and detailed world of sound was given to the piece. There are cheering crowds, revving engines, and whistling wind. Everything builds as the car goes faster and faster! We approached the Other-World as a place with echoes, the characters footsteps being only stifled thumps as eerie wobbles and whines seem to come from the very air (Figure 4). In the end the sound really brings the viewer into both the worlds of speed and strangeness in a way that compliments the visuals quite well.



Figure 4: A vision of the Other-World.

Conclusion

I would say that the process of creating an animation in its entirety has been just as fun, draining, and insightful as I hoped it would be. I had a great time refining my craft and integrating all the knowledge and skills I'd learned over my five years at the University. I trust that I can take my work into the world with my head held high.

I will conclude with these final thoughts: The Other World was something that sprung from ideas of the existence of an afterlife but it clearly isn't Heaven and it doesn't look like Hell either. I took something as worldly as a speed trial race and brought it to a place where such things no longer matter and the truths of human existence are laid bare or at least questioned. Is something like racing a pointless endeavor? Does it give a man a chance to throw all he has and is into one task, and thus transcend that task allowing him to move onto another plane of existence? When it comes down to it, my animation is really about mystery, because after all no one can answer the questions it poses without leaving here and going Somewhere Else (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Is it the end of our characters journey or the beginning?

Bibliography

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