

Development Write-up

Joining the team

At the end of the 3rd university year, I was reflecting upon the past three years and figuring out what I need to improve going forward. The goal was simple: Learn from the past experiences, improve and become a production ready artist over the next year. I identified several key weaknesses that needed to be polished, and among them was my susceptibility to be stuck on a single task, attempting to polish it until I was happy with it. Therefore, it was something that very often prevented me from moving forward in my projects and finishing them. This weakness was also identified by Chris and Joe, who without my knowing had already formed a group for next year. Later, they approached me with an offer I could not refuse. Their proposal: Join our group, but when we tell you to stop and move on from a task, you have to do it.

I accepted, as it provided me with an environment where I have to get better at working in a group, slightly more pressure and responsibility and a place where I can improve on my weaknesses.

Goblin Project

Before and over the summer, we decided to get ahead of the game and started developing an animated short under the name *Taverns and Trolls*. The premise was "Goblin in want of beer". One of the first ideas was a live-action/3D animation mix, where a group of players would be making their way through DnD campaign, then it was reduced to a solo campaign of a single player against the dungeonmaster with the premise evolving into a Goblin thief sneaking into a tavern to steal a casket of a legendary brew. After several creative decisions, the story we decided to go forth with, and pitch at the start of this university year was a story of a Goblin, who climbed a mountain to visit a remote tavern of heroes in pursuit of a legendary brew.

After initially presenting the idea, we were met with strong criticism exploiting several weaknesses lying within the story, and we decided to attempt to address those problems. Unfortunately, a week later we found ourselves unable to fix the issues within the story and decided to shelve the idea and come up with a completely new story.

Hunting the new idea

Over the next week, we repeatedly met in classroom, cafeteria and cafe outside university grounds. We tried coming up with a message we wanted to convey with the new animated short. Robert McKee, in his book *Story substance structure style and the principles of screenwriting* mentions, that the writer, once he comes up with a theme/controlling idea, he should stick it onto his writing instrument or the wall above, and never lose sight of it. In the attempt, we shared past life experiences, events from our lives and anything that could inspire

our next creative venture. Unfortunately, all this was to no avail and almost defeated we sat in cafeteria with only one thing we knew for sure: We wanted to make Fantasy. A new idea sprung into life, and we tried to get into creative flow as a group. We took out blank paper, and started throwing ideas, one over the other, never discarding any thought. We pulled out our phones and started playing fantasy music and this *brain dumping* soon (d)evolved into us standing over the tiny white table and tribally yelling ideas, one over the other, to the backdrop of the whimsical tones of the music. After we exhausted ourselves, we were sitting down, collapsed in the small red armchairs. Unfortunately, we did not manage to nail down a single idea, but we had laid down some ideas to work with. After a while, I remembered my own story, that I had in the back of my mind for few years now, that I was very very very slowly and passively developing. The idea was a story about a librarian, trying to find out why are some books blank. Therefore, I decided to pitch this idea to the group as a possibility, which was met with approval. And thus the basic idea was born: A librarian in pursuit of the mysterious.

Developing the idea

Over the next two weeks we set out to develop the idea into an actual story, and hopefully, give it a meaning. We bought pens and post it notes and sat ourselves against one wall, and started sticking the notes onto the opposite wall. One after another, we stuck or took down the post it notes, shaping the story into its current form, discussing where to take it one after another. There were plenty of questions that needed answering. Why is the person in the library, who is our main character, why are the books going missing, why is the animal licking the books, what are their relationship et cetera. We had a pretty good idea of the structure, and of the exposition and climax, but the middle part was still cloudy. We wanted the middle part to be a chase sequence, and since the story is taking place in a magical library, we wrote down an extensive list of items you would find inside. Afterwards, we took the list, and wrote even more extensive one, detailing possible scenarios with each item from the previous list. Next, we discussed which ones we liked, circled them, and tried pitching the to others, sometimes with a small visual aid or re-enactment. I'd say, that developing the chase sequence was the hardest part of the development, and at this time, it is still something I am not too happy with, but we had to continue working, and we democratically agreed on the 4 events, currently happening during the sequence.

On chase sequences

When developing the chase sequence, we knew exactly what we wanted. An exciting chase in the wondrous magical library. But we also identified, that the important part of developing a successful and exciting chase sequence is the structure. There has to be an interplay between positive and negative values for the main character, the chase going back and forth, while also increasing the tension by amping up the stakes as the scene unfolds. Personally, I do not think we have been very successful in this task, but some people have found the scene entertaining.

Developing the idea - Cont.

After we established the rough story, we continued onto thumbnailing, while also creating other helpful parts of the project, for example, the art style.

Thumbnailing process

Me and Chris took up the task of thumbnailing, and while I did the first and the third act, Chris did the second. In photoshop, I tried to develop the story a past the rough outline we had, and hit the inciting incident in a reasonable manner. Unfortunately, my drawing skills are limited and after feedback, I elected to switch into basic blockout in 3D environment, using a pre-existing rig, while creating the environment with basic shapes. This proved to be rather successful, as it provided me with greater control of the camera. Now, I could test out if the shots are working, or if they are even possible. My plan was to render out basic images, draw over and colour them in photoshop, then stitch it with Chris' parts. At some point, Chris has also elected to assist himself with 3D and we seamlessly transitioned into, what we consider a semi-storyboarded animatic.

My plan to do draw overs and colours of the rendered images was taking too long, and after a short discussion, we decided that I will leave it be and selectively do slight draw overs in the necessary parts, while leaving the other rendered frames untouched.

After drawing over several key story frames, I started stitching the pictures together in premiere into a rough animatic. Overall, it took me around a week to time out the first two acts, with daily revisions and adjustments based on feedback and discussion with the other group members. Afterwards, I started adding sound effects onto the premiere timeline, matching them with the actions, one after another.

After we had complete soundscape, with the help of accessible online libraries(Notable ones include Adobe and BBC SFX libraries), we played back the whole thing for all three of us.

In the beginning of the short, we are trying to accomplish a form of audiovisual storytelling to provide the backstory for Joanna, painting an image in the head of the audience about the event that left her scarred. Unfortunately, with the current audio mixing, the event proved to be too visceral and ruled out the possibility of targeting the audience we wanted to. It is yet to be fixed.

Library development

I started concepting the library at one point, and after going back and forth between maya and photoshop, without achieving deserved results, I decided to work inside unreal. Unreal engine has provided me with the opportunity to actively walk through the environment, giving me better sense of the space, as I could see it through Joanna's eyes. We decided on a two part circular layout as we feel it best represents the narrative we are aiming for. Unfortunately, the design is

not yet finished I have plenty of work to do until I can proudly say that the design and layout of the space is finished. We are also yet to discuss some architectural elements, but the current agreed style is early gothic, as we are inspired by Harry Potter's Hogwarts.

Outro

One of our commonly discussed questions is if we want to render in Unreal Engine using real time technology to save time, or using Arnold. We discuss it almost every week and our opinion and choice swayed multiple times from one to the other. Unfortunately, I do not consider that we have managed to complete all of our pre-production, therefore, as we move into the production, we will have to work twice as hard, and design some elements as we go, although we need to make sure we do not neglect discussion and critical evaluation.