

Hi everyone! Firstly, thank you for joining me tonight for my final defense of my thesis project “Blind Dragonfly.”

I’m so happy to see that I recognize a lot of you, but just in case, I’ve got a quick rundown introduction for you all.

I’m Piper Haswell! I’m an animated arts major, and I minor in stop-motion animation. I’ve always kind of been an all over the place kind of artist, dabbling in every medium I could get my hands on. I’ve sculpted, drawn, both traditionally and digitally, painted, screen-printed, sewn and embroidered... pretty much if it’s an art form, I’ve probably tried it, or want to try it. When I was deciding what I wanted to do for college, I found myself thinking about stop-motion more than anything else. It was an art form I’d always admired and loved, I’ve been practically obsessed ever since I was a kid, constantly watching the likes of Ray Harryhausen and Rankin Bass, and it was a medium that would allow me to continue practicing art in the multimedia way my brain tends to work in. All of this, of course, has resulted in all of us being here today, for my senior thesis.

Speaking of that thesis, let’s talk about what I’m here to show you today! ‘Blind Dragonfly’, a silent stop-motion short film, adapted from the story of ‘The Gift of the Magi’ by O. Henry.

I knew I wanted to use my thesis as an opportunity to delve deeper into character animation specifically, as that’s the part of stop-motion I’ve always been the most drawn to. To give life to something that isn’t alive, and have that life be believable and moving to an audience. In order to do this, I had to create a project that was ambitious, but achievable within the incredibly short timeline we have to work in as thesis students.

One of the things that I chose to do to work within this structure, was to create an adaptation. I wanted to find a story that I could adapt, something that could serve as a vessel for the kind of art I wanted to create. I thought about it for a while, I wanted a story that would be recognizable, but not so ingrained in the public zeitgeist that I would feel restrained. I wanted a story that would allow me to delve into relationships, and character dynamics and emotion. This ultimately led me to ‘The Gift of the Magi’ by O. Henry.

‘The Gift of the Magi’ is a story that I feel isn’t very recognizable to the average person by its name alone, but the story may feel familiar to some of you. It features a young couple, Della and Jim. The narrative follows Della as she realizes she has no funds to get Jim anything for Christmas, and she despairs briefly, desperately wanting to get something for Jim that she feels is worthy. It centers around the couple’s two most valuable possessions, Della’s long beautiful hair, and Jim’s golden pocket watch. She realizes that in order to get him a present, she can sell her hair. She ends up cutting off her hair in exchange for the money to buy Jim a chain for his watch, and upon his return that night, they discover that he also sold his pocket watch to buy her a set of jeweled combs. They both laugh at their own foolishness, and put the gifts aside to enjoy eachothers company.

I found a lot of the elements of the story appealing, as it featured many moments of significant emotion, and it was something that I felt really lent itself to the kind of project I wanted to work on. This leads me to one of my other inspirations for my project, Ladislav Starevich, and specifically his 1912 film, '*The Cameraman's Revenge*'. I find the tone of *The Cameraman's Revenge* so appealing, and I really wanted to create something that would give me the same sense of whimsy. He uses bugs to create such a human-like story of interpersonal conflict and relationships, and I wanted to pay homage to that in my own work.

This leads into one of the first ways that I chose to deviate in my adaptation. I, of course, made them bugs. I also knew that I wanted to focus more on my characters rather than the initial narrative of 'The Gift of the Magi', which was used as more of a way to convey a Christian Moral, the name itself being a reference to the three wise men. I focused instead on the driving event being an anniversary between my two characters.

Speaking of those characters, I should really introduce you to them. Scarlett is the character whose narrative we follow for the duration of my short film. She's based off a Crimson Marsh Glider, a type of dragonfly, and also serves as part of the inspiration for the name of my film. Iris is her partner, based off of a rainbow stag beetle. I chose an anthropomorphic style for my characters as I wanted to design puppets that I felt could emote strongly within their character acting.

Throughout all of my research, I felt myself again and again being pulled towards older inspirations, early stop-motion animation, 1920s style aesthetics, and ultimately, silent film. I found a lot of charm within the motifs of silent film, and it had a significant amount of overlap with the early stop-motion I was looking at. The more I thought about it, the more I felt it was applicable to what I wanted to create. Silent film would allow me to investigate and explore character acting and animation in a more in depth way, there would be actual stakes, as it would be one of my only methods of communicating understanding with my audience. The more I watched and read about silent film, the more I wanted to incorporate different aspects of it.

I used intertitles as another of the methods through which to drive my story non-verbally, as well as referencing film with a 4:3 aspect ratio, something one of my teachers here, Za, encouraged me to do.

After my proposal, I had a lot of work cut out for myself. This is the part of the presentation where I tell you about ALL of that. In excruciating detail. Because if I had to do it, you have to hear it. Sit tight my hostages. I started with revising my storyboards, getting help from my brother, Sydney, who helped work out more dynamic angles and shots. Before the semester started, during winter break, I created two of the proposed sets. Both sets were measured and designed for a 4:3 aspect ratio and to fit on a downshooter, this thing! (pictuor)

One of them was a backing for my intertitles, and the other was a bush, which actually doubles as one of my characters. I could have made this incredibly easy for myself, in fact it should have been easy. The mockup I made of this set consisted of 5 parts, a backing and 4 sections of

leaves. Instead what I made was this monstrosity. (picture) The bush was composed of 95 individual leaves, all of which were animatable. I had a part in the making of every single leaf, but my family kindly contributed some help with some of the most tedious parts. I also hand painted the borders for my intertitle background.

As I started the semester, I compiled everything into a loose animatic, figuring out all the timing. This is when I really got started. I used the fact that I had already created two of my sets to my advantage, and I started animating my intertitle shots right away. I also sculpted and created props for the other downshooter set. While I was doing this, I started fabrication on my first puppet, Scarlett. I knew I should start with her, as she was the puppet I planned to use for the majority of my animation, but there were several logistical things that I needed to figure out as I was constructing the puppet.

Firstly, I needed to create her head sculpt. Luckily this part was fairly simple, as I already had turnarounds from the previous semester in which to reference. The only thing I changed here was to make her head larger, as I was thinking about how I would be doing facial animation, and the smaller the scale, the more difficult to delicately animate. My original plan was to use replacement animation for several features of the puppets face, such as their mouths, their eyelids, and their eyebrows, akin to Rankin Bass style. I stayed fairly true to this plan, but sticking premade assets to the puppets was a little trickier than anticipated. I pivoted, the first of many, opting to instead use unbaked clay to sculpt eyelids frame by frame on top of the puppet, as well as using a paint marker for their mouth shapes, scraping away and adding when necessary. By the time I finished the puppet, I had almost all my downshooter shots finished, but I still hadn't finished my final set.

With help from my dad, (shoutout to John Haswell) I used power tools and cut out a GIANT base for my set out of MDF board. Then we tried to make the walls out of wood and... man. Bending wood is way too hard and delicate of an operation to be doing on a time scale like this. I decided trusty cardboard was the way to go. We cut and scored 4 sheets of cardboard to bend into shape, using a ring we cut out around the original MDF board used for the base to secure the top of the set. All of this was to create a set which I could take apart as needed.

Once I had the base for the set constructed, I painted. I painted the walls of the set and I textured the ground using a mixture of coffee grounds and paint. Then I had to bring that set to school. This is where I ran into a problem. This set is huge. Like too big to go through doorways big. Luckily we had constructed it specifically to be taken apart, so that's what we did. Every single time it needed to go through a doorway. When I got it to school I built the props for the set as fast as I could get them done, as really, what I needed to be doing was animating. This was when I had my midterm meeting.

The meeting left me feeling extremely hopeful about the project. Things had felt slow moving as I was stuck in the weeds of fabrication, but here I was finally getting to the point of my project. The advice that I received had a few common themes that really stuck with me. Stop-motion animation is a beautiful medium, but it can also be incredibly physically taxing, so they gave me

plenty of advice about how to optimize the way I animated, things like wearing hats to avoid the shine of obnoxious lights, using standing mats to decrease fatigue, and setting up puppets in practical locations to reach while shooting. They also made a point to tell me that the most important thing I could do with my thesis was to finish it. Sometimes a thesis has a way of looming over you, needing to be the greatest, largest scale thing you've ever done, and it can have a tendency to grow beyond its means. Now my thesis does happen to be the largest scale thing that I've ever done, but I think what was most helpful for me was trying to rein in that scale where I could in favor of creating something I could finish.

Before I could even start animating, I needed to figure out lighting. Luckily, my mentor brought in someone to help, that someone being Dan Pasto. He helped me figure out a basic setup for the lighting, with a focus on dramatic contrast, as my film was being shot for black and white. Speaking of that, you might have noticed something a little bit odd about my puppets. They're wearing rather... colorful outfits. This is one of the elements of my project that I had to consider in every single thing that I made or had done so far, how would it look in black and white? Every single color choice I made was determined by value rather than actual color. I have probably like 50 photos on my phone alone of random felt sections in craft stores with a black and white filter put over them. My sets are a bit more true to color, mostly just because I wanted them to be pretty, but they also have these same considerations put into them.

But back to lighting. One of the main things I needed to focus on was creating contrast between my puppets, and my sets. I also needed to maintain consistent lighting throughout shots that would be seen in the same scenes. I did this through two big main lights to light the general stage, and then I used a spotlight against the back of my character to create the separation between puppet and set. One of the other techniques I was able to use, as seen here, is reflecting that light. In almost every shot, just out of frame, is this trusty piece of white paper, taking all of the light I shined on it, and reflecting it back up at my puppet.

I started working on animation, but my pace was slow. With every single shot I animated, I needed to reset my camera and the spotlight, all while making sure they were properly secured, as one bump, and there goes your shot.

Stop-motion animation is all what we call straight-ahead animation. In 2D animation, things are generally done with keyframes. You can create your key poses, drawings at different points within your action that will remain the same, and your job is simply to fill in inbetween. You can also animate things in different passes. One pass you might animate the main figure, then the next you would animate the hair for instance. In stop-motion, you can't preplan anything like this. Anything you want in that shot has to be animated at the same time, and all in order.

As I was working I realized that I REALLY needed to figure out in what order I was going to animate my shots. Sure I had created a set that would be able to shift and change, but the thing I hadn't factored in was just how much you actually DON'T want things to shift and change. I needed to do every shot that would show the set in its entirety first, so that I wouldn't have to reset things in between shots and risk continuity errors in my placements or visible shifting.

This meant I really had to get my second puppet finished, and fast. Originally I had planned to animate the first scene, and then animate the second scene, as both only included Scarlett's puppet, so this would allow me more time to finish my second puppet, however, I realized that I needed to complete all of the shots that would be on this main set first, to avoid issues with lighting changes and set shifting.

I had the armature for this puppet already from a previous project, but I needed to reshape the body and sculpt an entirely new head for the puppet. I also needed to make the puppet clothes. Luckily, I had my wonderful friend Mya, who offered to help me by creating a set of overalls based on my character designs for my puppet. I handed off my child to Mya, who is now actually her godmother.

Also at this time... oops fourth set actually. A fourth set wasn't in my original proposal, but I've actually technically known I would need a fourth set this entire time. Forgive me panel. In scene 2, Scarlett leaves my main set, going outside. This meant I would need to create this 'outside' for her to be in. Luckily, this set was pretty simple, as all I would need was a ground plane and a background. This is where we go back to when I made 95 animatable leaves. Always one step ahead.

This is where things got REAL.

Spring Break was upon me, and by god I was going to get this project done. I was finishing my second puppet and my fourth set, all while trying to animate. I had 25 shots left, out of the 39 in my film, and only 3 weeks to accomplish this. I locked myself in the school to finish my film. This studio is where I lived for 2 weeks. My monstrously large set created yet another issue. I physically couldn't place the camera in some of the places I had planned in my animatic. I had to adapt and change angles as I animated, constantly checking to make sure my scenes flowed correctly. When I changed one angle, I had to change others to make sure there weren't any jarring changes. The first scene ate up so much time. Every single shot was a different angle, which required me to move the camera, move my spotlight, and secure them down.

Adina and I met on Wednesday that week, as we usually do, and she gave me a goal. I should attempt to animate 3 shots a day for the rest of Spring Break while I didn't have classes. That meant for 5 days I was in the school every single day, for around 11 hours on average. Adina came to check on me both Thursday and Friday, and we would break down what I had left, and the best order in which to approach things. As we reached Monday... I had completed 12 shots of animation. This is definitely what this message originally said.

Now coming into this week, I was determined not to slow down. On Monday alone I completed another three shots of animation. Essentially anytime I wasn't in class, I was animating. I told myself that by the end of that weekend, I would be done animating. And guess what.

I did it! This was absolutely the hardest part of my thesis, but it was also the best part. I was finally getting to work and learn on my character animating and acting, and actually seeing my story coming together before me. My puppets would break, I would have to create a prop I didn't anticipate, or I'd have to completely rethink the way I was doing a shot constantly, but despite all this? I genuinely loved it. Every time I animated a character blinking or breathing, every time their hair moved, every time they laughed, I was giving motion and life to these inanimate puppets I had created. I was constantly recording my own acting and referencing it, thinking about the physics of my puppets, their weight and speed, and how to show their emotions in a way that would guide understanding.

By that Sunday I had completed all of my animation, and it left me with a week to finish my compositing. I got to work right away.

One of the things that you have to consider in stop-motion animation is rigging. A stop-motion animator's greatest enemy is gravity. So rigging is what's used to support your puppets. This most often comes in the form of tie-downs. These are essentially screws that screw into the bottom of your puppets foot, and are secured with a nut underneath. These however, don't support every action. Puppets constantly need to be in positions that they can't support on their own, so animators will use other things to support the puppet. This can be anything from a wire to a block propping a puppet up, but usually these things are edited out after in the compositing stage. I however, did NOT want to do this. It's incredibly time consuming, so I optimised every shot I had to avoid showing my rigging. At several points in this film I have wire assisting my puppets movements and actions, but you'll never see it.

That meant all I had left to do was adjust the framing of some of my shots, put on all the effects and filters I wanted, and... fight to the death with after effects. Thank you to Sean, I literally could not have done that one effect without you. Once I finished my visual effects, I came face to face with one of my questions from last semester's proposal. Would I include music in my silent film? I had always had some idea that I wanted to add music, but I wanted to do it in a way that felt true to most silent film. I wanted to create my film first, and then face the challenge of scoring to an already made composition. I ended up choosing a classical score, and ultimately, I hope to find someone to re-record a performance of the piece specifically for my film.

In conclusion, I couldn't have chosen a better project for my thesis. I think the most valuable experience I gained from this project was in just how much practical experience I got from working on it. I had to change and adapt things so many times throughout this project, but I never let those things slow me down. I just kept working. I'm so proud of the film I've made, and I'm incredibly excited to share it with you all today. Without further ado... 'Blind Dragonfly'.

So, what now? I made this piece to go into my portfolio, and to learn. My plan is to re record the music for it, and then start submitting to film festivals. Eventually I also want to post it online.

Finally, I want to extend some thanks, firstly, Thank you to my mentor Adina, who supported me throughout this whole project, I truly could not have done this without your guidance and advice. Thank you to Ran Sheng, who saved me multiple times throughout this thesis with my technical questions and with equipment, Thank you to Marilyn and Za, who've truly supported me in more ways than I can count, Thank you to my family, Thank you to Mya, for being my assigned bonded pair, Izzy, for keeping me sane while we both lived in this school, and of course Sam, Mo, and Cam for helping me in the moments when I needed it. I could sit here and name drop every single one of my friends, but we would be here all day. And for that, I am so thankful. I could have done this without you.