SURVIVING AND THRIVING

Introduction
You’ve graduated, you’re looking for a job or a contract, all your new skills are in place and ready to use. .. what next? This is a brief guide to the options and some resources.

Choices
Many people want to be animators, but animation is not a mass market product. The jobs for animators, FX developers, and digital modelers - particularly full time jobs, with benefits, that are somewhat secure - are few and highly competed for. What do you really want? A secure, reasonably well paid career? Then animation may not be for you except as a part time extra. Or do you love animation and want to do that more than anything else? In that case you probably won’t get rich (unless you make a short movie or a series that goes viral; that has been done, notably by the French animator Pierre Coffin with Despicable Me and the creators of South Park) but you will have a fascinating and creative career. And one that can be pursued independently.

No matter where you are, consider yourself a freelancer. Any job these days, animation based or not, can end two minutes after you’re asked to go to your manager’s office. Fortunately animation is one of those professions that can be pursued at home with relatively inexpensive equipment; in other words, you have a lifeboat for the rough times between regular paid work. But you have to keep that lifeboat maintained and seaworthy even in fine weather.

There are several things you need to create and keep current to improve your chances of contract work, part time employment, or full time employment. These are:

1. demo reels
2. a resume
3. professional contacts
4. an online presence

Let's look at each of these in turn.

The demo reel - or reels
A demo reel is a ninety second to three minute compilation of your greatest professional (even if you’re not quite yet a professional) hits. It should start and end with a static frame that has your name, what the demo reel is based around (2D animation, rigging, modeling), and at least two contact options. Generally these are an email and a phone number. If the demo reel is specifically for a job (ie: not going to be posted online) you may also want to include your address.
The importance of a demo reel cannot be understated. Broadly, it does four things:

1. It’s evidence of your accomplishments
2. It’s also a summary of your skills
3. If placed online, it’s a way for people to find you
4. And finally it answers (one hopes) the question “What can this person be relied on to do?”

The best demo reel examples I’ve seen are by Christine Li. You can see two of them at http://lishiow-huey.com/. Each is targeted to a specific potential client or job type, each is broken into clear sections with a reference number in the lower right corner, with attributions and her contribution clearly shown. The reels include classic turntable animations (fading from smooth shaded solid to flat shaded wire-frame), stills, animated scenes, and sketches. The music - she uses the same track for both - is suitably bland and avoids the need to cut on a beat. Her opening and closing contact images are clear and no-nonsense.

2D animators will want to include sketches and storyboards to serve the purpose of turntable animations and wireframe renderings.

An excellent set of videos showing how Pixar hires its people is at https://www.pixar.com/paths-to-pixar-1#paths-to-pixar. One point worth noting is that hiring managers like to see experience of working in a team, as professional animation is always a team project. So be happy to acknowledge anyone who has contributed to a particular scene or model in your reel. This is an advantage, particularly if they are willing to be a reference.

Demo reels can be created entirely in Blender’s Video Sequence Editor and should be posted on your channels on Vimeo (where they will reach a more creative and professional audience) as well as YouTube (where the audience will be wider but less professional). You should also place non-specialist reels on your website or a hosting site such as Behance or Core77. More specialized reels, perhaps dealing purely with your figure animation or digital modeling work, should be kept to send to potential clients and employers or when you’re applying for advanced training at a college or for-profit school.

Keep your main demo reel current and weed from it irrelevant, outdated, or excess material.

The resume

There is more about resume writing on the web that I have the space to add links to. I recommend writing several resumes loosely related to possible jobs or contract opportunities and then tailoring each to the specific situation when it happens. Unless the advertisement specifically says send it in Word format or to fill in an online application, send a PDF. These can still be scanned for relevant key words but have the advantage of being able to include live links to your web site, a demo reel on Vimeo or elsewhere, and your email address. Because so many employers automatically scan resumes for key words relating to experience be sure to save your PDF with editable text. This means printing as a PDF from Word rather than saving a JPG image and turning that into a PDF page.

For greatest flexibility you may want to prepare your resume in a page layout program such as Illustrator or InDesign.

Professional contacts

To begin with your professional contacts may only be your teachers, but equally if not more valuable when you get them will be fellow, more experienced, professionals you’ve worked with and for, as well as happy clients. Open and start to build a LinkedIn resume as soon as you can, even while you’re a student. LinkedIn, with its opportunities to describe experience and training, along with allowing people to recommend and comment on your work, is a semi-independent endorsement of your work from people whose own background and standing are easily visible. Don’t rely on it to find jobs directly, however:
anything on LinkedIn is visible to millions of people. The same is true of most job sites except local ones like http://www.santacruzjobs.com.

Stay in touch with past clients and don’t hesitate to ask them for a quote for the web site or if they would be prepared to act as a reference. This is particularly important for your LinkedIn profile.

I’m not a great enthusiast for MeetUps as in my experience few people are interested in hiring animators at those sorts of general professional events; you’re more likely to be on the receiving end of a pitch from an insurance agent or a lawyer. But they’re good experience in giving the “elevator pitch” for your business: a twenty second verbal presentation about what you do, why you’re good at it, and why it’s a great deal for your clients. You may also meet a fellow animator, a video editor, or another creative professional who you could work with when the opportunity comes along.

**An online presence**

This takes the most time but will also add the most to your employability as either a full or part time animator. There are several alternatives:

1. creating a portfolio on a professional site like Behance or Carbonmade
2. hiring a web designer (or exchanging services with them) to create a site for you
3. creating your own web site

You may want to progress through these as you build skills and examples. In all cases you should be able to send a link to a potential client or employer that shows the range of your work, including a demo reel, downloadable resume, contact information, and possibly PDF cut sheets or brochures. Descriptions of your work process and of past projects will educate clients and enhance your professionalism; you might also want to include a sample contract as well as indications of price ranges. There is nothing worse than spending hours discussing a project with potential clients only to find out they only have a few hundred dollars to spend on it. If it offers the chance to do something new and interesting you may want to take it anyway, but if you need to pay the rent ... your time may be better spent looking for a better project.

A word about contracts. There is no easier way to get into trouble professionally than to offer more than you can comfortably deliver in the time and budget available. Make sure your client - and you - understand exactly what you’re delivering on what date by creating a clear contract with deadlines for deliverables (storyboard, revised storyboard, animatic, revised animatic, previsualization, and final) as well as payment schedules and timely signoffs from the client. The more time you wait for a signoff the less you have to work on the next stage before another deadline comes up. Make sure each side has a clear picture of what they have to do, and when they have to do it.

If you’re going to be working under a confidentiality agreement put something on to the price to compensate you for not being able to use your work in promotion. This will not only get you slightly better pay, it will reassure the client that you’re actually going to keep the information to yourself.

Going back to portfolio hosting there are disadvantages to each option. With a professional portfolio site you’re rubbing shoulders with hundreds if not thousands of rivals; it doesn’t have the individualism of the other two. With the second alternative you have the problem of updating and altering the site if you didn’t build it and don’t know the technology. And with the last you have to design, build, and maintain that web site singlehanded when your main interest is animation or digital modeling.

There are other ways to build an online presence other than a web site, of course. Writing a blog, if you do it regularly and professionally, is another way to build a following. Local 3D scanning and modeling expert Skylar Greenawalt writes an excellent one called http://betterlivingthroughcnc.com/; it’s worth looking at them for an idea of what works. He says it gets him free software for review as well as good commissions. Video tutorials on YouTube (Vimeo is less suitable for tutorials, more for finished pieces) are also good, as is entering competitions and showing work on forums for advice and suggestions.
**Business advice**

There are many resources online for learning more about business and freelancing. Unfortunately they’re of widely varying quality and it’s not easy for the inexperienced to tell good from bad. I recommend www.lynda.com as being the best commercial resource (from $25/month) for creative software and business training. I don’t recommend trying to get freelance work from online sites, though some do have good advice. Much better to put together a good demo reel and resume, then send letters to (don’t email) local advertising agencies, architects, litigation attorneys, videographers, manufacturing companies - anyone who might be able to use a digital model, an animation, or a presentation of how something works. Meantime look for a full time job to pay the bills. Having a full time job that you don’t like and a part time job that you love are not incompatible.

Especially in the early days, be obsessive about tracking money - where it comes from and where it goes. Use Quicken (personal finance) and/or QuickBooks (business finance) if you can; good open source alternatives for both are GnuCash and PostBooks. Money is hard to get and easy to spend.

**Local and online resources**

The best resource is a happy client, one who can act as a reference and steer new work to you. Do good work for people you like and the rest will follow. But there are other options:

1. enter competitions or show your work on online forums. Constructive criticism is always valuable and encourages you to continually work and improve in your medium.
2. collaborate either with other animators (no animator is exactly like any other) or fellow creative professionals such as web designers, videographers, and architects. A successful collaboration on one project can lead to another
3. give presentations to local professional groups; for this and other reasons I recommend gaining experience in public speaking through a group such as https://www.toastmasters.org/
4. teach; there is no better way to learn something than to teach it. Take it from someone who knows.

**And finally ...**

Keep learning. The days are gone when one could learn a craft and then spend the rest of one’s life refining your skill with it. In five years’ time you’ll probably be using a completely different collection of programs to the ones you’re using now. The projects you use them for may be entirely different and may incorporate elements that don’t even exist today. This creative situation is unprecedented and means that artists and craftsmen (no, they’re not the same) in the digital world need to be far more aware of technical developments in their field than previous generations.

It is said, by the way, that an artists tries to solve his own problems through his work; a craftsman (or designer) other peoples’. People shift between these roles through a career and sometimes several times a day.

So keep learning. The latest upgrade to Blender and Photoshop. How people use these programs. Interesting designs for web sites, demo reel titles, techniques of cinematography, highly compressed web video formats. The way a street looks in morning and afternoon sun. How surfaces wear and age. How machines work and plants grow. How you can show all this with the skills and the tools you have.

Learning something that is both an evolving technology and a creative medium never ends.

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