PLOTS, PITCHES, AND STORYBOARDS

Introduction

Animations are labor intensive, and hard to change once they’re more than partway in. In theory, computer generated animations should be easier to change as they’re all editable files, but in practice the considerations of time, expense, and deadlines reduce this advantage to a minimal amount. As with hand drawn or stop motion animation, planning and setting the right course from the start is vital.

The plot

Drama is as old as civilization itself. The first recorded dramas - many of which are still performed - were written by Greek dramatists such as Aeschylus, Euripedes, and Sophocles; their survival was in part due to a rigid format which gave an understandable framework to a narrative. The fundamental idea of Greek drama was that conflict gave rise to a story; characters (or groups of characters) could have needs that conflicted with others, with their situation, or with themselves. Characters who were presented in a form that the audience could identify with were the protagonists; those who conflicted with them were antagonists. If the antagonist wins, it’s a tragedy; if the protagonist wins, it’s a comedy (in the technical sense; it doesn’t have to be funny). If no-one wins (but everyone has fun) it’s a bacchanalia.

Let’s look at three examples of these timeless types of conflicts through animation. First, the protagonist has a goal that conflicts with another character, the antagonist. See After You, by Chris Cordingly, made when he was a student at Ringling School of Art and Design in 2007 (note this isn’t a good copy and better ones might be found with a current search). This is a comedy.

Second, the protagonist has an internal conflict due to psychological flaws. See Procrastination, by the San Francisco animator Lev Yilmaz. This is a tragedy.

Finally, the protagonist has a conflict with the world around them. For this, see The List, a 2010 animation in Blender by Pavel Lyczkowski, a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. The hero character changes his goal in life and wins. This is a comedy.

There are many possible refinements to plots, including creating a final scene that makes the viewer re-evaluate everything they have seen so far, but the fundamental elements still stand.

Plot development

There are five basic stages of plot development.

1. Exposition:
   defining the conflict (internal or external)
2. Rising action:
   everything leading to the turning point
3. Turning point:
   the point at which the protagonist decides how to resolve the conflict or face it. Here the story moves
from building tension to relieving it.

4. Falling action:
   the results of the turning point

5. Resolution:
   the close of the story, which brings the conflict to a conclusion. This should be a logical development from previous plot points.

The pitch

A pitch is simply the plot, described in simple but emotional words, in order to interest a potential (generally financial) backer in a movie concept. It’s often useful to make a pitch to oneself to see if a concept is sufficiently compelling to put time into it, even if no backer is needed.

Storyboards

These are collections of sketches designed to communicate the visual elements of the project. Storyboards can be complex and detailed, or simply thumbnails on scratch paper. There are two main types.

Television storyboards. These are presented as frames with descriptions and dialog/SFX on pages. To maximize flexibility they’re generally prepared in Photoshop or a similar editing program.

Movie storyboards. These are presented for collaborative review and editing as individual scene/cut drawings on pinboards. Sketches show camera angles, characters, dialog and important sound effects, camera movement; they are often contributed by different storyboard artists and do not need a consistent style.

Once the initial storyboard is approved (it will probably change) movie development work can proceed.
Pixar's 22 rules of storytelling

#1: You admire a character for trying more than for their successes.

#2: You have to keep in mind what’s interesting to you as an audience, not what’s fun to do as a writer. They can be very different.

#3: Trying for theme is important, but you won’t see what the story is actually about until you’re at the end of it. Now rewrite.

#4: Once upon a time there was ___. Every day, ___. One day ___. Because of that, ___. Because of that, ___. Until finally ___.

#5: Simplify. Focus. Combine characters. Hop over detours. You’ll feel like you’re losing valuable stuff but it sets you free.

#6: What is your character good at, comfortable with? Throw the polar opposite at them. Challenge them. How do they deal?

#7: Come up with your ending before you figure out your middle. Endings are hard, get yours working up front.

#8: Finish your story, let go even if it’s not perfect. In an ideal world you have both, but move on. Do better next time.

#9: When you’re stuck, make a list of what WOULDN’T happen next. Lots of times the material to get you unstuck will show up.

#10: Pull apart the stories you like. What you like in them is a part of you; you’ve got to recognize it before you can use it.

#11: Putting it on paper lets you start fixing it. If it stays in your head as a perfect idea you’ll never share it with anyone.

#12: Discount the 1st thing that comes to mind. And the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th – get the obvious out of the way. Surprise yourself.

#13: Give your characters opinions. Passive/malleable might seem likable to you as you write, but it’s poison to the audience.

#14: Why must you tell THIS story? What’s the belief burning within you that your story feeds off of? That’s the heart of it.

#15: If you were your character, in this situation, how would you feel? Honesty lends credibility to unbelievable situations.

#16: What are the stakes? Give us reason to root for the character. What happens if they don’t succeed? Stack the odds against.
#17: No work is ever wasted. If it’s not working, let go and move on - it’ll come back around to be useful later.

#18: You have to know yourself: the difference between doing your best and fussing. Storytelling is about testing, not refining.

#19: Coincidences to get characters into trouble are great; coincidences to get them out of it are cheating.

#20: Exercise: take the building blocks of a movie you dislike. How d’you rearrange them into what you DO like?

#21: You have to identify with your situation and characters, can’t just write ‘cool’. What would make YOU act that way?

#22: What’s the essence of your story? Most economical telling of it? If you know that, you can build out from there.

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