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Telling stories in Animation

By CHAITRA SHETTY | 21 December, 2009 - 17:38
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The art of 3D Computer Animation and Effects session by Isaac Kerlow, Nanyang University, Singapore was focused on story development and storytelling tips, things that start before animation production but are critical to every project.

"Coming up with a good idea has its merit, but the main challenge in the world of animation is in developing those ideas. It is always challenging when ideas that are not completely developed go into production." says Isaac.

He adds, "It amazes me how people fail to look for fresh inspiration in the obvious places. Many look at Disney and Pixar movies, but that usually yields recycled content. If you just look around your immediate world, walking on the street for example, most of the time you find most interesting stories. The writers at Pixar write stories that are close to them, often times stories that come from their own world. It is also important to learn the rules of classical storytelling before you attempt to break them."
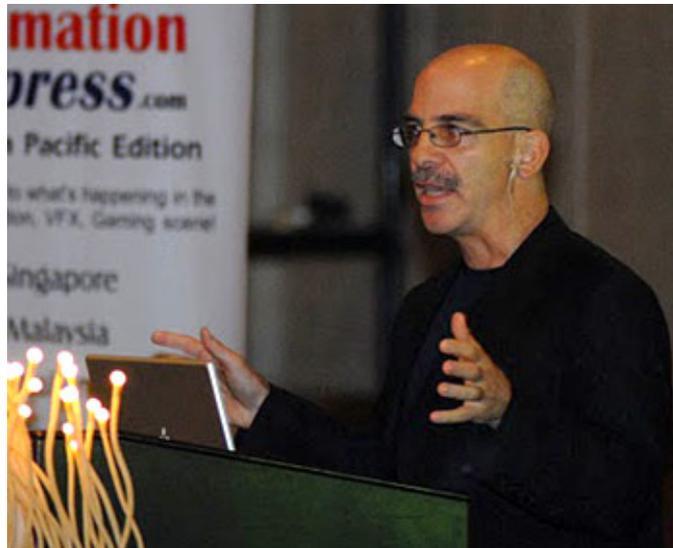
Isaac pointed out that people like stories because they love learning from others experiences. However it's not enough to have just a deep message, stories must be entertaining. Audiences find it challenging to sit through a drag story, the message should be within the story which is told in an enthralling manner.

"10 years ago many artists said that many animated features couldn't be made because the technology hadn't matured enough. Insufficient technology is no longer an excuse for limiting your creativity. Today we can create almost any computer animation style that we can think of, we can render in many different styles and we are no longer limited to the "CG plastic" look. Also in terms of craft of production, the world has come to understand that there are different forms of animations and that many companies have developed their own animation styles. But storytelling is not quite there and that can sometimes be a major problem. In terms of dollars, it usually costs a lot more more to produce a story than to write it and develop it," he added.

Filmmakers sometimes fail to apply the principles of classical storytelling, and that results in stories that might of less interesting to a mainstream audience. Sometimes creative compromises have to be made to bring stories to the mainstream and Hollywood has a successful record in doing just that. Asia is newer to the creation of mainstream international content, because much of the original animation production has had a regional emphasis. This is in the process of changing as the Asian animation workforce and craft are in a state of flux feels Isaac.

Taking Toy Story, for example, which was released more than a decade ago, but still managed to tell the story in a classical manner with limited resources, Isaac said that technology is rarely an absolute constraint for storytelling. The visuals and animation in Toy Story might not be as polished as Ratatouille, but the movie still touches you. The craft of animation has matured today, to the point where it doesn't

matter if one is using key frame animation, motion capture, or stop motion. Also it's not just about looking good, Isaac said, people don't want to sit through 90 minutes of a slideshow of amazingly beautiful images. Many animated features that are visually captivating fail due to undeveloped story or the lack of good storytelling.

And storytelling is not bound by culture. "Disney's Snow White is pure classical storytelling, the essence of its story is not based on any religion, it's a human story, whoever you are, you get the story, a 10 year old will get one aspect of the story and a 40 year old will get something else. Pinocchio the character, for example, is an Italian young boy. I am not Italian nor a young boy but I can understand the challenges that he had to go through. Mulan was a bold Disney experiment in cross-cultural storytelling and so is Kung Fu Panda by Dreamworks an experiment in cross-cultural storytelling which has been widely successful in China. Movies that are created as entertainment have to be judged as such, not as works of history, religion, or science" adds Isaac.

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