A Rough Guide to Animation Production

Two Black Boys in Paradise, 2023

Contents:

As the title suggests, this is by no means a conclusive or polished guide to animation production. The aim is to offer starting points, considerations and useful resources.

Coming up with an achievable idea: ambition vs. realism

When developing a concept, you don't have to be inhibited in animation. You create the world and the rules within that world. However, it's important to ensure your vision is achievable…

- Your concept and the world that you're creating need to be absolutely clear in your mind. This will allow you to communicate effectively with collaborators and ensure decision-making down the line is much easier.
- Compile as many visual references as possible to give a sense of style, tone and mood.
- Your short film doesn't need to have an epic narrative, it could be centred around a moment or a feeling.
- Developing a concept is a good time to start thinking about technique. Doing this early on will allow you time to consider what elements you'll need. If you're using more than one technique, make sure you're able to justify it creatively.
- You might have a strong concept, but if you focus too much on design the story can be lost. So even with the simplest ideas, don't lose the conflict or challenge that drives your idea by focusing only on *stylistic* choices only.

In animation, a short short is a good short

- During pre-production the story will shapeshift a huge amount and it's important to be open to ideas. Be prepared to let go of certain elements you might have worked hard to develop.
- Plot well. The more you meticulously plan your project, the more likely you are to identify potential challenges early on, saving time and money!
- Anticipating challenges can be hard, so unpick every detail and talk to fellow animation production teams about challenges faced on previous projects.
- Help your future self. For example, when developing storyboards for a stop-motion project, don't make the camera move unless absolutely necessary.
- Keep the action simple. Ensure you can justify every movement. Sometimes, the most powerful moments are made through the smallest of expressions.

Finding creative collaborators

There are many ways to find collaborators, this may be a specific industry-built context such as a networking event or something more organic and unexpected.

Networking
- Animation festivals (see p.61-62 in The Short Film Toolkit)
- Connecting in person at events/screenings/mixers etc
- Look out for digital networking opportunities, e.g Animated Women UK

Watching films
- Watching other people's work can be a really good way to find new collaborations. Scan the credits and make a note of names. You might be able to find more of their work on digital platforms such as Vimeo, or through festival websites.

Studios
- Look at small studios, see who is working with them. Often people are freelance so they might be able to work on smaller projects. Many artists working in animation work in commercial realms, so keep an eye on these studios too.

Other realms
- Lots of skills required for animation are transferable and therefore you might find collaborators in unexpected places. For example, some of the world's leading puppet makers found paths into animation through careers such as theatre design or jewellery making.

Reach, 2023

Budgeting

Each project will throw up an entirely new set of challenges and unique costs so it's important to make your budget flexible. A useful first step is to break down your script into a shot-list with timings, description of assets and other practical info. Remember, it's not just the Producer who draws up the budget, it's important for each department to have input: writer, director, the DOP (Director of Photography), key HoDs (Heads of Department) etc. Therefore, the sooner you get your crew on board the better.

The aim is to be effective and economical

Crew
- What crew will you need? Will you be working solo? If animators are working alone, will you budget for people from the production team to check on them?
- Have open conversations with your director about how much they can take on. Are they an animator?
- Consider having a lead animator to work on key frames, then bring on a junior animator for the shots in between.
- Give the DOP their own schedule and contingency, they might need to come in sporadically.
- Ask, 'how can you speed this up?' People power, simplifying techniques…?
- Keep payment rates fair across the board.

Animatic
- The animatic is key to staying on budget and keeping to timings.
- For stop motion you'll do a 2D animatic, but it's also useful to do a 3D pre-visualisation if possible.
- Once the animatic is locked and timings are secured, it's important to find out how long each shot will take to film. This will depend on your animator's experience and pace.

Schedule
- You can't create a budget without an idea of your schedule.
- Ensure the contingency pot covers the production over running.

Location
- What times can you have access? Is the space suitable for the number of crew you'll have at any one time?
- Are there physical challenges to consider? For example, temperature flux can cause wooden animation tables to expand and move.

Equipment
- Camera/lenses/lighting – what additional kit will you need for your technique?
- Look at bursaries such as ScreenSkills.
- Ask your crew what they have before approaching rental places.

Software
- Commonly used software includes: Adobe After Effects, Adobe Photoshop, Dragonframe (stop-motion software) and Blender (3D suite).
- Ensure the software you're using has been recently updated.

Materials
- Different techniques will bring up different materials eg a multi-plane set up will require blackout curtains and black wrap to avoid shadows.
- Try to be resourceful and consider sustainable options, eg recycling materials from other projects.

File storage
- Think about how you are going to store and share files. For instance, if you have a Google Drive or We-transfer account, do you need to purchase more space?
- Look at deliverables and whether your financier requires a specific type of hard drive.

Access
- Do any of your team/collaborators have any access requirements? (Note that BFI NETWORK offers a separate amount for access costs when you've successfully been awarded short film funding).

Legals
- You're working within a controlled environment and may not have many clearances to think about in terms of image. However, it is important to budget for unexpected fees.
- Make sure you have signed agreements in place with your crew (including work experience), voice cast and composer.

- Remember that if you are using commercial music or a music library these tracks will need to be cleared (see our guide to PRS).

Post-production
- Edit suites can be very expensive, so look for deals with post-production houses.
- The composer/sound designer should not be thought about last.

Festivals and distribution
- Consider your festival strategy early on, looking at submission fees for your top choices (see The Short Film Toolkit in the resources section below).

Workflow

Pipeline will depend on technique, but here are some general time-management tips:

- Keep your budget flexible to allow for changes in workflow.
- Do tests before filming key sequences.
- At the end of each day make time for:
    - Rendering (especially with 3D as this can take a long time!)
    - Backing everything up on an external hard drive
    - Sending shots to the editor who can add them onto a timeline
- Put in place effective communication tools for any remote working. Software such as Slack, Trello or ToDoist can be useful.
- Be clear when you need feedback from financiers and add that to your schedule.
- Don't be too rigid. Look at the best way of working, leaving breathing space within the schedule to ensure that no one burns out.
- Nurturing a healthy culture will benefit all areas of production. Your mental health risk assessment should outline the measures you're taking to ensure that a healthy environment is maintained, and it should signpost where support can be found. See the Film +TV Charity 'Wellbeing on set' page for guidance and resource

Environmental sustainability

Animation can be a very wasteful artform and sometimes dealing with limited budgets can affect a conscious approach to sustainable production. Albert resources on what to think about when making a sustainable short film can be found **here.**

You might also be interested to read our case study on *Beltane,* a BFI NETWORK short animation that was produced with sustainability in mind.

Growing Plains, 2021

Routes into animation production

There are many routes into animation and this is what makes the industry so exciting and vibrant. You may have developed the crucial skills for animation production in your career already, e.g., problem-solving, programming, engineering, architecture, styling, narrative design, set building/dressing, working as a storyboard artist or illustrator...

There are lots of training opportunities if you are changing paths from outside the film/arts industry, take a look at the ScreenSkills website for advice.

Finally, if you have a great idea for an animated short, BFI NETWORK would love to hear about it. You can find out more about our funding [here](#), and you can [sign up](#) to our newsletter for updates on events, workshops and mixers.

Glossary

*some terms may vary when working with international collaborators/co-productions

Animatic is an animated storyboard used to test sequencing and timing.

Compositing is the digital placement of assets and elements (such as backgrounds) to create a single final image.

A **Cel**, (also known as celluloid) is a transparent sheet on which the animation is inked and painted before being sent to the camera.

Cut-out animation is when the characters are split into several pieces and instead of being drawn frame by frame, the animation is carried out by moving these pieces each frame (similar to how stop-motion animation works). Cut-out animation can either be computer generated or done traditionally using paper.

Frame rate / FPS is the number of frames per second. Standard is 24-30 fps, and with digital being anything up to 60fps.

Multi-plane is when layers are placed at different distances from the camera so that when the camera moves, a depth illusion occurs.

Pose-to-pose animation is the action of creating all the main action poses, called key poses, and then placing the secondary poses between the keys.

Previs is the process of visualising a scene before creating it. This might take the form of a 3D animatic.

Rotoscoping is the process of creating animated sequences by tracing over live action footage frame-by-frame.

Traditional 2D animation is where every frame of the animation is drawn manually (historically on paper or cel, but today you can use different software)

South West Resources

Aardman Academy: Animated Insights

https://academy.aardman.com/animatedinsights

BFI SHORT FILM FUND (opening April 2023)

https://network.bfi.org.uk/short-film-funding

Look at BFI-funded animated shorts, including Knot; https://watershed.co.uk/filmhub/funded-projects/knot/

Animated Women UK South West

Mentoring, events, networking

https://www.animatedwomenuk.com

Depict

Short film competition

https://www.depict.org

Show me the Animation

Online magazine with news/ opportunities

https://showmetheanimation.com

Further Resources

The Short Film Toolkit

See Animation Festivals p.61-62

https://www.bafta.org/sites/default/files/uploads/the_short_film_toolkit.pdf

ScreenSkills

Courses, careers information, bursaries. See outline of Animation Production roles

https://www.screenskills.com/job-profiles/browse/animation/

For crewing-up: BAFTA Crew, TriForce Creative Network, Look Beyond The List, Shooting People, post on Arts Jobs or online Animation publications (see below)

Skwigly Online Animation Magazine

https://www.skwigly.co.uk

Animation Toolkit

Supplying Stop Motion animation parts, kits and supporting products.

https://www.animationtoolkit.co.uk

Ethical animation charter - BECTU
Ethical Animation and VFX Charter

How to budget an Animated Short
https://www.encounters.film/bfi-network-masterclass

NextGen Skills academy
https://www.nextgenskillsacademy.com

Animation UK
News, jobs, studio directory
https://www.animationuk.org

Women in Animation
Mentoring, networking, opportunities
https://womeninanimation.org

London Animation Club
Networking, events
https://londonanimationclub.com

Cardiff Animation Nights
https://www.cardiffanimation.com/can

Edge of Frame Animation Blog
https://www.edgeofframe.co.uk/lizzy-hobbs/

Cosgrove Hall Films Archive
Seed commissions, masterclasses and the annual Puppet Masters Conference
https://www.cosgrovehallfilmsarchive.co.uk/project-portal-home

Independent Cinema Office (ICO)
Vast catalogue of films and resources
https://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/