The Battle of Kings

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ABSTRACT

The work presented in this thesis explores the possibility to integrate 2D drawings with 2.5D animated characters in 2.5D computer graphics. The purpose was to show the effects of the illustrated artistic style and produce an effective emotional and story in motion without realistic animation look. Inspiration for the story comes from a true story based on Iranian history and an epic story that occurred just thousands of years ago. I focused my work on the context of Iran’s history.
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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The story describes the Persian Kingdom in the ancient times, where the first human rights charter was written by Cyrus the great king of Iran in Hakhmaneshi’s period more than 2500 years ago. Cyrus, was the first king who paid the workers and gave salaries to pregnant female workers while he did not let them work during their pregnancies and many other good things that he had done for his land. This is the most important moment in the history of Iran and the Persian monarchy that a king started to establish human rights statement around 2500 years ago.
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INTRODUCTION

Realistic style in computer animation is not always a good choice. Too much realistic style could, in some cases, work against the crafting of narrating a story and its message and meanings could easily get lost. In this thesis, I advocate the hand drawing illustrated style to present an animated short film based on history and an epic story.

During the last two years, I focused on my country’s history, culture, traditions and epic stories and my goal was to show different aspects of who I am and where I came from. I started my storyboard since the spring of 2018 and it took me almost a year to arrive to its current state, trying to develop the story that I changed several times and experienced and learned new techniques and skills.

My intention was to produce a 2.5D short animation, but I’ve decided to explore how the 2D hand drawing characters would work with two-point five dimensional animated environment. The purpose was to achieve a special graphic quality combination of a 2D illustrated hand drawing style while introducing simple coloring, camera movement and visual effects for enhancing visual narrating. However, my work evolved and concentrated on the techniques that I have used to achieve the final result especially in combining the 2D hand drawings characters with the 2.5D animated environment.
CHAPTER 1

THESIS JOURNEY

Over a year ago I started to think about my thesis. I experienced different areas and techniques and learned a lot from each one of them and altogether. Learning from those projects helped me to be able to make my final thesis animation. In order to better my skills at animating I took additional courses from Theatre department. All those experiences led me to create a short animation that reflects who I am and where I am coming from and what is the history of the place I was born. I started to work on the stories and novels I was familiar with and I was interested in their concepts and characters and their story lines.

Here is the outline of the other projects I worked on before settling on my final project:

1. The battle of Rostam and Sohrab
2. Tell Tale Heart
3. Rebecca Cherry Tree of the Sixteenth Day
4. Sherlock Holmes
5. First Animation
6. The Battle of Kings
CHAPTER 2

THE BATTLE OF ROSTAM AND SOHRAB

This was my first attempt to visualize a story. It was an assignment for a class but I learned how to summarize a story and choose the important parts to draw and somehow it was the beginning of learning how to draw a storyboard which I have never tried before. “The Shahnameh”, or "The Book of Kings", is a long epic poem forms part of the 10th-century by the Persian poet Ferdowsi and is the national epic of Greater Persia. This is one of the most tragic episodes of the Shahnameh. This is one of the most famous stories in Persia. I wanted to visualize it. I started to draw some conceptual environments and characters for the story to show the battle scenes and the differences between the female character and male characters. I used Adobe Photoshop for drawings, some in color and some in black and white. I presented it in class as showing slides of still images that were telling stories.
CHAPTER 3

TELL TALE HEART

This was the next story I tried to visualize. I was always interested in Poe’s dark and mystery stories and I thought it would be a new experience to choose a Western mystery story to visualize. I also watched Poe’s movie collection. The story had three characters and mostly happened inside a building. This was the first time I drew a storyboard. My storyboard for this one was simple and I used 3x5 cards for one-minute quick sketches for each scene. The material I used was pencil. After drawing the whole storyboard, I came to realize that although it was an amazing story to animate, it was not about me.
The reason I chose this story was because we had an old copy of the novel at home when I was a child and I was interested in characters and the mystery of it. I also watched Hitchcock movie Rebecca which was inspired by this story. I started to draw the storyboard for it. First, I used black and white-water color and I spend more time and added more details to each frame, but I came to realize that black and white was not enough to express emotion at each frame. I used watercolor and drew the storyboard for the whole story. First, I summarized it and then I started to draw each frame. At this point and based on my research I added arrows to each frame and scene to show the camera movement, and also, I wrote some notes under each frame to give more information to the audience.
CHAPTER 5

CHERRY TREE OF THE SIXTEENTH DAY

Over a year ago, I took a Shadow Puppetry course at the Theater Department. The course was about making shadow puppets using Super Black Cardboards. We worked on a project as a team. The project was about a Japanese story that was narrating a Samurai’s life who ended his life for his honor. I drew the storyboard for this story multiple times. I used pencil, ink, pen, watercolor for sketching the scenes and characters. I also made puppets. We had five rehearsals for the show. There was a big screen inside the room. Underneath the screen there was a wooden board that puppeteers would hide behind and move the shadow puppets behind the screen so the audience could watch the show and the movements of puppets. There were some scenes during the show which we projected on the screen. I used Harmony, Adobe Photoshop and Adobe After Effects to make the digital parts for the projection. I also made a silhouette short animation of this story using Harmony for the first time and I added sound to it. I drew each part of characters’ bodies as separate parts in Adobe Photoshop then added puppet pins in Harmony and rigged them for the animation.
CHAPTER 6

SHERLOCK HOLMES

In my country which is located in the Middle East, we grow up watching Western TV series, listening to western music, and we learn about the history and art of Western countries at school. Many years ago, there were lot of tourists coming to my country from the West and they used to work on oil. I was raised hearing those stories from my grandmother and my parents. Our life is influenced by Western culture as well. Ever since I remember I was watching TV or listening to radio or reading books about Holmes adventures so it was always at the back of my mind. I wanted to visualize one of my favorite stories of Holmes. I chose The Speckled Band, which was a deadliest snake from India in this story. The story has a connection to the East. I drew the storyboard for it using Adobe Photoshop. Then, I illustrated and colored each character, scene and decorative thing for the story. I also drew some conceptual illustration of some scenes using watercolor. I chose a realistic style for illustrating each frame. For animating and rigging, I drew separate parts of characters to attach them together by using Puppet pin in Adobe After Effects.
CHAPTER 7

FIRST ANIMATION

After experiencing and learning from visualizing all those stories, I became more confident that the story I needed to start working on for my thesis should be related to me, my culture, history, and art. I wanted to use art to show who I am and what are my concerns and use art as a tool to communicate with other people around the world who know little about my country. I decided to choose the most famous love story in my country and the Middle East. The two male and female characters in this story are the symbols of love in the Middle East. Singer and composer Eric Clapton wrote a song called Layla for his lover who was one of The Beatles singer’s, George Harrison’s wife. Layla was inspired by this story.

The female character’s name is Layla and the male character’s name is Majnoun which means crazy, he was crazy for her. They never got married. It is a very old and interesting story, there are lots of old books with traditional paintings of this story and lots poems telling their love story. For example, once Majnoun was sitting with a pot in front of him at one of the village paths with other people, and Layla came and was passing across that place, she hit Majnoun’s pot and broke it and left the place, Majnoun stood up and was so happy, other people asked him why he was happy while Layla broke his pot, he answered, why she broke mine if she was not interested in me?

During my bachelor’s courses, I had Persian Painting course which is called Miniature and it has very long history and background and we learned how to draw Miniature by using Gouaches, gold sheets, watercolor cardboard, different brushes, and other materials. These painting were developed in each period of Kingdom in our history and each period had different and their own style of painting. We also have unique calligraphy, which I studied at high school as part of Graphic Design. For this animation, I decided to show the most of our culture and art by taking inspiration from the Layla and Majnour story. I drew the storyboard and illustrated and colored each character using Adobe Photoshop, and then separated their body parts for rigging in Adobe After Effects. I made a short animation using Miniature styles and Persian Calligraphy and Islamic motives. I rigged and rotated individual elements, changed their positions, and worked with Camera movements during the animation.
CHAPTER 8

THE BATTLE OF KINGS

For my thesis, after putting effort into learning storyboard, animating, rigging, camera movements, and etc, and also becoming more confident and determined of what I want to show and visualize, I finally believed that the combination of all these experiences could help me make a better animation. The Battle of Kings is a story inspired by one of the stories of Shahnameh, which has happened in history and history repeats itself. My concerns and the reason I chose this story was to show the culture and place where I was born and grew up in, as well as to talk about the current situation in my country using historical events that are repeating themselves in our current time as a metaphor. The story describes the Persian Kingdom in the ancient times, where the first human rights charter was written by Cyrus the great king of Iran in Hakhmaneshi’s period more than 2500 years ago. Cyrus, was the first king who paid the workers and gave salaries to pregnant female workers while he did not let them work during their pregnancies and many other good things that he had done for his land. In this story, there is a good king and queen who are ruling Persia and a bad king who attacks Persia and at the end he will be defeated by the king of Persia.
I was born and raised in Iran in two different cities in the Middle East, then I moved to Turkey and after that to the United States. I was raised with reading about Iran’s history and epic poems and stories. Since my bachelor’s degree was Handicrafts, I had a chance to learn and explore in many different areas that represents Iran’s tradition and culture such as Waving Persian Carpet, Pottery, Glazing, Glass, Jewelry, and Persian Painting which is called Miniature. Iran has a very long history and is an ancient country. While I was in Turkey I studied Architecture. Iran has a unique art and architecture and literature. For the first time two years ago, I started an animation about one of the most famous epic stories of Iran and I drew images and showed them as slides to tell the story. The purpose of it was to be prepared and experience how to visualize a story that I was grown up with and It represent the costume, culture, architecture, and geography of Iran and how the power exchanges during history.

My academic background in Architecture helped me in creating scenes easily with concentrating on the details of history itself. Drawing characters took a quite bit of time to come up with the characters personality to support the hand drawing of each design.
CHAPTER 10

CHARACTERS DESIGN

After selecting the characters of my story and determining the scenes, I tried to understand and develop a number of factors. The main ones were; who are the main characters, what are their role in the narration, what are their motivation, how to show their personalities and how to make them unique. As a result, I have decided to concentrate on the following:

1. The Concept: I was inspired by an epic story from Shahnameh, the book of kings, which is a long epic poem book written by the great Persian poet Ferdowsi between c. 977 and 1010 CE and is a national epic of Greater Persia. As we all know, the history repeats itself. The story is about the battle between two kings, the good king and queen that rule Persia and the bad king or evil character that is the king of Turan country, and attacks Persia to occupy it but at the end he will be defeated by the good king.

2. Character and Personality: I concentrated on two important subjects in the characters: Their facial expression and their clothing styles which goes back to thousands of years ago. I tried to reflect the characters’ personalities by simplifying their appearances.

3. Colors: I used water color and pen. First, I drew the rough sketches of characters using pencil after that I colored them using watercolor paints, then I refined the edges by black pen. I used somewhat Middle Eastern skin color, hazel black eyes and light brown-hatches for the girl’s hair and mainly used red for the evil men’s suit.

STORYBOARD DEVELOPMENT

I went a long journey to reach to this point and reformed the story the way to show both historical event and traditional and also cultural factors of Iran. I drew several different storyboards
for different stories and finally I drew a storyboard for a love story inspired by traditional Persian painting which is called Miniature. I learn many techniques from each storyboard. First of all, it was the first time I was visualizing a story and I learned to use arrows to show panning or tilting of camera movements throughout the animation and writing short sentences to describe each scene.

The story happens in thousands of years ago, and I used the ancient architecture and buildings that exists in Iran, also because it is a four seasonal country, I drew Iran’s nature and gardens as well. Furthermore, I focused on enhancing my characters and scenes by adding light layers and refined colors using Adobe Photoshop.
CHAPTER 11

DRAWING AND SKETCHING

Drawing is the creative process of producing or creating two dimensional realistic or unrealistic shapes using artistic materials such as pen, pencil, watercolor, and etc. Being determined with lots of practice I became confident to use variety of drawing and painting techniques. While drawing the characters I came to realize that there is not a single workflow for every character, each one of them was done in a slightly different way. The goal was to develop the progress of my work to create individual illustrations in an effective and efficient manner.

CHARACTER TECHNIQUES AND DETAILS

Although I was keeping my characters simple, they had to be unique and special. That was addressed through adding variety facial expressions, figures and clothing including their eyebrows, eye size, lips and mouth shapes, overall placement of features, hairlines, and finally their bodies. I began by drawing the concept sketches, the two front and side orthographic views of the characters that I planned to animate and for some of them I drew some other different angels. While drawing them I was thinking about each scene and it’s expression but the most important factor was camera. I considered camera’s point of view as a main element for drawing the characters. The concept sketches were visual references during the process of drawing different angels of characters.

First, I drew rough pencil sketches, then I colored the characters based on their personalities and roles in my story and animation, and at the end I refined the lines by using pen. I used Winsor and Newton Professional watercolor and mostly mixed the basic colors to achieve my desired color for the character’s skin tone or clothing or hair and etc. For the bad characters I mostly used dark and
red colors to convey tension and darkness evilness inside them and I added horn to some of their heads. For the good characters, I used mostly blue colors to show goodness and calm inside their personalities. After drawing them on Illustration cardboards, I scanned the drawings and used Adobe Photoshop to enhance the lighting and colors also I used Patched tool and several brushes to refine them. I divided each Characters into separate parts such as hands, legs, hair, head, and etc., in order to be able to import them into Adobe After Effects and be able to rig and animate them.
I have always curious about and wanted to explore how 2D environments and animated characters and scene layers would appear in digital media forms and displays with the 2.5D effect? After Effects is a program developed by Adobe Systems which allowed me to apply visual effects to my scenes.
First, I wrote a script which was a draft then my sister revised it and I wrote a new script that was matched and aligned with the animation scenes. She recorded her voice reading the script and I added it as a narrator’s voice for my animation. For the different scenes and places, I added sound effects such as, fire, rain, waterfall, and etc.
Compositing and Editing were the final and the most important stages of my work production. The process was responsible for the sound mixer of the different pieces of voiceover and sound effects together, so it can make sense to the ear as well. Adding transitions in between and combining the final animated scenes and which need focusing on the small details and to know where do I need to add transitions. As well as the combination of the sound effects, and narration with the final scenes needed to train the ears on concentrating where the volume of the sound effects needed to be louder than the narration’s volume or louder than the sound effects.
CONCLUSION

The making of The Battle of Kings, story of kings were indeed both interesting and challenging endeavor. The development of the story and the process of making it was my country’s history which was a metaphor for its current situation that many people around the world know little about. The journey went over a year ago and were full of obstacles and challenges. I have discovered that 2.5D animation were critical to the realization of my work. During my thesis I had challenged myself. I had learned how to develop short animation and how to solve problems by researching and experimenting with many techniques to reach the best results.

In my point of view, the integration of 2D and the 2.5D animation was complementary and I would like in the future to develop and produce more animations using these techniques.
REFERENCES


