CONFIDENCE IN BLOCKING
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Lately at work when I've been given a more acting oriented scene (ie: one that isn't a big action sequence with a dozen characters in it) I've been experimenting with really filling out my blocking. And I mean just throwing caution to the wind and packing it with info. It's been a lot of fun to start to see just how much I can put into the scene right from the start. Earlier on in the project I'd only block the major key pose hits, unsure of my process (since I hadn't been a fulltime animator in a number of years). Then after I got comfortable with what the director wanted and I figured out how to accomplish in my work what I wanted to do in my head I started adding in major breakdowns and other info. As time has gone by and I've gotten more comfortable with my process and what they're looking for, and as I know who the characters are more I find my first pass blocking is just packed to the rim. I'm thinking through the way I'm handling the scene and I'm putting what I know is needed in there. Major keys, major breakdowns, sub-breakdowns, ease in, ease out, overshoots, settles, anticipations, end of moving holds, facial expressions, even lipsync- it's all there, all in stepped/held tangents. For a simple 2 second dialog scene I'll put out a blocking pass that has 15-25 held frames for each character (I think of them as 'drawings', even though they're just renders of the puppet on the 'puter). And the best part is that it's been just about the most fun I've ever had animating. And from the standpoint of getting things bought off byu the director it's been working out really well, too.

While it sounds like a huge risk to do so much work in first pass blocking before ever showing it to the director, I have found that if anything it makes for less work in the end. I think it has a lot to do with confidence. The more time I put into that blocking the better my shots are overall. My buy off from the director comes far more frequently, too. I feel like I'm giving him the clearest possible insight into what I want to do with the scene. He doesn't have to guess and I don't have to explain with words what my blocking isn't showing (a fairly common thing that happens. "Yeah, I'm gonna add a head shake right there and he'll be swinging under for that move."). I research the scene, then I animate the shot in my head. I'll do a fair amount of sketching to break it down, to understand how to get through each part of the action. Then in the computer I simply seek to express these found ideas in held 'drawings'. For me it's all about finding something strong inside me that I can put into the scene. I have bannished the old wishy washy "I hope he likes this" kind of thinking when I block. Because I'm doing my homework before I show it to the director I go in believing that what I am showing is the best possible way to do the scene. I have the confidence to put this much work into it up front believing the director will see my vision for the scene and will buy into it. And you know, more often than not he does. Maybe it's just because I'm a cocky son-of-a-gun. I dunno. But to me this whole idea of having confidence in your choices, in believing that you are putting forward the best possible way to do the scene, it has a lot to do with it.

If you come to dailies with a half baked blocking and you're kinda having to explain what you want to do with the scene with this sort of apologetic tone, man… it's no wonder why you would get notes like crazy!

Like many folks I've been digging through the history of other great animators. The notes and recordings from guys like Milt Kahl are a real inspiration,. Now if you want to talk about a confident fella you need look no further than Milt. I get the sense that Milt was pretty well convinced that he was the best animator on God's green earth. When it came to a scene Milt was persistent in thinking it through from all angles. And once he knew what he wanted to do, well dangit if he didn't believe down to the core of his soul that when he settled on a way to do a scene that was the best way on earth to do that scene. Period. And you know what? He was usually right. And he wasn't the only one who thought that way about his work. Sure he denegrated his own draughtsmanship, but that just shows he knew what his weaknesses were. Knowing your weaknesses and acknowledging them isn't a lack of confidence. If anything it allows you more confidence because you're dealing from a position of understanding rather than ignorance. Read notes and quotes from other great animators from the past as well. Thomas, Johnson, Jones, Avery, Clmapett… they almost all seem to have this innate confidence that the way they decided to do something was the best way possible at the time. They spend half their time thinking how to do it, then they did it, rarely looking back and wondering pensively "Gee, should I have done this here?"

For many of us who started off animating in CG we were kinda spoiled a bit. CG animation allows us to kinda 'find things along the way'. Since the whole thing is always right there and you can go anywhere in time and add things we didn't need to develop the disciplines of thinking things through first before we drew them. I knew I didn't and I see this discipline lacking in just about every young animator I've ever known. Traditional animation did not exist until the animator drew a few drawings first and then rolled them. And you can't draw anything useful for animation without first thinking and knowing what it is you want to draw. But the computer always had an endless supply of drawings for us, displayed in all its OpenGL glory. So we got used to working with sloppy ideas, ill defined concepts and we got used to making it up as we went along since we never were required to think about the image before it appeared. A far too common approach is to rough some really weak poses in, let the curves ride as splines, scrub and see how it looks, adjust, react, finesse. That kind of approach can be very comforting. If a scene's not working in blocking, well, no worries, I have 4 more days and I can fix it "in animation". Sometimes the results are inspired, amazing, loose and fresh. And sometimes the results are a half baked mish mash of a dozen different ideas which don't work well together. Often I'll see talented young animators get sucked down a rabbit's hole that just kills them when they come at things like this. With no confidence in the idea from the start, they're open to every shifting of the breeze. A bad night's sleep and they're doubting their approach to a scene.

A few minor notes from the director and they think the whole thing needs to be trashed and started over. A co-worker's well intentioned (but not thought through) suggestion can send them off on a tangent for hours. With no solid foundation to build on the door for major changes stays open almost until the deadline for the shot- or beyond. Not having a plan they take perfectly good motion, actions, timing or poses and muddle them up with layered in fluff that waters down the original impact of the moment. Perfectly good choices that have been established early on are thrown out because they're not used to having success with a scene so early in the process. I know at one time or another I've struggled with this. In all of this waffling I see a certain lack of confidence.

Confidence best comes from a solid mixture of past success, open minded inquisitiveness, present effort and diligent forethought/planning. Look at your past success and know that you have the ability to make good stuff. Keep an open mind to see as many potentialities as you can. Put in the effort on your current assignment and don't cut corners when thinking about how to do a thing. And when you have settled on an approach, think it through, work out the details, understand how it can be done and how you will do it right down to the core. Putting all of this together allows you the ability to move forward with confidence. If you can honestly say you put in the effort and seriously thought through as many potential possibilities as you could think of, that you settled on the one approach that you believe to be the single best one and then dug down deep into how that one approach will will work from beginning to end then you are free to go and enjoy your work, walking with confidence. And when you bring that work to someone to get their buy off it's almost like they can sense your confidence and they trust that you're gonna bring it on home with flying colors.

And hey, why not?

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