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Independent Animation: Exploring the Fine Line between Inspiration and Imitation

by Rebekah Rifareal,
News & Noteworthy Co-Editor

Name: Elise Neuscheler

Project: "Making it Happen: Establishing Prerequisites for Independent Animation"

Program: Honors Summer Undergraduate Research

Program – VCU Honors College

Mentor: Professor Ying-Fang Shen

Year: Senior

Major: Communication Arts



Tell me a little about your project.

I came into VCU hoping to eventually go into independent animation. The UROP opportunity popped up and it sounded great and I thought, “Hey, this is something that I’ve been wanting to do.” I read the book *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate* (which is a children’s book that I’m basing my animation off of) as I was coming into school freshman year and I thought it would be great to do a project on it. So, I wrote up a proposal and people liked it!

What are your project’s goals?

We have new technology that makes animation more accessible to people from smaller organizations. This type of technology used to only be available to larger companies. I want to actually see what it takes to get something done, to get something out there.

Are you creating an actual finished product at the end of it or does your project focus more on looking at guidelines?

Any animation is going to be such a huge undertaking. I’m going to be

making a framework for a film. I will be working with character design, story design, timing, soundtrack – all of the basics. I’m probably not going to end up animating the entire story. I’m going to create an animatic, which is a shot-by-shot. You have a still image for every shot with the audio in the background. I want to see what’s going on in there, with scene and design.

*You said that the book *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate* inspired you. Can you elaborate?*

I picked it up in the bookstore randomly, thinking “What’s going on with kids’ books these days?” And I really did love it. It won the Newbery Award and it was recent. I’ve written to the author. She said in the back of the book that she likes getting fan mail if people wanted to write her a letter. And I did! And her response was, “Wow, that sounds awesome! I’m really into this idea, but legally...” So basically, I wrote back and told her this is going to be a student project, so legally, I can’t make it a public thing. I can’t show it publicly; I can’t make it a commercial endeavor in any way. And that’s fine with me right now. I’m just learning so much as I go along.

Do you have certain animators that you consider role models?

Richard Williams is someone who pops into my brain. He has done some really interesting stuff, he is so his own person. I would also say Hayao Miyazaki – I mean, he’s a titan. Also, Nina Paley, who did *Sita Sings the Blues*. For the research for this project, I’m definitely going to be looking into what Paley went through with her work because she wasn’t allowed to use the music that she wanted. That’s why her work is free online. She’s become a huge open copyright advocate because of that experience. It’s been really inspiring to me, she never even meant to do it.

What exactly is an open copyright advocate?

Creative Commons is what it’s usually called when people just put media out there – they create something or use something of someone else’s – there’s no money being earned unless there are donations. It’s basically just stated that “You can use what I’ve made here.”

How do you feel your research can be beneficial to people outside of your direct department?

In terms of social media, or any kind of online media, there are a lot of copyright movements. There are a lot of schools that have clubs for it and I think I want to start a chapter here at VCU because I think that's so huge right now. I feel like people who are interested in doing anything within media would probably be able to gain something from this research.

Can you describe the dynamics of your mentor-mentee relationship?

I've taken a couple of classes with Professor Ying-Fang Shen. She teaches Sequential Imaging and Concept Design. She is very open to independent animation and she's done some animation herself and gotten into festivals and received awards for her work. So far, it's been really good for me to have someone to bounce ideas off of. Professor Ying-Fang knows the amount of work that goes into this type of project. She's not actually in the country right now, but we've been sending media back and forth.

So you still find it helpful to have a mentor, even if she is abroad?

Oh yes, absolutely. A recent email that I got from Professor Ying-Fang Shen was a video. It was made by another independent animator. It was a ten minute long animation with a totally original storyline and the narration was sung throughout it. It was very interesting, free, open-minded. That's a rare thing to see sometimes in animation because people are pandering to the money. Just seeing that allowed me to really reflect on what I'm doing and that this is all coming from me. Professor Ying-Fang Shen continually reminds me that this is not a commercial endeavor, this is art. And I'm happy to hear it.

From the time that you began your program to right now, do you feel like you've grown?

Absolutely. The UROP scholarship legitimized this whole thing I had going on in my head. It made my ideas a reality. The fellowship has given me a glimpse into a potential future that I might have that I really would not have understood otherwise.