



Beware of Monster: An Interview with Meghan Stockham

Meghan Stockham graduated from Ringling College of Art and Design in 2012. She was a Pixar intern in 2011 and is working as an animation resident at Digital Domain's Tradition Studios on *The Legend of Tembo*.

How did you get the idea for your film?

The original inspiration came from an assignment that I had for a class. The assignment needed us to use two characters. The problem was that one character wanted a bite of the other's food and we had to resolve that. I was on the Internet trying to come up with ideas and I found an image of this girl on a dock blowing bubbles. There was a huge monster in the water below, looking at her. In the picture it looks like she is all innocent and isn't aware of the danger that lurks just below her. But I came up with the idea that what the monster really likes is the bubbles. In my film then, there is this misunderstanding where the girl thinks the monster wants to eat her, but he really just wants to eat the bubbles. So the concept was things are not always what they seem to be. I liked the idea of monsters eating bubbles—that was really cute to me.



Please see the *Beware of Monster Animatic* video on the 'The Computer Animator' page of the Companion Website

What stuck with you about this piece that made you decide to pitch it for production?

That's a funny thing. I wasn't even going to pitch it, but then the night before I was telling my friends my ideas. One of my ideas that I thought was working just wasn't and one of them suggested that I pitch this piece. I wasn't sure it was good enough. But, I pitched it and that was the one that got green lit.

Obviously the film went through some big changes between this animatic and the final. Can you talk about some of the changes?

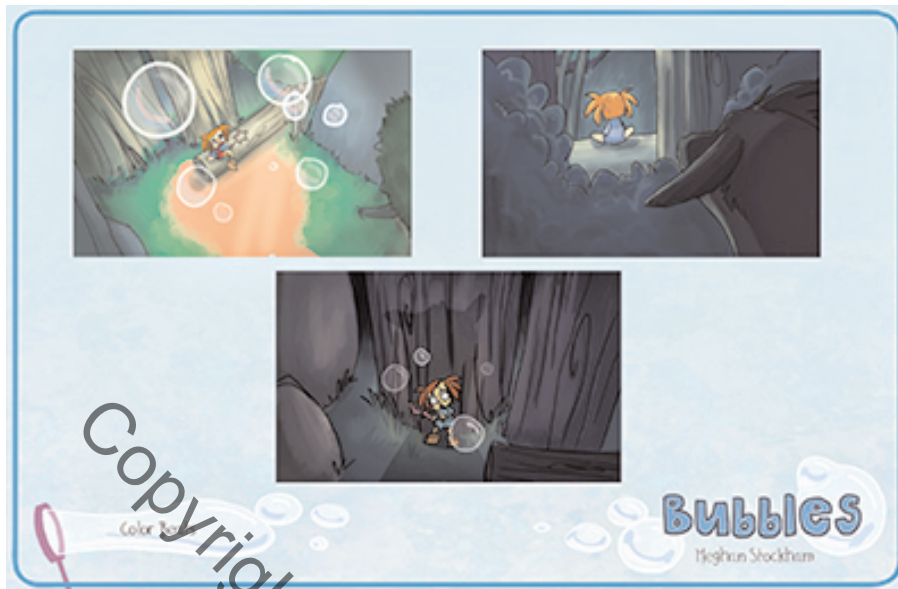
In my original there was more that I wanted to do, so expanding it was not really an issue. I wanted to have a little more of a chase scene that had them running around trees and maybe even with her ending up in the water. Just to give a few more environments and different kinds of animation.

At some point you moved the little girl from the pier to the woods. Why did you do that?

There had been a piece the previous year that had a water monster and a little boy. Everyone kept comparing my piece to that piece. And people couldn't seem to let go of the similarities— so I was trying to find a way to differentiate my piece more. There were so many things that I changed and tried, that I put in and took out. When he was a water monster he went through different versions. I always thought of him as otter-like. So one of my endings I had him on his back and she was sitting on his belly.



Then I moved it into a woodsy area and initially the monster spent a lot more time jumping through trees. This monster looked a little more evil. I was thinking that the lighting would be darker, he would be more in shadow so you would think he was evil until we got him into the light. This was to further push the idea that things are not what they seem.



Please see the *Beware of Monster Animatic* video on the 'The Computer Animator' page of the Companion Website

In that version when she saw him enjoying the bubbles, she tried them, too, and didn't like them. But that ending seemed like it fell flat and opened up another conflict. It was more like a gag and I was going for more heartwarming and cute. For me it just felt like it didn't belong.

Then there was a version with a bubble gun. The location moved from the lake to a tiny island and the two of them had a combat/mock chase scene where she shot bubbles at him. This one had a lot of action and not a lot of acting moments. I want to be an animator, and acting moments are really important so I needed something that had less action and more acting. With all the running around it also lost the heartwarming feel that I was going for. And it still didn't work because it was still too similar to the other works because at the core of the piece, he still wanted something she had.





At some point in the review process you were told that it was still too much like the other piece. The implication was that you couldn't proceed any further in the direction you were going. What was that like for you?

It was kind of heartbreaking. But I liked my piece and I really wanted to make it work. So I just sat down and tried to figure out how to distance this from other pieces as far as possible. I knew what I wanted to communicate and I knew who my characters were so I needed to rethink how and maybe where it happened. And I came back and pitched it again—and again.

A big change came when I swapped the bubbles for crayons. I fought that change for as long as I could. There had been a comment by someone, "Bubbles are OK but crayons would be better." And that kept sticking with me—in the back of my head. Would they? But no, I had been working with bubbles way too long to feel like I could change them. And they were part of what I found endearing.

However, in addition to water monsters, recently there had also been a few shorts completed with bubbles and balloons. So I finally put the crayons in to see how that would go. It didn't really work if he wanted to eat the crayons, so I came up with the idea that she was drawing and he didn't really want to eat what she had at all—which was another change to what had been a staple from my original.

And the biggest change was when I flipped the story over. I changed the dynamics between the characters and made him scared of her instead of her scared of him. She was clearly a tomboy in the final version. I had always thought of her that way, but now it was clear. She has trouble making friends because she has a weird sense of what she likes. She likes monsters.

As I was trying to find the ending I was doodling in my sketchbook and I drew a "Beware of Monsters" sign and that seemed to click. That's when I got the idea that they could both think the other one was a monster and at the end they could be both be drawing—all over the sign—and be friends. And it was really symbolic that you don't have to beware of the monster anymore. Once I knew they were drawing it kind of came together. Then I knew she had to draw in the beginning and what she drew would have to change at some point.



So through this all, my “must haves” were that:

- There had to be a creature, a human and they became friends.
- I really wanted the misperception that things were not as they seemed to be.

Some of the feedback I got kept steering it in another direction. I think everyone was trying to help problem solve the story, but I kept getting the suggestion that maybe the monster did actually eat her and that is not where I wanted to go at all. I think that’s really important, that you listen to the feedback but only take the parts that make your piece stronger. Knowing what I had to have helped me filter through all the comments and choose what would heighten this story and help really tell it.

When you finally figured this out, why did you think it was better?

When I finally did change it, it was definitely better because there are so many stories where kids are scared of monsters but there aren’t that many where the monster is scared of the kid. And in reality in the final piece it is just an animal doing animal things. It added a new, fresher dynamic to my film. He originally was a little more human like—now he is just an animal acting on his animal-ness.

How do you feel about the new piece?

Overall I like it. It accomplishes what I wanted to when I set out to make my film.

Can you talk a little bit about your character designs? How did your original drawings translate into 3D?

I knew a few things I wanted to keep—I wanted the girl to have pigtailed—I just really love pigtailed on little girls. For whatever reason she was in a dress in my final design, but when I began to model—I realized she is a tomboy—what is she doing in a dress in the middle of the woods? So that changed to overalls.

And she was a little older in the final piece. I felt like she needed to be old enough to be in the woods unsupervised. Originally she was five or six. And what parent would leave a five- or six-year-old out there by herself? Come to think of it, what parent would leave a five- or six-year-old on a dock unattended? I guess she knew how to swim.

Now I think of her as around 10 or 11. And when the roles were reversed she needed to be a little less innocent to realize what was going on.



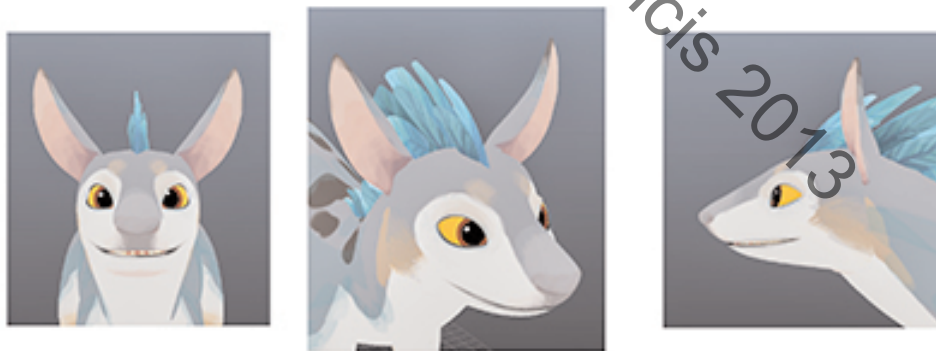
My monster went through a few iterations. I wanted feathers—at one point he had more of an owl's head but then the feathers became a crest—it helps his silhouette and expresses his personality. I originally meant for it to move, but I didn't really have time to rig that. His ears serve that purpose. The crest moves with his head, but it just doesn't really move independently.





When I was going into 3D I wanted to convert my drawings as much as possible. I really wanted my 3D to look like my drawings. Her original face was simpler and rounder and I had to give her a little more form so she didn't look like a blob in 3D. Her hair gave me some issues but I elongated them with NURBS spheres.

The topology of the monster was harder. I had never modeled a quadruped before and I really want his head to look good from every angle. In my animatic I could cheat it, but in 3D I had trouble with the head. Originally he had more of a forehead definition but when that translated to 3D, the shadows made him look really creepy and his ears were misshapen. So I had to completely remodel the head and streamline it. He also had a feather-fin on the end of his tail and I thought—that's going to be really hard to animate, so I got rid of that.



There is a moment in the original animatic where the monster eats a bubble and licks his lips. I think it is at that moment that we fall in love with the piece and realize what she realizes—that he just wants bubbles. How did you come up with those small gestures that indicate what he wants? Those are the things that animators invariably bring to the piece that aren't in the script.

I don't even know. I've always liked animals. I guess I took the reference from my dog that always licks his lips when he's hungry. Most of the monster's actions came from my dog or my cats. Even in the last film, there is a moment when his tongue is sticking out and that I borrowed from my cats.



You had a very simple location. How did you make us feel like we were in a full forest when there is only one tree?

The whole thing takes place in a clearing and there are big bushes that help to keep it contained in a small space. And then behind the bushes, I have a plane with these trees painted on it to help fill out the whole forest.



For most of my shots the tree or the bushes take up most of the space so there is just a hint of a forest in the background. And for my bushes I just made one bush—it is just a deformed sphere—and I can move it to wherever it needs to be to make a good shot. There are a lot of cheats with the bushes.

So all I really had to make was the sign, the tree, the coloring book, crayon and the little flowers. That was basically my set.

What are some of the most challenging aspects about 3D production?

Getting everything done. There is just so much to do. You really need to think about that when planning your piece. Everything takes so much longer than you think it will.

Getting everything into layout and translating that from the 2D animatic into 3D was probably the most challenging. It was difficult to get it to read just as well. Each shot had to be individually tweaked so the audience would look where I wanted it to look. The animatic helped me compose the shots. I just had simple shapes so I was able to look at how I framed the character in my drawings. I'm fortunate because I have such few things in my set—and I think it is easier with nature scenes—because I can inch something over and I don't think anyone is going to be able to tell that I moved something. I did that a lot to direct the eye or clarify a space.

There were a few shots when I was blocking in my monster character that the poses were difficult because I had cheated the movement a little too much in the 2D animatic so it was hard to make that fluid and have the poses read well in 3D. An example of that was when he was jumping out of the tree down to the ground. Another time was when he freaks out and jumps into the hole in the tree.

So to figure it out I would redraw the movements in Flash. But even in Flash I still cheated the movements a little too much. Like for the shot when he jumps into the hole. In Flash, I had him take two hops before he ran into the tree, but then when I got into 3D I realized—oh—he's too big to take two hops, if he takes two he will run right past the tree. I have to do it in one. It's something I do—I cheat my drawings too much.

When do you use Flash?

I use Flash when I need to get a good path of action—like a running shot or something—and so then I'll just draw a line where I want my character to go through the set and then draw the poses of my character over that line and I'll keep playing it over until I have a smooth path of action.

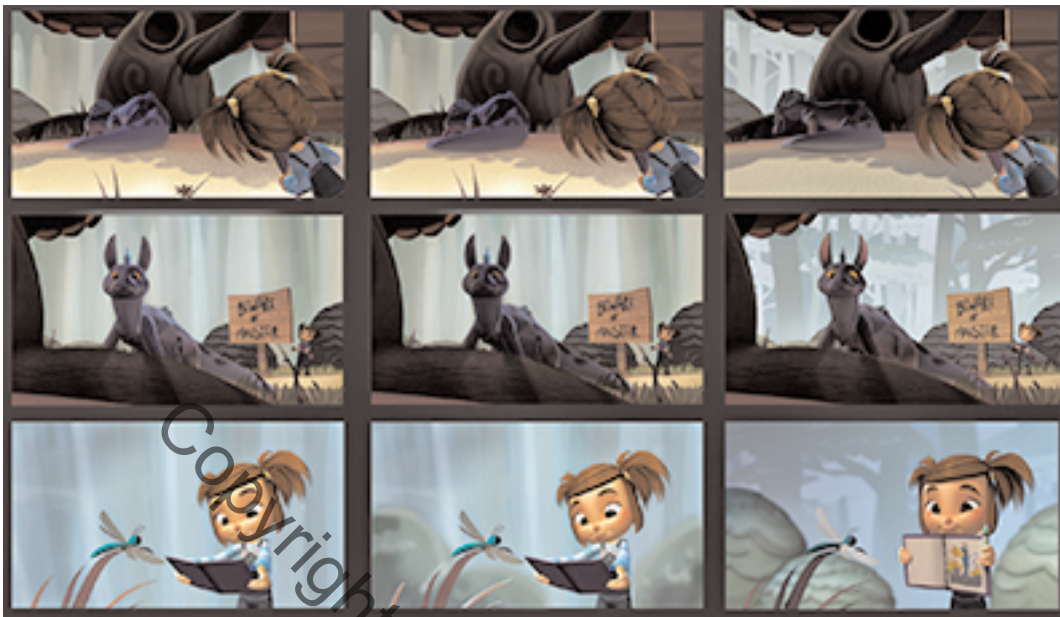
You have talked a little bit about staging and motion, but what about post production and lighting?

Getting my character to stand out from the background is maybe the hardest part. When the monster is introduced I tried to make him more silhouetted so that you can't quite see him or what he is doing, just holding back for a moment on what he might be.

There is so much that factors into lighting—you can change the color of the light, you can change how bright it is, you can change how soft it is or what the fall of from the light is. But lighting has so much to do with the mood of the film—I wish I was better at it.

I have a master lighting setup that I import to each scene, but then each scene needs to be tweaked because of the position of the camera, the character in the scene or what background the characters are against. And I learned a lot about color and how the color of lights affects a scene. In one scene I thought my colors were orange but they rendered as a desaturated purple. I had colors on my lights that affected the colors in my scene. I had to move my lights more toward white. And there are always little things to be changed. Like if her hand here is too bright when we are supposed to looking at her face or I need more depth of field in this shot versus that shot.

After I got all the shots looking good I had some issues with continuity between shots. Like there would be a shot where a character would come out of the shadows into the light and then there would be no transition to the next shot. I had to fix those.



Lighting Paintovers

My monster was supposed to have fur but I didn't want to use Maya fur because of the rendering issues that come with that so I simulated fur with color and bump maps.

The girl's overalls are textured so they have an old worn look. And there are a lot of colors in the textures so they don't look flat. So instead of just relying on the shadows I wanted them to stand up on their own. The overalls are her favorite pair so they need to show wear where they would rub. I make my textures in Photoshop. This one was made with a painterly brush with some wet edges.

I had to work my bushes. I added a displacement map so the edges would have ridges and look a little more bush-like. The grass is just a transparency map. There is no simulated grass or bushes.

In terms of animation, I needed to touch each shot again. Each one really still needed reworking. Some needed more overlapping action, on others my arcs were off and I needed to change some of the acting.

Please see the *Beware of Monster Animatic* video on the 'The Computer Animator' page of the Companion Website

How long did it take to render the piece?

I had one shot that took five minutes but most of my shots were between two and three minutes. So it took about five hours to render the entire piece. It really helped to organize my stuff. I went through every shot and made sure I had everything I needed and that all the render settings were correct and then I just saved a file for each shot. And then I just sent them in order. And as they got done I took them and stuck them into Premiere.

What about your sound design?

My scratch sound was from Killer Tracks, but I hired a composer to do custom sound.

Why did you do that?

There are places where I want the music to change with the piece and with the stock music it didn't do that, so I don't think it serves to tell the story as well as it could. It was just the same happy-go-lucky tune through the whole thing but in the middle, the mood changes and the music doesn't support that. I also used some minimal ambient sounds for footsteps and when his tail drags on the ground.

How did you find someone to compose your music?

One of the advantages of being at a school is that everyone is looking for the same types of outside resources. I just asked around to see who other people had used. Eventually on Facebook there were some composers who were still looking to work on a film and I said "Me! I need someone!"

Now that you've finished, how do you feel about the film?

It is weird to think it might be done. I've been devoting the last year to this thing but now that it is over, I can say, "I made this." It was fun—actually. It was a pretty smooth-going ride—I liked it. I liked how the project turned out.

Having gone through the 3D process—is there anything you would do different in the planning and animatic stages?

Plan everything. Planning is awesome when you actually do it. If you don't do it you will regret it. You may think you have everything planned out but you never do. Think of all the props you are going to need and how you are going to rig and move them. For example, I had a coloring book in my film and I didn't think at all about how it would be modeled or rigged until I actually had to do it and then I had to figure it out on the spot and it set me back. I mean that never occurred to me that a coloring book would need that kind of consideration. But yes, plan. Like if you have wind blowing through the grass, ask yourself if you know how to do effects or if that is how you want to spend your time. Focus your film on what you want to do.



That is an issue I had. I had to keep remembering that I wanted to be an animator so I had to keep my film as simple as possible. So I had to keep taking things out of the set, or figure out how to make my set less complicated so there were as few pieces as possible to texture. And then I also had to try to figure out the fewest and simplest lighting situations that would tell my story.

So if you are creating a piece that emphasizes animation, what are the things you need to consider?

- Have a simple set.
- Have a lighting set up. Keep lighting to the same time of day.
- If you can, use simple models. Make sure the rigs can do what you need your characters to do. Make expressions sheets and actions sheets that show all the extremes that your characters need to make. And then exaggerate them even more when you rig them because you might think that you have exaggerated them enough, but you didn't probably.
- Show a variety of different types of movements or actions.
- Make sure your poses are clean and read clearly.
- Make sure there is lots of opportunity for acting. Understand what your characters are thinking at all times. The acting in the piece is what sells it and makes it believable.
- The eyes are super important—they're where the audience will look most of the time. Make sure you have eye darts and blinks. Eyes that don't blink look weird.
- Create a story you like. You can create a story that focuses on animation but if you don't like it, it will show.
- Don't get too long! Biting off more than you can chew is a sure way to burn out and end up with an unfinished film
- Ask for feedback *all the time*. Looking at the same thing over and over dulls your senses and you need fresh eyes.

