

Defective Detective: An Interview with Avner Geller and Stevie Lewis

Avner Geller grew up in Israel. From a young age he was interested in the art of animation. During his years in Thelma Yellin High School for the Arts he worked in collaboration with the theater and dance departments where he helped with set design, costume design and crafting masks. A month after he graduated, Avner joined the Israeli military where he served for three years. As part of his service he managed to use his artistic skills for creating instruction and educational materials. After his discharge in 2005 Avner worked as a freelance illustrator, which led to his move to Florida where he started his animation education at Ringling College of Art and Design. After his third year he won the Sony ImageWorks IPAX award for excellence in the field of animation, and worked as a visual development intern at Avalanche/Disney interactive studios on the *Toy Story 3* video game. After graduating, Avner interned at Pixar animation studios. He currently works as an animator at Cinderbiter, on Henry Selick's new project.



Avner Geller and Stevie Lewis

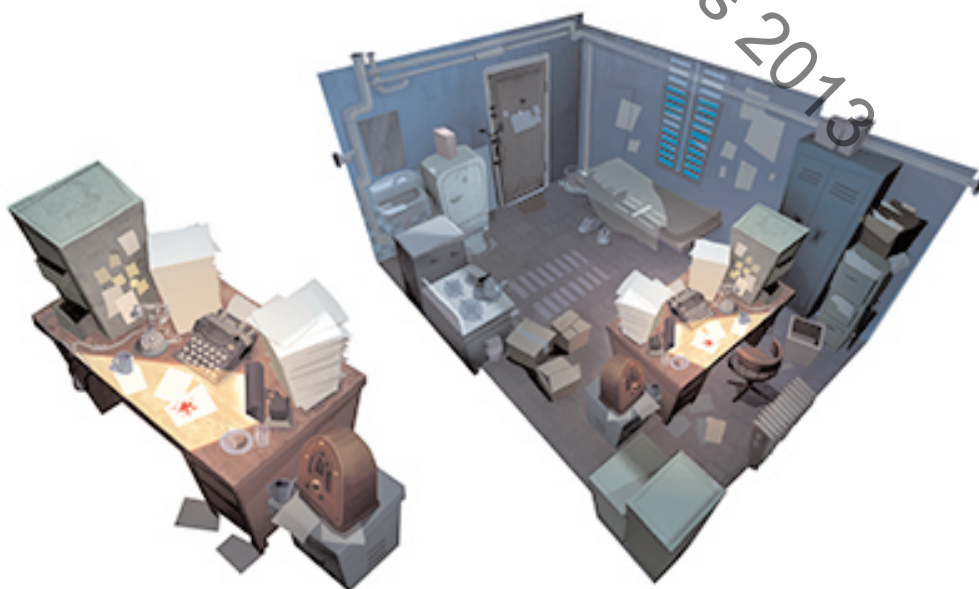
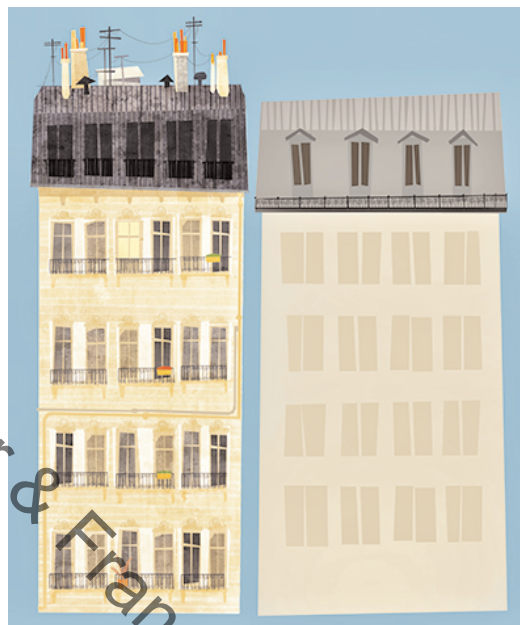


Stevie Lewis started her animation/drawing training by taking classes from Glenn Vilppu. She continued her education at Ringling College of Art and Design. After her sophomore year, she traveled with a friend to Swaziland, a small country in Southern Africa. There, they painted five large murals and presented art projects and learning material for young children. After traveling to Swaziland, Stevie spent the next month enrolled in a summer animation program at Gobelins L'École de L'Image in Paris, France, where she learned from incredibly talented artists and animators. After her third year at Ringling she interned at DreamWorks animation in San Francisco as an artist on the upcoming film, *Madagascar 3*. Stevie currently works as a full-time visual development artist at DreamWorks Animation.

Where did the original idea for your piece come from?

Avner/Stevie: We were brainstorming for a long time and wrote pages and pages of ideas exploring different worlds, characters and stories. We spent days, weeks drawing ideas and talking about what kind of film could be suspenseful but also fun to watch. Then we came up with a drawing of two apartments and began to develop the relationship between the occupants. We thought it would be interesting to tell the story of a notorious burglar who lives right above a detective, who happens to be looking for him. We didn't know any more about the story at that point, but there was something intriguing about the relationship between the two apartments.

The plot evolved a lot after that, but the core of the idea was interesting enough to continue exploration. From there we began to develop the idea of other occupants to the apartments and eventually came to rest on the idea of a neighbor who the detective imagined needed help but, in fact, was not in trouble at all.





The story changed some from the original animatic. Why did you make those changes?

Avner/Stevie: One of the most difficult tasks of working on a project for so long is staying as objective as possible. During the production of the film, we were always conscious to stop and observe everything as a whole, and try to see what works and what doesn't. Even though it was a major "work in progress," showing it to new audiences helped us to see what parts got a reaction from the viewers. When we didn't get the reaction that we hoped for, we knew it had to be adjusted.

We focused a lot of time on defining the characters, especially the detective. The main story beats were there from a pretty early stage, and mostly refined the staging and acting throughout the process. We knew what we wanted in our first act. We also knew our ending early on in our brainstorming. The main challenge was figuring out what happens in-between. In our first pass, the second act felt more random than purposeful, that

things were happening "too conveniently" than what could really happen in this sort of situation. We wanted it to feel like a natural progression.

A good example is the use of the rat. We always had a place in our minds for the rat throughout the film, but his role ended soon after he was blamed as the reason for the soup spill. While brainstorming, you try to think of funny gags, weird ideas come up, but some stick and some don't. So, we tried to have the granny cook the rat in her new soup. This would cause a horrible smell to drift through the apartment, triggering the detective's visions. Then, early in production, Steve Hickner from DreamWorks was a guest who came to critique our work. He pointed out obvious continuity issues with our final animatic, and we realized some changes had to be made.

For example, he mentioned cooking the rat seemed strange, and didn't really fit the granny's character. So, we came up with a simpler solution. Instead, she'd throw the rat in the trash, while a fan blows the smell down the hallway. Ha, we weren't sure if that was realistic either, but it moved the story forward in a more natural way. Sometimes it's good to try those crazy ideas, so you can realize you've gone a little too far and pushed them out of character.

We also needed to push our compositions and camera angles to be more dynamic and unique. Our first pass animatic was really flat, and it was hard to understand the layout of the detective's office or apartment. Hickner encouraged us to figure out the floor plan, and place our cameras with a purpose. Show what's important, and leave out what's not; but also consider putting things in frame that further describe a character. For example, decorating the granny's apartment to have that "lived in" quality was something we added when we were already in layout. We thought the granny would have lots of random stuff, not just one picture frame or pan, but several. Paying special attention to those details can pay off in the long run, by helping your audience to easily understand the personality of your characters.

What were the advantages of working in a team?

Avner/Stevie: When working in a team, it's important to split the work evenly while being as productive as possible. For us, the greatest advantage was bouncing ideas off each other while pushing ourselves to do the best we can. It's truly great to work with someone who cares about a project as much as you do and constantly wants to make it better. On a daily basis, we critiqued each other's work, knowing that we must be willing to make changes for the better of the film. It was always helpful to have a fresh

. the granny's apt .

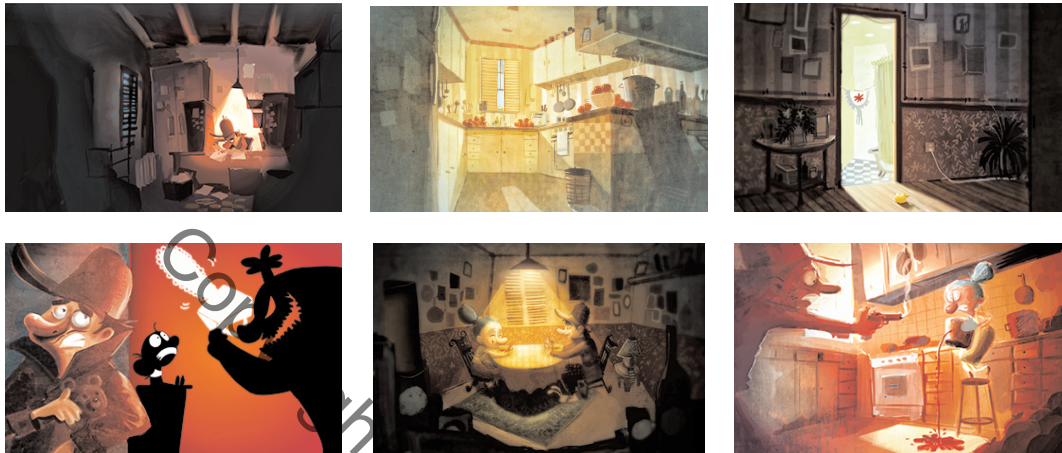


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granny's
front hallway



pair of eyes sitting right next to you. Working in a team can be helpful with the distribution of responsibilities. At Ringling, we're encouraged to split the work as evenly as possible down the 3D pipeline. But in other cases, each team member could concentrate on their area of expertise, which could result in a range of pieces for a portfolio.



What were the disadvantages?

Avner/Stevie: It's difficult to think of many disadvantages. For us, it was a truly great experience. When you work on a group project, you must realize that it's a group effort and that all of your ideas might not end up in the final. Sometimes we would disagree on things, but we'd have to work it out in order to move forward.

People usually think the more people you have, the faster you work, and the more you complete. But in reality, it's not always the case. There are always going to be multiple opinions and ideas, which you have to discuss with everyone in the group. That being said, the back and forth discussions are similar to how it works in the industry, which inevitably lead to a better final product.

What would be the things that people who want to work in teams should consider before they start? What advice would you give to people who want to collaborate?

Avner/Stevie:

- Be open-minded. Have good communication, trust, skill level, and a solid vision. It's nice to work with people who are very open-minded and easy to work with. The last thing you want to worry about is someone who takes critiques too personally.
- Communication is vital to the success of a project, so be sure to be verbal about your thoughts whether they are praises or concerns. It's also great to trust your group members, and believe in their abilities to make the right choices.
- Skill level is also important because everyone will have an equal amount of responsibilities. If you're not close to the same skill levels, it will become a question of who is doing the most work. That being said, it can be very helpful to have team members who are strong in specific areas so it's guaranteed those parts of the project will be strong.
- It's also very important to have a solid vision, where everyone's sensibilities are combined into one strong idea. When group ideas aren't ready for production, it could result in disputes over



Which detective?

which idea will best solve the problems. It's a shame to see disagreements hurt relationships between friends and jeopardize the progress of the film.

- Working on smaller projects with your group prior to a major production can help you get a sense of how successful or unsuccessful collaboration could be. Try something simple together first.

Your piece contains both 2D and 3D elements. Why did you choose to do that?

Avner/Stevie: We both come from a background of drawing and painting, and we have huge passion and love for traditional animation. We really wanted to use this opportunity to incorporate some 2D sequences in our film. Luckily we had moments in the story that supported this idea. The 2D sequences



were perfect for illustrating the difference between the detective's reality and his imagination. It was a conscious choice to make these scenes 2D instead of 3D, and push the idea to be very graphic and simply colored.

What were the challenges in creating a piece that has both elements?

Avner/Stevie: It was a challenge was to make them work seamlessly. We didn't want it to feel abrupt, as if the style changed too randomly. So we experimented with different transitions and really tried to find the best technique to match the two together. Since it was our first film we've attempted to do, it was also a challenge to manage our time with the 2D sequences. 2D can be very hard to put together, to look polished enough to match with the 3D parts. Unfortunately we left a lot of 2D for the end of the production, but if we could do it again, we'd probably start planning it much earlier.

Your piece has three characters (detective, woman, mouse), several locations and different animation techniques. What are the top considerations to think about if you want to "do it all"?



Avner/Stevie: Since we worked in a group, we had the liberties to take more risks and try new things. But, for a single-person project it could be helpful to keep in mind what you want to show with your piece. Someone who wants to be an animator might choose simple visuals with efficient set design. Don't create more work for yourself by trying to "do it all" if you know that you're not well rounded in other parts of the pipeline.

If you'd rather focus on lighting or modeling, it might be wise to have one character with minimal animation, so you can spend extra time in those places. We knew that we wanted to create a film that would illustrate a believable world full of rich details. Luckily we were able to balance most aspects of the 3D pipeline, because we didn't want to compromise on anything. However you must decide when it's time to stop, be happy with your work, and move on. It's important to focus on the important moments that are crucial to the story. There will always be parts of your film that you won't be satisfied with, but just try your best to get everything to an equal level of finish, all across the board.

What advice would you give to someone creating their first animation?

Avner/Stevie: Try your best to tell a good, simple story that you connect with emotionally and artistically. Seek inspiration outside of what you normally look at, go to the library and pick up books from different cultures and try to be inspired in as many different ways as possible. Sometimes it's easy to get frustrated with the technical aspects of 3D animation and drawing. Just try your best to remember what you're making, *your own* film. Don't be afraid to ask questions and really try to define a unique world for your characters.

