



origins: An Interview with Robert Showalter

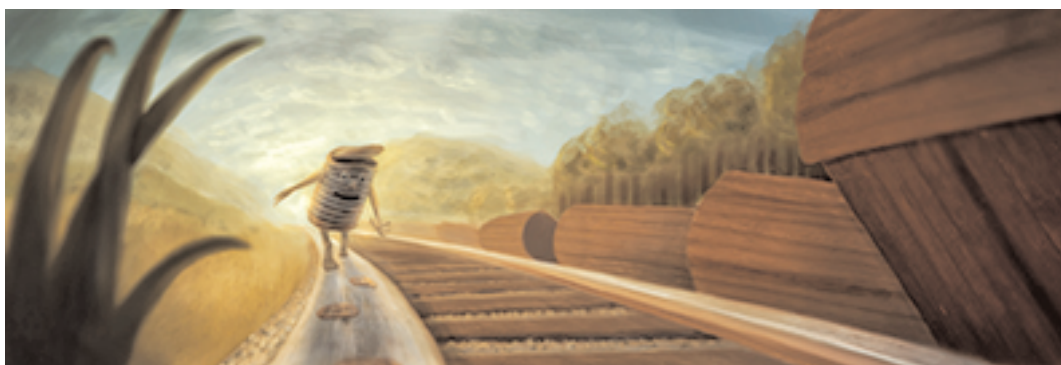
Robert Showalter: I grew up in Michigan. I was a shy and introverted kid but I had a knack for working through technical problems. I wanted to be an engineer or math teacher when I grew up but I always admired animation. I pursued 3D work as a hobby as a teenager, when 3D animation was starting to become more accessible. When I started taking classes on the subject in community college, the instructor was impressed with what I had taught myself and recommended me to a client of his. Living outside of Detroit, the work mainly revolved around lighting and texturing commercial automotive work. It was great experience and it proved I could make money in the CG industry, but I wanted to get into more narrative work. I started going to Ringling College of Art and Design a year later. After my junior year I interned in lighting at Walt Disney Animation Studios in their Associates Program working on a short, *Chalk*, and then I completed *origins* when I returned for my senior year. At the moment I am back at Disney doing the lighting on its next feature.



How did you come up with the idea for *origins*?

Robert: The idea came from seeing a can that looked like it had a face. I had painted a piece about a tin can that had come to life and it wandered around train tracks crushing pennies.

When I started to develop the idea I spent a lot of time daydreaming about how this can might have come to life, what his days were like, what he fears, how he occupies his time, what he does for fun, and what sort of problems he might deal with. I even went so far as to think about how he might eventually pass away. I wrote down a lot of the variables that could possibly exist in his universe. Let's say, as an option, he runs on batteries. There are limitless stories that could be told revolving around that: his battery's about to run out, his battery is needed for something else, or you could turn it into an allegory about



sustainable energy, etc. They might be boring, cliché, or pointless ideas but I keep throwing them around and writing each one down.

When I was done, I reviewed the situations and looked for ones that really interested me. I'd also read them off to close friends and mark the ones that got reactions. It's essentially story-Darwinism: Survival of the most engaging.

I took many of those basic ideas and turned them into a bunch of seven-sentence stories that involved this character. I wasn't too picky or judgmental, yet. I just wanted a large variety. Sometimes I would listen to musical scores, let that carry my imagination and write stories as I went along. I think I ended up with about 15 vastly different stories. For example: in one he was an old, out-of-shape can who shaved the rust off his face as though he were grooming himself. Later, he notices how a recycling plant takes old metal and makes new shiny things. From that setup it could end a number of different ways: he recycles himself and becomes something new, or something ironic, or we could play it as a dark comedy and just cut to black. In another version he was still made of metal and in the forest, but he wanted to fit in with nature, so he'd replace his metal parts with pieces from the forest and slowly become something different entirely.

Every story could make a profoundly different statement, and that's incredibly important to consider when sifting through ideas. I chose my story not only because I was trying to appeal to the audience, but I also wanted it to say something honest and to revolve around ideas that are important to me.

How did you choose an idea and what were the challenges in story structure?

Robert: The structure itself was there early on. I knew I wanted a pleasant starting point, then to discover a less-desirable place of origin, and lastly I needed something to bring him back to where he came from. It's a simple enough idea: What choice do you make when you're not welcome where you expect to belong? This version of the story was something I could really connect to and approach in a very honest way because my biological father has never been a part of my life. It's something I don't often think about, but I wanted to explore it through this film.

The trouble is that the root of the idea itself is a very tragic one. Even after my third animatic I couldn't seem to arrive at a satisfying ending. I began thinking, "If I can't find a good ending for my film, what does that say about my own life?" I stepped back from the film, and instead asked how I'm addressing my own problems. I've lived my life with this tragedy but I get by. Why? The story began to come together when I started treating the environments as their own characters: The forest, a warm mother; the factory, a cold father. Only then did I realize what I should say with the film: Some things are beyond your control. You can be hung up on it and pity yourself, or you can appreciate all the good things that are still out there. It's all a matter of perspective. It might be obvious to some, but when you're in the middle of it, it can be difficult to figure out. That's the benefit of being a storyteller. You get to examine life's problems and search for a resolution.

**Warm mother****Cold Father**

When I had my ending there was still the trouble of interpretation. During production I would often get feedback that pushed the film to have a more environmental theme. I think a successful story should represent different things to different people. If you dig deep and find the basic truth, it will be analogous to lots of things in life. I'm sure a lot of people see *origins* as an environmental piece, and that's fine, but I wasn't making the film to make a statement exclusively about industry vs. environment. Frankly, anyone can tell that story and it's something we all know about. I had to be very deliberate with all the symbols I was using and making sure that people were seeing them the way I wanted them to. I chose to make

the factory nondescript and indifferent rather than something more menacing like a saw mill or something with toxic waste. Had I wanted to make a blatant environmental statement, those would have been appropriate.

In the end there were some things I had to sacrifice for the sake of clarity. While in production, between the first and second pass animation, I had to cut and redo everything on the train. You'll notice the logo is on the crates there. Originally, I had another interaction with the logo that triggered a seamless transition into a daydream. It's there that we would establish his expectations of the factory as this golden shrine of sorts. Unfortunately, it wasn't clear enough in animation. The film had to go through an approval process so I ended up compromising that story beat to get the film in a safer, more agreeable spot. I still think it would have communicated, but I suppose we'll never know. The lesson is: If you're getting feedback from others (and you should), make sure it reads clearly as soon as possible.

Please see the *Origins Animatic* video on the 'The 3D/CG Lighting Artist' page of the Companion Website

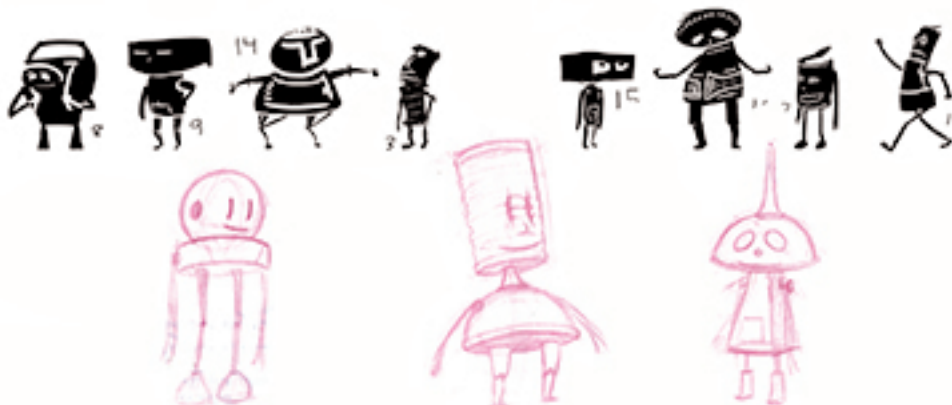
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Can you tell me a little bit about your character design?

Robert: I'm flattered to be asked about character design because it's not my strong suit and I've always struggled with it. I dedicated a lot of time, and tried lots of things. I really considered how he might have been created—what random objects could be used for what function.

I made rules for myself and the world. I decided from the beginning that he didn't have to work mechanically, such as having working gears, motors, etc. There's a bit of mysticism to the way he functions, but the pieces still had to interact and function amongst themselves in a believable way.

From the beginning it was an uphill battle to create a wide variety of designs. I tried lots of different approaches to find interesting shapes. Lots of sketching, ink blots, scribbles. The trouble for me is if I don't have a clear idea of what to draw, I end up with very little. So I searched the Internet for scrap that looked like body parts and checked out books on scrap and scrap art. I researched a lot of folk art that you can often find at local festivals. I even visited a junkyard and a hardware store, and found lots of interesting pieces and took lots of pictures. I would try to collage them together, or take one unique piece and draw characters based off that simple object. My friend's dad repairs things like lawn mowers and other equipment, so I had a field day going through his work area. I did whatever I could to expose myself to my character's world.



I started to arrive at his design when I used an old oil can for his head (the kind that's a half sphere with a spout coming out of it). He had a long Alfalfa-like shape on the top of his head that later became more of a red-wagon, hubcap sort of thing. There were a few other designs I enjoyed, but they didn't fit the mood of the film.



Your piece has an emphasis on lighting to help tell the story. Can you talk about lighting?

Robert: Good lighting is something all shorts can benefit from. Take advantage of it! It describes everything on and off camera such as the surrounding environment, and the weather. It directs the viewer's eyes, reveals shapes, defines surfaces and brings out texture. Additionally, it can enhance the mood and supplement the emotional arc of the whole film. A lighting piece should have variety and showcase your mastery of the many functions of light. This includes things such as different environments, various times of day, interesting shapes and textures.

You'll also want a color script that abides by those things and also has a color language that fits with your story at different points. Having lighting tied into your story so closely may seem a bit overboard or contrived, but the fact is that's how films are done. Most people just take it for granted and don't notice it but when you watch any great animated film (or live-action movie, for that matter), the lighting fits with the emotional point in the story. It's constantly there informing the audience how to feel as much as the animated character that is front and center. It's just not as obvious.

A good lighter needs to have the same sensibilities as a good photographer or a good painter.

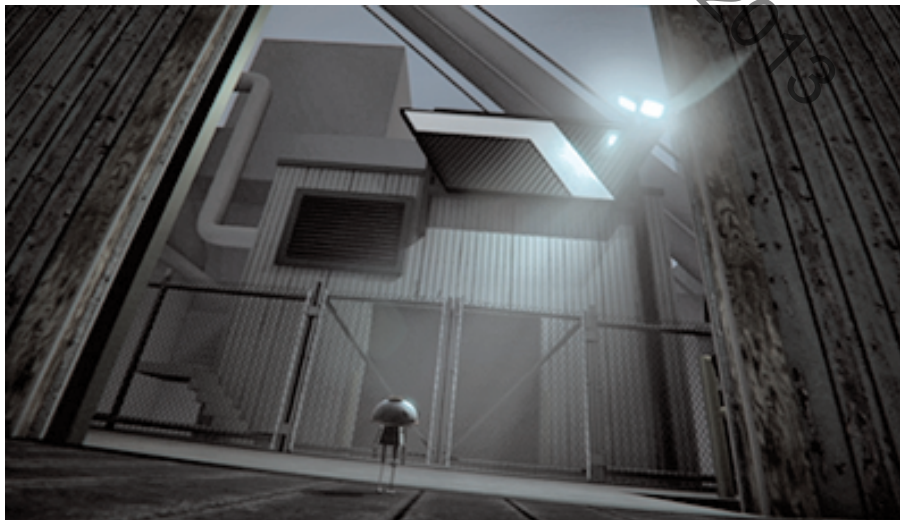
Things to consider:

- **Direction and quality.** Where is the light coming from? Is there a lamp nearby? The moon? What time of day is it? Is it a large light source (soft shadows) or a small one (sharp shadows). We should get all this information from your lights and their shadows. Look to real life situations and make a note of what looks interesting to you.
- **Intensity.** What is the focus of the shot? Just like staging, except now you're using values. Realize lighting is where you control where the audience looks. Make sure the important stuff is clearly shown. Take advantage of lights on darks and darks on lights.
- **Low key vs. high key lighting.** Is the scene predominantly dark with a few middle tones? Very light? A wide range from dark to light? How will that affect the mood of your film?
- **Graphic shapes.** What's interesting about the shot? How can you group things together or separate them with different lights? How would your shot look as an abstract painting? Would it be interesting? Does it convey the right emotions?
- **Color.** How does the color fit the mood of this shot? Does it fit with the environment as well? If they are in conflict, how can you creatively get them to work together? On a technical note, are your whites white or are they off-white? Is this intentional?

It's wise to create a colorscript for your film with those basic principles in mind. In *origins*, I started off with warm, saturated earth tones in the forest sequence. There's a sense of where the sun is coming from, but the shadows are softer and the light is not as intense. I wanted to give the feeling that the leaves were scattering the sunlight, and that helps to give the forest a friendly, wholesome feeling. Graphically, the ground takes up a lot of screen space to nest him in the environment and the trees are gently silhouetted creating lots of verticals to make him feel small. He's essentially a child.



I introduce blue to the palette when we first see the train smoke. Then the train sequences work to transition into the factory lighting. The factory is in opposition to the forest with the exception that they're both analogous color palettes. Graphically there are more straight edges, and more frames-in-frames to make it feel unwelcoming and something you want to escape from. The factory uses cool colors that are more desaturated, especially on the character. The shadows are sharper, the highlights are brighter and the midtones are much darker. There's more contrast, in other words.



I definitely could have pushed the differences more, using less fill, cranking up the contrast and pulling out more saturation but I didn't want it to become distracting. The two environments are very different, but I did what I could to transition gradually from shot to shot. Of course, in the end we re-introduce the lighting considerations from the beginning (the warmth) and additionally, he's larger in frame, and doesn't feel so small. He feels grown up.



Lastly, from a production standpoint, keep in mind the more shots you have, the less time you will have to light each one. Take advantage of same-as shots and re-use your lighting setups from shot to shot whenever possible, even if it's just a jumping off point. It tends to be easier to repurpose the lighting from a wide shot to a close up, rather than the other way around. Like painting, start broad and save the detailing for last.

What advice would you have for animators lighting their first big project?

Robert: Be organized and have a plan, and make sure you *keep on finishing*. Making a film is such a humongous undertaking. Don't get stuck on one large problem or you will bury yourself. Break that big problem into smaller parts and keep chewing through it piece by piece.

Seeing as I graduated not too long ago, I suppose I'm in the best position to be offering advice to student filmmakers. If I can be philosophical for a moment, I just wanted to remind all the students out there that they're making a film, not a demo reel. Separate the two. Getting a job is a huge concern, of course, but if you make a great film, your talent will shine through and it will be a good demo reel. On the other hand, if you make a film only to showcase your best talent and everything else slips, it's probably not going to be a very enjoyable experience for anyone.

Remember the magic of what you're doing here. The ability to tell a story visually is incredible. Don't blow this amazing opportunity because you're trying to predict what companies are looking for.

One of the best things I heard as a student was at a Q & A with producer Don Hahn (producer of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* in 1991). Someone had asked him what they should do if they don't get a job at one of the big animation studios, suggesting there weren't many other options. He concisely replied, "You're an artist no matter where you are." You should not let a company decide if you can make a great film. It's a Catch-22. If you can make a great film without them, they want you to make a film with them.

It makes sense that big studios want people who strive to make great things with or without their company. That energy is easy to harness. You'll never have to make them work. They're self-sufficient, a golden goose. Like relationships: when you're needy and want people around, they tend to keep their distance, but if you're independent and fine on your own people want to be a part of that.

If you simply want to work for a big studio, there's nothing that separates you from all the other animation students out there. It helps to have a deep desire to tell the world a story. It's a win-win situation for you, the studio, and the audience. As I was saying before, great demo reels are rarely great films, but great films are almost always great demo reels.

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