



The Disney Summer Associates Program: An Interview with Terry Moews

At some point, if you are going to work as a professional animator, you will be working with a large number of people to successfully deliver a film. The pipeline for industry begins in story and visual development. It then goes to layout and modeling and rigging and from there to animation and finally postproduction with texturing, surfacing and lighting.

The Disney Summer Associate's Program is a microcosm experience of what it is like to collaborate on a larger project. Terry Moews, Layout Supervisor at Disney Feature Animation was kind enough to share what it is like to work in this program.

Terry Moews has worked in the motion picture business since 1986, contributing visual effects to over 45 motion pictures such as *Speed*, *Stargate* and *Batman Forever*. He was visual effects supervisor on *Dinosaur* and Layout Supervisor on *Chicken Little* and *Bolt* and on a number of shorts like *Tick Tock Tale*, *Chalk* and *Paperman 3000*. He just finished *Wreck-it Ralph* where he served as a studio department leader in layout at Disney. "Layout, in my opinion, is one of the best kept secrets in the CG film world. In layout we do the blocking, the staging, the camera—laying the foundation for the film and it is a great job."



What was your role in the program?

Terry: I was a production supervisor. I was there to basically help guide the associates through the process, help them make decisions, work with the tools and the technology and within the timeline that we had. I was a mentor to help get the project made.

At Disney, I especially enjoy when I'm leading a group (we have such wonderful and talented filmmakers here) and the best thing is we're all strung together by our passion, sort of bound by our individual love for film making. We have a really wonderful department and it is a joy to come to work most days.

It's pretty cool then, to tie this back in, with the Summer Associates Program where you're actually working with students. I remember what it was like when I was in film school, where you had such a thirst for information, guidance and mentorship, from people who are in the business. Just getting an opportunity to rub shoulders with them and hear them talk and hear what it's about. It's a great experience for me to be a part of this opportunity for them.

So what does it take to get selected for the program?

Terry: This is a part that I'm not 100% clear on. I know that Disney receives applications from universities all over the country but I'm not involved in how exactly they are selected. My role comes in after the selection process when they need to produce a short.

Once selected, these students work as a team on the project correct?

Terry: That's correct. They work as a team, which is interesting, because there's a real cross-disciplinary nature to the team. Some are 2D trained and some are 3D trained and the project has to engage all of their ranges of skills. One of the things that I found (and this is certainly not a judgment or a knock or



Front: Liz Paradis, University of Texas, Dallas, Modeling; Matias Codesal, USC, Software Engineering; Casey Robin Neal, Art Institute of Sacramento, Story; Courtney Tuck, Ryman, Animation; Anna Bron, Sheridan, Animation

Back: Justin Sklar, Ringling College of Art and Design, Animation; Alex Alvarado, Columbus College of Art and Design, Look Development; Robert Showalter, Ringling College of Art and Design, Lighting; Alex Curtis, Savannah College of Art and Design, Animation; André Medina, CalArts, Character Design; Jorge Cereijo-Perez, Texas A&M, Technical Director; Ben Holm, CalArts, Animation; Craig Peck, USC, Production Management; Nick Orsi, Academy of Art University, Visual Development

anything like that) is that the work we do and the nature of the environment that we are in is highly segmented, but collaborative. You have to have a team of people, get them to work together and get the project out the door. And one of the things that I found with this group is that, especially at the undergraduate level, there is a lot of emphasis placed on self-reliance. They do a lot of things for themselves, which is great because it forces you to learn and learn a lot of what we would consider disparate sorts of work: like animation versus lighting, versus texture, versus layout, versus modeling, versus rigging. All of those things are individual disciplines in industry and so it was interesting because, yes, there was a group—a big group—with all this wonderful range of talent, but they really had not been forced to work as a big team before coming to the program.

How did the team get organized on the project? Did you organize them or did they organize themselves?

Terry: A little bit of both. Our piece, *Chalk*, was a 2D/3D hybrid piece. There were certainly people whose talents were very clear and it was clear what role they were going to play on the team. And then there were some people who really were forced to learn something new. Like one of our texture painters was a traditional artist who wanted to go into Story and Visual Development. But he had to become a texture painter. He knew nothing about it but there was nobody else to do it and he was the most qualified to come up to speed. He bravely stepped forward and said, "OK, well, I'll give it a shot," and not only over that summer did he absolutely excel at it, but he's now working here.

It was just awesome and to see him learn something new but then also find that, wow, he can excel, absolutely excel. He was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. Then some people like Robert Showalter, was the only guy to say, "OK, I can light and so I'll be the lighter." He ended up being the sole lighter on the show which was no small task. Then some people, could pretty much stay within the sort of the disciplines that they knew and the training and education that they had experienced. So it was kind of a little bit of everything.

The wonderful thing was that when it got to be the eleventh hour, when it got to be all hands on deck, everybody would just chip in and say "Well, OK, I don't know much about it but if you can tell a little bit how it's done, I'm happy to help." And so a lot of that actually went on. From my vantage point it was hugely rewarding to see that exposure.

So do you do any team-building exercises or is there a way that you tell if someone is going to be a good team player?

Terry: Well, that's an interesting story. When I was first brought on to the project, the summer was structured in two distinct halves. The first half was focused on an associate's individual discipline where they would have a mentor for exercises and things that were very, very discipline-oriented. And then the second half of the summer was a time, based on that experience, to now make a project. I'm not too involved in the first half because one of the absolute sad things is that we never get people coming through wanting to do layout. And that's what I do, 3D layout. So when I came in was to work as basically a production supervisor, mentor, and guide and help them make their project.

So the associates come in. They sit down. They find out their teams, decide what they are going to do and that's it. That's how it all started. No preparation. No big fanfare so when I got there, team building was already obsolete. We only had essentially eight weeks total to make a story, figure out how it was going to be done, and do it. And so we didn't have a lot of time. Basically when I walked in the team was already assembled and they'd even decided on who the directors were going to be.

So they had already talked about what their strengths and weaknesses were and who could do what?

Terry: Yes, it happens very quickly. Then we set up our milestones, set up the dates by which we have to see work. My initial talk to the whole group was trying to put them in the right frame of reference for what the next six to eight weeks were going to be and how important it was to simplify, hone the idea, get the overall length of the project down to a manageable level and then try and execute it efficiently. That was sort of the first big talk and basically, from that morning on, it was off the races.

So how did the idea originate?

Terry: The associates meet together. They agreed amongst themselves that they were going to make a full short and that it was going to be 2D and 3D hybrid to take advantage of everybody's strengths and weaknesses. They had polled everybody for ideas and *Chalk* kept rising to the top. It was basically king of the hill. So they decided to move forward with that.

The different story lines and plot lines were certainly bandied about. Initially it was too big and the goal was get the idea focused—albeit still a stretch—for our time limit. The first thing that I did was to bring down one of our big story guys and let them pitch the idea to him. I had already prepped him ahead of time that the original idea felt a little long and that they needed to simplify. So I brought him down and it was really good because I think that things started homing in and tightening up and getting us down to defining shots that would be good and shots that we didn't need; this story beat's great, that beat's redundant etc.



That's got to be a really good exercise for them to learn to what to keep and how to throw out what isn't necessary.

Terry: It's interesting too because I remember my own student films at that age. They started off as simple ideas and the first thing that happened is that they grew to be these mini-epics. Unlike the opportunity that the associates had, I would just get into it and go, "Oh my gosh! I'll never finish this. It's never ever going to get done." I think it is part of the process and it's good. Again, one of the great things is that exposure to professionals. I don't think there were any story people among the associates and so it was good to hook them up with somebody and realize how important the story process is to everything that we do.

In layout one of the things which happens quite a bit, is that we start executing and then realize that *even there* that—yeah, you know what—some of the stuff can be cut out and is unnecessary. Or, we find that things are missing, we don't have this beat or we don't have that connective tissue. The story is vitally important. It all starts from story. The stronger your story, the simpler your story, the more that your story has legs, the easier everything is.

That's one of the things that really attracted me to *Chalk*. It is so incredibly simple. The little girl is hot. She's hot and she wants to get cool. She's alone and she wants to have fun. So she draws a kiddie pool with chalk on a sidewalk. It's that simple. Then we're in the water and at first it feels like nothing happens until the whale comes down. But there are subtle builds to this moment. She meets with some minor conflicts that let us know that the water is not such a nice place after all. She gets bounced by a jellyfish and whirled around by a school of fish before the whale arrives—so you got your three's—but they're so subtle and so simple that you don't even realize they're happening. I thought that was amazing to just come up with something that was really pretty sophisticated and tight in that amount of time with a big group of students.



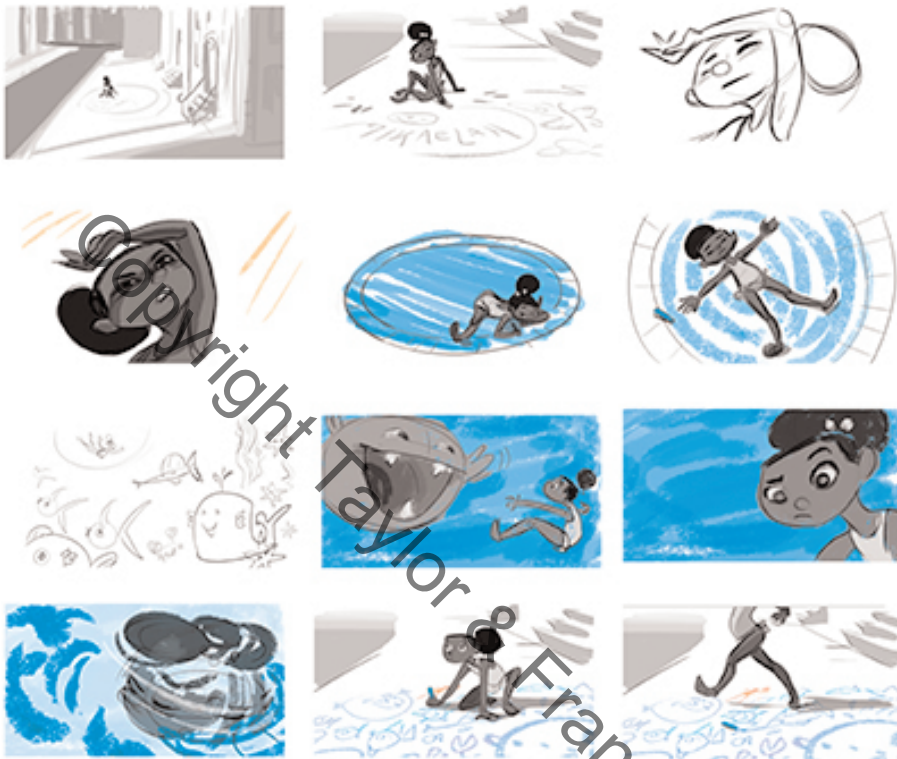
Terry: Well, to that point one of the most satisfying vindications is when the associates show what they worked on to the entire studio. In whatever shape it is in. If it's finished, if it's not finished, if it's rough—whatever they get to. And obviously their goal is always to try and finish, and have the piece polished. But, that's not a guarantee. And certainly things in the past have not made it to that level of sophistication. But one of the biggest indications for all of them is that here we have our directors, our heads of story, our story artist people who were all some of the best in the world at what they do, completely picking up on exactly what you are saying. They got the story, they got the eloquent simplicity of what it was and they were all so genuinely effusing about what they had done. Because in the previous summer, and then the following summer, the associates in those years actually went for a much simpler concept where the work was actually almost more like a teaser and less like a fleshed-out original story. And in the last three years, the work has all been wonderfully executed and really wonderful to look at, but certainly nothing as comprehensive from a story standpoint as *Chalk*. *Chalk* is the only one to really be a real short that has a beginning, middle and an end, a set-up and resolution, and is designed to stand on its own.

Did they have a script, a story board or an animatic that kept them all on track?

Terry: That was one of the first things we did. Once we have our basic idea, now we need the storyboard, because the other important thing for the team is to realize that the storyboard is going to stand as the first version of the film. We are going to put it up on storyboards first, time it out, put rough music, try and put all of this together so that there is the sense of how it plays. That's what we do here, and that's what they do in all the animation studios, is to try and get that representation up. And it's so important because it's so easy and quick to draw a picture and make changes. It is so easy to do that and to get to know your film quickly before you get into the process of actually trying to build assets, rig

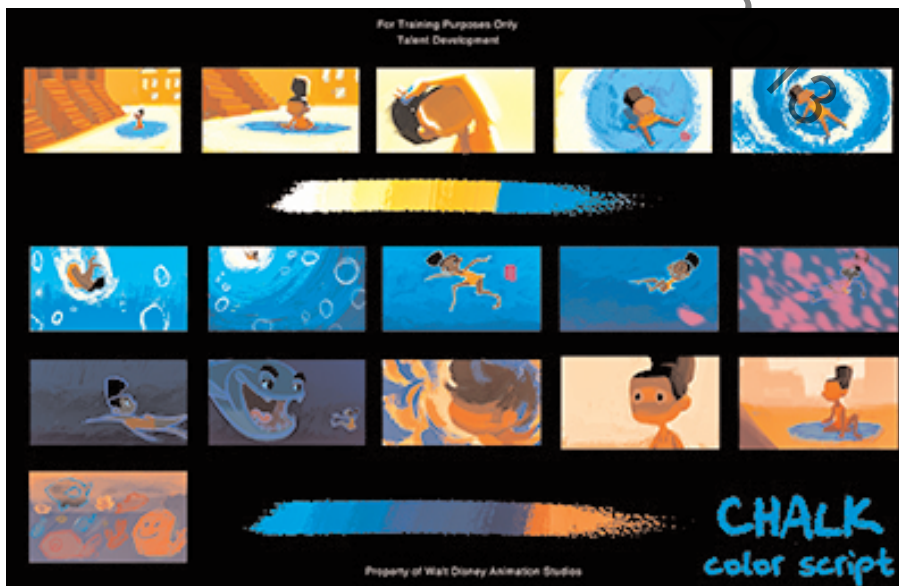
Sullivan, Alexander, Mintz, and Besen

them up, and putting it in front of the camera. All of that is very time-consuming and it's so much easier, efficient, and faster to see it move on boards, to know what your shots are and the timings that you need because it tells you what you have, what you don't have, and what you have an excess of. We were on a very, very tight deadline. We gave ourselves a week to get that process done. And they did it, they knew it, and it was largely what you see when you watch the film.



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CHALK color script

Were there any really big challenges or problems in the process?

Terry: First and foremost, I think for a large number of them it was their first big exercise working in a large group, having to contribute, having to put up with the demands that are apparent when you start working with people. Everybody has a vision of the project and they may not all be the same. It's a small microcosm, I guess, of what happens when you make a \$150 million to \$200 million animated project.

Ultimately, that's why we have directors. You look to your directors to be the leaders because somebody has to make a decision. Movies by committee, truly by committee, are impossible beasts. They are very, very impossible. Somebody has to maintain a vision and make decisions about the course the film will take.

Most conflicts arise because people have good ideas. But when you are making a movie, you can't use every good idea. And I think that was at the heart of this education. It is a big realization when you have to collaborate to discover that even if you *do* have the *best* idea; it's not always going to remain intact. It's going to get augmented and it's going to get stretched and pulled and modified by the rest of the process and other people that are making up the other parts of the machine. And so there was definitely some friction and conflicts that arose out of what people wanted to see in the project.

Somebody—the director—has to say, "OK, I hear you but I think it needs to be this." Ultimately at the end of the day, the director, the leader of the film, is the one that has to make the decision.

Casey Robin Neal and Justin Sklar were our directors. There was several times where I would say to them, "What do you think? What's the decision that you think needs to be made? Don't worry, at this juncture, about the other good ideas and the people behind them. You have to go with what's the best decision for the project. This is your decision to make as a director and then stick with it."

This also became a lesson in diplomacy and learning how to do that effectively. That is, you have to apply the right decisions, but you have to apply them with a modicum of diplomacy so that you try to mitigate the confrontation and the hurt feelings and create an environment where contributions continue to be made. But yep, there was plenty of that.

What advice would you give to students who begin to collaborate on a project?

Terry: Just that all great films are collaborations. Some of the best directors are able to make the right decisions. They have a vision, but then they are also able to be receptive to the good ideas that come up. And, even with the Jim Camerons and the Steven Spielbergs, the people that we perceive as being these amazing auteurs, none of their films are ever the sole product of their vision or their creativity. It's a process and what the good directors do, what they realize is that the life blood of what we do is that creative discourse that happens. And then being able to realize what's helpful, what's the right choice, or what's the wrong choice but being receptive all the same.

And what if you are on the other side of the street, what if you are not a director, what if you are one of the production artists?

Terry: It's interesting because it's your particular creativity, your discipline, your craft. When you master your craft, it's always apparent in everything that you do, everything that you do is a decision. We are always taking the material that we are given. In this case mostly storyboards and we were always trying to elevate that. There are a million decisions that have to be made along the way and in each of those decisions you are putting your personal stamp and your personal craft decisions and your personal sort of artistry on what you do.

It is about finding those moments where there is a better idea and in that case hopefully, you have an understanding of leadership and the process that lets you get that idea recognized. As a culture, this is one of the things that Disney has been really pushing and pushing hard ever since John Lasseter came

to this studio. They are really pushing the culture of the individual artist's contribution way down into what we do, and it certainly has changed our perception of what our team is. The goal has been to find the tools and processes that allow us to iterate the individual artists, ideas and contributions, into the system faster so that we can get these great ideas in front of the director. Overall you need to find these other place where we have opportunities and that is where great movie-making happens.

That's a great place to stop. That was a wonderful last sentence. Do you have any closing comments or any advice you'd want to give the students who want to be a part of this program?

Terry: I would say just take advantage of it. Know that that opportunity exists and apply yourself. And, apply yourself with both feet, because the rewards of getting accepted and being a vital part of the process are so much bigger than you would initially think. The opportunity to go to one of the world-class animation studios and be a part of it for a summer is unparalleled. What you learn is that everyone working here is an artist. At one time, I was exactly where you are at. I had exactly the same aspirations and dreams for a career. We are all artists. We're all basically very similar at heart. It's just I think what separates a lot of the ones who succeed versus the ones that don't, are the people who have the drive and desire to get out there and push themselves and take advantage of opportunities. And that's what this program is. It's an opportunity.



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