



Treasure: An Interview with Chelsea Bartlett

Chelsea was born and raised in Maine, where she was inspired by the ocean and lush surroundings. She utilized what was around her artistically from a young age, encouraged by a creative mother. As she grew up she discovered a love of story as well as art, and gained an interest in production and film. However, working in the movie industry seemed like a far off dream for someone from a small town. She never considered it a possibility until discovering the curriculum at Ringling College of Art and Design, where she attended and received a bachelor's degree in computer animation. Chelsea has worked as CG Artist at Sytosoft Corporation where she supervised production, and created models, GUIs and animation for gameplay. Chelsea is currently working as a 3D freelance artist and is an Animation Resident at Tradition Studios.



Treasure is such a quiet little piece. Where did the original idea for the piece come from?

Chelsea: It mostly came out of a little sketch I did of the character in my film. I call her Esther. The initial drawing intrigued me and I wanted to know why she had such an eclectic sense about her. I knew she was a homeless woman, just by the way that she presented herself in the drawing and I wanted to figure out why she was still homeless. Why didn't she have family that was taking care of her? The story sort of developed from there.

The idea also had to do a little bit with the type of animation I wanted to make. I wanted to have a variety of objects and textures to feature modeling and texturing a little bit more. The sketch attracted me even more because she already had so many different textures and shapes in what she was wearing.

When most people think of animation, they think of humor. Your piece is so endearing. Why did you choose to tell this kind of story?

Chelsea: It has always been the more sentimental and heartfelt stories that stick with me in the long run. I remember when I was applying to Ringling, I was watching the films on the website and two really stuck with me. They were *The Clocktower* by Cara Antonelli and *White Fox* by Ian Burkard. They stood out amongst the other stories and made me pause. They inspired me and I still enjoy watching them. I wanted to create a story that would hopefully be equally memorable for viewers.

So how did you want your audience to feel after they watched your piece?

Chelsea: I guess a little bit sad, sort of content. I know those don't really go together but I wanted them to have a quiet moment. When you see a homeless person, you might think—oh, that's sad—but, you know, it might not be all the time.

And how did you decide that she was content with her life?

Chelsea: Her personality kind of came out. She wasn't sad. There wasn't really anything sad about her. And she wasn't upset; she's making the best of what she had. She was in a place where so much had been discarded and left behind. And she sort of fit there, too. I'm not saying she was either discarded or left behind, but she was comfortable in the junkyard with that stuff.

And that sort of became the concept or the theme. Things aren't always what they seem. And that you can create your own world and be happy with what you have. And that maybe we all could be just fine with a little less.

Everything seems to hinge on your last scene. Did you plan your last scene before the rest of the piece?

Chelsea: Definitely. I always had a vision for what I wanted in the final scene, but the objects that she gathered changed slightly from version to version. I needed a series of objects that appeared to have absolutely no worth when they stood alone, and only came together in the end. When I was planning that scene, I drew out what I wanted it to look like to her and then stepped back and thought about what items could make a particular shape or shadow. I had to figure all that out in before I could have her find what she needed.

Was it Christmas in the final scene?

Chelsea: No. That was a funny thing. That came up on the final script and I remember people arguing about that—whether it was or not. I kind of laughed. It wasn't intentionally Christmas. I mean, if that's what people got out of it, fine, because it's sort of the same sensibility and the same feelings. But you know if people saw that, it didn't really matter to me.





Early concept art of the final scene



Final render from inside the tent

So what did matter to you in that environment?

Chelsea: The emotion that you get out of it. Because the feeling of Christmas is kind of the same feeling I was going for is why that didn't matter. I was going for comforting. It's all going to be OK. Everything's here, everything's fine. It's more for herself, just trying to create her own environment and atmosphere that she enjoyed.

This is something interesting and I'd like to get your reaction. I recently showed your piece to my class. They didn't read the environment as a junkyard. They thought she was in some kind of apocalyptic future, like the one in WALL-E. I just wonder how that perception or feedback works for you.

Chelsea: Actually, that was one of my initial ideas, too. Like the very first one. It was supposed to be that she was one of the last people around. And, that's why she was homeless, because it was the end of the world. I definitely looked into *WALL-E* for that. I definitely see where they could say that. But, I stepped back from that because I didn't want to go so far into that whole world. That's kind of funny that it kind of showed through.

And if that was the world, then it would change the meaning of the diamond when she found it. In an apocalyptic world, the diamond would have no monetary value—which for her it doesn't, but I didn't want to give that away to the audience too quickly.



What was your biggest challenge in production?

Chelsea: There were two things. First, there was a lot of visual clutter in my film, so there was a fine line between too much detail and not enough for it to be a junkyard. I don't know how many designs I went through for the heaps of trash when I went into 3D, trying to find something that fit into the semi-realistic world I had created. I needed something busy enough to look like a pile of junk without being distracting, and maintaining a good silhouette. It sounds so easy now, but I spent a lot of time getting each shot cleared of various tangents and other distracting elements. It was all compounded in that second to last shot, the beauty shot, when you finally get a look around the space she has created. I wanted it to be cluttered with objects that she had gathered over the years, but the important part was the specific items she had gathered that day and the overall look with the shadows and diamond refractions. I had to take some things out, and balance the clutter with those more important elements.



Attention to tangents and silhouettes

Second was definitely figuring out what the objects were going to be. I went through so many different things, different items. And just sometimes one gave the slightly wrong feel. I had books and Christmas bulbs and other things. Back to the Christmas thing, I took those out to try to separate it a little further from Christmas. The story was fairly simple. It stayed pretty much the same throughout the entire thing. It was mostly like the objects and those moments of her interacting with the objects that changed the most. But definitely finding the objects was what I spent a lot of time on.

When you were modeling your character and your props, what were some of your considerations in terms of acting, action or placement?

Chelsea: For the character, I knew that we'd hardly ever see her feet. The one time we see them clearly is a long shot, so her feet were a little bit simpler. The biggest problem was the skirt. In that same shot, I needed it to have a lot of sway. It helped show her personality and mood. I wanted to be able to control it—allow it to sway—but still have those shapes of the skirt. You also want to make sure there is a bit of asymmetry in your models. You don't just model one side and flip it over. Characters are more interesting if you put some variety in them. Think about hard edges vs. soft edges.



For the “hero” objects, the ones she interacted with, I definitely had to think about a variety of organic vs. manmade forms and a variety in scale, mass and weight. I also had to think about where they would be viewed from the camera. I had to consider the level of detail in the objects because those were all going to have a close up at some point. So I wanted to make them detailed. I would sort of sketch it out the shot first and have shapes of leading lines and stuff like that. Then I would decide that, oh, I could put a file container there to fill that shape right there. So I sort of planned it beforehand. Otherwise, I was going to get a lot of tangents and problems. So I had to be very careful, sort of fit things in there and then once I had all those leading lines and the composition down, I had to add the details just to make it look like it was trash, a junk yard. So I had to have smaller details in there, too, just to show the mess.

There's one shot where she's walking up to a table and there's a big filing cabinet and I think there's a chair. Then I threw paint brushes and paint cans in there just so each shot had a little bit of a scene. So I organized the junk a little bit like that, too, just so it wouldn't be totally random. Like, this is the “old paint can” part of the junkyard and this is the “old car parts” area of the junkyard. This was just for my mind to keep everything organized.



You mentioned that you sketched out objects, compositions and placements when planning. How important is drawing to a modeler? What kind of concepts do they need to be able to understand?

Chelsea: When you're working in pencil, in a flat environment, you have to be able to think of how that will translate into 3D and try to work through it. Otherwise what you have drawn could change drastically once you go into 3D. Some things aren't possible or they just look weird. The more you can think and draw for 3D, the less it will change. For example, for me silhouette is important. I was talking about the trash heaps before and those were a huge problem, because I wanted to go very silhouette with them. But, because the style of the piece was more realistic, I couldn't just do a silhouette of a trash heap. It had to have substance. So, when I went from 2D to 3D with that, it was definitely a shift that was sort of difficult because once it gets put into 3D there had to be real stuff there.



Early character designs



enviroment 1: Dump

Early environment sketches



Early story beats and color studies

What role did research do in determining the style of your piece and the detail of the objects?

Vaguely in my mind I had based everything around like the 1970s and beforehand. So I had to look at things from that era and then have a general sense of that aesthetic. So, definitely find an aesthetic that you want to use and try to bring that across in your pieces that you model. Look at a ton of stuff. I mean you might remember something and think, oh, that was a cool fridge or fence or whatever, but you won't remember the small details that make it really interesting. So you have to look that up. Those details are what set the time and style. Definitely look at as much as you can—and even stuff that might not be directly related to what you're doing so you understand specifically what is and what is not specific to your aesthetic.

How does texturing relate to modeling? Do you think those go kind of hand in hand or do you see those as different things?

Chelsea: I personally think they go in hand in hand. I mean, that variety is what I'm interested in. Texture is definitely part of that. I think the texturing of it is just as fun, because you can throw in that detail that you can't feasibly model. Like a little dirt speck or whatever. That will come through in the texture as opposed to the model. So I definitely think they go hand in hand because they both build what your world is going to look like.

Again, in terms of detail, did you have any high- and low-resolution models of the same object? What did you need to consider in terms of rendering?

Chelsea: You want to be efficient. I had a few low-resolution models. But I cheated a few times, too. For example, if I had a scene where I had a still background, I would render the background then get rid of it for the rest of the shot and just use that rendered still. So I cheated where I could. The stuff in the background will really slow you down. If it's not on camera, get rid of it. Because, my models were really, really heavy, I just start deleting objects and even faces that you couldn't see. That definitely goes back to planning your objects. Focus on what's in the camera and what will be seen. Don't waste your time on that chair that's always in the background of the shot and will end up getting blurred out. I know it's tempting to add all those nail heads. Don't do it. If your efforts are not going to be picked up by the camera, leave it alone.

I wasted a day modeling the entire front end of a car, only to end up using part of the hood and windshield. Prioritize and focus.

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

If you know what you want to do specifically, be it animation, modeling, texturing, etc., try to gear your animation toward it where at all possible. Your demo reel will thank you for it very much. If you don't know what you want to do, still try to pick something that will be your driving force behind your project . . . even if it's just the idea, the story you want to tell. Push your passion, whatever it is. It will show through.