

*** Here we are combining materials that were already online and combining them with pages being removed from the book for the second edition. ***

Originally an online chapter: Chapter_One-1-Topic Review.pdf

Topic Review

This section presents a brief overview of the topics that are often referred to in this text: hitting the emotional target, storybeads, and visual storytelling. If you are already familiar, feel free to skip ahead to the hands-on example.

Hitting the Emotional Target

Figure 1.19 is a simple diagram to help remind you, student filmmaker, that there is something you need to keep in mind for every drawing, every shot, every story that you try to tell: there is an emotional center. Everything you do needs to support that emotional center. If it doesn't support it, then it possibly doesn't need to be there.

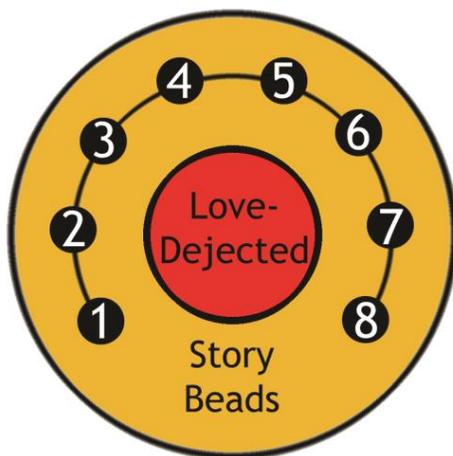


Figure 1.19: Bull's-eye diagram. With slight adjustments this can be used for animation, live action, game creation, even web design!

I first came up with the diagram shown in Figure 1.19 while adjuncting at a small community college, Valencia Community College, in the evenings after my day job of working at Disney Feature Animation as a digital artistic trainer. In those days I was just beginning to find my opinions, put them up on the white board, and test them out with the students. I started using this diagram as a visual aid to remind myself of what should be most important in story creation.

The Center Ring: Emotion

At Disney Feature Animation, they follow the concept of always adding a central theme to the feature animated movies they create. *Mulan*'s center is "Always be true to yourself." *Beauty and the Beast*'s center is "Beauty is only skin deep." *Lilo and Stitch* told you their center throughout the movie, "Ohana, means family and family means no one gets left behind." It is a good way to help you focus on what should be used and what should be cut from the film. Later, when I worked for Electronic Arts, I was happy to find that the company had the same type of idea for the creation of its games. In the fast-paced world of game design where time is of an essence but debates by large groups of strong-willed individuals often arise, there needs to be some type of tool to cut through the confusion and focus the group. One of the company's many tools was to have a central theme, an emotional target to the game. It was nice to be in another studio that spoke the same language as I was used to.

For short films, I have found that one bull's-eye usually takes care of the whole story, and individual bull's-eyes can be created for each shot as necessary. Also, we try to use an emotional word or description instead of a sentence. It tends to focus us more. Instead of a theme, you want it to be more of a tone: desperate, insanely in love, stupid, happy, naive young becomes wistfully nostalgic, and so forth. With central emotions like these, you can look to the next rings and see if you are best displaying those emotions.

Ring 2: Stanislavsky's Storybeads

Were you to be "trapped in a roomful of colleagues discussing Acting (with a capital A) as a profession, an art, a craft, a business, and even as a way of life," you would find that method acting would be a topic "attacked and defended; views on Cosquelin, Stanislavsky, Kean, Booth, Garrick and Olivier would be served up like after-dinner bonbons." [2]

If you are an animator, you should be studying, seeking understanding, and becoming opinionated about acting. I hope you will then find yourself in discussions about these methods with peers. For further reading in this topic, you should add to your bookshelf a copy of Ed Hooks's *Acting for Animators*. This deceptively small, thin book takes a long time to go through and completely put into practice. It isn't to be read but must be lived. You can also attend one of Ed Hooks's workshops at SIGGRAPH or when he travels; see www.edhooks.com for more information. There's my plug for Ed Hooks, who is the kindest soul I have ever met. For our brief overview, we concentrate on one main idea found in Ed Hook's book: the idea of the communication of story between the actor and the audience. Hooks reminds us that acting innovator Constantin Stanislavsky stated in his teachings that the communication of a story should be like a string of gold beads. These beads are depicted in the second ring of our bull's-eye.

Stanislavsky's concept is that all beads should be golden and true to the emotion. If they are lacking, they are like a piece of tin. If every few beads the emotion is not true, it is like a gold necklace where every third bead is made of tin. "Who would want a necklace like that?" [3] Stanislavsky asks. Others have added onto this analogy, looking at the storybead necklace as a string of pearls that are all connected together. If one bead is removed, then the whole necklace should all apart. If the necklace does not fall apart, the bead did not belong. [4]

Take Note

Not all story structures follow the concept of connected storybeads. In fact, many shows are successful with the addition of random thoughts into their storylines. Perhaps you can think of a few?

To think on the idea of connected storybeads just one moment longer, have you ever watched your favorite film on TV? You should have felt the impact of your story being edited for television. What about a film that you are not familiar with that you have seen edited for TV? Have you watched one and not quite understood what all the commotion was about because scenes were cut out? I went through my whole young adult life not understanding why Pinkie was in such trouble in Greece and what everyone was screaming about in *Porkies*. (Okay, now you got a peg on my age.) To be more modern, I just caught a little bit of *Kill Bill* on TBS last night and saw the story necklace broken apart by editing for television. I do not know much on the thinking of editors whose job it is to take something that cannot be shown on television and make it showable, but there must be a fine art to it.

Do all films have a tight necklace of storybeads? Certainly not. There are times that rules can be broken. *Austin Powers*, *Family Guy*, and anything on Adult Swim revel in not following this method and manage to get many laughs. The next time you are at an animator's cocktail party discussing Animation (with a capital A) as a profession, an art, a craft, a business, and even as a way of life, I hope that you ponder aloud the pros and cons of breaking Stanislavsky's string of storybeads.

Most books will never refer to a story's story points as storybeads. They might call them storybeats. According to Ed Hooks, this is because of a translation error when Stanislavsky taught in the United States [3]. Whatever you call the communication between your actors and your audience, make sure it supports the emotion.

Ring 3: Animation Principles

The third ring in the bull's-eye has everything to do with what you as an animator should already know. These are the principles that you have been studying and reading about in *The Illusion of Life* and *The Animator's Survival Kit* and other haloed animation texts. If you haven't been studying these books and you think you are an animator, put this book down right now. You need to hone your animation/acting skills before you worry about the rest of the bull's-eye. If you have been working on your animation skills or you consider yourself not an animator but a director, background artist, layout artist, or something similar, then we should be clear as to what this third ring is about. It is to remind us that whatever we do in animation/acting should support the central emotion. For example, let's say that you have a scene where your character is going to answer the phone. The central emotion of the scene is complete misery. You must make sure that everything in your animator's tool kit supports the idea of complete misery: timing, spacing, squash and stretch (or lack thereof), exaggeration, silhouettes, overlapping action, arcs—everything must be completely miserable.

Looks like this can be discussed at that cocktail party as well. What if your character is a handless, footless ball? How can one show it to be completely miserable if the character is only a ball? To show my love for old movies and actors, if Spencer Tracy could convincingly act as if he was shipwrecked, miserable, and unshaven (when he was truly clean shaven—he refused to

wear prosthetics, which got in the way of his acting), you can animate a completely miserable ball [2]. If you want to understand more of how Tracy was able to be convincingly act “unshaven,” you must curl up with Stanislavsky’s *An Actor Prepares*.

Ring 4: Bruce Block’s Visual Storytelling Components

Now for my favorite ring: the fourth ring. Many of my students get bits and pieces of this topic throughout their animation classes with me. We now even have a complete course dedicated to this one very large topic. Some might argue that animators, per se, do not have to understand this topic; this is a topic left to the directors, art directors, layout department, and the like. I argue that animators, when working on shots, need to understand this part of the bull’s-eye as well so that they can plus the ideas in their scenes.

Where does the concept of visual storytelling components come from? Bruce Block. He has been an amazing creative force in the film industry. He has ghost storyboarded and consulted on more films than he has ever been credited on. His teachings on this subject have touched many film and feature animation makers in the industry today. If you find yourself working at any of the feature animation houses, you are likely to be able to attend one of his workshops. Everyone else will have to make do with reading his book, *The Visual Story: Creating the Visual Structure of Film, TV and Digital Media* (2nd ed.). Again, this seemingly small book looks like a quick read, with plenty of diagrams, short chapters, and movie examples. However, it is a book that you don’t read so much as you adopt into your glossary and live.

Block puts forth that there are seven visual actors that we deal with anytime we create a film. The concepts he puts forth are similar to what you will find buried in other cinematography texts. However, he does two things: first, he breaks down each “actor” into components that you can easily control; second, he ties them directly into how to support the story. I will highlight his concepts here as we apply them to our fourth ring. According to Block, besides the animated or live actors (that we have in the third ring of our bull’s-eye), there are seven actors that we can use to tell our story [5]:

1. Space
2. Line
3. Shape
4. Tone
5. Color
6. Movement
7. Rhythm

We first need to choose which of these actors we will use to set up a visual rule within our story and not break our rule (unless, of course, we reach a moment where rules should be broken). For example, we can choose color and tone as our actors and our visual rule will be that in the daylight (tone: high key; color: warm) there is danger and in the shadows (tone: low key; color: cool) there is safety. This happens to be the color rule used in Tarzan’s fight with the leopard in the Disney’s feature animated film *Tarzan*.

Second, we need to understand each of the subcomponents of these actors so that we can harness their power and control them to better tell our story (for that, you need to refer to Block’s book).

For now, I've chosen an easier actor to deal with, which most of us know by instinct. (However, read Block's book and you might find you are completely wrong with how you think about color! I dare you. Check it out for yourself.)

Lastly, we will chart how to use the actors based on the intensity of the story. Because we are telling a story that has an intensity level that builds during the conflict and ultimately climaxes (like many films), we need to make sure that we are governing how we use the actors so that shots early on in the sequence are not more intense than shots in the climax of the sequence. If you make that mistake, it lessens the impact and the audience does not feel the emotional center that you were working hard for them to feel. In Figure 1.20 you can see where a sequence of shots correlate with an intensity chart. Again, for more information on this concept, please refer to *The Visual Story* by Bruce Block.

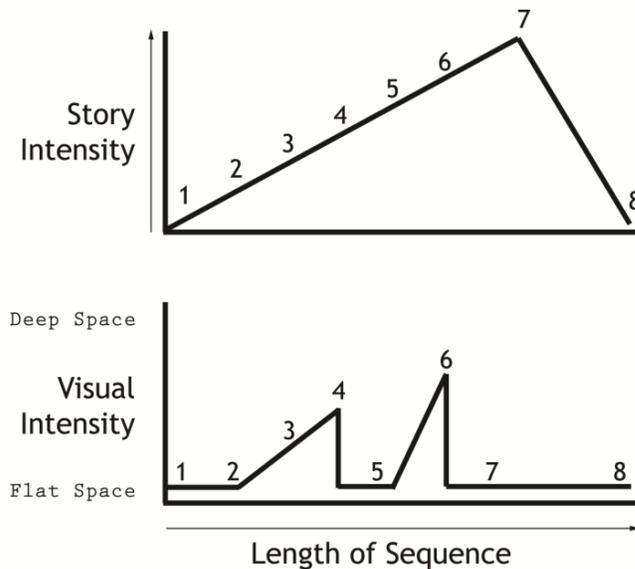


Figure 1.20 Example of an intensity chart showing how the storybeads relate to the visual storytelling rule of a sequence.

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Hands-on Example

The following exercise will allow us to go through a story creation process using the bull's-eye method, thus solidifying our use of these new glossary terms. Because we are working on a

2D/3D project as well, you might find the process slightly different from what you have read in other books. I have found breaking things down this way allows me to move students away from the very first way of setting up a shot that comes into their heads. It pushes them to look a little at their shots and how they relate to the story to dictate the setup. Basically, I'm throwing logic at the problem.

We'll actually start with the second ring of our bull's-eye first. The storybeads for your exercise are as follows:

1. It is a lovely night.
2. There are two people, in the city, in love.
3. Character A thinks that now is the right time.
4. On bended knee, character A asks the big question by presenting the ring.
5. Character B thinks over the question.
6. Character A waits for the answer.
7. Character B rejects the offer.
8. Character A is rejected in the city as the rain begins to fall.

Now let's look at the center of our bull's-eye: the emotion. We will start the story out by making the audience think this couple is in love, get their hopes up, then show the loneliness of the dejected lover at the end of our story.

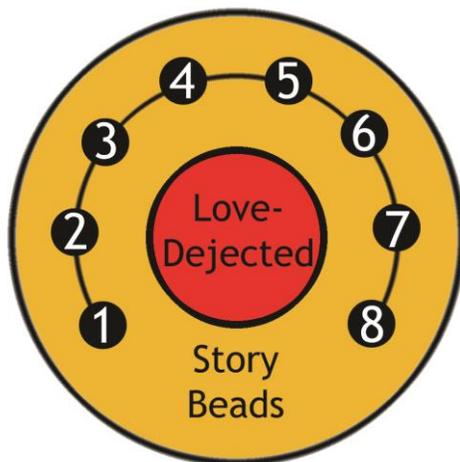


Figure 1.21 Remember your bull's-eye with central emotion and storybeads.

We know about the third ring in the bull's-eye, so let's move onto the fourth ring. To make the audience feel our story, we will use a visual storytelling component: space. We will use the contrast of flat and deep space for our story. If you haven't read Block's book, follow along with the imagery and you'll be able to deduce some of the ideas of showing off space as an actor. You

may miss the finer points, so make sure to read his text. The visual rule for our small story will be as follows:

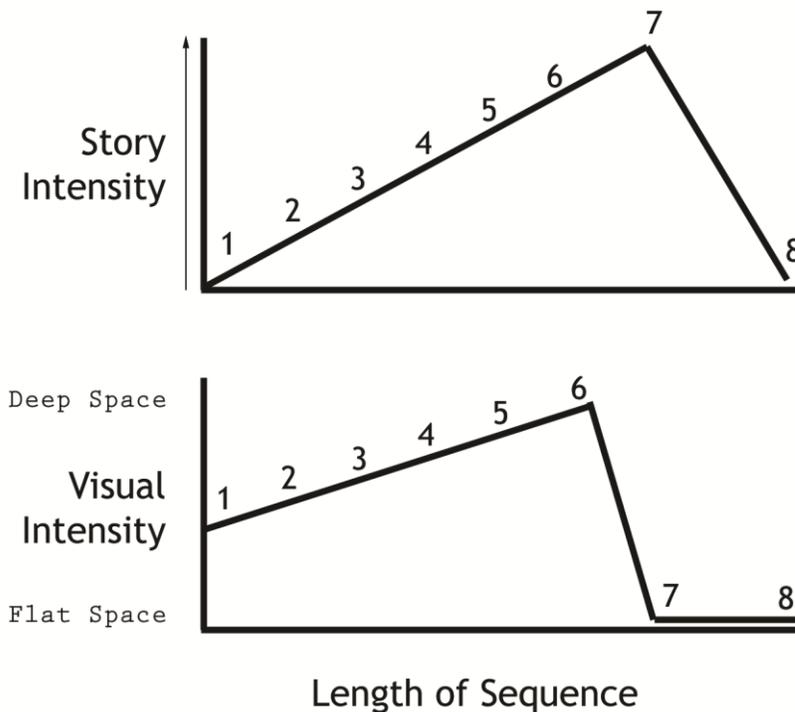


Figure 1.22 Story and visual intensity chart with visual storytelling components.

1. Deep space = in love (shots 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6)
2. Flat space = rejected (shots 7 and 8)

In Figure 1.22, you can see that the visual intensity holds the audience in a deep space when the couple is seen to be in love. The moment character A rejects the offer, the film switches to flat space. This creates a change in the visual language of the story and thus plusses the emotion the story is already telling. Did it have to be deep space for love and flat space for rejected? No. You can set up any type of rule that you want, as long as you stay true to that rule during the telling of your story. Now, if my students are reading this, they are holding their breath thinking I'm going to start talking about neurons, the hippocampus, inhibitors, synapses, and other parts of the brain to prove how exactly this works. I'll just leave it at this: Pavlov knew what he was doing with those dogs. "Ding. Ding."

Of course, that is not the only way to tell the story. What if our emotional intent was to show that the marriage proposal was doomed from the beginning, and the story is about two lovers who

can never marry?

Flat space = single/rejected (shots 1, 2, 5, 7, and 8)

Deep space = hope for marriage (clueless character A's shots: 3, 4, and 6)

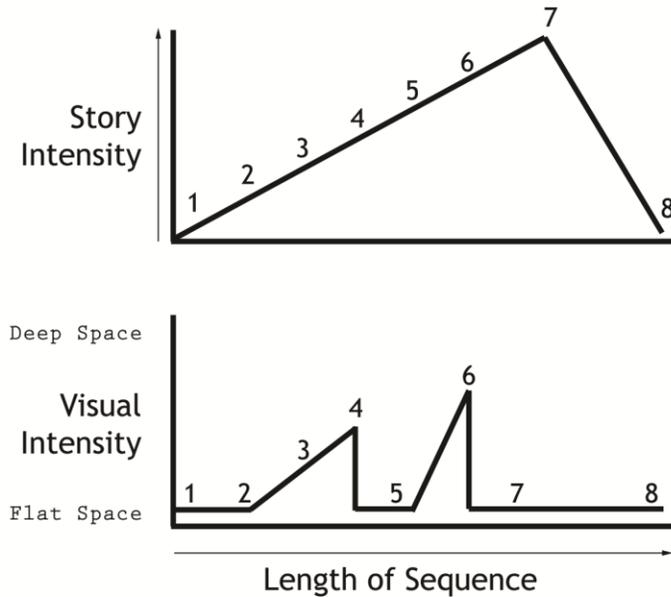
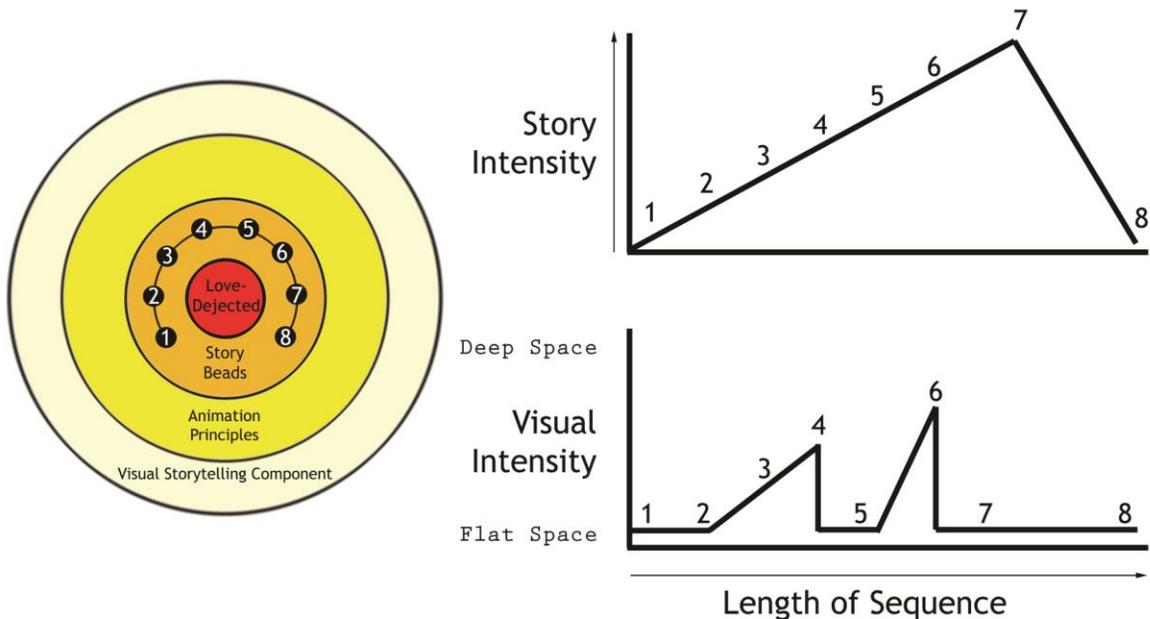


FIGURE 1.23 Deep space for clueless character who believes. Flat space is the reality.

We keep the story in flat space and the only time we break into deep space is when we are showing poor, clueless character A as he or she hopes for a marriage acceptance.

If we put all of these elements together—the emotional center, storybeats, and visual storytelling components—we get a bull's-eye chart something like the one shown in Figure 1.24.



1. It is a lovely night
2. There are two people, in the city, in love.
3. Character A thinks that now is the right time.
4. On bended knee, Character A asks the big question by presenting the ring
5. Character B thinks over the question
6. Character A waits for the answer
7. Character B rejects the offer
8. Character A is rejected in the city as the rain begins to fall.

Flat Space = single/rejected
 Deep Space = hope for marriage

Figure 1.24 Our story's intensity chart with visual storytelling components and bull's-eye with storybeads and central emotion.

You will note the animation principles ring of the bull's-eye. I remind my students that were they an actor on a stage, they would not give the Academy Award-winning crying speech in every scene. They would save those tears and all-out acting for the climax of the film. This ring reminds the animator where to pause, where to hold back, and where to let every trick out to hit that emotional center.

Here is an example of a thumb-nailed storyboard and the final storyboard for the first version of our story where everybody is in love until the final rejection. Note that all shots are in deep space with only the last two panels in flat space. This reflects what we set up as our visual storytelling component:

Deep space = in love (shots 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6)

Flat space = rejected (shots 7 and 8)



Figure 1.25 Thumbnail storyboard for version 1.

To following shows an example of using the visual storytelling components to change the emotion of the story to show the cluelessness of character A. Note that shots 3, 4, and 6 have stayed the same, as they were in deep space already. The camera movement changed in the beginning two shots to make them into flat space. Shot 5 was changed the most, and I reframed the final shot to make the character feel a bit more trapped near the center:

Flat space = single/rejected (shots 1, 2, 5, 7, and 8)

Deep space = hope for marriage (clueless character A's shots: 3, 4, and 6)



Figure 1.26 Thumbnail storyboard for version 2.

What have we done so far? We worked on our storybeats/storybeads first and focused on what emotion they are trying to portray. Then we decided what visual storytelling component we will use to visually support the intensity of the story. All of this was completed before we began storyboarding. Of course, complete books can be dedicated to the storyboard process and how to visualize the story, which is not the focus of this book. I will suggest that you read, along with Bruce Block's book, Francis Glebas's book *Directing the Story*. If you read the two books

together, you will have a great understanding on how to tell your story.

Visual Development

Before we can discuss what this book is about—creating a hybrid animation—we must research and design the style of our film. A little research will help us expand our horizons and move beyond the first image that pops into our heads. Graduate students spend the bulk of their time toward earning their degree by researching styles that appeal to them and then formulating their own style. Undergrad students should spend the bulk of their time researching styles and mimicking them until they understand the fundamental makeup of each style. By visual styles I am not necessarily referring to animation only. We can find inspiration in sculpture, painting, illustrations, architecture—any art form. Do not limit yourself. I urge you to dig deeper during your research phase.

What Does It Mean to Research a Visual Style?

To me this is such a fun part of the process. At Disney, the training department would offer all sorts of classes and guest lectures. I sat in on most, because that was the department where I worked. The whole department (all five of us) set up the chairs and handed out the pizzas, and I would get an education out of it until it was time to put everything away, go back to the training room, and show artists how to use the software. One of those guest lecturers was a production stylist for *Hercules*, Sue C. Nichols. She described this part of the process as going into the candy store and looking at the isles and isles of shiny, tasty candy. At first it is difficult to make the choice. It is an inspiration process that artists should thrive in.

When timelines are involved, I see that students often fall back to a style they are comfortable with. My students know that I am constantly pushing them to move beyond having only one style of drawing or animation. I am sure it has not been easy for them; they have not liked it but worked through it anyway, and I thank them for their hard work. I liken it to actors who can get pigeonholed into one type of character type versus actors who can move in and out of different characters seamlessly. It gives you a portfolio with much more breadth that allows you to expand into any type of role. Do not be afraid to try different styles of animation, different character looks, and different final compositing styles.

Take a look at the extra features on Disney's *Treasure Planet* feature animated film on DVD. You will find that the filmmakers used N.C. Wyeth and other illustrators from the School of Illustration as their visual inspiration for the art style of *Treasure Planet*. When researching for a visual style, aim high. If you think a Rembrandt painting captures the warmth that would best support the emotion you are trying to create, use Rembrandt as inspiration for your visual style.

How Much Research Is Enough?

You always want to complete more research than you need. Research should be an inspirational process. There are plenty of books on concept art and visual development to help you through this portion of the process. At Disney, we had a research librarian who stocked shelves with pertinent books, DVDs, slides, and so on that would be on hand in case an artist needed inspiration and guidance during the course of the project. Once she was even asked to please research “the meaning of life” (with no signs of Monty Python anywhere) for *Brother Bear*—and

her results were due in two weeks.

My warning about the research previsualization step: often I have seen students who adore the previsualization stage and doing the concept art, but when it comes to the actual production of their short film, they either run out of time because so much was spent during the previsualization stage or they run out of passion.

What If I Work on This Step Later and Continue with the Story Development?

You can. If your team is made up of more than you, the jobs can be assigned to different individuals. However, when working on a small team project or a personal project, I urge my students not to put off the visual development stage, especially in the case of 2D/3D projects. Research early on helps the animator to work toward a visual style much earlier. This style can work itself into your final storyboards. With these more developed images you can begin to think about the media needed and other questions that we will look at shortly.

As a word of caution: when developing storyboards for 3D animation you must work out many issues completely (more so than you would for 2D animation) to aid in production. For instance, you do not have to model everything completely if it is not going to be seen. This can be visualized in your storyboard process early on and save production time. The same is true, even more so, for a hybrid animation. Planning in the beginning stages will save time, money, and the sanity of your art production manager (APM).

Now we are ready to focus on what this book is about: creating a hybrid animation from this story. We're going to work with the second treatment of the story where character A is absolutely clueless that he is about to be rejected.

The questions we need to ask are as follows:

- What medium or media would best tell this story?
- What are the technical challenges?

What Media Would Best Tell This Story?

In other words, how should the story look? We decided to use a flat space in most shots. Flat space does not have to be 2D; it could be 3D. Depth cues can be removed from 3D shots to create flat space fairly easily. However, if we look at our chosen style of Frank Miller, we see that a flat graphic style might be best depicted with 2D. The most important point is that the linework should be smooth and graceful.

To push the deep space aspect of our sequence, we will need to work with the camera. By having parallax between the buildings, characters, trees, and so on, we can push this naturally flat space to appear deeper.

In shot 4, we want to make sure that the ring box is shown in the deepest space of all. It is character A's hopeful moment. We might want to use 3D for that ring box and use tones and highlights to push the tonal range.

If we pushed shot 6, "Character A waits for the answer," to be in ambiguous space instead of

deep space, it might up the intensity even more and cause the audience to feel on edge. If you've ever seen a horror film or *Citizen Kane*, you have seen ambiguous shots. The result is that the members of the audience aren't quite sure where they are. Composing an ambiguous shot can be tricky, so we'd have to make sure we do some tests on how to achieve the type of look we are aiming for.

What Are the Technical Challenges?

As we proceed in the next chapter, we need to keep in mind that the following technical challenges need solutions:

1. The flat 2D: traditional portions. Should they be pencil or digital vector line to achieve a smooth look?
2. For the deep space shot's parallax: Can we accomplish this with compositing only or all in 3D?
3. The 3D ring box: We'll need to test a cartoon rendering style and match it to the 2D style that we have accomplished.
4. The ambiguous shot: How will we achieve this shot? We better put this one into testing pipeline first and allow extra research and iterations so that we come up with the best look, not just the first one.

The final step in this stage: more research.

What Has Been Done Before?

It does not matter how old the film is or even how successful a film was. Research should include everything. Many lessons can be gleaned from films that failed to pull off what they were trying to achieve. Perhaps the technology just wasn't ready at the time the film was made. How did the filmmakers go about pulling off the shot? DVDs and their great commentaries and supplemental information nowadays are an amazing resource. "Why, back in my day, we didn't have the Internet and DVDs with people telling us how they did things. We were all clueless and had to figure things out!" My students laugh when I go on my old lady rant, but it is the truth. It also made us all great problem solvers. We had to figure it out, most of the time without manuals. Those were the priceless printed toms that the school only had one copy of and you did not have access to them. Start storing up your old lady stories. You'll be telling your own version in about 20 years. Research. You must do this. Nothing is too old. Nothing is too wrong. You can learn something from everything.