

# A Work In Progress

Wes Ball

## *Introduction*

“The evolution of *A Work in Progress* was a real roller coaster,” Wes Ball said about his 2002 BFA Thesis Film.

It all began with my previous live-action short, *Jacob: The Movie*, a pretty ambitious student endeavor that ignored everyone’s concern about “scope.” In the end, it had its flaws and I made my mistakes, but I accomplished a lot and gained some confidence in myself. Still, after the scale of *Jacob*, I decided I wanted to go back to basics and tell a very simple story as well as I could.

“Of course,” he added,

because of the way I am, I couldn’t just sit on keeping everything simple. I knew the story needed to be simple, but I wanted to try something new, something challenging, something I or anyone else hadn’t done at the school before. This is where *A Work in Progress* was born.

Wes decided to try his hand at full CG animation:

This wasn’t an easy sell during my thesis pitch to the faculty. In *Jacob* I had dabbled in CG with a little robot character that shows up, but I had never attempted creating an entire world, its props, and its characters from scratch. But this challenge was really appealing to me, so the faculty let me go figure out a way to pull it off. At this point, the short was going to be entirely animated. I settled on telling the story of a lonely bear (which appeared briefly as a prop in *Jacob*). That was about all I had for a while. After that, the story

went through a lot of changes. It went from a bear that was thrown out, to a bear looking for love, and finally to a bear searching for friends. When I incorporated the message of “be yourself,” the characters suddenly jumped into my imagination all at once.

And something else jumped—or crept—into his imagination as he worked on the animation:

An idea started to creep into my brain: the idea of incorporating a small live-action sequence about a girl who sketches these cartoons that would open and close the CG animation. This was an idea I kept pushing away because at this point the other thesis films and their shooting schedules had been worked out by the faculty. I didn’t have the guts to ask for film now that I had convinced them that I could pull off full CG.

But he couldn’t shoo the idea away:

The idea wouldn’t leave me alone. So I decided to suck it up and beg for a roll or two of film and a small equipment package to go shoot a short live-action scene. Luckily, the faculty graciously gave me a very small camera package and four hundred feet of film to shoot on an off-weekend, but now I had to convince a few of my exhausted fellow students to help me out on my shoot. About a week before everything was lined up and ready to go, another idea suddenly hit me while driving in my car to my production meeting—weaving into the animation a live-action story about a lonely girl also searching for friends. It was a real lightning flash of inspiration. But I had to scramble to get things worked out for the new idea. It was both a blessing and a curse. I had to rewrite, find locations, and cast about a dozen kids (no small feat in Tallahassee) in about a week. Thankfully, the small one-day shoot went off without a hitch. It was a really great experience—getting back to basics—just a couple of friends, a camera, and some reflector boards. After shooting, I edited the scenes together and then set aside the next two months for animation. Since I was animating it myself (on my home PC on a program called Lightwave 3D), I could change things very quickly. Little ideas and ways to make the scenes more efficient were always coming while animating. I just let the story grow and change as I completed it. Aside from the basic story skeleton, the film really was a work in progress.

The screenplay published here is exactly the way Wes sent it to me, in two parts—a scenario followed by the verses spoken in each of the scenes.

“Writing for animation was a whole new world for me when it came to screenwriting,” he explained.

I never really even wrote a script. I only wrote a brief description of what happened to the characters during the scene. The rhyming narration was my dialogue for the story. I knew the time I had for each scene, what had to happen, and it was just a matter of figuring out the blocking and details to make it work for the time allotted.

And what did he learn while *A Work in Progress* was a work in progress?

“I found it really is true that you make the movie three times: write it, direct it, edit it. Things always changed and grew, and with this film, being open to that added a ton to its impact.”

But he’s still amazed by the film’s success, a steady stream of national and international screenings and prizes, not least among them the 2003 Bronze Student Academy Award for Animation.

“My little mini-Oscar is sitting in my living room,” he said, “collecting dust.” He smiled:

I truly had no idea it would be received as well as it has been. Working so long and so hard on a project tends to make you lose your objectivity. All together, I couldn’t be happier at how the goal of telling a simple story has turned out to be an incredibly rewarding experience. But as usual, I see the little mistakes no one will ever notice, and I’m ready for a new challenge.

While *A Work in Progress* made its rounds in the festival circuit, “it opened some great doors in Hollywood,” Wes told me.

After *A Work in Progress*, Wes founded OddBall Animation, a VFX and animation studio that worked on commercials, music videos, and TV shows. In 2012, he created a CG short film called *Ruin* which garnered much online attention and ultimately led to him being hired to direct his first theatrical film, *The Maze Runner*, in 2014. He went on to direct the remaining sequels to the *Maze Runner* trilogy which grossed nearly a billion dollars in worldwide box office versus production costs totaling just \$170 million. Currently, he and his producing partner, Joe Hartwick, run OddBall Entertainment, a production company with an overall deal at Twentieth Century Fox.

*A Work in Progress*

By

Wes Ball

*\*\*\*Cartoon scenes are not written, only BRIEFLY explained...Bear with me...no pun intended.\*\*\*:-)*

*the text for the narration/rhyme follow at the end of the script.*

over Black

Sounds of playing and laughter.

FADE IN:

EXT. SHADY TREE CANOPY - DAY

A bright and beautiful sky leads us to an open grassy park filled with playing children. Their laughter carries through the field. We continue through the branches of a towering oak tree, then to an empty tire swing, then to a little girl who sits quietly alone at the trunk of the old tree. Her name is MELISSA.

She sits in the shade, silhouetted against the bright field. A sketchbook rests in her lap as she watches the other children playing. She softly smiles at their happiness.

She slowly glances to the empty tire swing next to her. The ghosts of herself and others playing on the swing slowly appear. Just as Melissa smiles, the apparition fades away as slowly as it appeared.

Melissa is alone again.

She opens her sketchbook to reveal a drawing of a lonely tree with a tire swing hanging from its branches. She looks out to the field one last time, then begins to write. She speaks out loud as she writes.

MELISSA

There once...was...an old tire that  
hung from a tree. Not a soul in sight,  
no one to see...

We slowly push into her pencil drawing. Color slowly begins filling in the pencil lines. Soon the drawing itself slowly takes a three-dimensional shape.

MELISSA

...except for a bear that loved to  
swing.

By this point, the pencil drawing has completely transformed into a rich and realistic cartoon world.

EXT. CARTOON GRASSY FIELD - CONTINUOUS

\*\*\*First part of cartoon\*\*\*

*Melissa's rhyme accompanies the introduction.*

*An empty tire swing hangs from the branch of a lonely tree perched atop a grassy hill. The world is empty, not a soul in sight. A BEAR slowly appears swinging on the tire swing, then dissolves to the bear swinging himself, then to the bear gazing out into the empty world. He is sad and alone.*

MELISSA (VO)

When it came to this, he knew  
everything.

VOICE (OS)

(intrigued)

It doesn't just end there does it?

The cartoon quickly transforms into a sketch again.

EXT. SHADY TREE CANOPY

Startled, Melissa looks up from her sketch. She sees a little girl holding a ball standing in front of her. This is FAITHE. She seems very comfortable with herself, definitely not bashful like Melissa.

MELISSA

Say what?

FAITHE

Your story. It can't end there.

MELISSA

(looks down to her drawings)

Oh...well I wasn't done yet.

FAITHE

Oh, okay.

(sits down)

Sorry, go ahead.

Melissa squirms uncomfortably. She isn't used to company, but she shakes it off and begins to write again.

MELISSA

So the bear found a turtle who was  
walking under the trees.

EXT. CARTOON GRASSY FIELD TRAIL

\*\*\*Second part of cartoon\*\*\*

*Bear finds a grumpy TURTLE trotting down a trail in a patch of trees. Bear has an idea. Next we see Bear trying to catch up with a box strapped to his back. He walks on all fours trying as hard as he can to look like his new turtle friend. Unfortunately, Turtle doesn't have the expected reaction. He rolls his eyes and tucks into his shell. Bear is alone again.*

VOICE (OS)  
(disapproving)  
Wait a minute.

The cartoon world stops dead in its tracks.

EXT. SHADY TREE CANOPY

Melissa is surprised to see several children have now gathered around her. A BOY stands in the middle.

BOY  
(sure of himself)  
He shouldn't give up there.

All the other kids nod their heads approving the idea.

BOY  
He should try again.

Melissa, growing more comfortable among the other kids, nods with a smile and goes back to her writing.

EXT. CARTOON WORLD SKY

*\*\*\*Third part of cartoon\*\*\**

*Next we see a FROG squatting on a lily pad in the middle of a pond. We pan to reveal Bear is also squatting on a lily pad trying to be as frog-like as he can. However, a tasty fly buzzes into Frog's sights and he quickly leaps after the fly. Bear drops his head in disappointment.*

*Just then, the same fly grabs Bear's attention. He watches it fly into the air. Then, Bear sees something that lifts his spirits...a bird!*

*BIRD lazily flaps high up in the sky. Little does he know a Bear with wings made of branches quickly approaches. Bear flaps up next to Bird. Needless to say, Bird is a bit dumbfounded. What Bear doesn't know is that his crude wings are falling apart. Just as Bear notices, he falls from the sky. He tumbles closer and closer to the ground. Just before he hits...*

SMALL VOICE (OS)  
Excuse me.

EXT. SHADY TREE CANOPY

Melissa looks up from her drawing. Even more kids surround her. They are all entranced by her story. A LITTLE GIRL steps forward and builds the nerve to speak.

LITTLE GIRL

I think he's trying too hard.

The children listen to what she says. Some begin to nod their heads in approval.

LITTLE GIRL

He should just be himself.

The kids look to each other in agreement.

A smile grows on Melissa's face.

EXT. CARTOON GRASSY WORLD DAY

*\*\*\*Final cartoon story\*\*\**

*Melissa's rhyme sums up her realization of "Just be yourself" as we see Bear at his tire swing again.*

*This time we see he is pushing the swing. Turtle happily sits in the tire with a huge grin on his face.*

*We pull out further to reveal Frog and Bird as well. They wait in line for their turn to swing.*

*Finally, we see a wooden sign slapped together with "Free Swings" painted on it.*

EXT. SHADY TREE CANOPY

Melissa slowly looks up to her new audience.

MELISSA

Well? What do you think?

No one says anything. The children look to each other with smiles on their faces.

Finally the first audience member, FAITHE, steps forward.

FAITHE

Well...we were wondering... Can you tell us another one?

Melissa grins with excitement and quickly turns to a fresh page in her sketchbook.

MELISSA

There once were a bunch of bears, who  
lived in a forest...

As she tells a new story, her voice slowly grows more distant  
as we pull out leaving the writer and the audience alone to  
imagine another story together.

FADE OUT.

A WORK IN PROGRESS - Narration/Rhyme

OPENING SCENE

There once was an old tire,  
That hung from a tree.

Not a soul in sight,  
No one to see.

Except for a bear,  
That loved to swing.

When it came to this,  
He knew everything.

But something was odd...on this bright sunny day,  
The bear couldn't have fun...in his usual way.

You see, the bear was lonely. Friends were far and few...  
So playing by himself was really all the bear knew.

If only he had a friend, things might be all right.  
So he waited for a visit...until day turned to night.

TURTLE SCENE

The next day

Bear left the tree in search of a friend.  
He just didn't know...quite where to begin.

Then he spotted a turtle...walking down a trail.  
And soon thought of a plan...that would not fail.

He strapped a box to his back and called it a shell,  
But the grumpy old turtle didn't take it too well.

Bear couldn't understand...just where he went wrong.  
Bear only knew that he wanted to belong.

FROG SCENE

But, Bear found a frog. And a green one at that!  
On top of a lily pad is where the frog sat.

So Bear decided to join him on a pad of his own.  
Now he wouldn't have to worry about being alone.

Bear dropped his head, and let out a sigh.  
He was alone again, but something caught his eye.

Then, Bear saw a bird way up in the sky.  
NOW bear knew what to do! He needed to fly!

BIRD SCENE

The bird looked ahead, as he flew through the air.  
He didn't expect to see...a flying bear.

He made some wings from a branch off his tree.  
Now just like the bird...is what the bear could be.

But something was wrong, and the bird knew just why.  
Without leaves on his wings, the bear would fall from the  
sky.

FINAL SCENE

Bear figured it out. He knew what was wrong.  
Turns out...Bear had the answer...all along.

By being himself...the bear could clearly see.  
He should go back to what he loved...his swing and his tree.

And this is where the story ends.  
Bear was no longer alone. Bear made new friends.