Project 2: First Team Video

Goal: Work in teams to create a short video piece comprising 3-D animation and/or special effects.

Due: The work for this project is broken into several stages:
- Assigned: Monday 24 September
- Exposé due: Wednesday 3 October
- Checkpoint: Friday 5 October
- Video due: Friday 19 October
- “Making Of” video due: Wednesday 24 October

Synopsis: You will work in 5-person interdisciplinary teams to create short videos using computer generated 3-D animation and/or live-action special effects. There are very few restrictions on length or content. Typical videos will probably range from 30 seconds to 3-4 minutes. For this assignment I would like your video to follow some existing format, such as a rock video, television commercial, movie trailer, comedy sketch, scene from Sesame Street, etc. These are not the only possible formats and you are encouraged to think of others, but your final product should clearly fit into some recognizable category. As part of this assignment you will edit a “making of” video documenting the process, pitfalls, and people involved in your video. You will also work with your group to present a exposé of a movie, commercial, etc. Finally, at a “checkpoint” date roughly halfway through the project, you will demonstrate and be graded on your progress to that point.

Details: Grading criteria and additional explanation for each of the subtasks:

Exposé: Your group will prepare and present a 20-minute talk (with visuals) on the making of a video piece such as a movie or commercial. Your goal is to research and present the behind-the-scenes, “How’d they do that?” information that people in this class want to know. Learn about and tell us about the process, the tricks, the workflow, the artistic and technical decisions that give the piece its unique look. Exposés should be in a presentation-friendly format such as PowerPoint or HTML and are all due on Wed 3 October, though the actual presentations will be given over the following weeks. You will be graded on the depth of your research (50%) and the quality of your presentation (50%).

Checkpoint: One of your first tasks will be to create a production schedule; after 2 weeks you should be well along in it. By this point you should have a concept, a script and storyboard, and preliminary 3-D models. Your “story reel”, with a shot-by-shot rough render, should be well along, with stills or sketches for the remaining shots. Voices should be recorded and the score ready or nearly ready. Raw footage for live-action pieces should be shot or in progress. This checkpoint should motivate you to work hard and avoid bogging down in the details. You
will be graded on your overall progress, not on the obstacles you have faced. If you find a part of the task too difficult or time-consuming, just work around it – keep your mind on the big picture.

**Final video:** The only restrictions on content are that your piece recognizably belongs to a common format, as explained above, and that it be more-or-less PG rated: nothing that I couldn’t show to prospective students and their parents. This is motivated by pragmatic reasons: I want to show your work far and wide to advertise the class, the students, and UVA, without being fired or sued or burned at the stake. If you have valid artistic reasons to include potentially questionable content, we can talk about it. As for duration, you will find that rendering time puts a practical limit on the length of your final video. I recommend that most groups aim for 30 seconds to two minutes, and budget plenty of time for final render. Grading of the final product is necessarily subjective, but will be based on creativity of concept and technical sophistication of execution: timing, lighting, camera work, composition, shading, animation, editing, etc. Outside experts will help the instructor critique these aspects of the video, and this critique may be offered publicly in class (though the final grades will only be shared with members of each group).

**“The Making Of”**: The purpose of this secondary video is to document the process of creating your video, to illustrate some of the technical behind-the-scenes work, and to showcase the contributions of each group member. The video can include raw footage, rough renders and storyboard images, footage or images of the group in action, breakdown of shots by layer, and anything else that might give insight into the making of your final video. The documentary will probably be as long or longer than the video itself, and will not be graded on presentation or editing, just content. Narration is optional. As you work on your video, remember to keep your sketches, scripts, and storyboards around, along with raw footage and rough renders. You should also take some pictures or video of the group in action, of any tools that programmers write, of any live-action filming you might do, etc. Note that the due date for the documentary is intentionally several days after the video itself.

**Grading:** Again, every group member receives the same grade on the project. This is not negotiable. Therefore, it is to your advantage to make every effort to get every member involved.

- Movie exposé and presentation: 20%
- Progress at the checkpoint: 25%
- Final video and “making of” documentary: 55%

The final video and documentary are graded together, since the documentary will help demonstrate the behind-the-scenes efforts and contributions of group members. It goes without saying, however, that the video itself is the more important of the two.
Advice: Your immediate task is to come up with a concept. Brainstorm, pitch ideas back and forth, discuss formats and ideas and what each of you could bring to the table. Remember Randy Pausch’s advice: Write your ideas down, give them names, and criticize or question the ideas, not their originators. Once you have a concept, establish some roles. Don’t get caught up in role titles like “Director” and “Producer” – there is too much baggage related to prestige and hierarchy here, and you don’t have time to fool with that. Just figure out very concretely what each of you will do to move the project forward, and write it down. Let me quote from the syllabus:

Groups that fail to identify and assign tasks and roles early are flirting with disaster. This doesn’t mean that you need to be hidebound by your early decisions. Most students will undoubtedly take part in many aspects of the production, pitching in when help is needed or picking up a new skill out of interest. But having a framework of defined roles to fall back on will help ensure things get done and help prevent power struggles over who does what.

Come up with a preliminary production schedule of what will get done when, and keep it up to date. Move from concept to script and storyboard to “story reel” – a rough but shot-for-shot rendering, no fancy shading or lighting, crude animation – as soon as possible. The quicker you get to the story reel, the better your chances of catching mistakes while there is still time to do something about them. Ed Catmull, founder of Pixar, says that 80% of Hollywood movies fail, while 80% of Pixar’s projects succeed. He credits their use of a story reel as the biggest reason for this success.

Work hard. Meet early and often, even when not everybody can make it. Remember our odd take on the honor code: you may work only with another member of your group.

Remember to keep track of what you’re doing for the “making of” documentary! Take some pictures, save the pizza napkin you sketch on. Your future fan club will thank you for it.

Finally, and most important, have fun!