

ANIMATED STORYTELLING

SIMPLE STEPS FOR CREATING
ANIMATION & MOTION GRAPHICS



LIZ BLAZER

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Liz Blazer

Peachpit Press

Find us on the Web at www.peachpit.com.

Peachpit is a division of Pearson Education.

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ISBN 13: 9780134133652

ISBN 10: 013413365X

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to:

Evan Story Oliver and Jeff Oliver

Acknowledgments:

Arial Costa, for sharing his spirit, immense talent, and artistry. His illustrations on the cover and throughout this book are the work of a multitalented wizard.

Nikki McDonald, for supporting this book in every way. It has been an honor and privilege to work with you.

Jan Seymour, the editor every writer hopes for—supportive, sharp as a whip, and creative. Jan, you made the editing process free of stress and full of joy.

To the Peachpit crew, Tracey Croom, Mimi Heft, Kim Scott, and Kim Wimpsett, thank you for your care and professionalism in helping me complete this book.

I humbly thank and am deeply indebted to Robin Landa, Christine Panushka, Denise Anderson, Laura Menza, Marc Golden, Bill Moore, Brian Oakes, Brooke Keesling, Alan Robbins, Karin Fong, Kim Dulaney, Sterling Sheehy, Greg Araya, Colin Elliot, Erin Elliot, Mike Enright, Yoriko Murakami, USC School of Cinematic Arts, TED Active, TED-Ed, Stephanie Lo, Jeremiah Dickey, Sarah Shewey, Kelly Young Stoetzel, Elizabeth Daley, Kathy Smith, Sheila Sofian, Lisa Mann, Mar Elepano, John Andrews, Leah Shore, Elaine Montoya, Becky Padilla, Justin Cone, Carlos El Asmar, Ron Diamond, Bonita Blazer, Jon Blazer, and Sheldon Blazer.

This book could not have been written without the collaboration, editing, and love from my husband, Jeff Oliver.

Art Credits:

Ariel Costa, Cody Walzel, Sirirat Yoom Thawilvejakul, Phil Borst, Jamie Caliri, Louis Morton, Michael Waldron, Richard Borge, Sterling Sheehy, Colin Elliot, Nathalie Rodriguez, Jiali Ma, Kim Dulaney, Passion Pictures, Psyop, The Mill, Von Glitschka, Ian Wright, Jordan Bruner, Maciek Janicki, Gregory Herman, Stefan Bucher, Hsinping Pan, James Lancett, Sean Weston, An Ngo, Richard E. Cytowic, TED-Ed, Alberto Scirocco, leftchannel, Karin Fong, Sony PlayStation, Imaginary Forces, Miguel Jiron, Marsha Kinder, Mark Jonathan Harris, Scott Mahoy, and Julia Pott

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a magical era for animated storytelling. Film festivals have sprung up worldwide to celebrate new animation, television and the web are packed with animated content for both kids and adults, and advertisers are hungrily seeking fresh talent to connect with audiences in a meaningful way. Skilled storytellers specializing in animation are in high demand, and the opportunities to thrive in the field are ever expanding. And yet (until now) it has been difficult to find a resource aimed at providing the skills necessary to become a successful animated storyteller.

This book is a step-by-step guide on how to make great stories for both animation and motion graphics. It's based on the idea that whether you are creating a character-based narrative or experimental film for festivals, an advertisement for television or the web, or a motion graphics title sequence, being intentional about storytelling is the key to success.

In ten simple steps beginning with pre-production and storyboarding through color and sound and finally to animation, this book will provide you with

the tools you need to create an effective animated story. You'll find concise explanations, useful examples, and short assignments allowing you to set the theory you've learned into action. You'll also find hints on how to take full advantage of animation's limitless potential.

Big consideration went into the idea of exploring animation alongside motion graphics in the same book. The two forms are often treated as if they come from different worlds. Certainly, they grew up in different neighborhoods. Animation (for the most part) has been lumped into the filmmaking discipline, with its commitment to experimental and character-driven stories destined for television, movie theaters, and video game consoles. The study of motion graphics, meanwhile, has been part of the graphic design discipline, where its focus on branding and content promotion has made it essential to advertisements, broadcast graphics, and film titles, to name a few. Animation and motion graphics have been kept apart, and yet these two forms have much in common and so very much to learn from one another. They are presented together in this book because they exist hand-in-hand and because their lessons are mutually beneficial.

For you animated filmmakers eager to get your experimental short into the Ottawa International Animation Festival, you'll find plenty in this book that speaks directly to your goal, but I also urge you to be influenced by the "commercial" culture of motion graphics which stresses discipline and strict deadlines. It will help you get that short completed and mailed off to Canada in time. And for you motion graphics artists working on a new commercial spot, I address you directly and often, but pay close attention to the lessons of animation's experimentalism and storytelling structures. Your motion work will thrive under its influence.

So flip a page and start the fun. Get ready to learn scores of practical skills, but know you're also headed on a personal journey. This is about you gaining the confidence to tell the stories you've always wanted to tell and becoming the storyteller you were always meant to be. Let's get to it... *and may the animated storytelling begin!*



4

COLOR SENSE

Enhance your story with the right palette

Color has tremendous storytelling power. It can express emotion, clarify motivation, and even dictate the entire meaning of a piece. A farmer's lush green field means something totally different if instead it's yellow-brown; a hero's ride off into the sunset becomes a ride into the depths of hell with a slight tweak in hue; a young boy's first kiss has a different connotation if the recipient of the kiss turns green instead of blushing red.

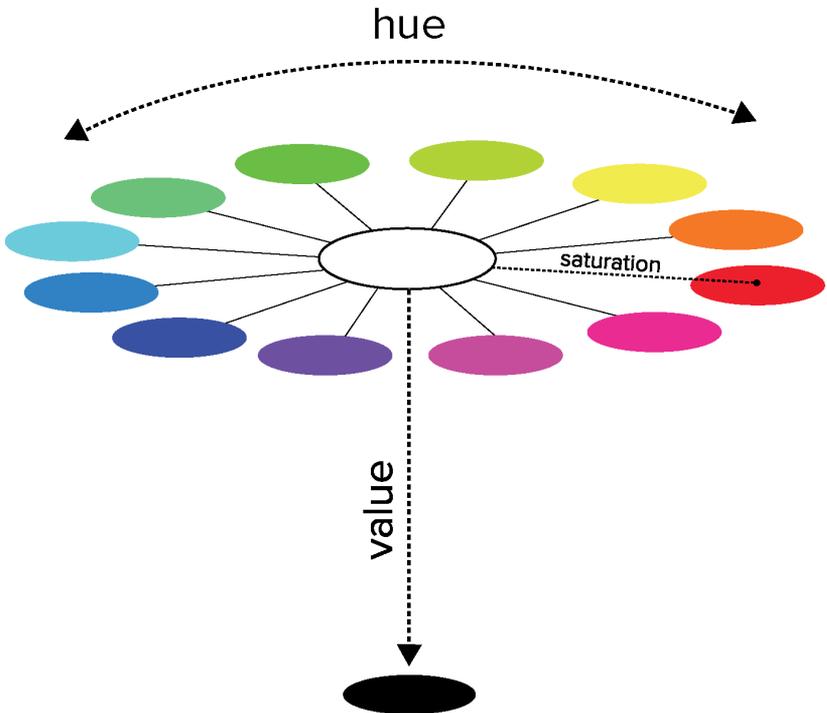
So what are the best color choices for your story? What is just the right amount of color to use, if any at all? How can you use color to enhance the emotional impact of your piece? This chapter will answer those questions and give you some simple guidelines for how to plan your palette and enrich your story with well-informed color choices.

COLOR VOCAB

Hue, Saturation, and Value

First let's make sure we're all on the same page about basic color vocab. As you may know, there are three standard characteristics of color: hue, saturation, and value. When we ask, "What color is that?" we're asking for the hue.

Hue refers to the common color name in the spectrum like red, blue, green, blue-green, and so on. *Saturation* is the intensity or purity of a color. Highly saturated colors look vibrant and bright while low-saturated colors look dull, almost grayish. *Value* is the relative lightness or darkness of a color—basically how much light the color is exposed to determines its value. Low value means a color is closer to black. I'll use these terms throughout the chapter, so please refer to the hue, saturation, value chart here if you need a refresher.



Create a Color Script

Let's pull out those cue cards again. This time, instead of blank ones grab your completed storyboards. If you've already attempted to make an animatic, then your boards likely will be scanned and integrated into an editing program. If not, do so now. Scan each card into the software of your choice and lay out your boards in sequence—it's time to start the process of creating a color script.

A *color script* is a sequential visual outline of how you intend to use color in your animated film. The process can be highly experimental, and, as usual, I encourage you to find a process that works best for you. The trick is to balance what you think looks right in your individual scenes with what helps to enrich your story as a whole. Story is always first, so you may need to replace colors that you absolutely love (aesthetically) if they don't serve the big picture of your story.

To begin, take a step way back and try to define what color your entire story would be if it could be only one color. This is akin to figuring out the theme of your story, as it will influence each of your color choices as you move forward. We'll discuss color symbolism soon, but I encourage you to go with your gut in answering the following questions to help you determine that one color: How does your film feel? Is it a pink film? A gray one? What is the overarching central mood of your film, and is it strong enough to base your film's palette around? Figuring out the dominant, thematic color of your film will help establish the palette of your other colors moving forward.

Once you have that one color, the next step is to create what I call a *pre-color script (PCS)*. This is your storyboard represented by a series of single colors, one for each board. Each color in the series can be repeated. Think of your pre-color script as a game of charades—you have to tell your entire story start to finish but you can use only one color per frame to do so.

The best way to start this process is by identifying the key moments in your story that will require color for emphasis. These are the moments that have to pop in your storyline—and then the color you choose in the rest of your film should act to support those moments as best they can.



Louis Morton, *Nose Hair Storyboards*

Take for instance the story of a bear cub lost in the woods. Say the cub faces off against some dangerous predator during the night and by dawn finally makes her way back home to her family of bears. The moments where color is important seem straightforward: when the bear cub gets lost in the woods, when the cub fights off a dangerous predator, and finally when the cub arrives safely back home. If these key moments are to be represented by solid hues, which would they be?

I encourage you to go with your gut in answering that question, break some rules, and be creative. However, if the ideas aren't flooding in, it doesn't hurt to start your color thinking with popular symbolism that permeates Western culture. Red represents menace, anger, or danger, like Darth Vader's red light saber or Captain Hook's red hat and jacket. For instance, you may think to use a splash of dramatic red when the bear cub is fighting against the violent predator.

Symbolism, however, may not always best serve the scene. What about when our bear cub gets lost in the first place? For the disorientation and fear that the cub may be experiencing, consider changing the value of the existing green so that the whole forest goes a bit darker when the cub realizes that she's lost.

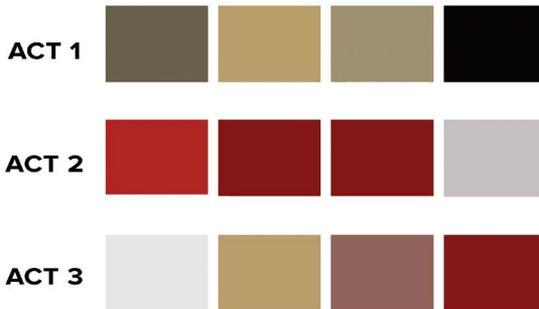
Finally, for the cub's return home, it may be neither hue nor value that best enhances the moment. Perhaps a change in saturation will work best. Through the cub's travels the forest may have become desaturated to imply the sadness of the lost bear cub, but when the cub finally discovers home the forest could return to a saturated green. It will infuse your shot with sudden optimism and joy as the cub runs back towards her family.

Choosing the right hue, saturation, and/or value for the key moments in your story will help to amplify the emotion that you're going for and will also clarify intent. You can assign to a color any meaning you've chosen—you simply have to define and establish it and be consistent with how you use it in your film. Whether you choose Western culture's symbolism or you assign your own meanings, it's important to consider saturation and value as well as hue—and most importantly...go with your gut!

Supporting Colors

Once you've identified the hue, saturation, and value for the key moments in your story, go ahead and fill in the rest of your scenes with solid colors in the same way. Treat your key moments as the stars and choose colors that act as supporting characters. You may wish to avoid hue, saturation, and value levels that compete for attention with your star's key scenes.

PRE-COLOR SCRIPT



COLOR SCRIPT



Jiali Ma, *Black Bird*

Color Me Awesome

Now that you've completed your pre-color script, it's time to move on to the big time and complete your color script. With your PCS as your guide, pull up your original storyboard sequence and begin to work out the colors for each board. The principal color that you already selected will help keep you focused on the look you're going for in each scene. Take the colors that you identified in your PCS and integrate them into the board. Once you do that it's time to select colors for the supporting cast of characters, backgrounds, and props in each shot. Again, I urge you to go with your gut and always consider story above visual awesomeness. And oh...

Remember the important and simple tips I've outlined on the following pages when organizing color for your films. They represent the wisdom of experienced art directors and production designers whose decades of heart-wrenching trial and error led them to see the light. Take heed of their tips, or else their endless suffering will have been all for naught!

PLEASE NOTE

In print, colors are created by mixing pigments on paper. Mix too many pigments and you'll get black. In motion, light is used to mix color. If you mix too many colored lights you'll get white. As a result, print and motion function in two different "color systems." Motion uses the additive color system called RGB (Red, Green, Blue). Print uses the subtractive color system known as CMYK (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Black). Long story short, if you notice a weird change in your colors when transitioning from print to motion, your files may have changed from RGB to CMYK. Most programs will compensate for this shift, but if things look odd, you may want to go back and change your source files from CMYK to RGB.



Kim Dulaney, *Airbnb*. Lead art direction and design. Character design by Lauren Indovina. Directed by Marco Spier and Marie Hyon. Produced at Psyop

Tip 1: Limit Your Palette

In still artwork, the eye has time to explore color and investigate composition. With animation (and all film), movement and the passage of time create the need for a continuous and clear focal point. You want your story to read quickly and consistently from scene to scene. Distracting the viewer's eye with unimportant objects that are colorful is the first way to lose the attention of an audience.

Simply put, in choosing color, less is more. Too much color variety in a shot confuses the eye, just as too many flavors on a plate of food will confuse the palate. It's best to take a minimalist approach to color and start with as few colors as possible. It will be far easier to add colors later in the process than to take them away. Limiting your palette will allow the viewer's eye to quickly process the moving images and focus on what is most important in your story.

Tip 2: Support (Don't Upstage) Your Subject

Be careful with adding too much color to backgrounds and props when you have a colorful moving subject. Moving subjects are your stars and need space to breathe—they should be supported by their surrounding colors, not upstaged.

One way to please your attention-craving star is by designating an open area around it. This area is called a *white space* (though it's not necessarily white). Your subject will thank you for the wide-open stage where they can best be seen, and even if your audience's eye does wander, it will be thankful for a little rest in your white space.

Another way to limit the visual competition around your subject is by using high-contrast or complementary colors. This will help to solidify figure/ground relationships around your subject and will make your subject pop. High contrast is especially important for kinetic type, logos, and broadcast graphics, since words take more time to comprehend than singular objects and therefore require clear figure/ground relationships.

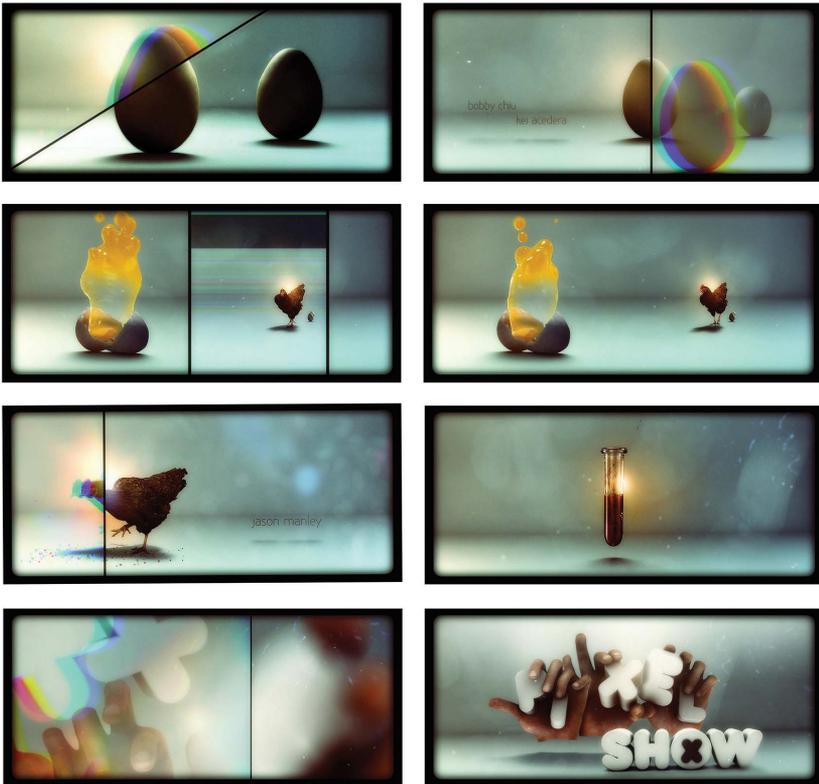


Kim Dulaney, *Eno*. Lead art direction and design. Directed by Lauren Indovina. Produced at Psyop (*above and opposite page*)



Tip 3: Select One Thematic and One Accent Color

We went over this during your pre-color script, but I can't stress enough how important it is to choose a dominant thematic color to unify your entire piece. Doing this gives you a basis on which to establish your palette and offers viewers a theme through which they can experience your piece. Once you've established your thematic color, you should focus on selecting an accent color. There are many ways to pick color pairs. Try complementary colors, analogous colors, colors next to each other on the color wheel, whatever. From this dominant and accent color all other color decisions are derived—so choose carefully and choose early.



Ariel Costa, *Pixel Show*



Von Glitschka, *Tire Goblin*

Tip 4: Use Saturation Mindfully

Saturated colors are so energetic that they can steal the spotlight if used in the wrong place. Use saturation in important places and moments when you need a character or story point to pop. Rely on it too often and the eye will tire out. In other words, use restraint with saturated colors and save them for when they will help focus the eye and move the story.

Tip 5: Use Surprise Color for Punctuation

A *surprise* or unexpected color is one that differs so greatly from your overall palette that it jars the eye. When placed at a key moment in your story, a surprise color can enliven your motion work, tie together a key idea, and even trigger the climax of the story. Warning: Much like saturation, surprise colors are very powerful, so use with great restraint.

Tip 7: Make Your Own Rules

As you've figured out by now, color is complex. Steadfast rules to using color in motion can be counterproductive to finding the right combination for your film. When it comes to color, uncomfortable combinations and new kinds of usage may make for interesting design. When using color, feel free to make your own rules for a project—just be consistent with them so that your piece is unified.

COLOR RECAP

Color Vocab: Hue, Saturation, and Value

Make Color Scripts to Emphasize Key Moments

Tip 1: Limit Your Palette

Tip 2: Support (Don't Upstage) Your Subject

Tip 3: Select One Thematic and One Accent Color

Tip 4: Use Saturation Mindfully

Tip 5: Use Surprise Color for Punctuation

Tip 6: Design for Movement

Tip 7: Make Your Own Rules

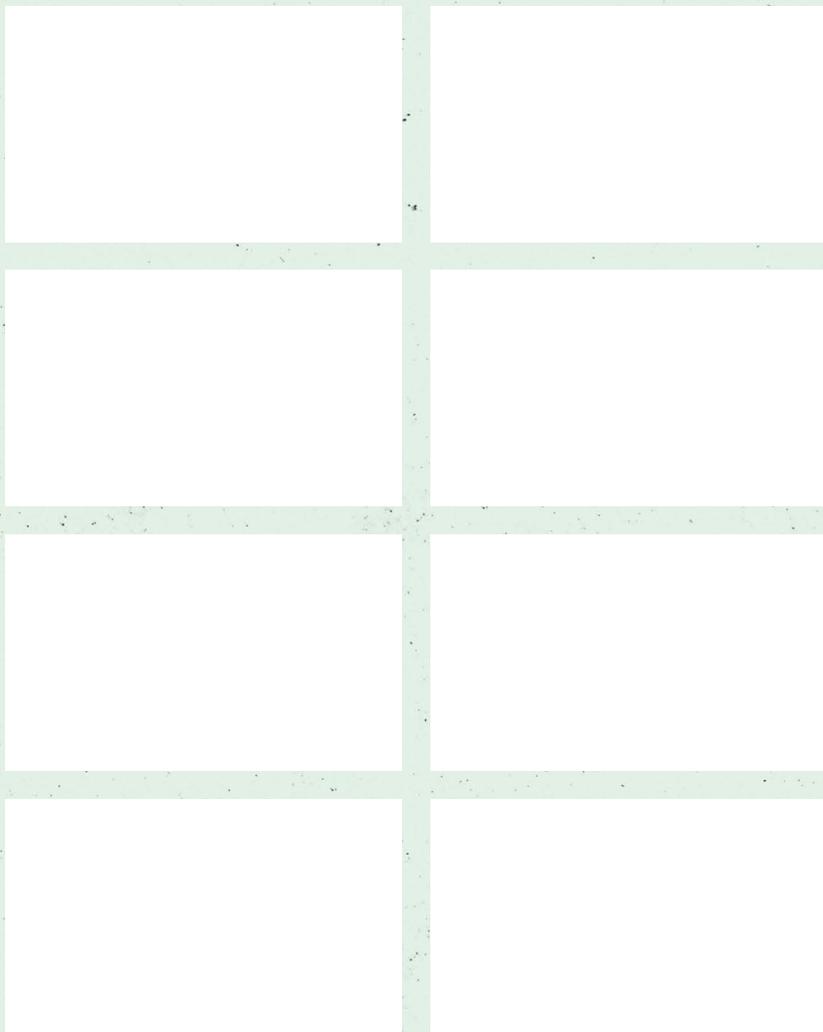
ASSIGNMENT

Subvert a nursery rhyme, make a color script

Subvert a simple nursery rhyme by translating it into a film genre, such as horror, comedy, musical, action, sci-fi, or Western. First, write a three-act structure—one sentence per act. Next, select a dominant color for your piece. Then, make a simple pre-color script for your story. If you want a bigger challenge, try storyboarding it in full color!



START YOUR NEXT FILM HERE!



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