

# Animation Production Reality Check

April 29, 2010

Many go into animation production before considering what is possible. Why not be sensible? Ease your way and make sure you can finish it, too.



**Here are some things good to think about before going into animation production for the first time. Main message is just this: Think what is doable and how you can reduce the amount of work.** I'm not saying don't do anything cool – just make sure you can finish it too. The following is bound to stomp on many toes, egos and dreams about animating wonders, but I mean well.

Animation production is literally producing everything in an animated movie, not forgetting the managerial part, marketing and all the rest. Usually the studios doing these things have from tens to hundreds of people on the payroll and still they outsource a great amount. Even smaller productions are epic in work hours. One has to be nuts, absolutely loco, to go at it alone. Yet some people do. Someone like that needs to be a generalist with very wide and adaptable skillset or have unlimited production time. Even then I would not recommend doing it alone.

My team for a small production (5+ mins, final cut 3min 33s) was a sound guy for sounds and a friendly musician gave me song of his to use. I did everything else.

## The tough decisions – kill your darlings

Many personal animation productions are born from big ideas and die for the same reason. Please be a realist. Scrap all big plans and start with a short story. Also don't aim for the production values big studios buy. Rather make many effort saving choices with your storytelling, cinematography and overall design – create something less grand but still absolutely wonderful.

## Some questions for those planning animation production

- What's the problem your protagonist has, how does he solve it and what challenge(s) does he face on the way? That and the main message of your story is all you need. Anything beyond this is likely just extra your short story can do without.
- Do you really need many characters? Try staying with just protagonist and the antagonist. 3 characters is the effective maximum for short story – more is just a distraction.
- Could all take place in one room or other limited environment?
- Could the story happen within one day or even an hour or less? Make that one momentous occasion in the life of your protagonist.
- What could be said with less? Often non-flashy way of getting information across has more impact.
- What do you really need to show to tell the story and what can you leave to the imagination of your audience? Comic books rely heavily on imagination – most of the story takes place between the frames and the frames you see and read have only some key moments. Film and animation can do similar things.
- What design is the most effective in telling the story and capture the hearts of your audience? Don't go for realistic characters just because you think or know you can. There are reasons why even the great Pixar avoids that. More stylized the design is the more forgiving your audience is towards the faults in any visual elements. Also the more cartoony/stylized you go, the easier it becomes to design sympathetic characters.

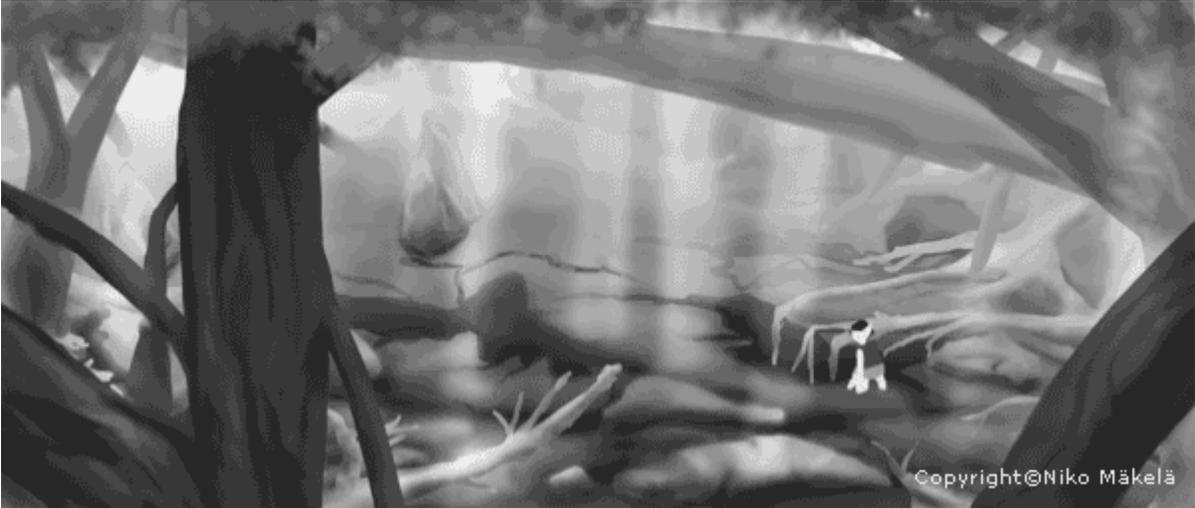
## Plan it, Test it

Get your story core down to few sentences. Run them by your friends, family and your cat, and get their opinions. When you have something that really works, write the rest. Remember to take brakes from writing, days or even a week, to regain sense and perspective. When you and your testers are happy, draw the few key story moments. Here is a good moment to define the style you are going for. If it the key moments work and connect both visually and story wise, continue.

When pivotal moments are pictured, draw all important moments between them. It doesn't have to be art, just something understandable. When you have all main things pictured, as if it were a comic book, put them in order and on a timeline (in Flash, video edit – any software with a timeline). Soon you should have a storyboard you can watch as a video – an animatic. This is the true stress test. If your story still works and resonates, you have something worth creating. This is also where you can pre-cut your movie, try different pacing and order for things – shape the movie before ever going into actual production.

I've written a few stories (most about nice goblins) and made animatics for some of them. Most tests soon showed the story wasn't working and the animatic was never completed. I think I've only finished one which passes the stress test, more or less. I'm including pictures from different animatics.







## Focus

It is easy to lose focus in production. Maybe you want to add one more cool environment, a bit of backstory or just a little more detail in that one rock to make things more interesting. Don't do that. Rather finish what you started the way you planned and tested it and only after, if you still feel like it, add things.

That's it for now. So, did I do my animated movie like this? Nope. (*see following article*)

Do you have an animation production experience to share? How well did you plan yours?

# Animation Production Hell

May 5, 2010

An animation production should start from a good story and careful design. Read what happens when it has neither of those things.



**This is a story about how my animation production came about, and it wasn't the way I've recommended on this blog.** Read the following brief journal and see why. This was done on the side of occasional freelance work and other on-going projects ([movie](#) and [game](#)). I didn't sleep much for half a year. You can view clips of this animation production at the start of my [2009 demoreel](#).

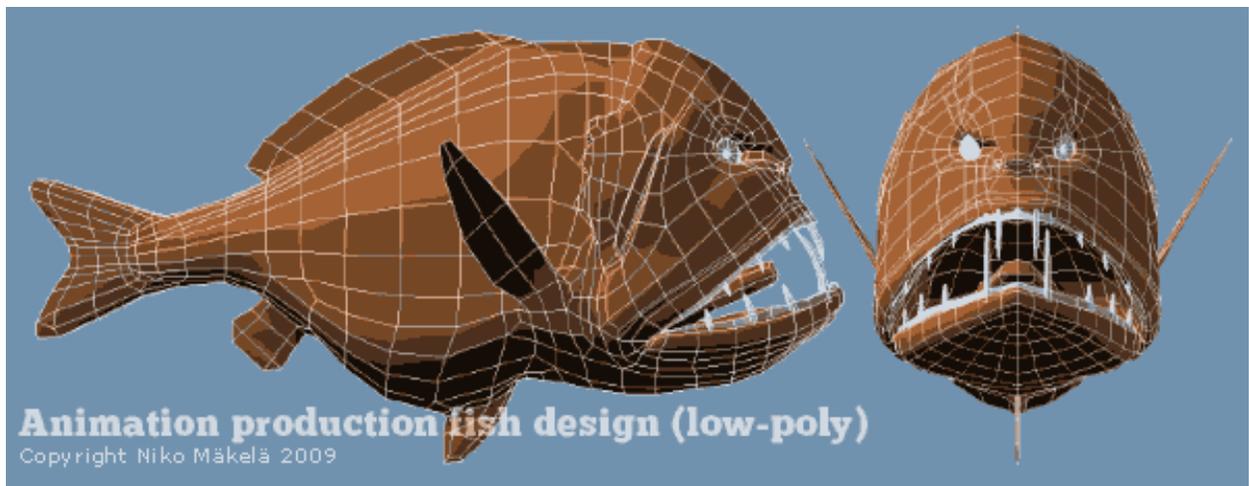


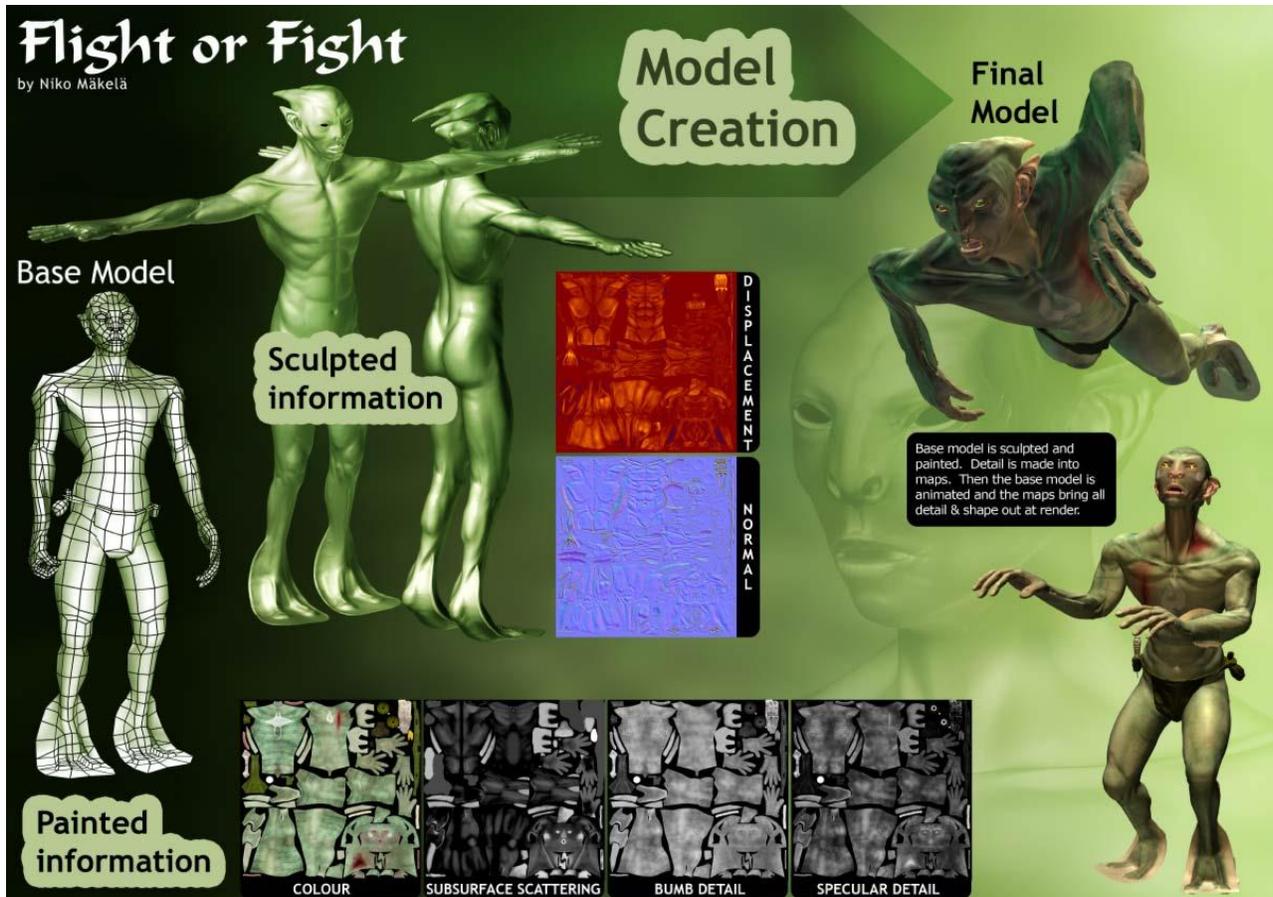
## January 2009

My HD-demoreel needed some current generation game characters, animated. I decide to go with a 'fishman' who I had earlier modeled a preliminary head for. For his nemesis I chose a nasty looking deep sea fish (enlarged many times over). Plan was low-poly game-models with Zbrush-sculpted details applied as normal-map.



I didn't spend much time on design, just went ahead modeling animation-ready base meshes in Modo. Polycount (triangle faces): fisman 7532(including eyes, teeth, clothes and equipment), fish 4572.





After 3 or so weeks I had both characters modeled, sculpted, textured and rigged. Rigging was the slowest step, for it is the most technical and not my favourite. Last days of the month went to finding a way to make Messiah animation work in Lightwave with Zbrush-based displacement. I've later done a tutorial on this.

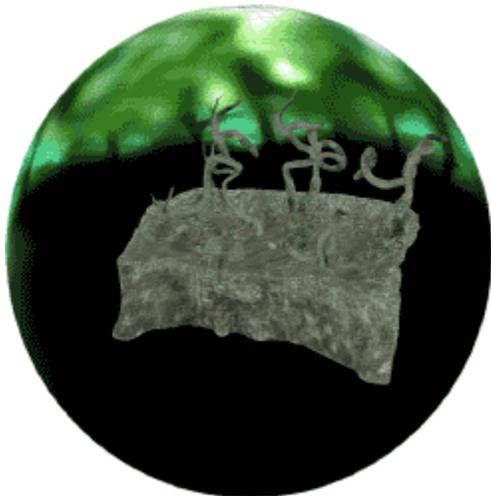
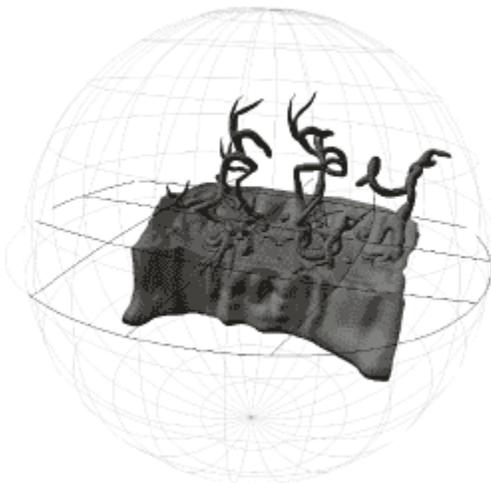
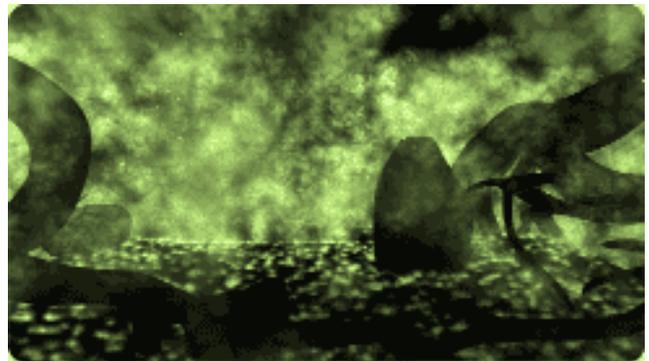
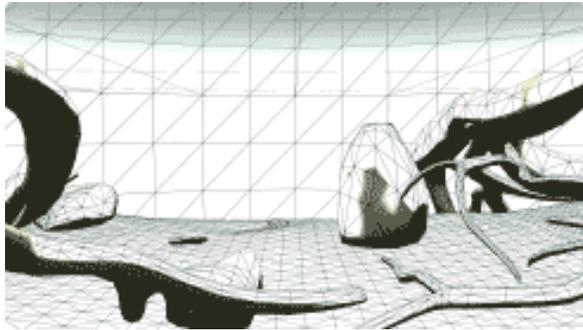
Plan had changed: Game character showcase now had a short high-detail animation production added to it. *Oh boy.*

## February 2009

Action takes place by ocean coast, underwater. Fishman escapes towards the light and the demonic fish chases. Environment creation was next.

I modeled an underwater bay with massive roots coming from above. The more I built, the more the story wanted to grow. Dangerous thing, that. Suddenly I was doing particle effects, great mats of flowing

seaweed and water caustics, colours, shadows and light projected from world above. It was slow work, endless testing. Early February was also when I started production rendering, my one computer laboring 24h hours a day – with limited power of course while I work.



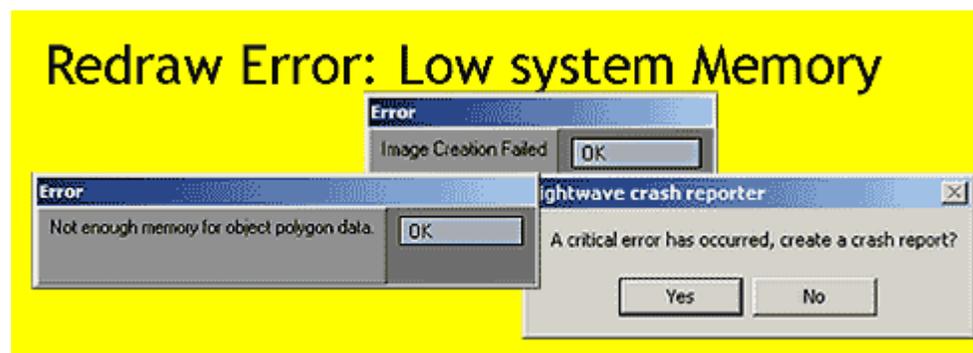
After that I could finally begin animating and of course discovered issues in the rigs and meshes that needed tweaking.



The tiny animation production had grown to inestimable size. And silly me went ahead optimistic. I knew it would take some time, though.

## March – June 2009

These 4 months were all divided somewhat like this: 1 week for animating, 2 for trying to make renders happen, and 1 for other technical problems. My ambition was too much for my computer, or, better said: **My goals were all wrong – high detail & HD instead of good story and animation.** Had to drop many cool features, optimize the scenes and renders, find workarounds and segment the workflow as much as possible to render at least one layer at a time. This in turn caused problems when things separated to several scenes had to interact with each other (shadows and more).



**In short most of the entire production was spent fighting limited resources, trying to make the render at all possible, and then render and re-render because it crashes over and over.** I count my computer rendered 5 months(!) around the clock giving me 12+ gigabytes of hd720p animation frames: characters, scene and effects all on separate layers. Combined it is 5-6 minutes of animation.

## July – September 2009

I spent a week or so combining animation frames to video clips in Vegas. Doing this it crashed 9 times out of 10. HD editing with more than 2 layers was again too much for my computer. The rendered clips revealed many faults in the animation, but there was no way I would go through the test'n crash-hell again to fix them.

I edited the animation down to 3 and half minutes. Following removed scene was an easy cut. It doesn't fit overall story pacing and both continuity and animation are lacking. In the clip the fish looks for the fishman but finds his discarded lamp instead.

A sound-savvy friend did the sound effects in August. I also had a musician working on the music, but our sensibilities didn't meet this time. In September I found another [musician](#). One of his compositions was almost a perfect match for the film pacing and length. So, on September 29th the final movie was complete.

## Results and things learned

The movie is now going to festivals. The first it was accepted to is Short Film Festival of Los Angeles. So even though it wasn't a sensible story-based production, it has some merits – people like it. I'm glad.

So what did I learn? I knew this is not the way to do an animation production but couldn't help myself. It was a technical challenge I set myself to finish, no matter what. I learned not to do production this way ever again. Also the process taught many practical things – some I've been sharing as tips. And finally I learned doing production the hard way doesn't necessarily mean the result is bad. But doing it 'right' would improve end result a lot and make whole process a great deal easier.

**Please don't get carried away with some half-baked project like I did. Be a realist and plan well to get the most out of your story and animation.**