

# Oppor-toon-ities in Animation and Computer Graphics

## Pamela Kleibrink Thompson

As a recruiter and career coach in the entertainment industry, I help companies find the people they need and help people find jobs. I have worked in all aspects of production and know what it takes to succeed in this field. I've worked in television, features, commercials and video games, starting with an animated ride film made with computers 23 years ago. This article will point out some highlights of the animation industry, and give six tips on how you can build your career.

There is no better time to enter the animation industry. There are lots of jobs for animators today. But it wasn't always that way.

### Animation Becomes Popular

Twenty-three years ago there were very few opportunities to work in animation. There were a few features but certainly no animated websites. Animation in video games was crude, if non-existent, and done by programmers. There were no special cable channels like the Cartoon Network dedicated to showing animation. TV animation was for kids. The idea that animated feature films could be profitable, or that anyone would watch animation on prime time television, was laughable. Then in 1986, Steven Spielberg commissioned a half-hour animated film for his *Amazing Stories* series, which was called *Family Dog*.

It was my job to set up a studio from scratch to produce that show. We converted an old warehouse in downtown L.A. — the cheapest space we could find. I obtained animation desks that Hanna-Barbera was going to throw away. The floor was concrete, and we had exposed plumbing. We had one telephone and one bathroom — it was primitive.

Yet *Family Dog* was the only animated project in town, so every animator wanted to be part of it — we had a team of very motivated artists who were excited to be working on a quality project. Many of them were students fresh out of school. Who were some of the artists that worked on that animated half hour?

Brad Bird, the director of *Family Dog*, went on to direct *Iron Giant* and *The Incredibles*. Many *Family Dog* artists became directors: animator Rob Minkoff directed *The Lion King* and *Stuart Little*; Chris Buck co-directed *Tarzan* with Kevin Lima, who directed *102 Dalmatians*; Don Paul directed *El Dorado*; Brenda Chapman directed *Prince of Egypt*; Kirk Wise directed *Beauty and the Beast* (which got a Best Picture nomination) as well as *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* and *Hunchback of Notre Dame*; Darrell Rooney directed

*Simba's Pride* and *Lady and the Tramp 2*, two commercially successful direct-to-video features; Rich Moore directed many episodes of *The Simpsons*, *Futurama*, *The Critic* and *Baby Blues*; Greg Vanzo directed episodes of *Futurama* and *The Maxx* and started his own studio called Rough Draft. Sue Kroyer established her own animation studio and produced *Fern Gully* with her husband, Bill; and Ralph Eggleston directed a fabulous short at Pixar and was a production designer on *Finding Nemo* and art director on *Toy Story*. The list goes on.



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opportunities for people  
interested in animation  
continue to grow.

All those people worked as artists in this little downtown warehouse on a small animated film because they loved animation and that was the only opportunity they had to animate.

Shortly after *Family Dog* came *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, and studios realized that animation wasn't just for kids anymore.

Then a startup network called Fox took a chance on a prime time animated series called *The Simpsons*. The ratings climbed in 1990 beating out the live action competition on the three major networks. As production manager on *The Simpsons*, I hired and supervised many of the artists, some of whom are still working on that show 14 years later. Now that's a steady job in animation. But that is very rare!

The public wanted more, so other prime time animated shows were made and it became obvious that adults loved animation too. Today there are entire networks devoted to animation.

In 1994, when *Lion King's* box office neared the billion-dollar mark, other studios thought they should tap into the animation box office bonanza and built studios, developed scripts and recruited animators. Disney wasn't the only animation player in town anymore. There

was Dreamworks, Fox Feature Animation and Warner Brothers. The competition for talent was intense. So intense, that I became a freelance recruiter for Fox, which was setting up a studio in Phoenix, AZ. I traveled the country meeting students in animation schools. In 1996, Disney employed me as a freelance recruiter to help them find the people they needed for their Florida studio, which was producing *Mulan*.

Business people understand about basic economics. Supply and demand. When the demand goes up, prices go up. That's exactly

what happened. The salaries of animators rose radically. I heard one story where an animator was called by an animation studio trying to recruit her. She said she was perfectly happy at the studio where she worked, and was making a good salary. The recruiter simply said, "Whatever you're making, put a one in front of it." It was a very good time to be an animator.

The cost of production increased dramatically. There was a lot of press about the need for talent, and about the astronomical salaries being offered.

Animation is big business. In 1994, *The Lion King* ruled with over \$787.4 million in worldwide box office. Other studios scrambled to catch the audience's appetite for animation. Ten years after the *Lion King's* success, in 2004, the trend continues. Audiences love great animated stories, whether drawn with the help of a computer or a pencil. *Finding Nemo* netted more than \$853.2 million in worldwide box office, toppling *The Lion King's* reign as the biggest animated box office take. It's not just the Disney films that can make money. Other studios have had success. Audiences fell in love with an ogre in 2001, and *Shrek* saw \$469.7 million in green. *Shrek 2* has added to the pile with \$395.3 million so far.

## Animation Interest Continues

With numbers like that and no stars to contend with, is it any wonder that studio and television executives are interested in animation? The animation industry will continue to grow with new outlets and expanding markets. You can grow with it with these six tips.

### Tip #1: Be Open to Opportunity

There are tremendous opportunities to work in the animation industry today. You can market your skills in features, prime time television, Saturday morning cartoons, syndicated series for television, cable, direct to video and on the Internet. Almost every website has some sort of animation, even if it's just a spinning logo. Video and computer games create a great need for animators, as do commercials. Those polar bears in the soft drink commercials exist only in a computer. Computer animation is used extensively in visual effects. Computer animation is used in legal recreations, industrial films and ride films. Animation can recreate an ancient city or prehistoric animals for a museum kiosk or film. Medical visualizations help train medical personnel in new surgical procedures or teach nurses about patient care. Animated films train technicians in new assembly techniques for the space station or help NASA scientists explain their projects to gain government funds. Animation is used in factories to train workers how to install engines into automobiles and in architecture firms to pre-visualize buildings and bridges. The field is expanding exponentially.

You no longer have to live near the major feature animation studios to work in the animation field. There are small studios everywhere providing animated websites for local businesses. Tiny shops can produce commercials and training films. There are video game companies all over the United States who are clamoring for animators. Explore your area for opportunities to work in animation. Get experience wherever you can.

In the animation industry you must be prepared for change. Be flexible. Take chances. You may be asked to relocate, to work in a part of the industry you didn't anticipate or in a specialty you didn't expect. Be open to opportunities. The more open you are to new opportunities, the quicker you will find work.

There are thousands of companies producing animation in some form. If you want to work at only one specific company, apply there, but be open to gaining experience at other places and building your career. It may take a long time to land a job at your dream company, but you will be building your skills, portfolio and network while you wait for the doors at your dream company to open.

### Tip #2: Learn the Basics First

A solid foundation in the principles of animation will give you the edge over those who went to schools that simply teach software or those that offer quickie degrees. Whether you work in computer animation or cel animation, whether you work in 3D or 2D, you must know the principles of animation, like squash and stretch, anticipation, staging, follow through and overlapping action. You must be an artist first. The software in demand might change, but the basic



animation principles are the same that Walt Disney used in the very first animated short he did with Mickey Mouse in 1928 and that the best animators still use today. A computer is simply a tool for the artist - a very expensive pencil. You can rely on the foundation of the principles of animation whether you work in prime time or Saturday morning television, video games or the Web, whether you direct a feature or open your own studio.

If you are a recent graduate, you must realize that your education has just begun, not ended. You will have a lifetime of learning. Learn from every animation or layout test you take, from every artist and director you work with, from every project or film you contribute to. Learn the latest software. Keep your skills up to date.

### Tip #3: Be Resourceful

With a wealth of resources to draw from, animators can learn from others through conferences like ACM SIGGRAPH, software specific user groups, or even through the Internet. Read the trade magazines like *Cinefx* and *Animation Magazine*, visit industry websites such as [awn.com](http://awn.com) and [highend3d.com](http://highend3d.com) and attend meetings of organizations like Women in Animation. Closely monitor what is going on in the industry so you'll be ready for whatever happens.

The Internet provides jobs for animators. Discussion groups and on-line courses help animators improve their skill by getting feedback from peers they have never met. But the Internet also provides something else. It is a distribution outlet for your creativity. You no longer have to sell your project to a studio or a network — you can show it directly to a worldwide audience. No censors, no broadcast standards; you can put on whatever you want.

### Tip #4: It Is Who You Know

When I first moved to Los Angeles, I thought I could do everything on my own. I didn't want help from anybody. I learned that to get ahead in any business, you have to help others and ask for help yourself. It's called networking. Everyone you went to school with and everyone you meet on every job you have can become part of your network. You will see those same faces again and again. Lend a helping hand, share information and help each other along the way. That's the path to success.

Market yourself. Don't wait for others to take control of your career. Don't rely on a recruiter or anyone to get you a job. You must make the calls, send out your work and go on the interviews. It's hard work to find work, but there are ways to make it easier.

Build your network. Stay in contact with the people you meet at school, at user group meetings, at animation related events. Provide support to each other. Join organizations like ACM SIGGRAPH and Women in Animation. Subscribe and contribute to user groups on the Web. Attend software user groups meetings. Attend trade shows and festivals. It's a great opportunity to network.

When you're looking for the next job, your network is the best resource. If the people you've worked with know you're reliable and professional and easy to get along with, they'll tell you about opportunities and help you get your next job. And, you'll always be looking for the next job.

Do your best on every job, even if it's not your ideal position. The people you meet on that job may be the ones you work with on the next one, and a good reputation is vital to getting hired.

Animation is a team sport. You might be working in the same room with other people

for 12 hours or more a day, under tough deadlines, with a great deal of stress. Make sure that you are pleasant to everyone you work with and everyone you meet. Be professional, be reliable, be a team player. You want to get invited to play again on that team. Remember what you learned in kindergarten. Work well with others.

Give it 110 percent and maintain a great attitude. That person working next to you might help you get your next job. Never be a putz. The one thing you can count on in your career as an animator is that you will look for work. Learn how to do it well. The best way to get a job is through friends. Make sure you make some friends while you are making money.

#### **Tip #5: Be Prepared**

Keep your resume, portfolio and demo reel up to date. Put your email address on your resume. And make sure your current phone number and area code are also on your resume. Keep your demo reel under three minutes. Quality, not quantity, counts. I heard a story about an animator who had one shot on his demo reel that lasted about 10 seconds. It was a shot of a photorealistic whale. It was so photorealistic that the people viewing the reel asked him what he had done on the reel since it looked like a clip from a Sea World promo. He said he did everything and told them how. They hired him on the spot, based on that 10-second shot.

Decide what sort of company you want to work for and what kind of work you want to do. Know what you are good at. Research the employers that interest you and market yourself well. Target your skills to meet their needs. Be flexible and open to the possibilities.

Being open to opportunities doesn't mean you can't target a specific company — everybody has a dream job. Research that company. Use the trade magazines, Internet, your network to find out what they do best, what skills are in demand. Then obtain the skills that will make you an attractive candidate. Stress those skills in your resume and demo reel.

The one thing you can count on is change, whether it is software or markets for your skills. Know what's happening in the industry.

Animate on your own. Practice your craft. Continue to build your portfolio. Continue to do life drawing. Draw every day. Get feedback on your work whenever you can. You can post it on the Web and ask others in user groups to take a look and critique it. Listen to what others tell you and improve your skills.

Once you get a job, don't go out and buy a BMW convertible. Put a little money away. There is no such thing as job security. It is likely that you will change jobs many times. There will be down times between jobs. Plan for those.

#### **Tip #6: Be Patient, Persistent and Professional**

Animators must be patient. That goes without saying doesn't it when it takes 12 drawings to make one second of animation? Computers have helped the process a bit, but it still takes a long time. Animators must also be patient when it comes to advancing your career. Remember it takes a lot of work.

If you pay attention to the rules of the game, you will write your own ticket. Or perhaps I should say, draw your own ticket.

The myth of the starving artist is gone. Artists work in all kinds of companies. You might work at a company modeling toys or cars, or creating educational software, or architectural walk-throughs. You might work at a company recreating accidents for courtrooms, or recreating dinosaurs for documentaries on television. Wherever you work, do your best and build your reputation and your career.

With new opportunities and freedom comes some creative responsibility. What kinds of stories do you want to tell? What kinds of images do you want to create? Remember the words of Walt Disney: "Animation can explain whatever the mind of man can conceive" and choose wisely. Think about what you want to contribute to the world.

The opportunities for people interested in animation continue to grow. Twenty-three years from now, there will be outlets and uses for animation we haven't dreamed of yet. Get ready for an exciting, fun career.

#### **Resources**

- <http://www.siggraph.org/> is a fabulous resource for educators and students. There are links to publications and companies.
- <http://mag.awn.com/> is a wonderful resource, not just for students and recent graduates, but also for anyone interested in an animation career.
- Pamela Thompson writes a monthly column called The Career Coach on [awn.com](http://www.awn.com), which also has sections devoted to job postings and other relevant topics of interest.

### **About the Contributor**

**Pamela Kleibrink Thompson** is a recruiter/hiring strategist and career coach. She is speaking at the SIGGRAPH 2004 conference as part of the educator's program on August 11: "Resumes and Demo Reels — If Yours Don't Work, Neither Do You." She speaks at conferences and universities on careers in the entertainment field. She can be reached at [PamRecruit@aol.com](mailto:PamRecruit@aol.com).