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Lemmings: A Student Animation

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Lemmings brought together eighteen students for one full year to work on a 5 minute computer animation. Such a learning experience broke the bonds of a normal artistic and technical education; it became a lesson in teamwork, leadership and hard work. The entire animation was student run and directed.

We begin by outlining the process used by Professors Brent R. Adams and Kelly Loosli to push students to new levels of professionalism and achievement. It is a process not limited to any field of study as much as it is a simple application of well-known principles. What is surprising about this process is the level of professionalism and dedication by such a large group of students. This type of group project is sure to become the standard for future educational programs throughout the different computer graphics communities.

Specific to creating an animated short as a large group project, here is an outline of what we did to keep the entire class involved.

- 1 Everyone pitched their story ideas and we voted for the best idea
- 2 Art Directors and Technical Directors were voted for by the class
- 3 Everyone presented character designs which we voted on
- 4 Everyone presented ideas for look and feel by bringing examples to show the class. As a class we discussed which ideas we would incorporate and which ones we wouldn't
- 5 The class was divided into groups such as Modeling, Lighting, Story, Concept Art, etc. according to the students individual choices. All students were allowed to work in their primary area of interest. Most students worked in multiple areas
- 6 Throughout the year the class came together to give feedback on different areas of production such as Story, Design, and Animation.
- 7 All students came to industry critiques even if the critique was specific to an area they hadn't worked in.

We are the first to admit there is much we could have done better. The biggest mistake we made was having the director double as the project manager. There needs to be one person who is solely concerned with deadlines and keeping track of production. With so many things going on it was hard to keep track of what stage the various groups were at and where we needed to concentrate our efforts. From early on we were not meeting deadlines and I was focusing work into areas that I was worried about. Technical problems received lots of attention while texturing was forgotten until late in the game.

We wanted a production manager from the Junior class. That would have given us a person that I would not feel badly about working on entirely uncreative work. As seniors our time needed to be keyed towards portfolio quality work. It also would have given the program someone who had already been through the process for the next years class as they started to work out their own project. I am sad that there are still a lot of questions between us and the younger classes. I get lots of questions from Juniors and Sophomores about what Lemmings is all about and how

we were doing things. It was a great idea. It just got lost in the shuffle and by the time we realized it was so important it was too late to bring someone else in.

We reinvented the wheel. There was a well established process for how industry produces quality animation. We ended up reinventing a lot of that process. I have put lots of thought into how this really affected us. It is true that we spent lots of time deciding how to set up our art reviews (which always remained informal meetings that happened at convenience rather than according to a schedule). We spent a lot of time coming up with brilliant strategies for workflow and pipeline. In short we spent lots of time talking and making decisions that could have just been laid out for us. That being said I'm not convinced that it was a bad thing. In some ways I think reinventing the process was important to the overall lesson we were trying to achieve. Working the whole thing out ourselves helped us commit to the decisions that we had made and still left the flexibility to throw away previous bad decisions under the anonymity of "reinventing the wheel". This is where I think the type of students involved in the project will decide whether this is a good or a bad thing. This program was designed to create leaders. For us it was a good thing. If your end goal is to just create an amazing film and you have a tight deadline then you will want to structure all of this for the students.

The success of *Lemmings* is reflected in the quality of the students that worked on it. The film is quite good (and I am quite biased). More important though, are the changes that occurred in the students who worked on it. Some of the students that I thought would initially be the most helpful had troubles taking ownership beyond themselves. It also became clear to those students that that was the case. And towards the end of production I saw changes in the way they worked. They really started to invest themselves, their attitudes became better, and they became easier work with.

Some students at the start of the film, I thought, were mediocre in their skills and talent. I was surprised by the dedication they showed right from the start. Their ability to work hard from the very start was a boon to the project and an example to the rest of the class. By the end of the project not only had their skills improved beyond any instruction, they had also gained confidence in themselves and had proven to be leaders of the best kind, example.

Of The *Lemmings* Students that worked on the film over half of them received jobs in the animation market. Most getting into highly coveted Hollywood Visual FX jobs. If *Lemmings* had been about making a great little film then we succeeded. The film won a Student Emmy. But the truth is it was about making professionals out of students. In that we succeeded as well. The nice little film was a by-product of that.