

SECOND EDITION

# ANIMATED STORYTELLING

SIMPLE STEPS FOR CREATING  
ANIMATION & MOTION GRAPHICS



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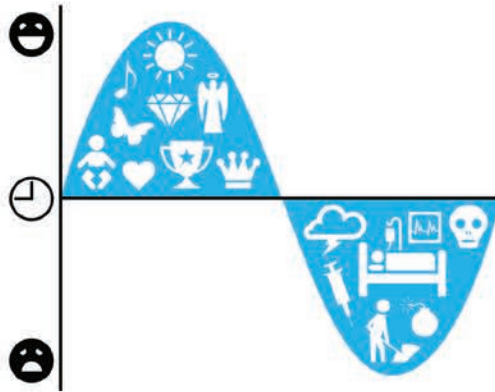
When the man left the library (in a bit of a hurry) my hour was up, so I stopped my spying and got to the writing assignment. I decided that the man had a big problem: His hands had become magnetic! Metals now stuck to his fingers, and the problem was quickly spreading to his entire body. He tried to research what his condition might be online but the magnetization in his hands made his computer go haywire. His only choice was to head to the local library in search of answers!

I'm the first to admit that my imagination took a turn toward the fantastic, and this was probably just an overdressed dude with cold hands looking for some winter reading. But he had become my character, and I had discovered his secret, and therefore I could take my story anywhere I wanted. I'd already come up with a dozen different scenarios that might play out for my magnetic man. Some were dangerous, some hilarious, but all derived from this simple exercise.

So, follow *your* character around for a while. Spy on them. And ask this simple question: *What is your character's secret?* And feel free to take the questioning a step further. *What is your character's biggest fear? What is the one thing they can't live without? Who is their best friend? Worst enemy, etc.?* Take these and other questions out for a spin as you spy on your character and try to gain a deeper understanding of their inner workings and motivations. This information will help you propel them forward into more interesting stories.

## **Exercise #4 Get Graph-y**

While Kurt Vonnegut is best known for his satirical novels (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat's Cradle*, etc.), his rejected anthropology master's thesis on "The Shapes of Stories" may be his greatest gift to storytellers. Vonnegut's thesis proposal was a series of graphs that illustrated the plots of what he claimed to be the most popular types of stories. He described these stories to fit into three archetypal categories: "Man in Hole" (but it doesn't have to be a man or a hole, just a character who encounters trouble and then gets out of it); "Boy Meets Girl" (but it doesn't have to be a boy meeting a girl, just a character



### Man in Hole



The main character gets into trouble then gets out of it again and ends up better off for the experience.



Arsenic and Old Lace  
Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle

### Boy Meets Girl



The main character comes across something wonderful, gets it, loses it, then gets it back forever.



Jane Eyre  
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

### From Bad to Worse



The main character starts off poorly then gets continually worse with no hope for improvement.



The Metamorphosis  
The Twilight Zone

### Cinderella



It was the similarity between the shapes of Cinderella and the New Testament that thrilled Vonnegut for the first time in 1947 and then over the course of his life as he continued to write essays and give lectures on the shapes of stories.

### Creation Story



In many cultures' creation stories, humankind receives incremental gifts from a deity. First major staples like the earth and sky, then smaller things like sparrows and cell phones. Not a common shape for Western stories, however.

### Which Way Is Up?



The story has a lifelike ambiguity that keeps us from knowing if new developments are good or bad.



Hamlet  
The Sopranos



who finds something they treasure, loses it, and then gets it back), and finally “Cinderella” (but it doesn’t have to be Cinderella meeting her Prince, but a character whose life is in the dumps, who is given a chance to experience happiness, must then retreat from that happiness, all before gaining it back at the last moment).

He drew up graphs (beautifully redesigned on the previous page by Maya Eilam) that expressed those stories on a horizontal “Beginning-to-End” axis and a vertical or “Ill Fortune-to-Great Fortune” axis. Said Vonnegut: “It was rejected because it was so simple and looked like too much fun.”

These graphs may indeed seem over-simplistic, but if you’ve read any of Vonnegut’s work you know that he was anything but a clichéd writer. His stories seemed to have their own shape entirely, and yet he would probably argue that all fell into the shape of one of these simple graphs. His point was that stories must travel along a dramatic timeline, where conflict (either internal or external) triggers action and leads characters on emotional rollercoasters that may lead them on a wild journey, even if they end up in the very place they began.

Now that your story has clear and prominent conflicts, begins at the right place, and features characters with interesting secrets to motivate them (see Exercises #1–3), it should be easy to draw the arc of your story into one of Vonnegut’s graphs. Hopefully, just seeing that arc laid out visually will give you a better perspective on how your protagonist is reacting to their conflict. If your arc seems too flat, then you may want to adjust the structure of your story for increased drama. Perhaps nudging your story to match one of Vonnegut’s “classic story arcs” will guide you toward a stronger and more dramatic story. According to Vonnegut, these are shapes of stories that “people just can’t get enough of.” So why not give it a try?

## PART 2: THE EXPERIMENTAL FORM

Okay, we've just completed a full body workout on narrative story. But what if the story that you want to tell isn't really narrative at all. How can you know if you want to make an experimental film that lives outside the narrative or nonlinear structures you've been following so far in this book?

Let's start by answering a few questions: When you think about the story you want to tell, do the images in your head veer toward dream-like, abstract, or surreal? Does your need to experiment with forms and materials seem to be ruling your storytelling process? Do you find the prospect of exploring new territory in terms of story structure especially exciting when it comes to your story?

If you said yes to any of these questions, then you may indeed be making an *experimental film!* This is exciting, as some of my favorite animated films are experimental and many of the big prize-winners at the festivals are, too.

### NOTE FOR MOTION GRAPHICS

Historically, title sequences for film and television (in particular) have been a breeding ground for experimentation and nonlinear storytelling. Title designers are known to value a process-oriented approach, often sculpting the direction of their sequence as they try out new techniques and story structures. If you are interested in creating motion graphics for film and television, I encourage you to pay close attention to the tools in this chapter.

0M0



0M0



Realizing that you are (or might be at some point) making an experimental film is a big step. It gives you the freedom to shed many of the rules of traditional structure and focus on the powerful vision (or visions) that motivated you to make a film in the first place. As experimental animator and educator Mike Enright describes the experimental process: “Filmmakers may begin with a memory or vision that is so profound that it must manifest, and that’s where the process starts—before even laying out structure.” Enright puts materials and discovery of techniques at the forefront of his process, leaving behind much of the usual pre-production methodology. He gathers and edits scenes, plays with images and ideas, and lets himself dig around for inspiration and truth, even if it feels uncomfortable. Robert Lyons (another tremendously talented experimental filmmaker) identifies “discomfort” as a key part of his method: “It is a process of discovery, so you have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable and willing to accept failure. Not everything is going to work, but magic happens when you are willing to accept the possibility of failure.” I particularly like Lyons’ quote because it is an encouragement baked into a warning: As an experimental filmmaker you are going on a road trip without a map, and while getting to your destination may be time-consuming and even frustrating at times, you will be forging your own path, and that will make all the difference.

Below, I’ve laid out six unique types of experimental animation to guide and inspire you. I’ve done my best to explain the concepts and how you might approach them with your own story, and I have curated a list of films that I urge you to watch online, since these films have achieved success in that specialized category of experimental film.

**Ariel Costa**, *R&D Los Angeles*, poster (opposite)