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Scaél Eitilt (Flying Story)

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Scaél Eitilt (Flight Story)

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The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Project Board:

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Artist’s Statement

I seek to be a storyteller as well as an artist in my work. I am fascinated by the ability of well-told stories to stick with people long after the tale is finished. One of the most well-known examples of this is the fairytale, which is told repeatedly to children and is remembered long enough for its lessons to be passed on to the next generation. My own tale, *Scéal Eitilt* or *Flight Story*, is a 2D animated short featuring Lucy, a young witch who is curious to a fault. Using fantasy and fairy tale elements, along with a touch of Irish architecture, *Flight Story* speaks to the consequences of curiosity without compassion, and the importance of looking outside of ourselves to see the consequences of our actions on others.
Acknowledgements

I would like to start by thanking my parents, Cynthia and Robert Person, for steadfastly supporting me over the last four years. Becoming an art major was not part of the original plan, but they took the news in stride. After asking practical questions to make sure I knew what I was getting myself into, they proceeded to cheer me on from the sidelines with enthusiasm. I love you with exceeding love.

I am immensely grateful to my first reader, Professor Steve Prince, and my second reader, Professor Amara Geffen, for providing advice and support not only during this past semester, but over the last four years. You both recognized my potential as an art major before I recognized it in myself. It has been an honor and a joy to learn from both of you.

Thank you to all of my friends who watched some of the earliest versions of this project and provided feedback. Thank you especially to Emma Rockenbeck and Zachariah Sullivan for letting me talk your ears off and providing storytelling advice from the Communication Arts and English perspectives. Our conversations kept me inspired during the most exhausting moments of the semester.
Scaél Eitilt or *Flying Story* is a keyframe animated short film featuring a witch named Lucy and her cat. The film opens with two bees flying through the open window of a tower as a band of three mice tune instruments while they sit upon the windowsill. Inside, one of the bees lands on a book open to the beginning of a chapter titled “Beginner’s Flight Spells”. Below the title is a warning in bold: *Do not practice on living creatures*. As the second bee prepares to land next to the first, we see the mice raise their instruments in preparation before the book suddenly slams shut, triggering the mice’s music. The second bee, scared and startled, quickly flies away. We see Lucy holding the book and, eager to test the spell despite the book’s warning, she prepares to practice the flight spell on her cat. In her first attempt, her cat grows wings and a beak, which are so alien to the cat that he awkwardly flies briefly before crashing to the ground. The second time, rather than making her cat fly, Lucy unintentionally turns her cat into a fly. On the third casting, the cat inflates like a balloon, and becomes so large that he lifts Lucy into the air and crashes through the ceiling of the tower and into the sky. The bee, seeing an opportunity to avenge his friend, pops the inflated cat, causing both the cat and witch to fly through the air before falling back down the hole in the tower roof. Both believe they are going to fall to their deaths until, right before they hit the ground, the flight spell takes proper effect – the cat is flying, allowing both the cat and the witch to hover safely right above the ground! Confused, but delighted, the witch safely drops from the cat to the floor of her now messy, disordered library. The music comes to a halt as a particularly large pile of books falls over, leaving a copy of *Daedalus and Icarus* next to Lucy.

*Flying Story* is a very short, sweet story, but that is not why I created it – at least, not the only reason. I seek to be a storyteller as well as an artist in my work. I am fascinated by the
ability of well told stories to stick with people long after the tale is finished, inspiring empathy and a better understanding of others and oneself. One of the most well-known examples of this is the fairytale, the type of story that virtually everyone hears as children and is remembered long after it is told, long enough for its lessons to be passed on to the next generation. According to a recent study, many of the fairy tales we know today have origins that are thousands of years old. For example, “Beauty and the Beast”, which was first written down in the 17th and 18th centuries, now has proven roots somewhere between 2500 and 6000 years ago (Silva 8). The oldest of the stories studied, “The Smith and the Devil”, was traced all the way back to the Bronze Age (Silva 1). Though I may not have been able to create something with the staying power of “Beauty and the Beast”, I wanted some of the fairy tale elements and images that we have come to equivocate with such stories (such as magic spells, soaring towers, and intelligent animals) to guide the visuals in my work. Like modern fairy tales, I wanted Flying Story to raise questions and inspire inward contemplation in a lighthearted way. Through engaging environment and character designs containing layers of visual symbolism, I wanted audiences to be able to watch and consider this story multiple times while still finding new details that added to the viewing experience.

This is also why I chose animation – specifically 2D hand drawn animation – as a medium. Although animation has a history of being associated with frivolous comic humor devoid of thoughtfulness and meaning, this medium has always inspired fascination in its audiences and possesses a unique ability to carry powerful messages and morals with lighthearted grace. Its champions knew this – Winsor McCay, often called The Father of American Animated Film, swore to animation’s ability to empower artists to make anything they could dream of possible. He saw animation as a fine art, and was heartbroken when he
saw the commercial industry taking to it faster than the fine art world (Solomon 18). Walt Disney himself said:

“I have had a stubborn, blind confidence in the cartoon medium, a determination to show the skeptics that the animated cartoon was deserving of a better place; that it was more than a novelty; that it could be one of the greatest mediums of fantasy and entertainment yet developed.”

Before I delve more specifically into why I chose keyframe animation for this project, let me start with a brief history. The roots of animation go back to 1645 when a Dutchman named Athanasius Kircher, a Jesuit scholar and inventor, invented the Magic Lantern. It was a box with a light source and a curved mirror with an image painted on a clear sheet in front of it – essentially, a projector. Fifty years later, a man by the name of van Musschenbroeck found a way to place a series of sequential images in front of the box to create the illusion of motion – the first animated entertainment (Solomon 3). Magic Lanterns were a common sight among traveling showmen in the 18th century. Throughout the 19th century, various gizmos and gadgets were invented using sequential images that imitated movement, including the Thaumatrope, the Zoetrope, and the Kineograph (or flip book) created by Thomas Edison. In 1897, James Blackton and Albert Smith used a variation of Edison’s Kineograph to open the Vitagraph Company, which became one of the first and most important film studios of the Silent Era of animation, eventually being sold to the Warner Brothers in 1929 (Solomon 14).

While Blackton was inventing animated film making, Winsor McCay earned the title of Father of American Animated Film by discovering the artistic potential of the medium
through his film “Gertie the Dinosaur”. It features a Brontosaurus named Gertie, who is
introduced by McCay and asked to do various things to entertain the audience. Gertie is

![Gertie the Dinosaur, 1914, ink on paper, Museum of Modern Art, Museum of Modern Art Online](image)

initially shy, but proves to have a big personality, being stubborn and often choosing to eat the
foliage around her or pick fights with other dinosaurs instead of listening to instructions.

_Gertie the Dinosaur_ is considered the first character animation, and McCay the first true
character animator, because Gertie showed animation’s true potential to create the illusion of
life on screen (Solomon 17). The animations of Blackton and his contemporaries were mostly
strings of visual gags for a quick laugh, with no story or character depth. Through 10,000
sequential ink drawings, McCay not only brought an extinct creature back to life through the
Vaudeville shows he put on with Gertie, but created a character with enough personality that
audiences connected to and cared for this drawn creature. McCay’s work is also one of the
earliest examples of keyframe animation, where the start and end of a movement is drawn
before the “in-betweens” are added. This is a more reliable alternative to the more
unpredictable frame-by-frame animation where animators work on each frame sequentially.
and let the movement organically develop. McCay was an inspiration for some of the first Disney animators, and his work still holds up to a modern viewership.

McCay’s work influenced me heavily as an animator, both technically and creatively. Creatively, his work is inspiring due to its staying power. McCay presented *Gertie the Dinosaur* for the first time on his Vaudeville style tour in 1914, and over a century later, the modern viewer will still find this amicable dinosaur entertaining. Like McCay, I think audiences find animation alluring due to its fantastic nature – anything the animator can imagine is possible. This creates a space in which audiences are prepared to suspend their disbelief in order to see where the animator will take them. In this way, animation and fairy tales have always seemed like a natural pair – the nature of both subjects encourages audiences to be prepared to suspend their disbelief, allowing for easier immersion into the story. McCay used his audience’s suspension to bring a dinosaur to life. I have used my audience’s suspension of disbelief to bring a variation of fairy tale magic to life in order to raise questions in a subtle and entertaining way.

As previously mentioned, McCay invented keyframe animation, which allows the artist to make purposeful acting choices when planning a character’s movements instead of blindly forging ahead frame by frame. Like most contemporary animators, I used this process to give me a clearer vision of my film before animating. Although I had a rough outline of how my film was going to look through the storyboard I created at the beginning of the semester, placing all of the keyframes in the timeline of my animating program let me watch a smoother version of the film that gave me a feel for how my characters would move, which sequences were working, and which ones needed to be rewritten and redrawn. Since animating is time
consuming and it is incredibly painful to throw away fully animated scenes when one is on such a short deadline, this was extremely valuable for this project.

Each of the keyframes (around eighty in all) was drawn by hand on paper in order to give the animation a more organic and expressive look, while the in-betweens were drawn using a Wacom brand tablet in Adobe Animate CC. The entire film was made up of 1600 frames at the standard speed of 24 frames per second, and between each keyframe, there were usually 2-3 in-between drawings used to complete any given action. In order to expedite the process, I reused movements wherever I could. For example, I only had to animate Lucy waving her wand once. I then copied and pasted those frames and made minor changes to her expression so I could use that animation whenever she waved her wand later. Although I considered drawing the in-betweens in pencil as well, the time it would have taken to integrate hundreds of drawings into the animation software was simply impractical. Even professional animation studios, which were slow to integrate computers into any part of the animation process during the last few decades of the 20th century, eventually had to admit that ignoring the perks of integrating traditional and computer animation was impractical and silly (Sato 223). The work of British animator Simon Tofield confirmed that I was approaching this project in a reasonable way. Tofield's animated web series *Simon's Cat* features a hungry house cat who uses increasingly heavy-handed tactics to get his owner to feed him. I initially used the series as a study tool for how to animate cats in
a convincing and amusing way. I discovered that not only does the series have a similar style to my own, but Tofield uses the same tools for animating that I do (a Wacom tablet and Adobe Animate CC). He completes each of his episodes in about 10-14 weeks, the same amount of time that I have had available to me. Throughout the semester, I used Simon’s Cat to gauge which of my ideas were reasonable and which were too time consuming to animate within the bounds of my deadline.

*Flight Story* is heavily inspired by *The Secret of Kells*, a French-Belgian-Irish animated fantasy film created by the studio Cartoon Saloon about the mythos surrounding the illuminated text *The Book of Kells*. The film takes place at a monastery in Kells, at the center of which is tower that struck me as very reminiscent of the kind of structure where Rapunzel or some other fairy tale princess would be trapped. Through research, I discovered that the structure is called an Irish Round Tower. There are only sixty five round towers left standing (Lalor 55), and they are thought to have been used as bell towers, treasuries, small libraries, or, as in *The Secret of Kells*, places of refuge during Viking attacks (Lalor 67). The towers were
always built near monasteries, so although many monasteries are no longer standing, remaining towers have allowed anthropologists to find where the monasteries once were.

Initially, I thought it would not make sense to use the round tower as my setting, since a religious structure seemed like an odd place for a witch. However, as I began breaking down and analyzing my story, I was struck by the symbolic possibilities setting this story in a round tower provided. As part of a monastery, the tower is a sort of elevated holy space. Books and the higher learning they provide help us to understand ourselves and the world we live in which, in a religious context, could be considered a form of understanding God and His creation. In this way, Lucy’s studious curiosity and persistence in exploring her own magical abilities is an admirable trait. In her relentless pursuit of knowledge, however, she lacks compassion, and unintentionally harms the creatures around her. For Lucy, the tower acts as a personal refuge, allowing her to recklessly sate her curiosity without having to recognize the consequences of her actions. It is not until she has put her own life at stake, breaking out of her comfort zone through the tower roof, that she recognizes her hubris. Like Icarus, she ignores the warnings of her elders by ignoring the warning in her book. In her eagerness to know whether she can successfully make her cat fly, she is not prepared for the results when she does – and the consequence is falling. Though she survives, she recognizes her folly, as
shown by the wry look she gives the copy of “Daedalus and Icarus” that slides next to her at the end.

Elizabeth Person, *Scael Eitilt (Flying Story)*, 2017, Pencil and Digital Animation

Since the Irish round tower worked out so well as my setting, I dug deeper into *The Secret of Kells* to find more inspiring material. While designing Lucy’s library, I kept the environments in this film nearby for reference and inspiration. Although the inside of the tower in the film was purposefully quite bare, the alchemy scene where two of the characters mix up some ink for illuminating *The Book of Kells* provided lots of inspiration for the props on Lucy’s table and around her room. The film also features a cat named Pangur ban who, like Simon’s Cat, I carefully studied to see how they animated his graceful movements. When I designed the monk and goat walking near the monastery while Lucy flies through the air, I studied the numerous creative monk and animal designs from *Kells* with the intent of creating visual foils to Lucy and her cat. While Lucy and her cat represent the reckless curiosity of the young, the monk and goat are the wiser, more thoughtful nature of age. Like the warning in the book, the monk is meant to act as a symbolic Daedalus to Lucy’s Icarus.
This project has been invaluable to my development as an artist, and it has been an amazing experience. But as one would expect, there are things I would have done differently were I to do this project again. The most significant lesson was in time management. Managing a project with as many moving parts as an animated short takes practice, and while the final product made it off of my one-person production line, I plan on organizing my projects differently in the future. I avoided fully animating anything for as long as possible in order to allow for easy edits to the flow of the story, which was a wise choice overall. However, there are some key scenes that, as I expected, did not change much. These include the opening bee sequence and most of the spell casting in the tower library. It would have saved a lot of time if I had allowed myself to start animating these scenes earlier in the semester while I developed the otherwise tentative storyboard. I would also have liked to push the character designs more, but since the development process happened very swiftly over winter break and the first weeks of the Spring semester, character designing blended together with storyboarding and key framing.

At this time last year, I was teaching myself to animate a walking cycle in the hopes of integrating animation into my senior project. The following Fall, I spent six months as an
intern and student to animator Debra Solomon in New York City. As an artist who began her career as an illustrator before teaching herself to animate, Ms. Solomon taught me that an animator is a jack of all trades - not only an illustrator, but also a writer, actor, set designer, and sound mixer. If there is anything the animator cannot do, then they seek out someone who can. My experience as her intern was inspiring, and I realized that the only way to learn this painstaking and highly rewarding art was to jump in head first. It was also made clear, however, that this was not a journey that would last one semester, but a lifetime. *Flying Story* has allowed me to apply everything I learned during my Allegheny career to writing, storyboarding, and animating an entire animated short of my own in only four months. This is only the first step in what I hope will be a long and rewarding storytelling career.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


