

# **INSIDE THE STUDIO**

**A Survivor's Guide**

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# Preface

An animation student I had taught in college got in contact with me two years ago. He talked to me about how his vision of what he thought it was going to be like in a studio was not matching what his expectations were. He was concerned about how to navigate studio politics and how to go about being a better studio animator.

He was coming to the realization that it is not just about having a strong demo reel and a great attitude. That is indeed what gets you into the studio. However, once you're in, there are a whole host of other skills that need to be developed in order to stay successful for the long haul.

In a nutshell, **there is a pretty deep mental game involved** and this presentation is all about me sharing my experiences so that it may help you succeed once you get in. Since my initial talk with that student, he felt very different, and realized he could be doing things better. Both artistically and personally.

So I decided on shedding light on this important topic for other animation students, so you can truly bring your energy and passion into the industry and continue to let it grow.

# Attitude

The most common advice on attitude is to have a positive one. This is, of course, easier said than done. It's normal to have bad days, we're only human. It's what you do with both the good and bad days that can make or break your success and overall fulfillment in the job.

I've found that steadiness and consistency is the key, and a proactive attitude is your best weapon. Recognize the bad days, reflect on what made them bad, then let them go. Embrace the good days, reflect on what made them good. These nuggets of personal learning you collect can keep you extremely motivated.

The scale of the successes and failures change but both will always happen

## 1. Successes:

- Getting picked up on a show
- Nailing your shots
- Making a big contribution to a worthwhile project

## 2. Failures:

- Shots revised
- Missing deadlines
- Shots recast
- Not having a contract picked up

How you react to your circumstances says as much about you as an animator as your work. The best advice I can give is to try to stay humble after success and to try and reset after failure.

Not every success or failure is a representation of your abilities. You may struggle with a shot, a sequence or even for an entire show. It does not mean you are not a good animator. You may just be working on something that lays outside your sensibilities.

On the flip side you may kick ass and work your way up into a top position on one show, but not hold that position when moved to the next. You can never *expect* special treatment because of your achievements, and don't be bummed if you don't get it. Try to maintain a steady professional attitude and this will speak volumes.

This applies to both 2D animators and 3D-CG animators.

Sometimes you get promoted to a Lead Animator or Scene Planning position for one project, but get bumped back down to Animator on the next. This could be because the other production that was happening in the studio has wrapped up, and the senior animator or supervisor of that production has moved on to the project you've been assigned to.

A returning veteran animator has seniority over you, and that could be the only reason why you've been demoted. So don't take it personally.

There's usually multiple productions going on in the studio, you may REALLY want to work on one project but you get placed on the less desirable one.

The Production Manager or Director has decided which animation artists belong on which production due to each individual's skill sets and the schedule of the projects and how they overlap. Sometimes you need to speak up to your supervisor/director to make it known that you'd like to work on the other production, often they can accommodate.

But don't get all bumped out if you can't transfer over, sometimes you have to work on the other project because that's where your skills are needed. The Directors and Production Supervisors must always keep in mind what is best for the production before all else

# Ego

**The advice you will typically hear around EGO is, “Check your ego.”**

I believe it is in your best interest to be a pleasant person to work with. There will be egos. Expect it. How you handle yourself will truly make or break your success at that studio.

Checking your ego only works when everyone else checks theirs as well - which typically does not happen. There will be situations where this happens and they're great, and there will be times where you will need to have the confidence to stand up for yourself as well.



## **Building your confidence level:**

Checking your ego and being humble does not mean putting down your work. In a “safe work environment” such as college this may work, but in a professional environment you will be lowering people’s expectations of your work.

Having Confidence is part of the job. Your job as an animator is to deliver the best solution on the shots you are given.

Doing so requires having some level of confidence in your abilities. Failure can come from presenting half baked ideas on screen because of a lack in confidence or defaulting to other peoples opinions. Getting input is KEY to a successful shot, and bringing your best to the table first shows that you are indeed giving your best.

You will get notes on most shots you take on. That doesn't mean you can switch off and rely on other people's opinions moving forward.

# Your Growth as an Animator

The typical animator's journey into the industry looks like this:

- Get into animation.
- Struggle at first.
- Start to crack the learning curve and make fast improvements.
- Finally get your first animation gig.
- Struggle a bit getting up to speed once you get in the door.
- Hit a stride and kick some butt.
- Run into some inconsistency
  - Some shots you hit, some shots you miss.
- Get on great show you start to make real progress.
- End up on a tough show, where you level off or stop making progress.

### **It's a non-linear path. Why?... Well for a number of reasons:**

- Talent - you need to build it. It takes time and practice.
- Skill level - where you're in your skill sets is indicative of the type of job you'll be ready for.
- Experience - the more you have typically the more desirable you'll be.
- Situation - relocation, work visas, family, etc.

### **Expectations of what it's like in a studio:**

1. We pick up certain things in college, at jobs in smaller studios. Working on a smaller project can be a greater opportunity for creative input. The larger the studio the more specialized your department will be. The smaller the studio the more you'll be expected to do different things .
2. The transition from one studio to another can be a gradual one.
3. In most cases you will be starting in a smaller roll (intern, junior position, assistant animator, clean-up artist, design line art) and building up to you're your ideal role.

## **In a perfect world, every animator would:**

- Work at their studio of choice.
- On a project that they feel strongly about.
- Make a meaningful creative contribution to the project(s).
- Be part of a supportive crew that values their work and respects their opinion.

## **The reality of this job:**

- Every once in a while, all of these elements will come together. However, It is rare to have them all fall into place at once even at the best of studios.
- As pros we must find ways to do our best work and find creative satisfaction even while we're not working under optimal conditions.
- As an entry level animator, and a lot of times as a mid-level animator, a lot of these factors come down to breaks, which means, for the most part, things that are out of our control.

# The Breaks

In this business sometimes you catch the breaks and sometimes you don't. Opportunities don't always line up with qualifications. Luck and timing definitely play a factor.

## **Breaks include:**

- **Getting Hired** – Timing / Luck
- **Which Project** – There may be a show in the works that's right up your alley but your skills are needed on a different show. Do the best you can with the production and scenes that you are given, see if there's an opportunity to work on the other (cooler) project as well.
- **Your Supervisors**
  - A) Different Supervisors have different styles
  - B) Some Supervisors like to build up their teams
  - C) Some like to personally control their characters or episodes.

## Animation Roles

There are different rolls for animators some are more glamorous than others. These roles include:

- **Character Specific:** Someone who is great with their acting sensibilities.
- **Technical Animator:** Someone who can handle the tough technical shots; e.g. multiple characters.
- **Physical Animator:** Someone who can do the tough physical shots. e.g. high-speed action scenes
- **Utility Animator:** Someone who is good at a little bit of all of these things, the jack-of-all-trades.
- **Ninjamator:** The elusive animator who comes in cover of darkness to fix and improve your scenes under the director's orders, this person is usually a Lead or Supervising animator.

## Thoughts and best practices:

1. The biggest complaint from animators is that they feel they are not being used to their full potential.

It's not always production's goal to use you to your full potential. The goal is to get the series or film done at a consistently high quality within a tight schedule.

2. It's important to realize that the breaks are just that, and are, in most cases, out of your control.

You could end up spending energy worrying about this stuff to the point where it affects your work and attitude.

3. The best practice is to make the most of the opportunities that present themselves.

4. Try not to take it too hard when you miss the breaks because there will be other opportunities.

No one opportunity will make or break your career in animation. Let your skills and your motivation speak for themselves



# Shot Casting

## What is casting?

Casting is the distribution of shots to the animators. Casting is typically done by the directing animator with the help of the supervising animators. Casting happens over the duration of a series or film as new sequences become available.

Casting is something that can have a profound affect on an animator's experience on a given film or series. There are a lot of factors that determine who gets cast onto shots. Let's take a deeper look.

Also, "Shot Issuing" is when the director talks to the animator about the scenes. Acting choices, timing, the attitude and feeling of the scene and what is the shot's purpose.

## What determines casting?

- Experience
- Skill set
- Personal style
- Speed
- Sensibility
- Momentum
- Inventory/availability
- Trust in you by your Supervisor/Director

When I was an animator, I used to think a good shot was a long, juicy acting shot. Now that I've been planning & directing animation all these years, I believe a good shot is one that has something special. You may think this means the "money" shots on a film or TV episode, but really I believe it can be even the simple "throw away" shots that can be some of the most memorable in a movie or series.

With experience I've learned that it's a lot easier to pick out the good shots after they are animated. Waiting for "good shots" can be a bit of a scapegoat. Don't wait, work to make every scene you have to be a great shot; a good director will pull you back if you're going overboard and will encourage you when you're nailing it.

## What are considered less desirable shots?

Some would say:

1. Crowd shots- secondary characters.
2. Smaller shots out of continuity.
3. Wide shots where characters are small and barely visible.

### Examples:



- **Puss in Boots** - The 'eyes' shot: a typical "throw away" shot turned into something incredibly iconic.
- **Rise of the Guardians** - Crowd shots offer opportunities to really show a variety of character.
- **How to train your dragon** - Short, simple reaction shots turned into a very memorable moment in the film.

## **How do you work up in casting?**

1. The obvious answer is kicking ass on your shots.
2. By presenting well thought out ideas.
3. Delivering shots on time or ahead of schedule.
4. Building a trust with your supervisor and director
  - Bounce ideas off them early.
5. Making sure that you are animating for the show not animating for your reel.
6. Make good shots great.
7. Speed (which we'll talk about later)

## **What negatively affects your casting?**

1. Taking too long on a shot and going over the allotted time budget. It happens from time to time, but it should not happen consistently.
2. Rushing to get the shot out and not putting your best effort in.
3. Missing the point of the shot.

## **How to handle undercasting (not being utilized to your full potential.)**

- Challenge yourself.
- Stay engaged.
- Work to get your shots in on or slightly ahead of time and bring great ideas and attitude with each new shot you get.

# Speed

Animators are required to hit quotas. On each project their footage output is recorded and shared with future shows so production can better plan and schedule how long they think a particular film or series will take to complete.

## **How you develop speed?**

- Have a clear idea of the shots intention before you begin.
- Show your progress to your supervisor, early and often.  
Make sure that the director is on board with your ideas. This is the single biggest piece of advice we can give you for speed. If you “hold onto your shots” too long you are bound to be wasting time and may need to redo big sections that may not be reading well.
- Have a good understanding of the approval process.  
Know at what states your leads and director want to see the shots. Do not got past the “point of no return” until your shots performance has been approved.

- Spend your energy where it is needed:
  - a. Economy in your shots - work first on the things you see. Then, if there is time, which there rarely is, you can work on all the other details of the shot.
  - b. Foreground vs background - foreground deserves the attention if that's where the audience is supposed to be looking.

**Don't beat yourself up about being a fast animator.**

Speed develops with time and the good news is that you're not going to be getting A+ shots at a studio on day one. They will give you simple shots in the beginning so you can learn their pipeline process, having a good attitude when receiving retakes, giving and getting feedback, etc.



# Feedback

- **1. The feedback loop changes from show to show.**
- Understanding Dailies and Rounds.
  - Dailies: sit down reviews with your peers, leads, supervisors and director.
  - Rounds: walk around visits to your desk by the supervisors and directors.
- **Know what type of forum it is in dailies.**
  - Are opinions being solicited?
  - In most cases It is a presentation of work to the directors for *their* feedback.
  - Getting multiple sources of feedback is often disruptive for a shot, but depending on a studio's pipeline, this could be inevitable, go with the flow, try to incorporate all your bosses' opinions.
  - Sit back and observe the etiquette and be sure to respect it.

## **Different directors and supervisors have different expectations from animators:**

- Some will value your opinion, some won't.
- Some will have an open dialog. Sometimes the dialog is one-sided.
  - Try not to take it personally.
- **Addressing notes:**
  - Get a feel for the directors sensibilities. Try to get in their head
  - If you are just hitting the notes you're not doing enough.
  - Avoid becoming simply a pair of hands.
- **Own your shots and your notes and getting to the root of revisions:**
  - Getting back on the horse.
    - You will have your favorite shots changed or cut.
    - Don't let tough notes and story changes take the wind out of your sails.
  - With tough notes, try to take a step back and find the meaning behind the note. Approach the revision in a way that still keeps you in the shot.

## **Ebb and flow.**

- Working on a shot can be a rollercoaster. You can be on top of the world one day while things are going well and then absolutely broken up the next when things start falling apart.
- When our animation is doing well we are doing well.
- When you first start off in the industry everything is precious.
- Big notes or shot changes feel devastating.

Over time you realize that the best approach is to have a slight emotional detachment from your work and this develops over time.

# Politics and Networking

## 1. Politics are everywhere.

- In hiring, casting, advancement. It is a part of the game.
- When politics work in your favor they almost seem invisible.
- When they work against you it can be frustrating.

## 2. The Nature of politics.

It's not all evil.

If you were to start a project who would you hire? Would you search long and far for the best candidate or would you start with people that you know and trust

### **3. People working politics:**

- It's not unusual to see people schmoozing or even sucking up to their director.
- This again is one of the things outside of your control.
- There will be people who find success this way.

There will also be folks who try and it just backfires.

### **4. Best practices:**

- Stay true to your nature.
- Let the schmoozers schmooze and focus on doing the best work you can.

Your best network connections are your peers.  
Remember this and remember to not burn bridges. This industry is very small.

# Experience

## Clarity over time:

- There are so many things in this industry that seem confusing at the time but become crystal clear with more experience.
- If I gave this talk in five years I would probably have very different topics to cover, the industry changes a bit every year.

## Looking back on the work:

- You'll look back on times that you felt you were struggling and spinning your wheels and realize that you were growing in ways you didn't notice.
- Other times you might think that you were shafted on casting on a certain show only to look back and realize that your skill wasn't at the level to take on bigger shots.





## **The quality level is going up across the industry at a dramatic rate (2D/3D & Film/TV/Games):**

- Keeping up is an effort in it of itself . You have to give yourself credit. You have to be constantly upgrading yourself on the technical level, and constantly be practicing your animation skills.

## **Growth in your environment:**

- It's important to realize that everyone has their own path.
- You'll see some of the slowest learners grow to be the top talent in the studio.
- At the same time you'll see top prospects burn out and leave the industry.
- The longer you're around, the more you see the big picture. Worry less about the show-to-show aspect.
- Experience will enable you to focus energy in the right places.
- The old saying; 90% of the job is just showing up, may not be the case for us but may be more like 50%

# Quality vs. Attitude

	Getting Hired	Staying Hired
Quality	 95%	 30%
Speed	 0%	 20%
Attitude	 5%	 50%



Years of experience have very little weight on how employable you are. Your Demo Reel and eventually the type of productions you've worked on is what carries weight.

One thing that always follows you where ever you go, is your attitude. How well do you work with others? How flexible and diverse are you? How quickly do you learn new styles and pipelines? How fast do you complete your scenes? How consistent are you? How well do you receive direction?

If your reputation is garbage, you'll have a hard time finding work.

# Review and Conclusion

- There are things other than your work that will affect your career as an animator.
- The best bet for success is to stay true to your nature and focus your energy on your work.
- Make the most out of the opportunities that are presented to you and try not to linger on the ones that never connected.
- A career in animation is a marathon not a sprint. Work through it at your own pace.
- You'll notice as your career moves onward: With each level of understanding comes more enjoyment.