The Goal of Every Storyboard Artist: Eliminate the Superfluous

One of my all time favorite comic artists and animators is Alex Toth.

If you aren't familiar with the master, he did a large volume of work for Hanna Barbera in the 60's all the way to the 80's including Space Ghost and Super Friends.

His comic book work stretches back even further to the 40's (I believe) with Zorro, and a number of other pulp heroes.

So why am I singling out this one particular (superb) artist? Well, in all the time I've studied his work, there has always been one, very clear statement that he makes about drawing:

“**Eliminate the superfluous**”

It’s a beautiful, simple statement, just like his work. A quick web search popped that up as his first rule and many of his subsequent rules follow the same line of simplification. You can find a list of them here:

- Alex Toth’s drawing rules -

Some people would argue that you need to be more detailed or have more world elements in a story to be a successful storyteller. That’s great if you want to work once a year, but real people need to get paid! Back in Toth’s day, they cranked out comic pages that weren’t as detailed as today’s art, but none the less powerful, imaginative or clear. Equally, his animation work was also executed for quantity and quality.

So how did he do it?

Looking at examples of his art, he has large simple shapes that do triple duty of defining edges, creating interesting shapes and leading the viewer.

Even his Design sheets were laid out like a full blown illustration! Igoo, from Hanna Barbera's The Herculoids, is a perfect example of Toth's genius. This is arguably as simple as you can make a character but the design still withstands the test of time. It's simple, yet has a lot of positive things going for it, a strong silhouette, simple to draw quickly, clear signs of the actual physical composition of the character and very graphic.

So, taking what I've learned from Toth and applying it here to our lesson:

We are storytellers and designers. We have a very specific goal in mind to lead the viewers. And do you know what you need to get your point across and accomplish your goal?

Clarity!

Same with the art.

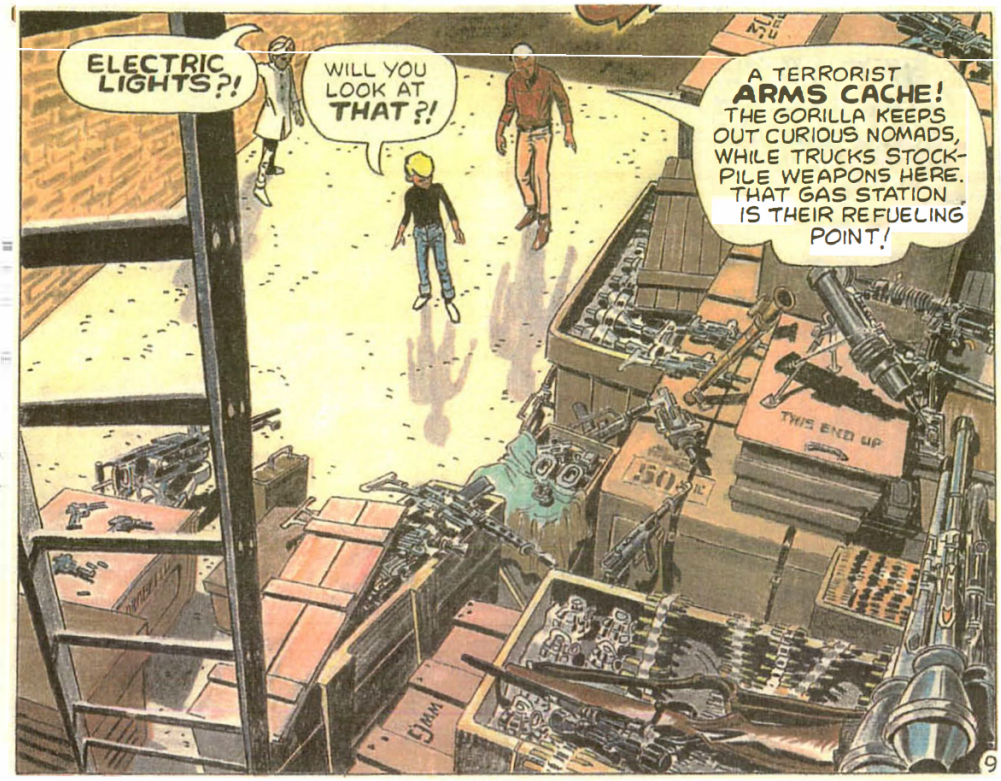
You may want to draw the heck out of a certain back ground object that looks cool, but ask yourself if it's important to the story.

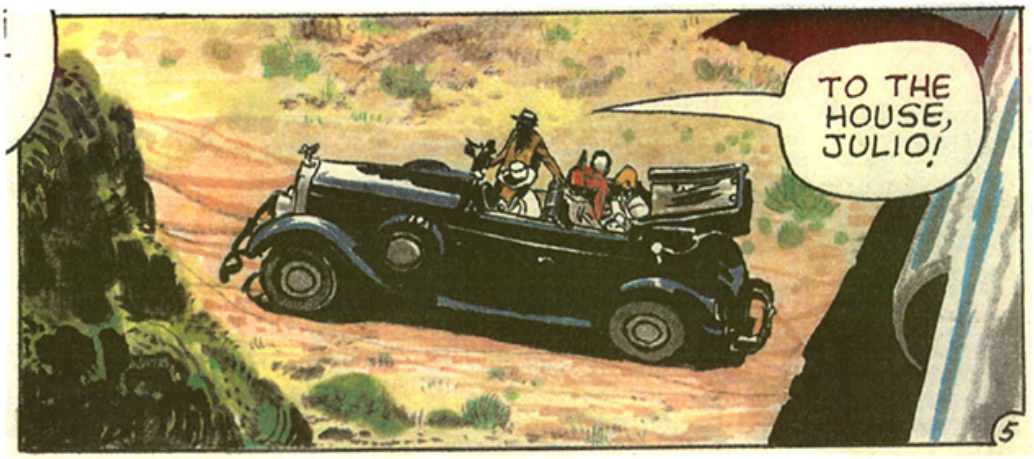
Treat your storyboards more like traffic signs that are meant to be read in the blink of an eye and less like the Sistine Chapel.

Just like the first pass at a script, take your character designs and boil them down to their essence. Make as few drawing lines as possible while making them recognizable. Work on a clear and unique silhouette of the character. Try to do a quick study of the character, filling a page with the same character over and over. Do a page of just facial expressions. Really break the character down and get used to them. Once you do that, you can really crank out some boards with a wide range of emotions and poses.

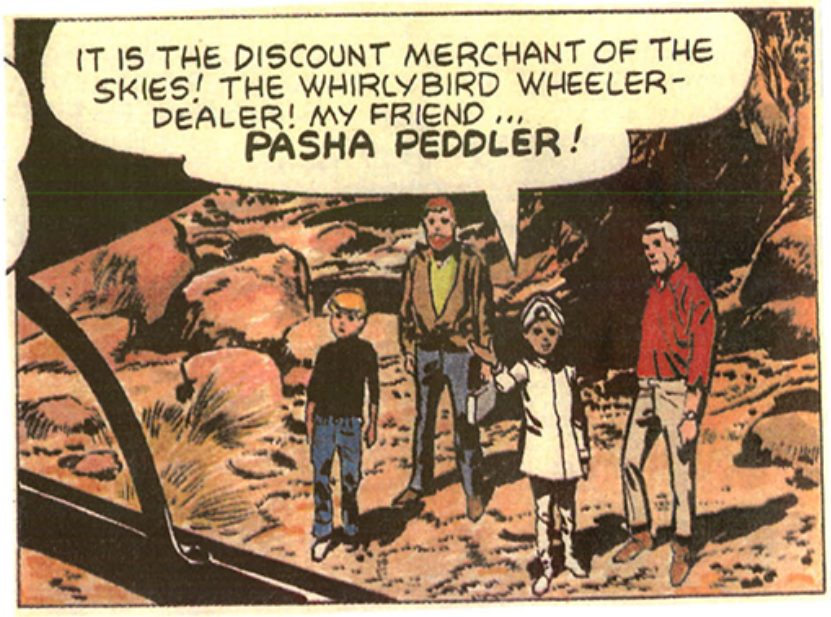
Do that, and you've "**eliminated the superfluous**" in your characters.

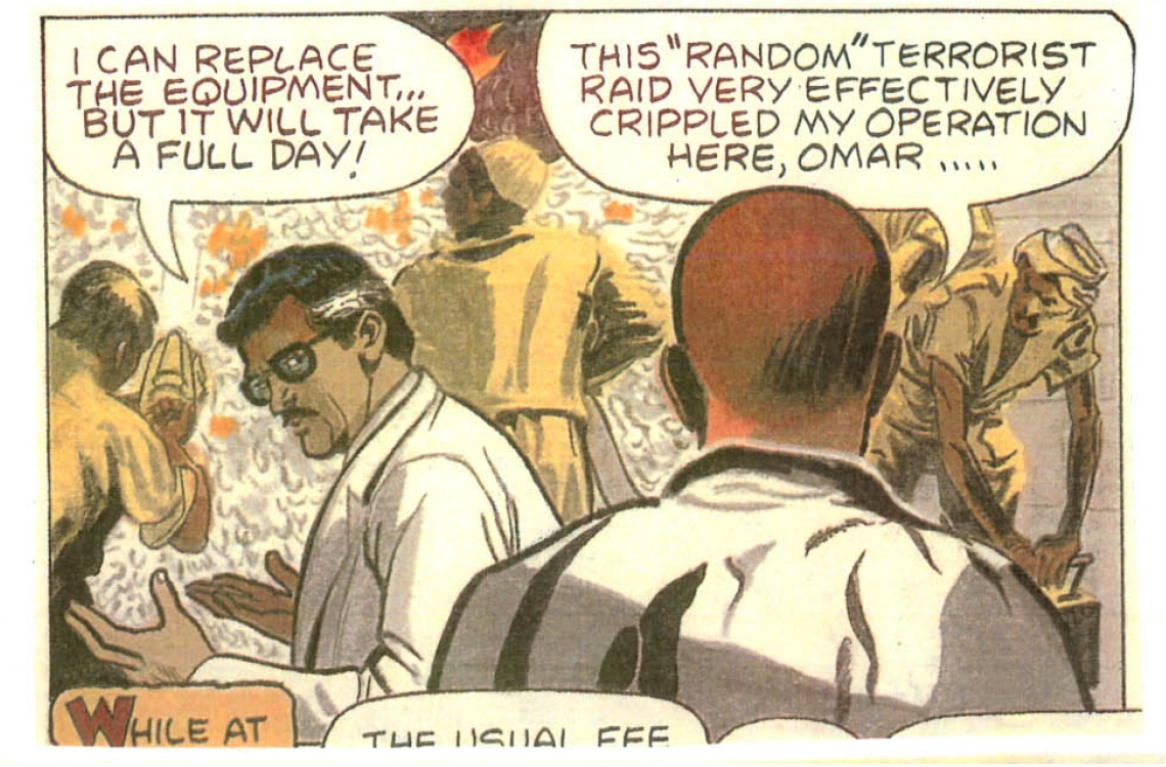
We usually have an establishing shot at the beginning that defines the setting. These shots are usually a bit more rendered out than the rest of the backgrounds on the page or scene. It helps to establish the world we are telling our story in and invite the viewer in. Having that establishing shot being a little more rendered, helps to keep the rest of the scene fairly simple.





FRAMING THE LONG SHOT





Just like your character, boil your scene down to it's essence, or most important aspects. What do we need to tell this story? Is that fancy vase in the back of the living room important? Does it help to establish the character's wealth, is it an ancient family heirloom, does it get smashed on a burglar's head? If the answer to all of these is no and it lacks any other important plot point, maybe you shouldn't worry about rendering it like a master still life painter!

You should figure out what's important to tell the story and include that. Look at that page of Zorro art by Toth, there are maybe 4 or 5 total background elements in the entire page, but you never feel lost as to where we are in the story.

As an exercise, try to create a space that is well grounded and as simple as possible. Pick a place and then create a list of elements that define that place, I'll use a gym as an example.

In a gym you find:

- Weights
- Treadmill
- Towels
- Yoga mats
- Balls
- People working out

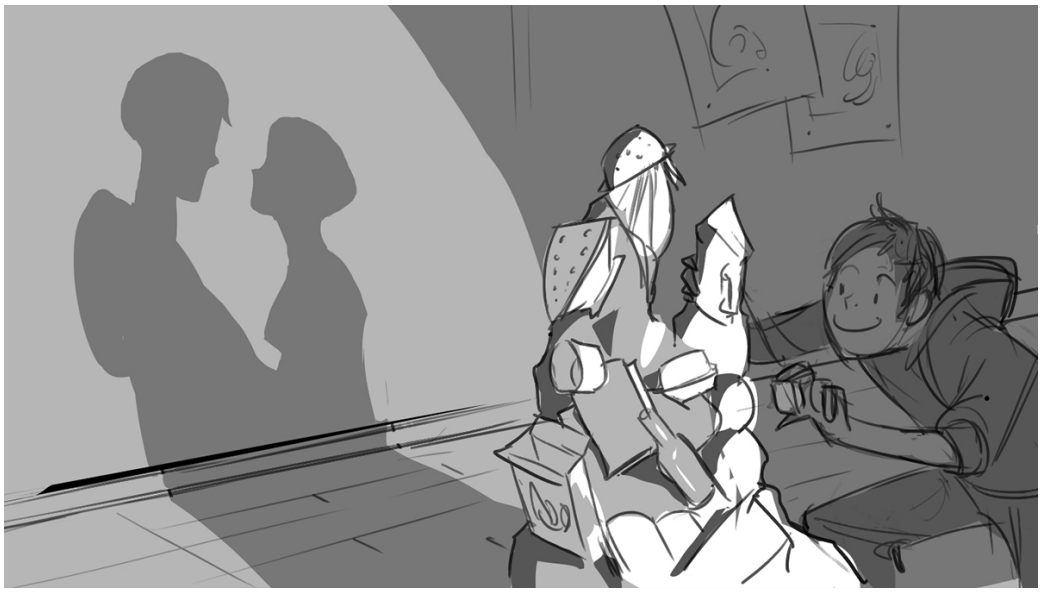
With this in mind, now get to work on dressing your scene. Do the bare minimum to define your space. See how little detail and clues you need to get that space across to the viewer.

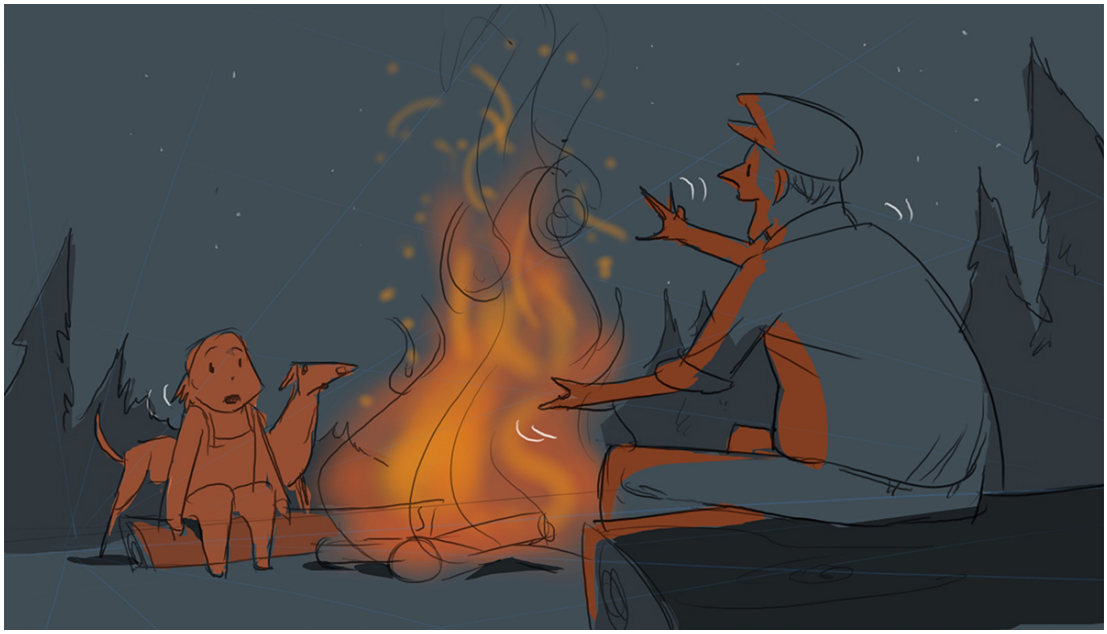
Do that and you've "**eliminated the superfluous**" in your backgrounds.

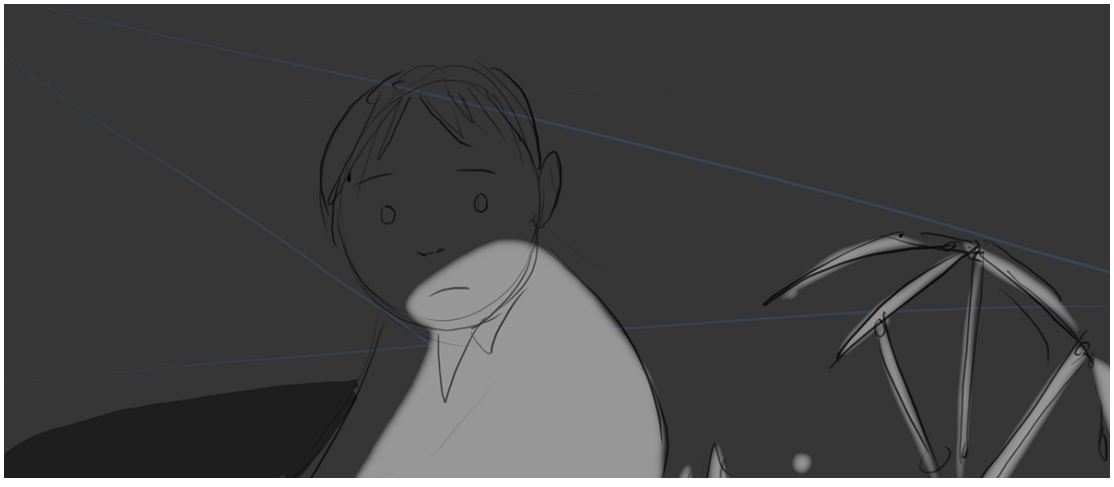
So we've got characters and backgrounds simplified, what does that leave?

For me, I would argue lighting, or value.

It can be just as important or critical to a story for many reasons. You don't need to triple light a scene or get a complete value range of 1-10! If anything, maybe you could get away with having three to four main values. Like 1, 4, 6,10 or 1, 5 and 10. Keep it simple. Use the light to separate fore, middle and backgrounds.







If you want to render something and make it look amazing, that’s great, but maybe save that for some other project, not storyboards. Speed really is important. It’s right under clarity.

To sketch out your staging and posing quickly and efficiently helps you to keep your job. Quality and Clarity are always #1, but a close #2 is Speed.

Storyboard Portfolio Building Tips

The most important things to always keep in mind when building a storyboard portfolio...

Clarity

This is extremely important. I can't over-emphasize how important clarity is, and yet I don't think people grasp how fundamental it is to the job successfully. Storyboarding is all about making sure that every story point is clear (without the crutch of dialogue or having the artist explain what's happening), and if you can't do that, nothing else matters. Once the viewer is confused, whatever comes after is lost on them. Period. Also, I don't think people realize how incredibly hard it is to be clear about what you're trying to say. It takes a tremendous amount of work and thought. I think most people don't put nearly as much effort as they should into this discipline.

The whole point of looking at a story portfolio is to see how that person handles the telling of a story. If I get confused at some point about what is happening in your boards and I can't tell what's going on, nothing that comes after that will register with me. I need to follow every step of the story to understand how the cause-and-effect of your story is unfolding. I need to know if the applicant understands how action and reaction work to progress a story. You may have great sketches at the end of your sequence that show your character crying and being upset, but if I don't understand why they feel that way, I don't know if you can tell a story. I only know that you can do nice drawings of a character crying.

So if you want to be a story artist, you need to put a lot of effort into learning to draw things clearly (this is difficult) and learning how to present ideas in a way that makes them crystal clear and idiot-proof to everyone who looks at them (this is also difficult). There is always the old advice to show your work to as many people as possible and see if they can understand it. That can be a great tool. If you do this, remember that you have to let people look at your work without the benefit of you standing there and explaining it to them. Because that's how we will be looking at your portfolio….you won't be here to explain what you were thinking. It has to be clear to us from the images alone.

The other way to get perspective on your work and see if it's clear is to simply take a

break and come back to it. I frequently look at my work in the morning and see problems that I couldn't see the night before. Distance will allow you to have a fresh perspective on things.

One crutch that people try to use to make their ideas more clear is that they start adding dialogue to clarify what's happening. That's not a good way to fix clarity problems. In storyboarding, it is always our goal to try to tell the story with the visuals alone so that the audience would understand what is happening even if they watched the movie with the sound turned off. This is because visuals are more powerful than dialogue and can convey the story much more powerfully than lines of speech can. We know people (and characters) can lie to us, so we don't always trust dialogue. We trust what we see with our own eyes. So visuals always have more power. Because of that, we look for story artists that can tell a great story without any dialogue. That said, a little bit of dialogue is okay. Sometimes you need it to help tell the story in the best way. Just don't rely on it to cover over confusing parts.

Look at other artists you like--especially ones that tell stories in their work--and examine what they've done to achieve clarity. Look at films you love and ask yourself how they achieve clarity, and if there are confusing parts, what makes them confusing? How could they be clearer?

A couple of hints I can give you to help with improving the clarity of your work: number one, only present one idea at a time. Only one idea can be communicated per story sketch. Often, people will try to present two (or three) ideas at the same time. This always leads to confusion. Change one idea per sketch to help the viewer follow along and get each new piece of information in a clear, digestible manner to minimize confusion and misinterpretation.

When story sketches are cut together in story reel form, each sketch is typically onscreen for a couple of seconds. In action sequences, each sketch may be onscreen for less than a second. So it's important to present one idea at a time (as well as draw clearly) so the audience can grasp what is happening in each sketch.

Here is an example….

In the first sketch, a man in a kitchen drops dishes as he carries them.

In the second sketch, a cook tastes soup in a kitchen.

In the third sketch, both ideas are presented at once.

I made these examples for use in a talk on storyboarding, and during the talk I show each sketch for about two seconds (with a frame of black in between). It may not be as clear here in email form, where you can stare at the image for as long as you want, but hopefully you can still see my point. Two ideas presented at the same time create confusion because the viewer may register one but not the other. Also, everything in a film is about action and reaction. If action and reaction are happening at the same time (or two actions, or two reactions), it creates a confusing narrative. The order of events is unclear.

The other tip I would say to help with clarity is to draw as simply as possible (while retaining enough detail to convey the acting, emotions and required subtlety of the scene, of course). Avoid unnecessary or extraneous detail. Everything in a story sketch should contribute to the story point of the sketch. Anything that's there for the sole purpose of making the drawing prettier may add confusion. And we look for people who are able to draw their ideas up quickly and efficiently. Story artists have to work fast. Adding a lot of extra detail and/or color to a drawing always makes me suspicious that the artist didn't understand what the point of the sketch was, or might have trouble working quickly and roughly when deadlines are tight.

What would you add to these sketches to make them more clear? Adding anything to them would only hamper their clarity and unity of message.

Deciding what to leave in and what to remove from a sketch is an art in and of itself. Obviously, if the point of a sketch is that a woman is admiring a very expensive dress in a store window, I might take the time to draw the dress in a way that makes it look fancy and ornate, because that helps sell the story point I'm trying to make. But if the story I'm trying to tell is that a woman is pretending to admire a dress in a store window so that she can spy on her husband across the street, I'm not going to put time and effort into making the dresses look ornate. That would be distracting and confusing from what's really happening in the scene. So a big part of being a great story artist is knowing what to include in a sketch…and what to leave out.

I have always been a big fan of Quentin Blake's work because I feel that he has a great sense of how many lines it takes to say what he's trying to say. He doesn't embellish with unnecessary frills and flourishes.

I have met a few people who find his work too simplistic and plain for their tastes. But the thing I admire about his work (other than the obvious energy and life it has) is that I think it takes a lot of experience and sophistication to know just how much you can leave out and still communicate. Animation is best when it is clear, direct and forceful without unnecessary nuance and baggage.

If you look at Bill Peet's Disney storyboards, his early work shows a level of detail and rendering that is completely absent in his later work.

By the 1960's Bill's work is much more efficient and streamlined. Obviously, storyboarding is about getting the idea up and trying it out quickly. So working faster and getting it up sooner is a big help. Also, decades of having to redo and redo your sketches as the story changes and improves will convince you to draw simply, if nothing else does. It's not worth putting a ton of work into each sketch - because it might get replaced by a better idea tomorrow.

Even when he does render things, it's about selling the environment and still feels much more dashed off than his careful Dumbo work.

One last important point: a drawing doesn't have to be clean to be clear. A rough drawing that communicates is much, much better than a cleaned up drawing that is confusing.

So those are some thoughts on trying to explain what I mean by clarity. The bottom line is that your drawings and ideas must communicate clearly to viewers and you must be able to tell a story without confusing or losing the viewer.

Character and Personality

Storyboarding has changed and evolved over the years. Storyboard artists are now expected to put more information into their boards than ever before. In particular, story artists are expected to deliver boards that contain specific expressions and poses for every character in every scene. At any animation studio, nobody is expected to draw the characters exactly on model (we don't even have designs yet when we start boarding anyway), but the poses, expressions and acting for each character is expected to be clear and readable, as well as the right kind of acting for the character in that particular moment. We are trying to develop the characters and explore their personalities. So we need to be as specific as we can be about who they are, how they act and how they think.

Some people don't really see the point of this. Sometimes people say that--if a story was really working--you could simply block in stick figures and still have a good version of the story reels.

I understand where this type of statement comes from. Sometimes directors want extremely subtle nuances in storyboard acting and they can expect so many poses that it no longer seems like story boarding…it's more like animating. That's frustrating and causes board artists to question why we're putting so much work and polish into the boards when the audience will never see them.

But at the other end of the extreme, I would say that stick figures wouldn't suffice to tell any story, no matter how "good" the story was. Stick figures don't really convey personality and don't do well at conveying expressions and acting. And it's very important to get a sense of who the characters are, what they're feeling and thinking, and why they're doing what they're doing. It's hard to get into a stick figure's "head". And those things are important. After all, what the characters are thinking and feeling are the things that drive the story forward and make the viewer care about the events that are happening on screen.

In other words, to say that stick figures are sufficient to storyboard a movie is to suggest that the characters are of minimal importance within a story. That a story is merely events that happen, and who or what is affected by these events is not of consequence. But in my opinion that's fundamentally wrong…it's impossible to separate the characters from the story. Story and character are the same thing. The events of the story happen because the characters make them happen by their decisions and the actions they take. And they make their decisions and take actions based on the events that unfold as the story progresses.

So I would say that stick figures are not sufficient for storyboards because they wouldn't give you insight into what the characters are thinking and feeling, which is of vital importance to making the audience care and feel emotion. At the same time, I agree with

people who say that you don't need to get super specific and elaborate subtle expression changes in story boards. When you focus too much on details in storyboarding, you tend to lose sight of the shape of the overall story. And feature storyboarding is all about finding the shape of the overall story. Animation is the place for nuancing subtle expression changes….once the story and characters are figured out.

So with all that in mind, when I look at story portfolios I look for people who can draw characters in a way that expresses personality and character. I look for people who draw poses and expressions that are appropriate for each character and give me some sense of who they are. I don't like it when people draw the same "stock" poses for everything….when every character has the same walk pose, or if every character has the same cliched pose to convey that they're "thinking", or if every character has the exact same expression when they get angry…that's a sign to me that the artist doesn't really think deeply about character. They're just using the same poses for everything and not pushing themselves to find distinct expressions and poses that are unique to that character and to what is happening to them in the moment.

By way of example, "anger", in particular, is an expression that people tend to draw a stock version of on every character. But every character has a different level of anger that they can reach….someone like Cruella deVil has a much deeper level of anger than say, Rapunzel does. And they're going to express their anger in vastly different ways. And how often is a character really "angry"? That's a broad term that doesn't imply specifics. Rather than drawing a character that's "angry", ask yourself: what is the specific thing they're reacting to, and what is the response this character would have? Are they irritated in this moment? Or livid…or infuriated….or ready to cry in frustration…or in a murderous rage…or whatever. Know exactly what your character is thinking, and push yourself to find the best pose and acting that fits the specifics of their inner feelings. And don't use the same acting twice, even for the same character! Always find a fresh take for the acting of each moment, a new angle on the character that makes them feel alive and real (to both the audience, and you, as you try to learn who they are and get inside their heads).

Appeal

I think that it's very important for Story Artists to have a drawing style that is appealing (that is, pleasing to look at). Again, this is one of my more controversial opinions. Not all of my co-workers agree that appeal is an important requirement for story artists. After all, as I pointed out, nobody outside of the studio will ever see the storyboards. Boards are just a tool, a blueprint of the movie. Who cares if the story sketches are appealing?

Years ago I would've agreed with that sentiment. But over the years I've noticed what a difference that appeal can make in story sketch. After all, the way story sketch is viewed is that we edit all the black and white story sketches together and record our own voices as temporary dialogue to represent the whole film. So we end up watching 90 minutes of story sketches without the benefit of (real) actors, color, or the movement and life that animation will (eventually) bring to the film. It can be tedious. And if you add unappealing

drawings to look at on top of that….it can affect the way you feel about the story and you may end up finding problems where--if the sketches were just a bit more appealing--you wouldn't see the same problems.

That probably sounds crazy. I understand that. If the story is solid and working….who cares if the sketches are appealing or not? Well, part of it is just human nature. People like looking at things that are easier to look at. And when story sketches are easier to look at, it just makes the experience of watching them more palatable and enjoyable. It draws you in and encourages you to keep watching and follow the story and characters. And you can focus on the story and what works and what doesn't, instead of being distracted by clunky drawings that are unpleasant to look at.

It's just like software. You can write a great, useful program that works well but has an ugly interface. And people will use it….but they will have a better experience using the program if it has an attractive interface. That's just the way humans are wired. And you can rail against it and complain about how unfair it is…or you can put work into making your drawings more appealing.

And again, appealing drawings have the advantage of giving viewers a better sense of what the finished product will look and feel like, which is important. The closer story sketch can replicate what the finished product will look like (within reason, of course), the more everyone will get a sense of what's working and what isn't. When people discuss the film and talk about how to make it better, they all have one clear impression of what the film is going to be. They aren't all having to make judgements about how the story reels will be changed as they're translated into the finished film. This helps everyone talk about the film and get quickly on the same page about what works and what doesn't. There aren't huge gaps in the understanding of what everyone is looking at.

So I look for applicants with a certain amount of appeal in their drawing. It doesn't have to be Mary Blair, but if you like to draw like Robert Crumb (and there's nothing wrong with that) I might feel like you're not the best fit for the job.

Staging, Blocking and Storytelling

The other big component of story sketch, of course, is that the story artist has to have a knowledge of film making. A story artist has to know how cutting and editing works, and have a good understanding of how to use staging (where the camera is placed to best tell the story) and how to use blocking (how the characters move through the scene) to tell the story in the most powerful way possible.

There's no better education than looking at movies and asking yourself why the director placed the camera where he placed it and why the actors are doing what they're doing within the scene. Does it work? Does it not work? Could it be better?

I really look for Storyboard applicants that aren't afraid to move the camera and pick interesting angles--not just for the sake of interesting angles--but to tell the story in the best way and make the viewer feel what the story artist wants them to feel and to enhance the telling of the story.

This is another new wrinkle that has become the job of story artists in recent times. For many years, story artists at most animation studios would concern themselves more with presenting ideas in a clear way than with picking specific camera angles. As camera work has gotten more sophisticated, and production schedules more compressed, it's become more important (and expected) for story artists to make decisions about layout and where the camera ought to be placed.

The layout department will still interpret the work as they see fit and they will change and improve the staging to better tell the story, but if the story artist has made choices about the best place to put the camera, it gives the director a better tool to discuss when he or she issues the scene to layout. And again, it'll give everyone a better idea of how the scene is working when they look at the film in story sketch form.

Entertainment

I look for Story Artists that are able to get a sense of entertainment into their work. At the end of the day, every moment in a film should be entertaining. That doesn't mean every moment has to be funny. Dramatic moments should be compelling. Action sequences should be exciting. Sad moments should feel genuine and real and not cloying and manipulative. So I always look for people who know how to present each idea in a way that's interesting and draws me into the story and characters. It doesn't matter how great the idea of a scene is if it's not executed in an entertaining way. I've been doing boards for a long time, and on every movie scenes get boarded and re-boarded and re-boarded. There are always certain scenes that just aren't working until the right person re-boards them with their own personal "take"…and suddenly the scene works for the first time. It's all about taste and knowing what each scene needs to work just right. I can't articulate it any better than that…more than anything, it's about having good taste and good instincts, and they come with time, practice, research, and non-stop self-motivated training.

So overall, I look for portfolios that have a good sense of entertainment. Whether the portfolio contains storyboards of a dramatic scene, an action scene, or a comedy scene, I look to see if they've been handled in a compelling, interesting, entertaining, or comedic way. But clarity in the draftsmanship, compositions, and storytelling are always paramount!