Chapter 1
Understanding the World of Animation

Before I discuss how to write cartoons I want to give a brief overview on the medium of animation. This will provide a general understanding of what’s happening in the world of animation. After all, the cartoon writer is the first link in the production chain, and the better you understand what’s going to happen to your script after you write it, the better able you will be to help make the best cartoon. A failure to understand the basics of animation production and the various types of animation will put you in the center of a mystery. You won’t know what’s happening around you, and won’t be able to communicate with the production people.

One of the most important concepts to understand about the production side of animation is budget. As a writer, you are responsible for writing a script that can be produced, both technically and financially. If you write too many scene changes in your script, which necessitate too many background drawings, you can go over budget. Similarly, if you put too many characters into your story, requiring too many actors, you can also go over budget. A good cartoon script that can’t be produced is not really a good cartoon script. The ultimate goal of all screen writers is to get their work produced. It’s fine to sell something and make a little money, but seeing your work on the tube or the big screen is not only emotionally rewarding, it’s a much better calling card to use to get more work.

A Brief Overview of Animation Production—From Script to Finished Cartoon

There are a few steps that come before the script, but we’ll go over these later in more detail. Suffice it to say, the animation production process, whether for television cartoons or full-length animated feature films, begins with a script.

A script describes the entire story, including a description of all of the environments in which the scenes take place, all the action that happens in those environments, and all the dialogue spoken by the characters. In television animation, unlike live action, the cartoon script lays out every detail of the story. Almost nothing is left to the imagination of others. That’s not to say that others along the production chain cannot or should not creatively contribute to the story, dialogue, or gags. They can and should, for this often makes for a better cartoon. But a television animation script should be a complete blueprint of the final production. In feature animation, months
are spent perfecting gags with sketches and pencil tests. But in television, what’s in the script is what will be animated.

Once the script reaches final draft, work begins on the storyboard. A storyboard is a visual interpretation of the script, made up of small, thumbnail drawings. The storyboard shows every scene in the script, and indicates action and camera moves by means of various symbols and sequences of pictures. A storyboard artist doesn’t just literally translate the script to pictures, his job is to act somewhat like a director and editor, setting up the scenes properly, adding dramatic camera moves and transitions where necessary to improve the telling of the story. A good storyboard is so complete that the script is no longer necessary except, perhaps, for dialogue recording.

On the facing page is an example of a scene from a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles storyboard.

Once the storyboard is put into production, the design stage of artwork is begun, consisting of background designs (sketches of interior and exterior environments that will be used in the cartoon), character models (sketches of the characters and their wardrobe), as well as designs for any vehicles, props, or anything else that might appear in the cartoon.

Another production step that can begin during the storyboard process is the casting of voice talent. If the script is an episode of an ongoing series, the main characters will have already been cast, but any new characters created in the script would now be interviewed and hired.

Once the storyboard is completed and approved, the dialogue is recorded. This is done before any animation is created because in cartoons the animation is drawn to match the dialogue track.

Next comes layout, which is the process by which the lead animators lay out the basic movements of the scenes, including how characters will move between the backgrounds and foregrounds and in relation to other characters. In most cases, after the layouts are done, and the key background art is designed, the material is sent overseas, along with the storyboard and dialogue track, where the remainder of the animation is produced. When completed, it is shipped back to the studio, where it is reviewed and any errors are noted so that retakes can be made and the errors corrected.

The 2-D animation process consists basically of drawing the individual animation frames on paper, then either inking them on acetate cels, Xeroxing them onto cels, or scanning the drawn images into a computer which then turns the pencil lines into black “inked” lines. These cels, whether real or just computer frames, have to be colored in. In the case of real cels, they are painted with acrylic paint on the backside, one at a time. In the case of computer frames, one simply has to point the cursor, click the mouse and... voila! The area is instantly colored in.

In 3-D animation, the characters and vehicles, once designed on paper, are then “built” in the computer in the form of three-dimensional wire frame models. These computer models are made to move in accordance with the storyboard. 3-D animated models are texture-mapped with whatever surface is desired. If, for example, the character is a robot, its surface might be mapped with a reflective metallic covering. By programming the computer so that the light comes from a specific direction, the skin of the robot automatically reflects light, falls into shadow, etc.
ANGLÉ - RAPHAEL

He hurlis one of his sais o.s.

RAPHAEL (CONT.)
...I'm gonna clip your wings, bird-brain!

UP SHOT - CHANDELIER

The sai strikes the fixture's chain, and the whole thing drops.

The chandelier lands on his back, and he goes down with a crash and clattering of crystal!
Next, the animation must be photographed. In the case of cel animation, the individual cels are placed over backgrounds and photographed one frame at a time on an animation camera stand. These frames, when viewed at 24 frames per second (film) or 30 fps (TV) give the appearance of motion.

With computer animation there is no animation camera. There are simply a series of computer files, similar to the frames of a film, which can be manipulated and altered in any manner desired. The computer sends these frames directly to a video or film recorder. In both cel and computer animation, part of the “camera” process includes the addition of transitions (such as fades or dissolves).

At this point the animation is more of less complete, and the post-production phase begins. Post production is pretty much the same as it is in live action. It consists of several steps. First, the film, video tape, or computer movie files are edited into their final form, along with the dialogue track. Opening titles, end credits, music, and sound effects are added. Then comes the mix, during which the volume levels of the music, sound effects, and dialogue are balanced for the best dramatic effect. And finally, there is color balancing of the film or video image, so that all scenes match.

And so a toon is born.

Types of Animation

In order to decide what kinds of cartoons you’d like to write, you’ll have to know about all the different types. The following is a breakdown of the most common media, forms, genres, and techniques of animation.

Types of Distribution:
Motion Pictures
Television (network, cable, syndicated)
Direct-to-Video (Features: Land Before Time II, III; Episodic: Vegetales)
Internet

Although Internet animation is just appearing as of this writing, this will certainly be a growing area of distribution.

Audiences:
Adult (TV: The Simpsons, King of the Hill, Spawn; Features: Ghost in the Shell)
Children (TV: Rugrats, Tiny Toons; Features: Tarzan, The Iron Giant)
Preschool/Educational (Blue’s Clues, Dragon Tales)

By adult I don’t necessarily mean R- or NC-17 rated; I simply mean animated films that are not made for kids. Although, as of this writing, there is effectively no adult feature animation market in the United States, there are adult features produced in Japan. Just as Japanese animation such as Pokémon is becoming popular for kids, Japanese anime is likely to become popular in America, and the adult market will expand.

Types of Animated Media:
2-D (The Flintstones, Little Mermaid)
3-D (Beast Wars, Shrek)
Clay/Foam (Wallace & Grommet, The PJ’s)
Paper Cutout (South Park)

Actually, South Park, though originally done with paper, is currently produced by computer animation made to look like paper.

Genres of Animation:
Action-Adventure (Batman)
Action-Comedy (Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles)
Anime (Dragonball Z)
Comedy (Hey Arnold!, Doug)
Dramatic (Prince of Egypt)
Educational (Dora the Explorer, The Magic School Bus)
Musical (Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast)
Preschool (Blue’s Clues, Dragon Tales)
Sci-Fi (StarChaser: The Legend of Orin)
Sitcom (PJ’s, King of the Hill)
Squash and Stretch (Catdog, Ren & Stimpy)

There are other categories, but these are the most common and should give you more than enough options to choose one that best suits your creative bent.

There are two distinct areas of television animation, so different that they are practically two different industries. These are prime-time animation and the rest of TV animation. Prime-time animation, at present, consists mainly of animated sitcoms like The Simpsons and King of the Hill. Non-prime-time animation consists of everything else, including Saturday morning, daytime, preschool, and network specials. The big difference between these two areas is that prime-time animation is written by live-action sitcom writers, as opposed to what most in the industry would call “cartoon writers.” The inner workings of these two divisions of the animated television industry are completely different.

Non-Prime-Time Animation

For the most part, non-prime-time animation is written by writers, whether staff or freelance, who work independently of one another rather than as a group. The vast majority work on a freelance basis. Most non-prime-time toon writers submit story ideas (called premises) for free. If the idea is approved, the writer is contracted to do an outline and script, with varying numbers of rewrites. A known writer may be guaranteed payment for both the outline and script, whereas a less qualified writer might be cut off at any stage without further compensation.

Half-hour animated script fees currently range from around $6,500 on the high end to $3,000 on the low. A staff writer might get anywhere from $1,500 to $2,500 per week, and the average story editor fee for a U.S. network series is probably around $7,500 per episode.

It’s quite common for non-prime-time writers to get their assignments, disappear for a week or more, then e-mail their scripts to the story editor. The story editor is responsible for reading the script and giving the writer notes so that he can do the rewrite. After
that, the story editor usually revises the rewritten scripts and does any further changes the producer or network may request. There are some shows that have staff writers who meet and discuss storylines. But they, too, usually go off and write their scripts, deliver them to the editors, and do their rewrites as above.

That’s the life of a non-prime-time cartoon writer. Life in the fast lane of prime-time animation is remarkably different.

**Prime-Time Animation**

Many children’s cartoon writers aspire to writing prime-time animation. But even a great deal of experience in non-prime-time toon writing may leave you clueless when it comes to writing prime-time animation.

To get a glimpse of the way a hit prime-time animated series is written I consulted Patric M. Verrone, the Supervising Producer of Matt Groening’s *Futurama*. According to Patric, Sam Simon, one of the executive producers of *The Simpsons*, worked out the following system, which is now used by virtually all prime-time animated series. Here’s how it works:

Animated prime-time series typically have a staff of between seven and twenty-two writers, depending on the show. Newer shows have fewer; older (spelled s-u-c-c-e-s-s-f-u-l) shows have more. The networks buy somewhere between thirteen and twenty-two half-hours for a single season.

The stories are all broken (meaning the story ideas are conceived and approved) *in house* by the staff. The story ideas are then assigned to the staff writers. So if there are seven staff and thirteen episodes in total, each writer would get about two scripts. The writers then go off in groups of four or five and beat out their stories (work out the beats) along with the lead writer (the guy whose name will wind up on the script).

Each half-hour script will have roughly thirty scenes and is generally made up of three acts. After a story is beat out, the staff all get together and do a joke pass—adding, deleting, and improving the gags, and adding any new beats that may be needed. They generally develop three to four times the amount of jokes that will be used in the final script.

At this point, the lead writer has a week to write an outline. The executive producer reads the outline and gives notes to the lead writer, who then has two weeks to do a first draft script.

Once the first draft is finished the table process begins. The “table” is simply the big conference table at which the staff can work en masse, and the “process” is a series of steps whereby the staff continues to develop the script.

The first step of the table process is for the staff to rewrite the script according to the executive producer’s notes. This step takes from five to eight days, during which the staff use a large computer monitor to view the script and go over it line by line. The executive producer attends the table polish, which is the final stage of this step.

Next comes the table read. At this stage the actors participate, coming to the table and reading their lines in real time (meaning the actual time it will take during the episode). The writers note which jokes don’t work and any other problems as the story plays out.

After the table read comes the read rewrite. Here the staff does another rewrite, based on the table read notes, which usually takes about another day and a half.
At this point they record. Recording, in animation terms, means recording the actors’ dialogue. Sometimes a read is done just before the record, and the script might even be fine tuned while recording!

About a month later a storyboard and an edited dialogue track are returned. During dialogue recording, actors may have to say their lines several times before getting it right. The director will note which take is the best and these takes are edited together, with pauses between them. The lead writer and executive producer go over the board and make changes, as needed, to ensure it conforms with existing gags and to fix any gags that don’t work.

About one and a half to two months later the animatic is finished. An animatic is a series of still drawings and pencil tests, edited together with the dialogue track to form a rough draft of the cartoon.

Next comes a process called the animatic rewrite. This is a one to two day rewrite, during which the writers view the animatic and punch up gags.

Three to four months after the animatic rewrite, the finished animation comes back from overseas. Typically, a show has around $5,000 budgeted for elective retakes in each episode.

And that’s the prime-time animation writing process. It generally takes about nine to ten months to complete a season of twenty-two half hours. Typically, prime-time toon writers work from 10 AM to 7 PM, five days a week. However, it’s not uncommon to work till midnight.

The good news is that virtually all animated prime-time series are now covered by the WGA. Unless you’re an animation professional you may be surprised to know that up until recently, no animation writing was covered by the Writer’s Guild of America. Even today, only a small percentage of animated series are covered by WGA contracts. Most prime-time series are covered, but almost no non-prime-time. Thus, other than prime-time animation writers, almost no cartoon writers receive residuals. While all live-action television writers receive periodic residual payments as the studios continue to air and generate profits from their work, over 90 percent of cartoon writers get paid only a small, flat fee. Believe it or not, most of them have no union representation whatsoever. The small percentage who do, have historically been covered by The Screen Cartoonist Union Local 839 of the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE)—the same union that represents inkers, painters, and animators. To change this, the Animation Writers Caucus (AWC) of the Writers Guild of America, an ad hoc group of WGA members who also happen to write animation, organized for the purpose of gaining better contracts and fairer representation for animation writers. To learn more about the AWC you can contact the WGA. The bad news is that, per WGA regulations, only one script in every thirteen goes to a freelance writer. And script submissions for most, if not all, prime-time animated series must be made by agents. So don’t go mailing your scripts to prime-time story editors expecting them to be read.

It is a general rule that prime-time animated series editors want to read live-action sitcoms or prime-time animation scripts as examples of a writer’s work. They’re not interested in non-prime-time toon writers, no matter how successful, unless they’ve written a good sitcom spec.

Staff salaries for prime-time animated series that have signed with the WGA are governed by the WGA Minimum Basic Agreement. Currently this is $2,500-$3,200 per week for a staff writer, and between $4,500-$6,000 per week for a story editor. Most staff writer
deals are for one to two years, with an option for more if the series is picked up (the same as sitcoms). The minimum staff deal is thirteen weeks. But that’s just the salary. All scripts are extra. Presently, the WGA half-hour prime-time script minimum is $18,659. WGA minimums go up every year according to guild agreements, so check with the WGA if you want the most current figures.

Wait! There’s more! All prime-time animation covered by the WGA pays residuals at the same rate as WGA prime-time live-action rates. This means that on a hit show the money can roll in for years.

So, although it’s much harder to break into prime-time than non-prime-time animation writing, there are several good reasons to shoot for the prime-time stars, including higher script fees, residuals, and the chance to make the “jump to light-speed” and get into live-action television.

Choosing Which Type of Animation to Write

I’ve been blessed with a varied and exciting career. I’ve written animated features, television, and videos, in genres as diverse as sci-fi, action-comedy, comedy, fantasy, children’s, and preschool. Frankly, I love them all, because I love to create fun and different stories.

If you want to start off with something easy don’t start with comedy. It’s more difficult than dramatic scripts because you not only have to write a good story, it has to be funny. Comedy can be difficult, unless you’re a self-propelled-automatic-comedy-making-machine like Robin Williams. If you want to get your feet wet with comedy you might try an action-comedy. These are action stories with fun characters, like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Because they aren’t as detailed in story plotting and structure, short scripts are easier to write than long scripts. Seven-minute squash-and-stretch cartoons, such as Tiny Toon Adventures, have a hair-thin plot with lots of physical schtick. If you like to just come up with wild and crazy visual gags then this is the form for you.

Speaking of short scripts, I wrote some scripts for Warner Bros. Online’s Entertainandom website. The series, Li’l Green Men, was made up of two-minute episodes that are about three-and-a-half pages long. You can’t get much shorter than that. A simple setup—gag-gag-gag—and you’re out.

There’s also animated feature films. Who wouldn’t like to write the next Lion King or Toy Story? But despite the allure of feature animation writing, it’s a simple mathematical fact that there are a hundred times as many available opportunities in TV than in animated features. So do yourself—and your career—a favor, and start out with television. You’ll get paid while you improve your skills, and thus have a better chance of selling that feature you have your heart set on.

Above all, follow your passion. If happiness is what you experience as you succeed in life, then succeeding at something you’re passionate about has to result in the most happiness of all. Who knows? Maybe the next $500 million grossing animated feature will have your name on it. Anything’s possible in Hollywood.