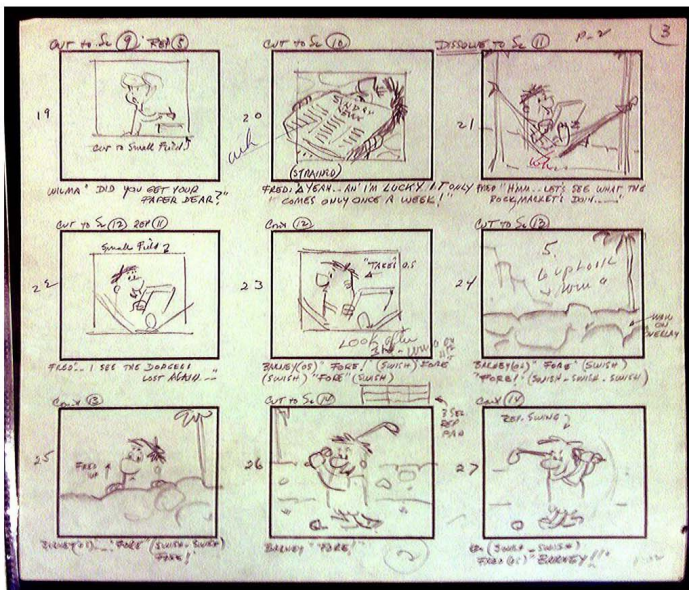1)
Under the Hood of the Storyboard
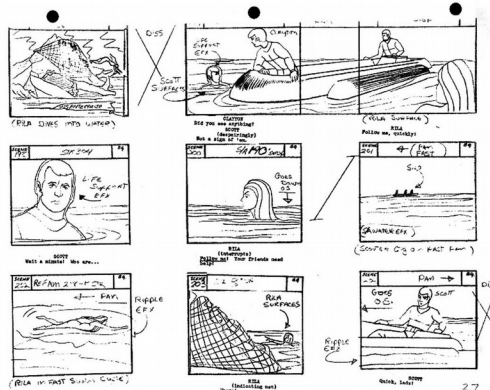

with Steve Evangelatos

Boarding Then and Now

Storyboarding Then and Now

- Early days of TV, boarding was just basic setups (one panel for long stretches of dialogue, arrows did the walking etc.)

- Back then, once the basic board was done, layout and posing fleshed out the visual story beats under the eye of the director. Animators took a far greater role in the storytelling decisions back then as well.

Storyboarding Then and Now

- Times have changed dramatically on many different levels:
  - Schedules are tighter, budgets are lower, and the opportunity for retakes has diminished.
  - When I worked in tv commercials in the eighties, the average cost of a national :30 second animated ad was about $120,000. Adjusted for inflation, that is far greater than the budget of most 26 minute episodes on daytime tv.

Storyboarding Then and Now

  - Audiences are also more demanding.
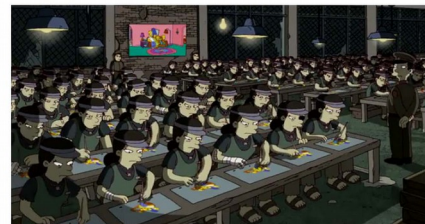

Storyboarding Then and Now

As much as we love the old Flintstones, audiences are no longer satisfied with formulaic "comedies of error". Just check out the complexity of the writing in Simpsons and Family Guy.

  - The production process and the technologies have changed. Many shows are now produced overseas

Storyboarding Then and Now

where the animators have no idea where the story beats are, or even what the overall story is.
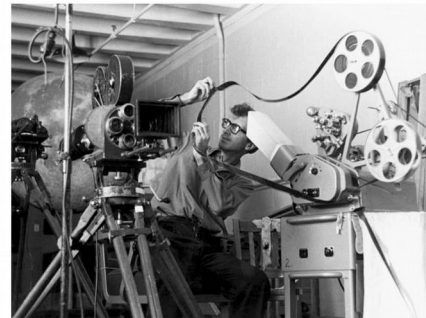

Storyboarding Then and Now

- Executives and writers are more involved in storyboards, and they want to see as many issues resolved at the board stage as possible.
- And good old animatics; Boards must be animatic friendly nowadays; that is, they must work clearly without notes, arrows, or long periods of inactivity.

- As a result, modern storyboards must lock down as many key elements as possible, including staging, acting, and camerawork. Not only will it sell more easily to the executives, it makes the modern production process that much smoother and guess-work free.

Storyboarding Then and Now

- But since modern storyboards are responsible for so much, board artists are forced to be even more careful about how they use this responsibility. Otherwise storyboards will just end up being a huge mess of line mileage that don't contribute at all to the increasing the impact of the story.

2) Let's Talk About the Boarding Process For a Moment...


The Boarding Process.

- Common approach: read the script, and dive in?
- First script page may take days...why?
- Thumbnailing: good or bad? What really happens in the thumbnail process?
  - Many years ago I used to thumb at least the first 2 or 3 script pages before I started a board
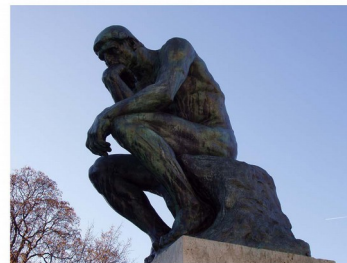
- only to abandon the thumbs within half a script page once I started the final board. I would always think of better solutions once I started the final. And the boards were awesome.
- So I assumed thumbnailing was pointless, and abandoned thumbnailing. And my boards started to stink. What happened?

- What happened is that the thumbnailing process, though fruitless in providing useful panel ideas, made me intimately familiar with the story. So when I sat down to do the final panels, it almost seemed as if I was improvising anew. And in fact, I was.
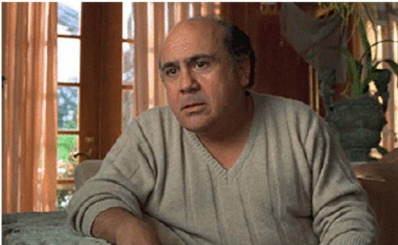
Actors and Their Process...

3) A Quick Diversion: Actors and Their Process...

- We've all seen movies which show actors in the process of making a movie. Invariably an actor desperately calls to the director and asks "b-but...what's my motivation?" This is a fictional device, as the filmmakers themselves well know: any actor that asks for his "motivation" on set would be fired immediately.

OK, I'm here. Now what's my motivation?
Actors and Their Process...

- A good actor walks on the set with an intimate knowledge of the character he or she is going to portray. They take singing lessons, sword fighting lessons, gain or lose 35 pounds, take great pains to investigate the mental state of the character, etc.

Actors and Their Process...

- More importantly, they absorb and understand the story that their character is involved in: the character arcs, the set-ups, the defeats, every tiny little

beat. **So though it may appear in the finished film that the character is leading the story, in the performing actor's mind it is the story that is doing the leading, by providing the actor with opportunities for that character to become stronger.**

So when they appear on the set, if they have prepared properly, they don't even need to think too much about how to perform their lines. Their performance is a carefully prepared improvisation, propelled by the needs of the story and their own personal way to interpret it.

4) Back to the Boarding Process...

- As storyboard artists, we are kind of like actors, except we have to act while holding up our own cameras, doing our own effects and makeup, and building our own sets.
- And like actors, we need to become intimately familiar with the script, the story and the characters.
- Like an actor, we need to create the illusion that the character is leading the story, while in actual fact, the story is leading the characters to opportunities for us further strengthen our characters, to have fun with them, and to further engage our audience.
- And this brings me finally to my key theme: a good storyboard artist doesn't just know how to create a well staged series of drawings, or create dynamic poses, or be able to draw a perspective grid like nobody's business - **they must know how to infiltrate a story and the characters, get to the core of it, look for opportunities to expand and integrate the characters, and take it to the next stage that, up till now, has only been outlined in the script.**

5) Let's talk for a minute about what story *is*:

Story. What *is* it exactly?

a) The Writer's story

b) Story Direction

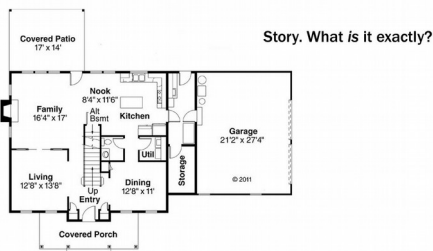- We all know what the word story means. At its' simplest, it is a related progression of events with a beginning and an end. But in our end of the business, there are two kinds of story process:
  - One is the writer's story, known as the script. It is basically a detailed sketch of the overall story points, with dialogue.
  - The other kind of story process is story direction, which is the storyboard. It is the job of the storyboard artist to corral the script ideas and expand on them into an entertaining final story product.

Story. What *is* it exactly?

  - The relationship between the two is similar to the relationship between a rough blueprint, and an artist's rendering. They both represent the same building, but the blueprint only solves the big decisions. The artist's rendering, (and the final product, as well) are created through solving countless further decisions based on the initial blueprint.
- Instead of adding mouldings and brick and window designs, story direction adds the endless details that make all the minor and major beats of the story come to life.

Story. What *is* it exactly?

- The problem is, quite often they are not immediately evident in the script.

6) So How Should a Board Artist Approach a Script?

Approaching the Script

- As I mentioned earlier, thumbnailing is a good way to explore the story. But unless you are working on a feature, it is agonizingly time consuming as a way to really explore an entire script. And you only have 3 or 4 weeks before pitch day.
- What you need to be looking for is the heart of the story that exists between the lines.
    - So sit down in a comfortable place with your script and a notebook and get to work. And hold all your calls, because this can take hours.
    - Start with the big picture. You need to isolate the key elements of the story, basically what essentially happens in all the acts.
    - Then break it down into the sequences. What is the key thing in each sequence that happens that drives the story. Sometimes there are two key elements to a sequence, but very rarely more than that.
        - At this stage it is easy to be distracted by well written bits of dialogue, or opportunities for a funny gag, and you'll be tempted to write these down. Don't. Stick to the heart of the story, what essentially needs to happen for the story to move forward.
    - Next, study all the characters in your script. Start with the main protagonist, and track his progress through every sequence one by one.
        - Note! When I say "track", what I mean is what is it that the character needs to be feeling, to be thinking, to be preoccupied with, or not preoccupied with, for the story to work best.

- - This is where you'll start to find that you really need to start using your imagination, because much of this is not covered in the script.
  - Then track the antagonist. If the antagonist is not a real character, let's say it's a tornado or hungry shark, track it as if it were a character.
  - Then do the same for each and every one of your secondary characters, through every sequence.
  - You may find some of this will turn out to academic, but quite often, knowing all these little bits of information will pay off.

7) A Quick Word About the Vocal Track...

The Voice Track

- If you are working in TV, chances are you will be provided with a voice track. You might say, well why not just follow the voice track, the arcs and emotions should all be there, right?
  - A voice track for an episode is often recorded by a bunch of rushed voice actors in six hours or less, sometimes two episodes in a day. You will be working on your board for three or four weeks. If you base all your decisions on the voice track, you will risk producing a crap storyboard.

- Cartoons are a visual medium. Voices are one of the balls to juggle, but so are the posing, expressions, staging, cinematography, transitions and pacing, all of which need to reference the source material, not just the voices.
- SO!..If you aren't happy with a particular take, talk to the director and argue your case for a "pick up" (or retake), if possible.

8) Digging In

Digging In

- So now your head is full of the story, in all its' glorious detail. You go home and you practically have dreams about it.
- Eventually, you need to start drawing. If you have done a thorough job in understanding the story, your job will now be a lot easier. Its' time to unlock your storyboarder's mental toolbox and get to work.
- Look at your opening scene. What is it about? What is the most important thing that needs to happen? Focus on the elements that provide the opportunities for the protagonist to begin to get involved.
- Again, though it may appear to the audience that your characters are driving the story, it is the story that is providing the opportunities for your characters to be all they can be. What are these opportunities? Be sure your characters clearly take advantage of them.
- For example, whenever you have two or more characters on the screen, always look for opportunities for them to interact in some way or another, based on the story. Get them involved with each other:
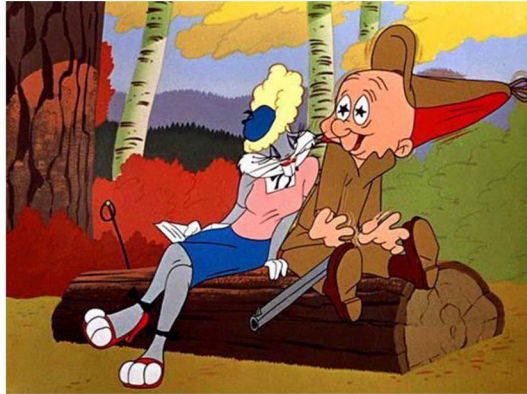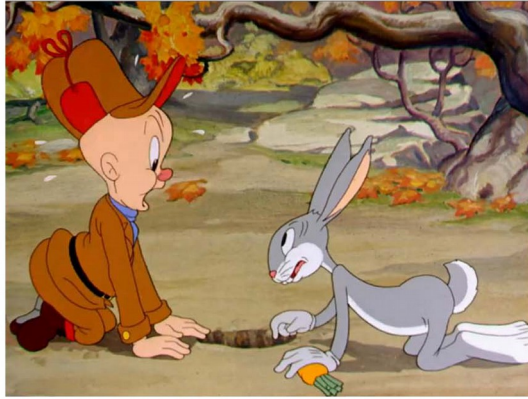
Use Personal Space
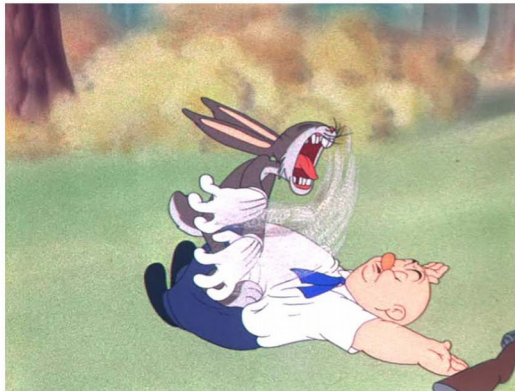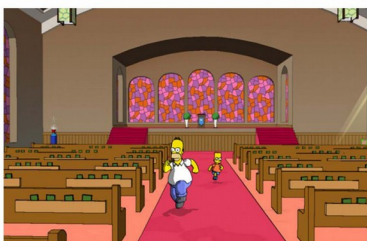

Contrast

Subtlety

Sympathy

Melodrama

- Look at your staging. What does the story tell you about how you should stage a shot?
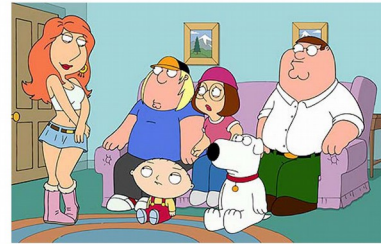

Wide for action?

Wide, to because the action is more important than the expression?

Close for expression?

Or close, because the expression is more important?

Wide, so we can see the reactions of others, which can lead to their involvement?

Wide for reactions?

Close for internalizing?

Or close, because this moment needs to be internal?

- We've all had problems with weak scripts. You may get one that starts:

Bad Scripts

"Ext. Billy's House:
It is a typical boring Saturday afternoon.
Int. Billy's House:
Billy is bored and decides to call his friend Pete."

You'd want to start with an establishing shot, as quite often you do at the start of a show. How do you make it look like it's a boring Saturday afternoon? Well, the key here is that it is boring for *Billy* that afternoon, *no one else*, so you'd want to get inside ASAP and see Billy. We know that Billy is a bit of a slob. Now, do we put him at the kitchen counter? In his bedroom? A kid can be bored anywhere. But we don't just want him bored, we want him really bored. We also know that later on his friend Pete has a dog that he is babysitting rips Billy's mom's new sofa apart. So let's put Billy on that fancy sofa, watching the TV upside down with his shoed feet up over the back, and Saturday morning cartoons can be heard on the TV. He's so bored and lazy that he's changing channels with his feet. He pulls the carpet toward him, on which is a small table with the phone. He could prop the phone against his ear with a cushion. Voila, we have a boring Saturday afternoon with bored, slobbish suburban kid, plus it preps the audience for a later scene.

9) In Summary

- Storyboarding involves proficiency and knowledge at a great number of skills. This is knowledge that you build up over time, and you are continually adding to it - I call it the storyboarder's toolbox. It includes knowledge on:
    - Acting, posing and expressions
    - Staging
    - Cinematography
    - Composition
    - Clarity
    - And good solid drawing

    However, all of this knowledge will never be used to its' potential unless you understand *how* to use it. **Knowing technique without understanding story, character, the importance of the story acts,**

the story beats and the arcs of the characters is like knowing how to control a car but not knowing where the road is.

If you know first where it is you want to go before you draw your first line, you'll get there sooner, easier and with a far better result.

And next time you are watching a really great movie with strong characters remember this: though it appears that the characters are leading the story, try to see how the *story* is providing opportunities for the actors to become the strong characters they are portraying.

This skill is just as important for storyboard artists!

That's it for now. Thanks!