

FALL 2021

ISSUE NO. 15

KEYFRAME

THE
ANIMATION
GUILD
QUARTERLY

MAYA AND THE THREE

FALL 2021



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NEW YORK MAGAZINE



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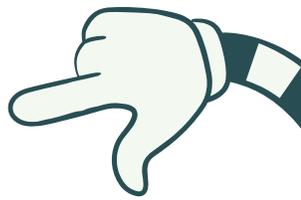


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ONE VOICE



THE FIRST IATSE (INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF THEATRICAL STAGE EMPLOYEES) DISTRICT 2 CONVENTION I ATTENDED WAS IN 2015 IN HONOLULU.

Even though I'd been an active member for years, that was my first time volunteering to be a Delegate for our Local. I have to admit, I was drawn by the opportunity to spend a few days in Hawai'i, but I quickly learned the work and commitment it takes to be a good representative of The Animation Guild.

IATSE is divided up into 13 geographical Districts. TAG is in District 2 which represents California, Nevada, Arizona, and Hawai'i. The annual D2 Convention host cities are rotated throughout the District to spread the IA love to far-off Locals. It was at a D2 Convention that I learned just how varied our membership is—from stagehands to projectionists to the people who set up trade shows, all under the umbrella of the International.

Every four years, like this year, IATSE also holds the International Quadrennial Convention where all 13 Districts come together to vote on resolutions and elect new officers to the IATSE leadership. It is at this convention that our most active members who have gathered support for their resolutions can present to the wider membership. This is where we can have a hand in guiding this massive ship.

Like most locals, TAG represents a variety of crafts, but unlike other locals those crafts are all animation related. It can be a struggle to push forward proposals that are craft-specific since they have a difficult time garnering attention from our members who are in a different craft. So it is for TAG at the District level and even harder at the International level.

At first, it feels like an impossible task. We are a local of 5,000 plus trying to have an impact and voice in this union of more than 150,000 members. How will a stagehand in Oklahoma ever feel invested in a proposal from a Hollywood animation local?

But the Quadrennial Convention is our opportunity to be heard. Every Local submits resolutions to be considered and voted on by the wider membership. During the meeting, everyone is assigned to participate in a committee. These committees work on the resolutions, debate their merits, work on the language of the resolutions, and then suggest which resolutions should be adopted by vote.

I am proud to say that The Animation Guild's delegation of 35 members made quite an impact with the 6 resolutions we put forward this year. We were able to find that common ground with our kin in different regions of the U.S. and Canada. We were able to find our one voice.

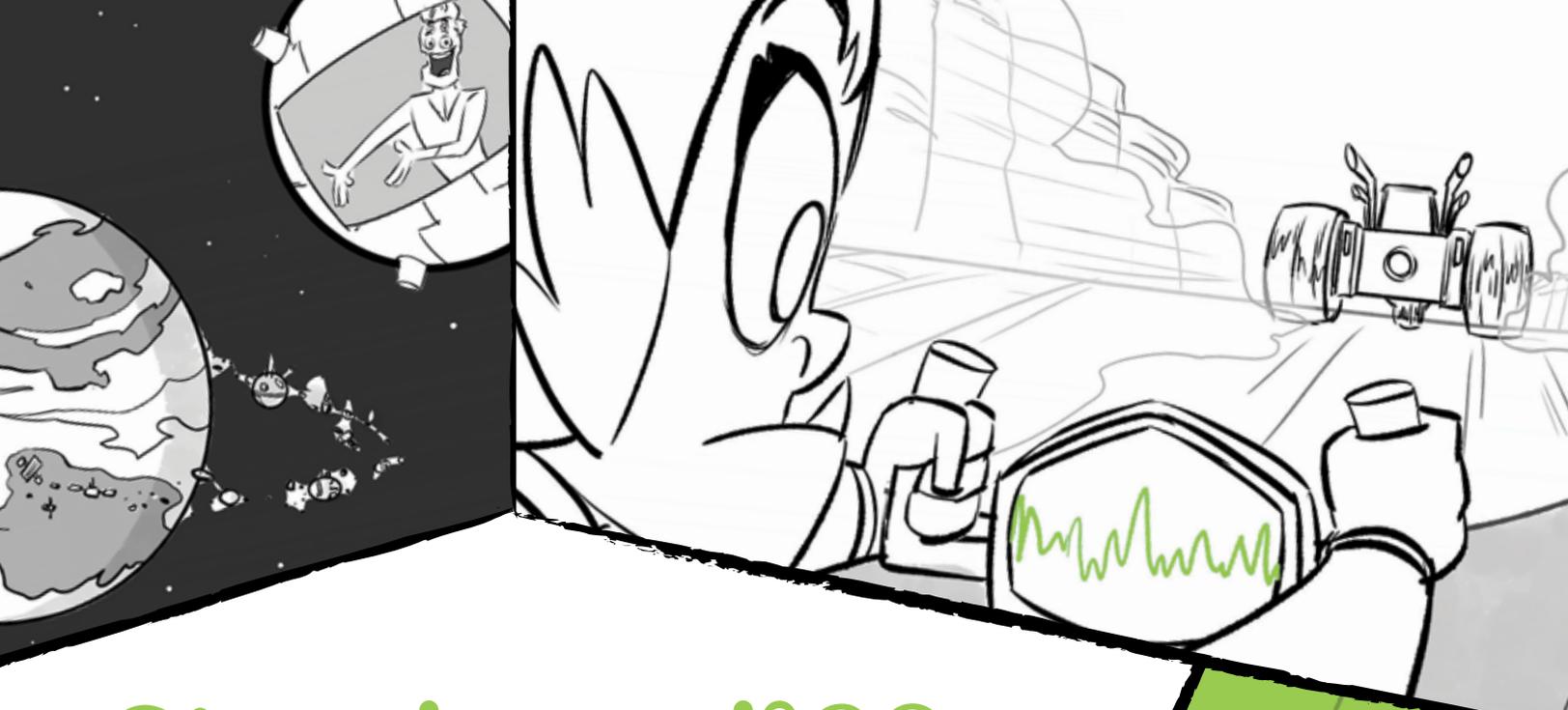
In the end, no matter what our vocation, we all want the same things—to be respected at our jobs, to earn what we are worth, to be able to work in a safe workplace, and to be able to have time to spend with the people we love.

In Solidarity,
Jeanette Moreno King | President
The Animation Guild, IATSE Local 839

ON THE COVER

Artwork from *Maya and the Three* by Jorge R. Gutiérrez.





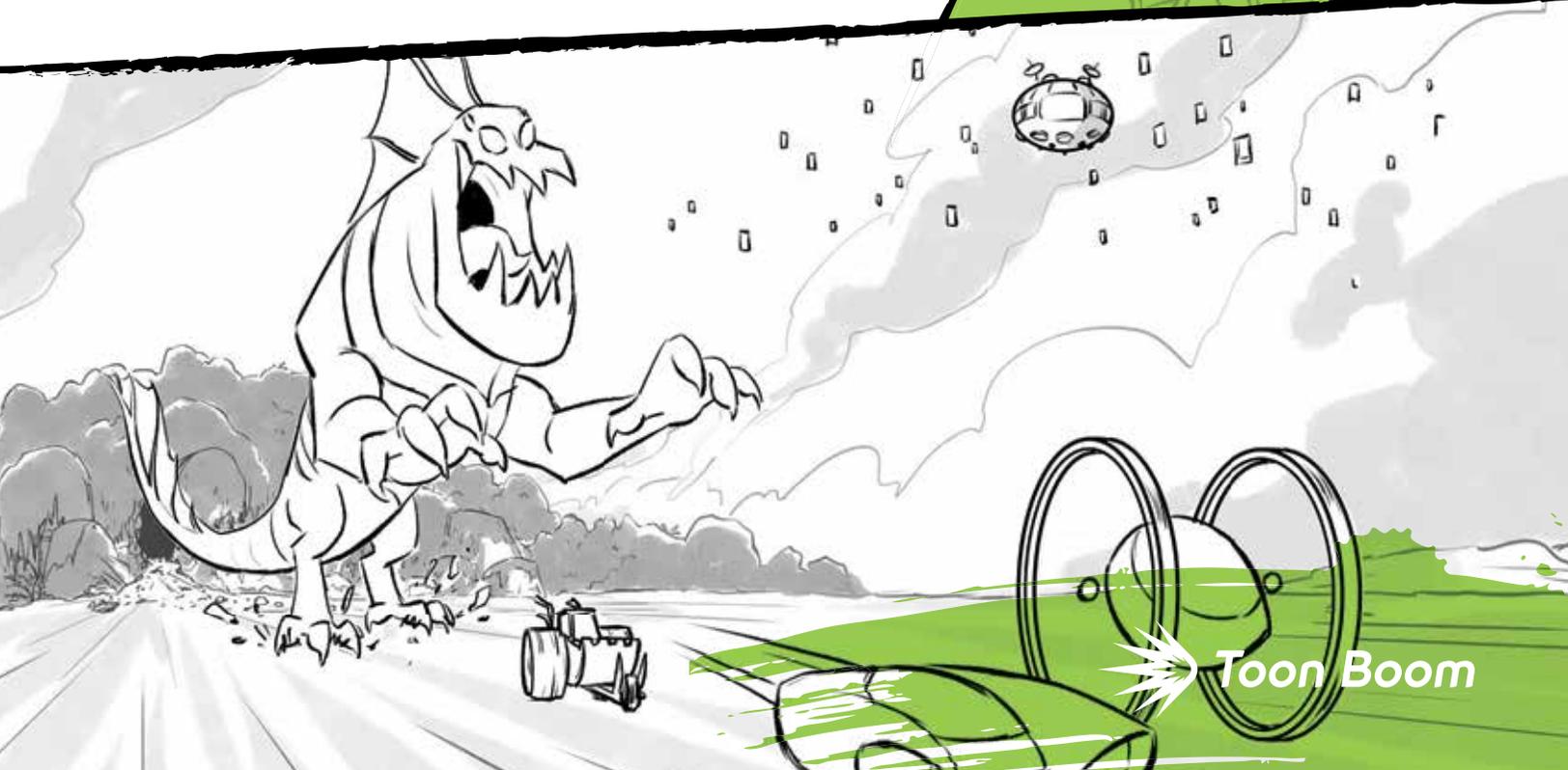
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PROCESSING THROUGH STORIES



HOW OFTEN HAS THE WORLD SHARED IN A SIMULTANEOUS AND UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE? I CAN'T THINK OF MANY INSTANCES, BUT THE PANDEMIC CERTAINLY QUALIFIES AS ONE THAT HAS IMPACTED THE ENTIRE GLOBE. THE EFFECT IS UNDOUBTEDLY TRAUMATIC WITH TOO MANY LOST LIVES. YET, IT'S

HUMAN NATURE TO TRY AND MAKE SOME SENSE OF THE SITUATION, AND OFTEN THIS NEED TO PROCESS LIFE MANIFESTS ITSELF THROUGH STORYTELLING.

Storytelling is a powerful balm whether through pictures or words. Background Painter Chi Ngô channeled her homesickness for her native Vietnam into artwork, inspired by the traditional áo dài garment, and she hopes to one day depict Southeast Asian culture in animation through her lens. You can read more about her in the Art & Craft column (p.9).

Art Director Nadia Vurbenova-Mouri shares her journey from Bulgaria to the U.S. in *The Climb* (p.12) chronicling how she worked as a housekeeper when she first arrived to this country, learning English, and pursuing her dreams to work in animation. Her persistence paid off, and today she is also compelled to share her own immigration experiences through a personal writing project.

Jorge R. Gutiérrez has long been a champion of LatinX culture and incorporating stories from his homeland into animation. Long before *Coco*, he celebrated the tradition of the Day of the Dead in *The Book of Life*. In his new project, *Maya and the Three* (p.28), he weaves his passion for Mexican, Latin American, South American, and Caribbean culture with ancient Mesoamerican folklore.

Maya and the Three's titular character believes adventure is life and vice versa, and by that standard we all are living our own quest and each one of us has a worthwhile tale to tell. How will the experiences from the last year manifest into stories? We don't know yet. But perhaps there will be some healing from our collective voices as we process the pandemic in the future.

Alexandra

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Her most recent novel is *Snowize @ Snitch: Highly Effective Defective Detectives*.



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ARTIST: Chi Ngô
TITLE: *Reading Garden*
MEDIUM: Digital
SIZE: 22" x 11"

HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS



When Warner Bros. Background Painter Chi Ngô was in high school, she moved from Vietnam to the U.S. The stark differences

between the two cultures made the transition jarring, and she sought ways to cope with the change. Today, one way she keeps from being homesick for her birth country is through her personal art.

She loves trying new approaches to illustration, and in her Vietnam-inspired work *Reading Garden*, she

used textured brushstrokes in Photoshop to mimic a hand-painted look and to show variation in the plants and flowers. Regarding the composition, Ngô says that it “creates the feeling of voyeurism, as if the viewer stumbles upon a beautiful lady reading in silence in the middle of the garden.” The addition of dappled light and shadows enhances the sense of serenity.

Ngô also wanted to share the beauty of the áo dài, Vietnam’s iconic national garment. “I love the shape and silhouette of the áo dài,” she says. “If you happen to walk into an áo dài tailor

shop, the amount of colors, textures, and embroidery details on the fabrics are so marvelous and most inspiring!”

Ngô hopes to one day unite her personal and professional art. “So far we have seen more and more representation of East Asian culture in mainstream media,” she says, “but I feel like Southeast Asia as a whole is still a mystery to a lot of people. Showing Vietnamese culture through my lens as a first generation [artist] is important to me. [It’s] a way for me to connect with Vietnamese Americans, and to encourage more inclusivity and diversity in animation.”

CONCRETE AMBITIONS

"Working with my hands and in a 3D format [utilizes] a different side of my brain and my craft and what I'm interested in."



Photos by Ange Beckum and Sho Sho Smith.

DELICATE MEETS DECISIVE IN THE ARTWORK OF ERIN ALTHEA, WHO USES CONCRETE AND RESIN TO REDEFINE TRADITIONAL BRUTALIST DESIGN.

When Erin Althea was growing up, she'd watch her mother, the artist Duane Smith, create kaleidoscopes of color out of metal and stained glass. She also developed a fascination with medieval designs, saying now that the flatness and angular aesthetic of that period's "visual vocabulary is interesting to me."

Today, this interest can still be seen in Althea's work as an animator, a visual development artist, and a creator of brutalist sculpture and jewelry. That last one might sound odd, since stained glass is considered delicate and light, and Althea

OPPOSITE PAGE FROM TOP: Althea creates 2D and 3D artworks in her studio. Concrete busts can also serve as plant stands. THIS PAGE: Wedge and Arched Bookends combine concrete and resin and come in a variety of colors.



works with concrete and resin to mold elemental busts of women, menorahs, altar pieces, bookends, paperweights, planters, and more.

Althea chose her business name, Love & Quarry, because she wanted something that was “reminiscent of stonework” but was also “warm and welcoming and not intimidating.” In addition, she uses natural pigments to create an inviting color palette of blues, cobalt, and terracotta that balance the decisive lines of her creations.

As for the medium she has chosen, “The root of brutalism is raw concrete,” she says. “Something about working with this material and the rawness and roughness... appealed to me. I think I always wanted to work with stone, but didn’t really know how to make it work in a modern way. Concrete is a modern [material] that imitates stone.”

Althea came to this artform about a decade ago when she was asked to design paperweights for the posh LINE Hotel in Los Angeles’ Koreatown, which makes its home in a brutalist building from the 1960s. A 2008 graduate of Pasadena’s ArtCenter College of Design, she has also worked as an illustrator and fine art painter, and she says the visual development work for

denim retail giant Levi Strauss & Co. prepared her for prop design—her first animation position at DreamWorks TV. Contacts she made through her freelance work led her into animation, and here her resume includes background painter for Fox’s *Bless the Harts* and background and prop designer for an upcoming pilot.

Not only does Althea’s sculptural work give her eyes a chance to rest after hours at the computer, she says it allows her some time to balance her thoughts. “Working with my hands and in a 3D format [utilizes] a different side of my brain and my craft and what I’m interested in. Even when I was in school, I always gravitated toward sculptural, [and] I’ve been incorporating sculptural pieces into my paintings. Making a meta-fictional story where the 2D and 3D pieces come together.”

Along with the opportunity to switch gears, Althea finds working with concrete meditative and says, “The making of the models, molding them, the casting, the sanding—there’s so much that goes into it. It’s not just exercise. I use every muscle ... I put my feet into the mold and pull with my arms. It’s very physical.”

This pursuit also gives her a chance to work for herself. Most of her time in animation has been on studio projects where, she says, “There’s such a lack of authorship on the design side of things, and that can be really frustrating for artists. I find that if I put myself into something else, it helps me be a little bit more patient [when getting] notes. If there are changes or if it’s somebody else’s taste and I don’t necessarily agree with it, it’s easier to let go than if it’s something personal.”

Just don’t tell Althea that women can’t work with heavy machinery.

This is also why she’s drawn to concrete. She says with a laugh, “It does smash the stereotypes of women’s work and men’s work. And smashing gender roles is very appealing to me.”

Althea’s work can be found at www.loveandquarry.com.

— Whitney Friedlander



ONWARD & UPWARD



FROM A TODDLER DRAWING OF A CHICKEN TO HIGH PRAISE FROM CHUCK JONES, NADIA VURBENOVA-MOURI'S TALENTS LED HER FROM BULGARIA TO A SUCCESSFUL ANIMATION CAREER IN THE U.S.

When she was three years old in her native Bulgaria, Nadia Vurbenova-Mouri remembers following her grandfather around the house, asking him to draw a chicken over and over again. Eventually, she tried to draw it herself, and after many attempts finally got something that resembled his sketch. From that moment on, she never stopped drawing.

Later in school her art teachers liked her work. But one of them advised her mother that even though her daughter had talent, she should not be encouraged to pursue art because it was such a difficult field to succeed in. Despite this advice, Vurbenova-Mouri's pharmacist parents continued to be supportive. By the time she was seven, she told them there was nothing else she wanted to do besides art, and this determination led her, at the age of 12, to start the two-year preparation process to apply to the extremely competitive National High School of Applied Arts. "The system in Bulgaria was very different to the United States," she explains. In addition to requiring good grades, applicants were given a topic and had to demonstrate their artistic skills. Vurbenova-Mouri was one of only thirteen students accepted in her year.

After graduating, she continued her studies at The National Academy of Arts, majoring in industrial design. Then, drawn to the idea of Hollywood, she moved with friends to the U.S. She looked for work in graphic design, but only got one callback, and she says with a laugh, "I couldn't communicate

with the person because I didn't know English." Fortunately, she happened to meet a fellow Bulgarian who was drawing layouts for animation, and even though this field had never been on her radar, she trained under him. At first he had her do layouts. "I would bring my drawings to the studio, and he would look at them—and he said: You suck!" He suggested she try color, an area she loved. He would give her the layout, and she would paint it. "The very first one that I took back, he said, 'Oh my God, you have a great color sense!'"

Vurbenova-Mouri worked as a housekeeper to support herself, finally landing her first freelance gig, doing a concept painting for Kroyer Films. She was paid \$400 and had to make so many corrections that it took several weeks to complete. Kroyer offered her a part-time job that led to a full-time gig, and so began her career in animation.

She recalls how little she knew then about the industry. She was working on backgrounds for a TV special based on the symphonic fairy tale, *Peter and the Wolf*, and there was great excitement among her colleagues when they learned the show's executive creative consultant and character designer would be coming into the studio. When the man told her that her work was fabulous, it meant little to her because she'd never heard of him. He turned out to be none other than the legendary Chuck Jones!

When Kroyer shut down and joined Warner Bros., all the crew was invited to apply



for new positions. Vurbenova-Mouri turned down the training position she was offered, demanding more because she thought that after being in the business for one year, she was no longer a trainee. “I was just so green,” she says, “but I was full of energy, and I got the job.” It was a big jump to feature animation, and worried she might be fired for lack of experience, she paid close attention to her fellow painters, studying their techniques. She ended up working on hits like *Space Jam* and *The Iron Giant*.

Vurbenova-Mouri moved on to Disney TV at a time when everything in the industry changed virtually overnight and animators had to learn how to use computers. She remembers studying a Photoshop manual over her lunch break, and by the time she spent four seasons on Disney’s *Kim Possible*, she’d become known for creating innovative styles. In 2005 she was nominated for an Annie Award for production design on that series.

While at Disney she realized that she really wanted to art direct but discovered it wasn’t easy to move up to that next level. Her break came when she worked on Nickelodeon’s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* as a color supervisor and then art director. “If you’re good enough and persistent, and you’re nice to the people that you work with—they will give you a chance,” she says. Since 2012 she’s art directed for a number of studios, working on projects like *Scooby-Doo and Guess Who?* and *Santiago of the Seas*.

While art directing is challenging, Vurbenova-Mouri feels she has even more to give and has set her sights on executive producing. She also wants to use her experience to help the next generation. “I get a lot of kids contacting me, and I try to answer them and look at their portfolios.” And if she sees potential? She recommends them to people she knows, and emphasizes the advice that propelled her career—never give up.

— Karen Briner

Vurbenova-Mouri designates Sunday afternoons for her oil painting and says, “Art is emotion. If you paint or draw something and there is no emotion, then you haven’t done your job.”
OPPOSITE PAGE: *Victoria*. THIS PAGE: *Black Lace*.



CREATIVE SOLUTION



ABOVE: Dhaliwal's self-portrait as a Cyclops.

A DESIRE FOR MORE CREATIVE CONTROL LED WRITER AND STORY ARTIST AMINDER DHALIWAL TO THE WORLD OF GRAPHIC NOVELS WHERE HER ART AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY UNITE.

Aminder Dhaliwal once had a pilot sit in development purgatory for four years before ultimately being scrapped. She describes the experience as quietly disheartening. "I've learned to find happiness in a really fast 'no,'" she says, wryly.

Feeling disappointed and robbed of her time, she resolved to make art that was guaranteed to at least see the light of day. She started posting comics on Instagram, and she says, "I was as shocked as anyone when I started getting this large following. I [resolved to] self-publish a book now that I had a base that would probably buy it."

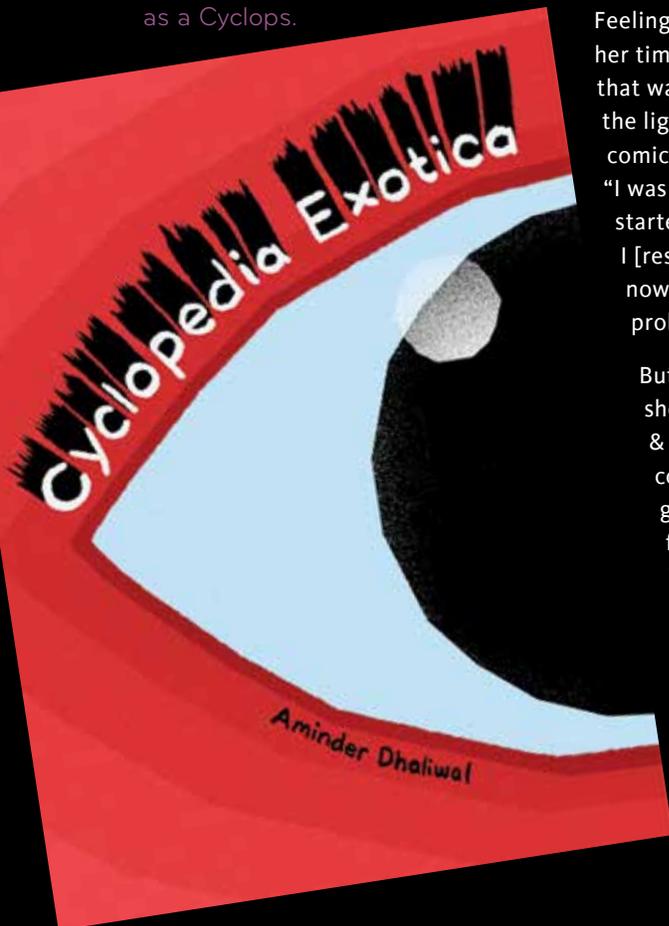
But instead of self-publishing, she cold-called publisher Drawn & Quarterly and sent over a copy of *Woman World*, her first graphic novel imagining a future where men are extinct. They replied a week later with an offer to publish it.

Next came this year's *Cyclopedia Exotica*, an allegory about microaggressions from the perspective of the mythological, one-eyed

creature Cyclopes. "I wanted to play with the idea of the daily comic strip," says Dhaliwal of the book's format. "Daily strips are not only a really easy way to offer bite-sized chunks into a new world, but it's also a nice way of layering on a theme." Each comic works individually, but when they are read as something larger in a book, she says it shows how "those microaggressions add up daily. The weight of them is so different than when you experience a one-off. What I find fun about these traumatizing events is the humor you can find in them, or those little pockets of joy when other people [can relate]."

Before Dhaliwal came to appreciate the comic strip form, her interest was in animation—an interest born out of a fascination for DVD bonus features and storytelling. The avid reader pictured stories in motion in her head. "There was something really enticing to me about seeing pictures move and how differently comedy works in animation," she says.

"I feel like that's such a cliché, but it really is something to have all these moving lines come together that can express emotion and have an effect on people," she adds. "I like that



animation has this accessibility to it, maybe because it's been softened with its association to children or family content: You're willing to watch it with an openness that you don't with other genres. I feel like you can backdoor some good messages that way."

Dhaliwal received her bachelor's degree for animation from Canada's Sheridan College. After graduating in 2011, she landed an internship at Nickelodeon and was later hired on, working as a revisionist on *Robot and Monster* and *The Fairly OddParents*, and as a storyboard artist and storyboard director on *Sanjay and Craig*. She also served stints at Cartoon Network, Disney TV, Sony, and Netflix, most recently working as a writer on the latter's series *Centaurworld* and story artist on a Sony feature in development.

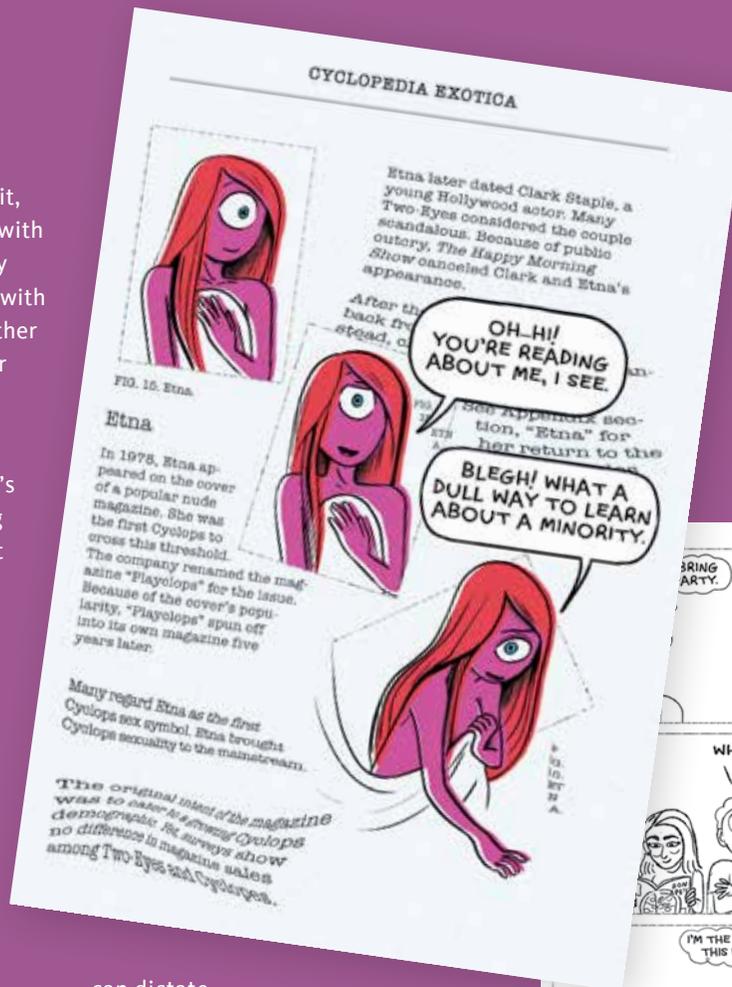
When Dhaliwal finally made the jump from her Instagram comics to publishing, she encountered new challenges. But she feels that dealing with the business end of animation prepared her for them. "As soon as show meets business, I think it's always a struggle for any artist," she says. She thinks she stayed at certain companies longer than she needed to out of a reverence for their history, "but it probably would've been beneficial to my mental health and creative ambition to have left earlier."

Today, Dhaliwal is thankful to have found an outlet that allows her to be in charge of her creativity. At the same time, she also appreciates the lessons she's learned from her 10 years so far in the industry. "Rejection

can dictate our identity where you think you're something and everyone tells you you're not that thing that you thought you were," she says.

Instead of fighting rejection, she embraces it. She's also learned how to have confidence in her own voice and to set reasonable career goals, which she feels should not be confused with hopes. "I try to think of goals that are completely in my control because that way if I do fail, I at least know it was in my control," she says. "A goal could be to write a book, but to hope to be on *The New York Times'* bestseller list is completely out of your control. That's been an important dichotomy for me to learn."

— Sonaiya Kelley



ALL IMAGES: From *Cyclopedia Exotica*. Copyright Aminder Dhaliwal, courtesy Drawn & Quarterly.



UNIONS STRONG

“STRONGER TOGETHER” IS MORE THAN JUST A HANDY CATCHPHRASE—IT’S THE LIFEBLOOD OF THE IATSE LOCALS LIFTING EACH OTHER UP TO SUPPORT EQUITY AND FAIR TREATMENT ON THE JOB.

On the surface, it doesn’t seem like last year’s TAG-hosted Halloween party has anything in common with this summer’s IATSE’s 69th Quadrennial Convention. One was inundated with sugared-up kids in costumes. The other featured delegates from local unions throughout the U.S. and Canada voting on resolutions that can affect the jobs of 150,000 union members.

In fact, there are strong common threads, and they all help tie the knot of solidarity that gives unions as a collective body their strength.

When TAG’s Family and Membership Committee came up with the idea for a drive-through, trunk-or-treat Halloween party, they joined forces with the Affiliated Property Craftspersons Guild, Motion Picture Costumers Guild, and Costume Designers Guild. It was about more than just offering a little relief from the pandemic. Families from numerous Hollywood IATSE Locals showed up, and it was a reminder during that isolating time that local unions are not islands unto themselves.

Each Local might have its own unique issues, but that doesn’t mean one’s needs—or one’s solutions—aren’t relevant to the others. “It’s good for us to reach out and look at what’s happening outside of our own Local, because very often the issues we’re experiencing—other Locals are experiencing, too,” says Teri Hendrich Cusumano, chair of TAG’s Color Designer Committee. “Instead of trying to work on an issue in your corner and everyone else kind of doing the same, it’s usually more effective if you come together to work on your common problems. You don’t know if they exist until you reach out to those other members.”

That outreach essentially occurs in three ways. The most formal is the International Quadrennial Convention, which takes place every four years and includes IATSE’s largest legislative body. “This is where the [multi-union] membership as a whole really gets to weigh in on matters that affect them,” says TAG Business Representative Steve Kaplan. “The international constitution is reopened. The international executive body is

reelected. It’s a pretty heady thing to be a part of.”

Next is the annual IATSE District 2 Convention, which represents 49 locals with approximately 45,000 members in California, Arizona, Nevada, and Hawai’i. Cusumano says this is another clear way to support each other, “especially when each Local might bring forth a resolution, and they’re asking other Locals for support on that resolution.”

Not everyone can be an executive board member or convention delegate or even attendee, though. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t ways to band together and effect change beyond the politics and the bargaining table.

For example, pay inequities between typically male- and female-dominated jobs need to be addressed in negotiations, but reshaping the makeup of these jobs is something any TAG member can help with—especially when it’s done in partnership with members from other Locals.

Cusumano describes a presentation, hosted by the District 2 Women’s Committee, that addressed how women typically put themselves at a disadvantage in the workplace by using qualifying language that makes them sound less certain. The committee is now exploring workshops to empower women to run for union leadership positions.

These actions—while not formal—can lead to a concrete effect on the workplace, but they can't occur if Locals don't join forces, combine resources, and unite for a common purpose. Yes, even a Halloween party. By creating strong relationships in more casual ways, members like Kristin Donner, one of the event's organizers and chair of the TAG Family and Membership Committee, are able to garner stronger support for serious issues, like the need to cover Spectrum Disorders by the Motion Picture Industry Health Plans.

In short, working together on the ground with other locals can create a trickle up effect as common needs are identified and solidarity is established to support action on those needs.

And as Nicole Miller notes, a win for one can serve as a guide for all. President of AAE Local B-192 and District 2 Coordinator, IATSE Women's Committee, she identifies a recent WGA success of getting paid family leave into their bargaining agreement. This, she says, is when Locals need to talk each other. Share the language they used in their negotiations, Kaplan adds. "[Not just discuss] what they have achieved, but how."

"It makes a world of difference," Miller says, pointing out that even if an action or an event may not always address a universal need, in the end, everyone will benefit.

— Kim Fay

(RIGHT) Artwork by Danny Ducker. Reprinted from The Animation Guild's 75th Convention of IATSE District 2 zine.



What I found most valuable about attending the 2019 District 2 Convention was the sense of perspective that I gained just from meeting other Locals. It's easy to feel like our problems are uniquely insurmountable, but lucky for us that isn't always true!
 —Danny Ducker (2019 D2 Delegate)



All images courtesy of DreamWorks Animation.

IN CONCLUSION

A DEDICATED TEAM AND FREEDOM TO EXPLORE CARRIED TALES OF ARCADIA FROM THREE INTERWOVEN SERIES TO AN EPIC FEATURE FILM CONCLUSION IN TROLLHUNTERS: RISE OF THE TITANS.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE: Advances in technology and expertise led to more realistic skin, fabrics, and other surfaces in the movie.

Typically, a grand finale evokes visions of a mind-blowing, climactic scene. Filmmaker Guillermo del Toro is anything but typical. The conclusion of his episodic, three-series *Tales of Arcadia* takes an unconventional approach.

“We did originally consider extending the third series for a few episodes to bring the entire trilogy to a close,” says Executive Producer Marc Guggenheim, “but the scope and scale of the climax we were envisioning really demanded the larger canvas of a feature film.”

While this might sound like a big leap, it was actually an organic move, growing naturally out of a project that progressed over the years with the same main team of directors and storyboard artists. “Working for so long and so closely together, we learned our strengths and weaknesses, so we could manage ourselves in a way where we balanced each other out,” says Yingjue Linda Chen, who advanced from texture artist to visual development artist to her final role of art director on the third series and the movie. “I also think we ourselves as artists vastly improved throughout that

time. So all of our knowledge from [all three series] was put into the movie, and that’s what I really love about it.”

First conceived as a live-action film and then an animated feature, *Trollhunters* eventually evolved into a TV show, and from the beginning, del Toro had a plan for three distinct series. *Trollhunters* (2016, 52 episodes), would be about a teen named Jim, in the suburban town of Arcadia Oaks, who is chosen to be the first human Trollhunter. *3 Below* (2018, 26 episodes), was conceived as a tale of royal alien siblings who escape their planet and crash land in Arcadia. And *Wizards* (2020, 10 episodes), would follow a secret apprentice to Merlin whose job is twofold: recruit the Guardians of Arcadia and take them back in time to Camelot and confront the Arcane Order that wants to destroy humanity.

Complex? Yes. But del Toro “made this whole thing step by step for us,” says Alfonso Blaas, whose journey from the first series to the movie began as a visual development artist, expanding into art director and then production designer on

Wizards and the movie. Still, he says, things could get tricky. “When you are finishing *Trollhunters*, you are in the middle of *3 Below*, and you are starting to think about *Wizards*. That critical moment, even more than the movie—three shows running at the same time—that was the most intense in terms of learning.”

It was also intense because of the need to keep each elaborate world distinct. “For *Trollhunters*, the dichotomy between the troll world and the human world was the focus,” says Chen. “So establishing those two worlds to make sure that there was a contrast between them was really important. Then with *3 Below*, because aliens were the lead characters, we tried to switch gears and do that new world justice. Guillermo was very adamant [about] seeing aliens that have no interloping design sense with the trolls. He wanted it to look special and unique.”

The team worked hard to stay true to each world’s aesthetic while making the series feel united. Numerous inspirations helped, from del Toro’s own live-action films to movies like *E.T.* and *Star Wars* that combined intimate and epic vibes. “With every show, we knew that we wanted to keep that kind of story, that kind of humor, that kind of adventure,” says Francisco Ruiz-Velasco, who started as a vis-dev artist when *Trollhunters* was being developed as a film, then returned as an art director and director for *3 Below* and a director for *Wizards* and the movie. “I think that helped thread the three shows so they feel coherent, similar but different.”

The characters were also a key to continuity. Chen remembers an early meeting where del Toro said that “the relations between the characters are what weaves the entire story together. It can’t just be massive movements and giant fights and lots of fire. There has to be an underlying relationship story there to make the series resonate. That was the focus for him from the very beginning.”

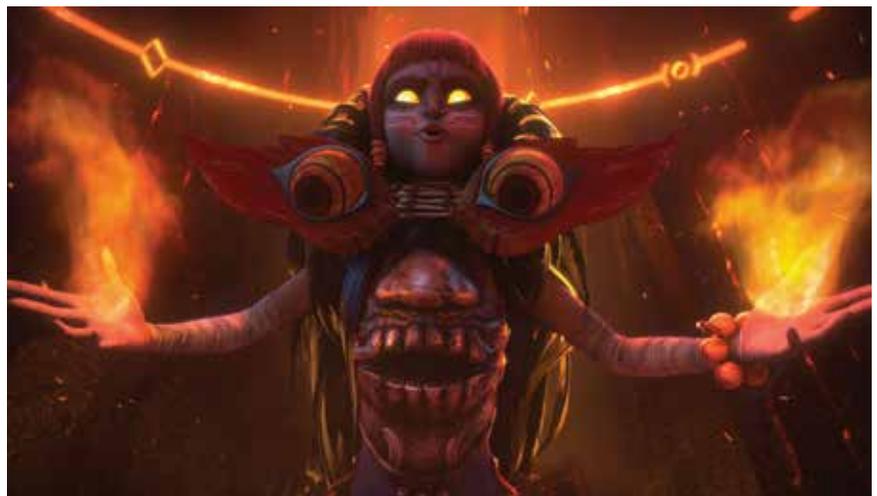
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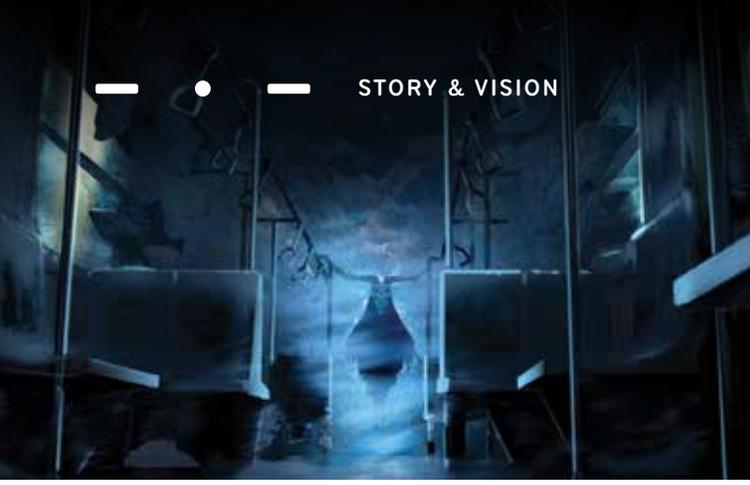
With del Toro’s background as a strong visual director and most of the core team coming from film, they were used to feature techniques like lighting keyframes. “Most [animated] TV shows don’t use that,” says Ruiz-Velasco. “They just do a basic lighting for the whole show, and every [episode] looks the same. We wanted to have that more cinematic look, so we started doing color scripts [from the beginning]. It wasn’t planned, but we wanted to push it.”

Blaas recalls creating these keyframes, trying to figure out colors, lighting scenarios, and shape languages for the epic world del Toro had created within the time and economic restraints of a TV series. He and the rest of the team pushed the bar, figuring out what worked and what didn’t, and by the second series they had improved the production pipeline to fit the show’s unique needs, establishing a dialogue to make things more efficient and figuring out how to get more out of the budget. “We were always trying to take the knowledge we learned from the first series and use it for the next and improve upon it,” says Chen. “I really do feel like that was one of the aspects where we were the most successful.”

“We just designed with no limitations... and then tried to make smart decisions on how to keep the massive feeling of the world, the massive feeling of the lore behind the show.”

– Yingjue Linda Chen, Art Director







THIS PAGE: The use of motion capture technology during visual development allowed production to envision the scope and scale of the Titans in various environments such as Hong Kong Harbor (ABOVE) and Arcadia National Park (OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM). OPPOSITE PAGE: Blaas used lighting keyframes (TOP LEFT) to push the dramatic use of lighting in final shots.

This continual growth allowed for significant improvements in the third series, including pushing camera setup shots, color correction and color processing, and more sophisticated lighting to enhance cinematic effects. The latter was also aided by advancements in technology. “In 2014 [when *Trollhunters* was in production], it was hard to find cinematic lighting for TV,” says Blaas. “It was incredibly insane because you needed to design lighting for each of the scenarios.”

Fortunately, del Toro encouraged creative freedom to find solutions. “We just designed with no limitations,” says Chen, “and then tried to make smart decisions on how to keep the massive feeling of the world, the massive feeling of the lore behind the show.”

CROSSING OVER

“We always had high ambitions for the series,” says Chen, “but I do feel like with the movie we were able to realize more of those ambitions.”

With the constraints of creating for a TV series lifted, it was possible to make huge improvements to aspects like texturing and surfacing. “We could have sub-surface scattering on skin, for example,” says Chen, and Ruiz-Velasco adds, “the render

technology was becoming so great that we could render stuff in real time and it looks top-notch.” Then there was the lighting. Along with Global Illumination when lighting scenes, “Alfonso was always an amazing painter,” says Chen, “but I think he pushed himself and really got into what lighting can do for the emotional beats of a movie.”

Another exciting opportunity was to see crucial scenes in real life. The team was able to utilize motion capture technology in the early phases of the production. This allowed them to play around with the movie’s monsters—Fire Titan, Ice Titan, and Earth Titan—in various settings and aided in the scenes where the main characters go up against the Arcane Order. Chen says that del Toro loves to play with scale, and this process gave visual development a deeper



sense of the massive scale the battle scenes required. “They fight and we see movement,” says Blaas. “We see the cameras and how much set extension we need.”

At the same time, says Chen, “Because we had to use the Titans for so many shots ... we built several different versions for the mid-shot, for the far shot, and for really close-up because, if you take the high-res one and you try to do wide shots with it ... we’re not going to see the detail.” That detail was important for enabling contrasts that emphasized the colossal scale.

As for the movie’s plot, it’s equally ambitious, bringing together disparate characters from all three series’ worlds to prevent the Arcane Order from ending humanity. Fortunately, production had already tested the concept in a crossover episode in *3 Below*. “It felt good. It felt right,” says Chen. Then came the movie, and “we had made these characters, and we loved them and believed in them. We didn’t agonize over how to bring them together. We just did it. And I felt like all of our knowledge, and especially working together and improving our own art, it shows in the final product ... Experience really does count.”

— Kim Fay



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

By Jay A. Fernandez

THE NUANCES OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ARE COMPLEX AND EVER-CHANGING, BUT THERE ARE SOME BASICS FOR HANDLING ORIGINAL WORK THAT EVERY CREATIVE PERSON OUGHT TO KNOW. READ ON FOR EXPERT ADVICE TO PLAY IT SAFE WITH YOUR IP AND OTHERS'.



THE EXPERTS

Thomas A. Crowell, Esq. is a partner at New York-based LaneCrowell LLP, an educator, and author of *The Pocket Lawyer for Comic Book Creators*. He also writes stories for Waxwork Comics.



Linda Joy Kattwinkel, Esq. is an attorney for San Francisco-based Owen, Wickersham & Erickson. Author of the *Legalities* column for AIGA San Francisco, she has been representing artists for more than 25 years. She is also a visual artist.

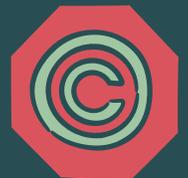


Aaron Moss is chair of the litigation department at L.A.-based Greenberg Glusker and the founder of the *Copyright Lately* website and blog. He is also an amateur concert photographer.

GETTING STARTED

Copyright protections give authors and artists control over how their work is used. While you cannot attain a copyright for ideas, titles, and concepts, you can for any specific creative expression that you have put in tangible form. All our experts stress from the start that any artist who creates work they believe has value would be shrewd to familiarize themselves with basic copyright concepts.

“It’s important,” says Kattwinkel, “because if you’re not aware of how copyright law works in this country, you can lose control of your work really easily, and other people can take it and do what they want with it ... whether or not they give you credit or pay you for it.”





CONSIDER USING WATERMARKS AND COPYRIGHT NOTICES

Placing watermarks and copyright notices on visual material seems to be falling out of favor, but some still attest to the usefulness, if only as a deterrent to those who believe they have a “right-click license.” Even though Google’s reverse image search and other software have become extremely effective at tracing stolen images, “when you include a copyright attribution watermark,” Crowell says, “the mere fact that somebody took the effort to remove copyright protection from your work gets them into far greater legal hot water.”

BEST PRACTICE TIP

Copyright notices are optional for works created after March 1, 1989, but do it anyway. Put that © at the bottom of the page, or embed it with your metadata in your images, along with the year of publication, your name or the name of your company, and “all rights reserved.” Even if you don’t have a U.S. Copyright Office registration, there are provisions under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) that allow you to go after infringers who have removed that kind of copyright information from your file.

Why you should register for copyright protection: According to U.S. law, any person who creates something “fixed in any tangible medium of expression” automatically has copyright protection for that work. But registering it officially with the U.S. Copyright Office (copyright.gov) is an essential, cost-effective way to protect your work because it gives you added legal leverage.

“If you think your screenplay or your art is worth the cost, get a copyright registration straight away,” says Moss. Depending on the type of material being registered, basic fees can range from \$45-\$125.

Start the process now and then be patient. Apply for your copyright registration early—and wait until you have it before making your work public. This is a tough one to swallow, but the risks are too great. As a result of the 2019 Supreme Court decision in *Fourth Estate Pub. Benefit Corp. v. Wall-Street.com, LLC*, copyright holders must have their U.S. Copyright Office-issued registration certificate in hand before they can file a suit for copyright infringement.

Kattwinkel says that clients often disregard this advice because they don’t want to wait months for the U.S. Copyright Office to process the application. “The minute you put something online, it’s vulnerable to illicit copying,” she warns. “And it’s vulnerable worldwide. Without a registration you have no bargaining power when you tell someone to stop infringing. If they know you can’t take them to court, they can ignore you.”

BEST PRACTICE TIPS

- Some online services—with URLs suspiciously close to the official copyright.gov—offer to register your copyrights for you for a premium. Don’t use them. Do it yourself. It’s simple.
- While registering your screenplay with the Writers Guild documents authorship from a given date, it does not guarantee

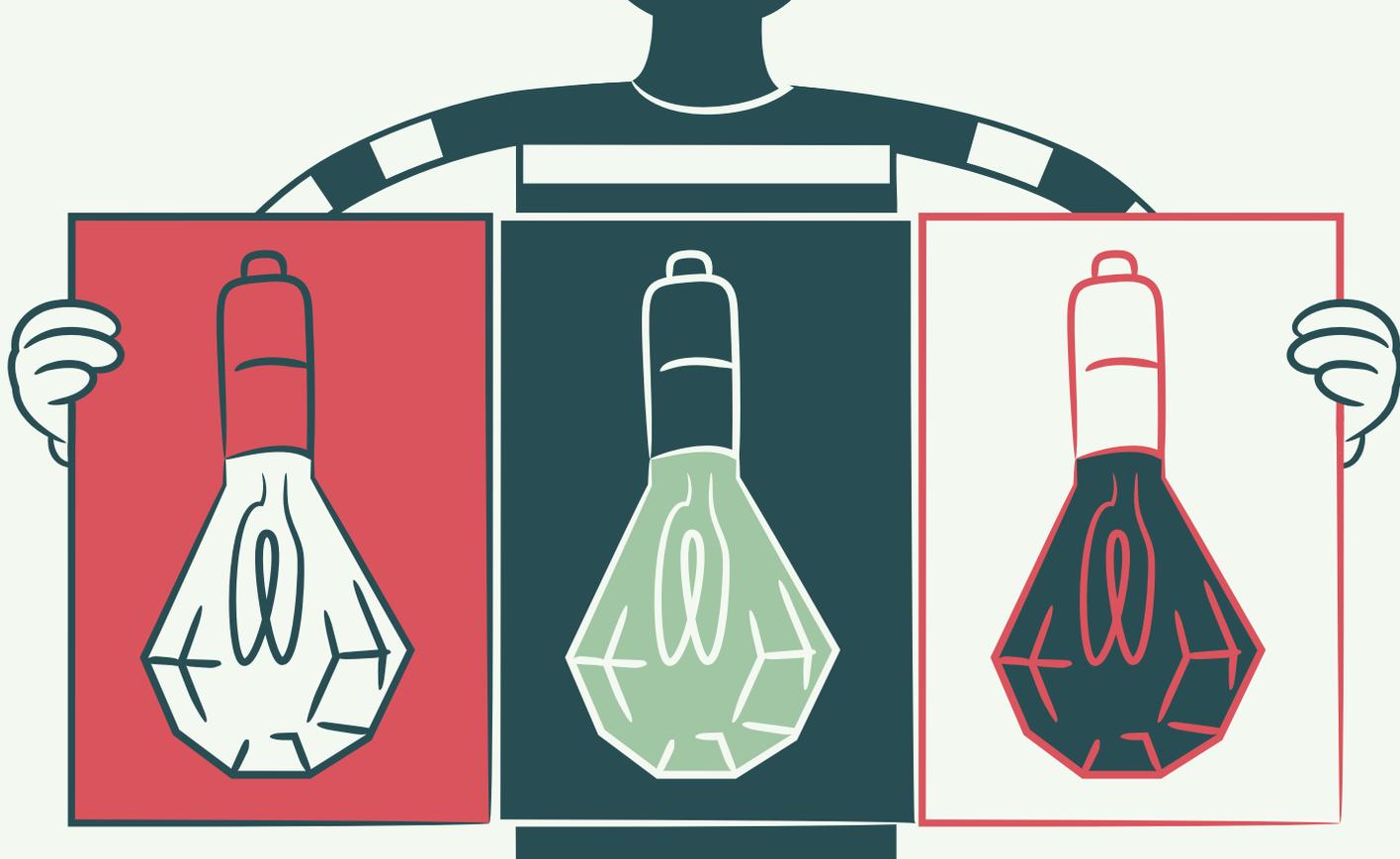
legal protection, so make sure to register with the U.S. Copyright Office.

- Register your copyrights annually. One efficient approach is to put all your creative output for the year in a print or digital sketchbook and then register the entire book as a single work.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW BEFORE YOU PITCH ORIGINAL WORK

When you’ve created something specific to pitch a client that they may want to adopt, buy, or license from you, it’s not always easy to protect. Generally, the same legal concepts apply to literary and graphic works, but the hard truth is that it is much easier to find similarities in written works and thus much harder to protect them. Common elements are inevitable, and if broad ideas without detailed plot and characters—even if they’re unique—just aren’t protectable, pitching them without a contract exposes them to potential theft without recourse. “That’s a bitter pill to swallow for a lot of artists,” says Crowell. “The best way to protect yourself is to put your idea—your concept as fully as you can, either in a sketchbook or in a screenplay—and then register copyright to that work.”

Animation and visual artists naturally have greater protections because they’re presenting copyrightable expression, so infringements are easier to spot. Still, gray areas are legion. Your two greatest defenses are nondisclosure agreements and being sure to work only with credible people. Regarding NDAs, though, the big studios and networks will first require you to sign away your right to sue in exchange for allowing you to pitch, since it’s possible that they’re already working on something with similarity to your work. The thing you can control is being sure to pitch to only reputable people. “Anybody at any sort of high level ... they’re relying on their reputation,” says Moss, “the reputation of the people they’re surrounding themselves with, and the copyright law, but nothing else.”



BEST PRACTICE TIPS

- “If you have something that you think is particularly unique and valuable, keep it close to your vest until you’re in a position to find people who can actually help you bring it to market,” says Moss. “At the end of the day, there’s only so much you can do if people are sketchy.”
- Don’t leave high-resolution digital copies with anybody, and don’t post beautiful high-res images online, because they are easily copyable and repurposed. Post low-res images, which at least won’t work for offline purposes.

CREATING FAN ART

It’s important to state outright two key points. 1) It is illegal to use someone’s copyrighted work in any way without their permission (unless it falls under fair use exceptions, see p.26). 2) A copyright holder can bring a suit against anyone who’s infringed on their copyright no matter how small the profits of the violator—even zero. That said, there are lots of reasons why copyright holders may allow, and even encourage, derivative works, or refrain from bringing down the legal hammer when their IP is used in others’ artwork.

For one thing, many aspiring artists draw from well-known existing characters to hone their chops, showcase their talent, and fill out their portfolio as an enticement to fans of the original work and potential employers. Some companies even require this, and there

you draw the line between allowing something that is going to be good for your brand because you’re encouraging really interested fans to surround themselves with your IP versus [something that crosses] into a commercial area,” says Moss.

“Most of where the tension arises is how do you draw the line between allowing something that is going to be good for your brand because you’re encouraging really interested fans to surround themselves with your IP versus [something that crosses] into a commercial area.” —Aaron Moss

are plenty of examples of artists hired by these companies based on that derivative work. In addition, some artists may sanction the use of their IP to increase exposure to their characters and brand. But if your unlicensed art is successful enough that you are making bank, that copyright holder is going to come after you.

“Most of where the tension arises—and this is something that big media companies face all the time—is how do

So yes, you can make unlicensed fan art, and even try to sell it. Some of it may even fall under fair use. For example, one-off works of fine art that utilize well-known characters in a new context have a better fair use argument than mass-produced T-shirts with well-known IP that is protected by both copyright and trademark. In the latter case, a company like DC or Warner Bros. could easily make you destroy all your product and pay damages.

BEST PRACTICE TIP

- Often creators who start from a place of wanting fans to have unobstructed access to their creative universe end up backpedaling once whole cottage industries of derivative work spring up on Etsy, eBay, and YouTube. While there's no magic language to prevent this, and it doesn't have the legal standing copyright registration does, Moss suggests placing a statement on whichever platforms showcase your work saying, "With regard to fan art and fan fiction, our policy is that we

Amount taken

How much of the original did you use? And did you take the "heart" of it or something less consequential?

Nature of the original work

What kind of work did you take from? Is it journalism/nonfiction or fiction? Works of fiction have more protections than news-related or informative material.

Purpose of the derivative piece

What did you do with the original IP? Did you add something new or use it in

WORKS MADE FOR HIRE

Professional relationships that involve works made for hire fall into two categories, and who owns the copyright on the resulting work can vary depending on the context of the relationship.

Employer-Employee

This dynamic is seemingly straightforward: If the work you create is done as part of the scope of your employment, then your employer automatically owns it. In fact, the law treats that copyrighted material as if it were created by the employer, meaning the company does not even need to name or acknowledge your part in creating it.

That said, pay very close attention to the precise contours of the scope of your employment agreement to determine whether anything you create falls outside of it and thus belongs to you as an individual artist. "For example," says Moss, "if you have been hired to come up with ideas for new animated characters, the company has a pretty good argument that *any* character idea you come up with while employed will be owned by the company"—especially if you do it on company time or using company equipment, supplies, or facilities.

If you are hired to work specifically on the company's preexisting properties, however, and not to develop new characters or properties, then the employer will likely not have any claim to any new characters you create on your own time. Keep in mind that there are nuances to all of this. In essence, the broader the scope of your employment, the more cautious you should be.

Independent Contractor

If an author or artist is hired to create something on a freelance basis, who owns the copyright depends on whether there has been an express written agreement commissioning the work as made for hire and that this work falls into one of nine statutory categories. With a valid contract of that type in place, the hiring party is considered the author and copyright

"The court rewards creators for taking art, even if it's without permission, and transforming it, recasting it, putting it in a context that was not the original context. The more you're doing that, the more likely that it will be seen as fair use. When in doubt: transform." —Thomas A. Crowell, Esq.



encourage our fan community to create derivative works that feature our IP for noncommercial purposes. However, this permission does not extend to using the IP for any sort of commercial purposes or monetization."

WHAT IS FAIR USE?

Fair use indicates circumstances where it is legal for someone to make use of another person's creative work. These exceptions allow copyrighted work to be repurposed without permission, but "the first thing you need to know about fair use is: There are no bright-line rules," says Crowell. "It is a fact-specific, case-specific inquiry."

It's important to understand that even if you have a good fair use argument when you make your Han Solo-Black Widow mashup, it doesn't mean Disney won't still sue you. At which point the court will consider four factors when determining whether your usage is legal under fair use laws:

a parody, editorial context, your own fictional context, or for nonprofit or noncommercial purposes? Numerous factors influence this aspect of fair use.

Effect on the market

Did your derivative work affect the market for the original? Is one now mistaken for the other? Has it impacted the value of the original work negatively because it's competing in the same marketplace?

Crowell stresses that "transformative-ness" is a key factor in fair use cases. "The court rewards creators for taking art, even if it's without permission, and transforming it, recasting it, putting it in a context that was not the original context. The more you're doing that, the more likely that it will be seen as fair use. When in doubt: transform."



holder of the work; without it, the creator retains copyright. There are nuances to this depending on whether the work was based on the hiring party's IP and what either party does with the work afterward.

BEST PRACTICE TIPS

- It's best to avoid using company equipment on the sly. This is one of the factors a court might review to determine whether an employee has a right to a creation.
- Freelancers hired in California have an additional negotiating tool in that state law requires the hiring party to treat an independent contractor in a work made for hire situation as an employee and not a freelancer. If you want to retain copyright, you could try using this to pressure the hiring party to forego the work for hire agreement.
- Depending on the type of project, when facing a work for hire demand from a potential client, consider making the fee for your work commensurate with the potential loss of copyright. Offer a choice between a full buy-out cost and

a lower fee that includes an exclusive license for just a few years after which you regain copyright.

TAKING ACTION AGAINST INFRINGEMENT

If you believe your copyrighted work has been infringed upon and you want to act on it, your main options are a takedown notice, a cease-and-desist letter, and a lawsuit. "But you really have to think about not just your legal rights but how it looks in the court of public opinion," says Moss. "What's the PR backlash going to be? You want to make sure that you're doing a cost-benefit analysis and seeing the big picture, because if you're just starting out and you've got a burgeoning fanbase, you want to have those soldiers helping to spread the word for you."

BEST PRACTICE TIPS

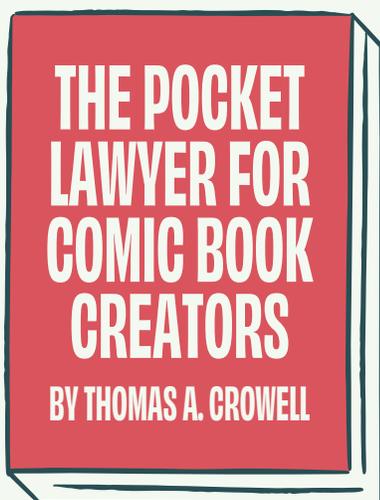
- If you decide to send a cease-and-desist letter, keep in mind that it can be immediately posted online. Use tempered, appreciative language that acknowledges the fan's love of your IP while stressing that monetizing it in this way dilutes your copyrights and

trademarks. "You're just trying to make these people understand that there are two sides of this, and usually that works," says Moss.

- For cease-and-desist letters, it's unwise to use a template you find online. These letters are most effective when they are tailored to the specific facts and laws at issue, so legal counsel is recommended. (See resources for volunteer arts attorneys.)
- If your infringed material is posted on a third-party-uploaded platform, take advantage of the DMCA's Notice-and-Takedown System (copyright.gov/512/), which allows you to compel companies such as YouTube or Etsy to remove or block access to the disputed material quickly. This way you avoid direct contact with the offender and don't risk coming off as aggressive or heavy-handed. Even better, you do not need a copyright registration to engage the DMCA takedown process. 🍷

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice.

RESOURCES



Maya begins her journey as a warrior, but her role will evolve. "So from the very beginning of her design," says Equihua, "we have to make her look like she's on her way. A foreshadowing, almost."



TRANSCENDING HISTORY, MYTH, AND LEGEND, *MAYA AND THE THREE* TAKES VIEWERS ON AN ADVENTURE THROUGH A FANTASTICAL IMAGINING OF ANCIENT MESOAMERICA

MLOTRÉ IS MLOTRÉ

By Kim Fay

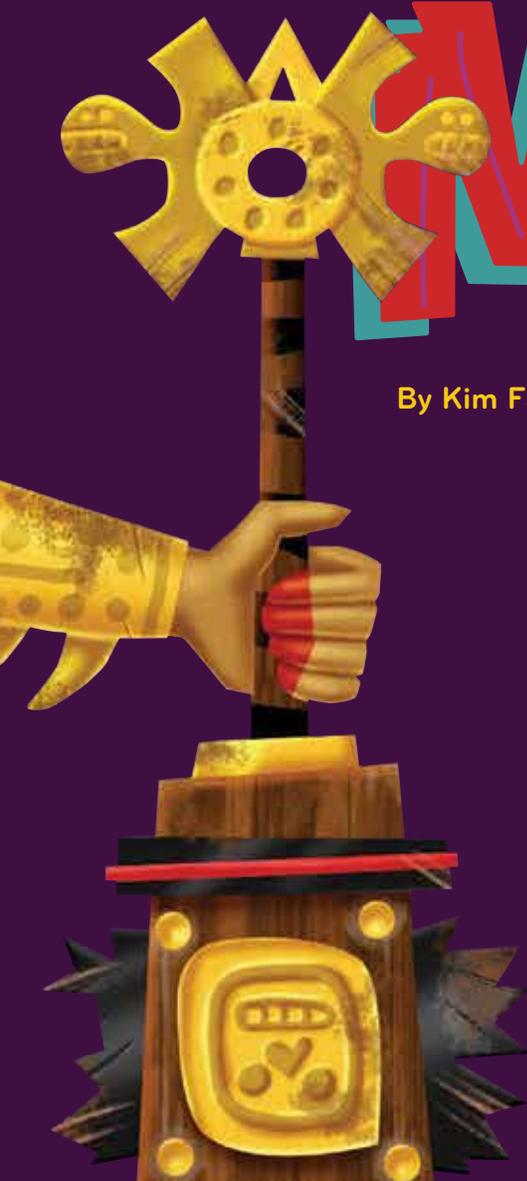
In January of 2018, Melissa Cobb, Vice President at Netflix, told Jorge R. Gutiérrez to pitch something he didn't think he could get made anywhere else. He offered a sprawling idea about a Mesoamerican warrior princess, and to his surprise Cobb said go for it.

"I remember driving home that night and telling [my wife] Sandra," says Gutiérrez, whose past projects include *El Tigre* and *The Book of Life*. "She was like, are you sure that's what she said? I'm like, yeah, pretty sure. I've worked in Hollywood a long time. I've never had my dreams come true just like that."

It also helped that the time was right. "I'm 46 now," he says. "Earlier in my career, I did not feel worthy." He

wasn't ready to take on the issues that his dream project, *Maya and the Three*, explores. Patriarchy in Latin America. Parents making mistakes so it's up to the next generation to fix things. The misinterpretation of certain teachings over time. Sacrifice as the most noble thing a person can do for something greater than themselves.

Brimming with deep themes, this tale of Maya's quest to recruit three legendary fighters, challenge an ancient prophecy, and save humanity from vengeful underworld gods is also awash in eclectic influences—Incan architecture, spaghetti westerns, hip-hop, Aztec floating gardens, telenovelas, heavy metal, Chibi anime, Bollywood, cholas, Hong Kong flicks, low riders. The list goes on.



But if you ask Gutiérrez, who is also the director and executive producer, if there's ever such a thing as too much, he'll reply: "Everybody who keeps saying less is more—I say, no! More is more!"

This is why an epic, nine-chapter, four-and-a-half hour, animated fantasy "event" perfectly suits the idea that had been swirling around in his brain for years.

Back when he was a kid, Gutiérrez asked his father: Why are we both named Jorge? "My dad is quite the character," he says. "He took me and showed me an art book with a painting, St. George Kills the Dragon. And he goes, George is Jorge, and Jorges kill dragons. You are going to kill dragons. I was like, what?!"

As Gutiérrez grew up, he fell in love with *The Lord of the Rings*, ancient mythology, and fantasies about witches and warriors fighting dragons. "I would read those books and watch those cartoons and see those movies," he says, "and I kept thinking, man, if that camera would just go south, I bet there'd be people like us."



He was right, and as he learned more about the mythologies of Mexico, Latin America, and South America, he was fascinated to realize that a god that had one name under the Mayans might be the same god, but with a different name, under the Aztecs. "Just like Roman and Greek mythology. You start seeing overlaps. You start going, oh, this is like greatest hits."

His love for a mixed-tape version of storytelling also comes from going to



Gutiérrez enjoys pushing characters—like King Teca—into exaggerated forms, but "you've gotta think about all the people who are going to be animating it," says Equihua. "It's a great sculpture, but how's it going to work? It's a lot of back and forth. A lot of teamwork."

school in the U.S. when he was young. Every weekday he would walk back and forth across the border from his home in Tijuana, passing vendors whose stalls were filled with a *mélange* of wares. "Aztec sculptures next to Darth Vader," he says. "Then Marilyn Monroe sitting with Pancho Villa. So seeing all of those things together, that was a huge influence on me. It made having Mickey Mouse next to a Mayan god be normal. We were used to seeing [that]. It was our culture. The mix of cultures."

As the idea for *Maya and the Three* grew, Gutiérrez's obsessions with pop culture and mythology united with his passion for the Mayans, Incans, and Aztecs, as well as modern-day Caribbean culture. But as intrigued as he was by all of this, he didn't want to do a straight history.

"Fantasy is definitely the foundation," says Production Designer Paul Sullivan. "The history was for the sake of being

informed. You've gotta know the rules before you break the rules kind of idea. From my perspective ... I wanted to make sure I knew a lot about each of these cultures so the decisions we were making in design were intentional departures that would be based on the story."

He also describes his deep dive into historical research as a North Star that helped him use history when it *did* serve the story. One such example was learning that "the Mayans are credited by some scholars with the discovery the Golden Ratio for proportions. They were mathematicians, they were very intelligent, so we used that idea of shape proportion balance. We put it in the doorways. We put it in the tree combinations. We put it in the bricks and some of the design elements. [It's] an artistic principle that a lot of people follow."

BUILDING CHARACTER

Maya hails from the Kingdom of Teca, where her father and mother serve as king and queen. Her mother was once a famed Eagle Warrior, and Maya doesn't understand why they don't want her to be one, too. She is a rebellious teenage princess who was born from the contradictions Gutiérrez found between his lived experience and the lack of female heroes in Mexican folk tales. He calls his wife, mother, and sister "real warriors." Because of this, he says, "I wanted to hack the popular culture and create this myth about Maya." He explains he chose the name because it exists around the world, from Africa and Asia to Europe and Latin America. "She was to be every woman."

Maya is strongly based on Sandra Equihua, Gutiérrez's wife, who served as Creative Consultant as well as Lead Character Designer along with Gutiérrez. Also hailing from Tijuana, Equihua met Gutiérrez when he was 18 and she was 17—at her most rebellious stage. "I think he really liked that," she says. "I had to go against [my parents] rules in order to live. So he decided to take that part [of me] and inject it into Maya."

Like Equihua's parents, Maya's shelter her. But Maya, Equihua says, "thinks adventure is life. And vice versa, life is an adventure."

Maya was designed to be a representation of female empowerment. "I hope little girls see the strong characters we're portraying for them through Maya, and that they see—they have to pave the way," says Equihua.





THIS PAGE: Bold color blocking and intricate symbolism allow the characters to take center stage, Sullivan says, while the environments were designed to feel rich and complex in their own ways. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** "Color symbolism is always a thing to consider strongly on these films with Jorge," says Sullivan. "That's definitely something we tried to infuse in all aspects of our design and the way we color the objects and the monuments and things."

You gotta go out there, and you gotta go find yourself. In order for you to live and for you to learn you gotta make mistakes. And she does make a lot of mistakes. She's not the perfect princess. She stumbles a lot."

Maya is a conflicted character, and this is deliberately reflected in her design, beginning with her partial buzz cut and lopsided half-bob, showing that she is torn between being a princess and being a warrior. It's also represented in the Eagle Claw club passed down from her father, a weapon that weighs a little too much for her, just like her responsibility to become a queen.

These are the kind of thoughtful details that help capture each character's story, and as with everything in *Maya*, the choices are deliberate. For the creation of Maya's mother, the Queen of Teca, "we wanted to make [her hairdo] look regal," Equihua says, "and I always thought that antlers look like crowns. I thought, wouldn't it be beautiful if she was wearing a crown of her own hair that almost resembled antlers, tied up with different colored ribbons?"



The ribbons were inspired by Equihua's family heritage in the Mexican state of Michoacán where the indigenous women perform a dance wearing long braids intertwined with brightly colored ribbons. This, combined with the antlers, is an example of Equihua leaning into the story's magic, which meant, as far as she was concerned, "the sky's the limit."

BREAKING BARRIERS

One of the biggest challenges was uniting the intricately detailed characters with the epic-scale backgrounds. "We wanted the environments to feel rich and supportive of the characters, but not compete with [them]," says Sullivan. The production team sought ways to balance cultural inspirations with character designs so that "each of [Maya's five lands] is really representative of a particular character or a particular group of characters and a particular culture."

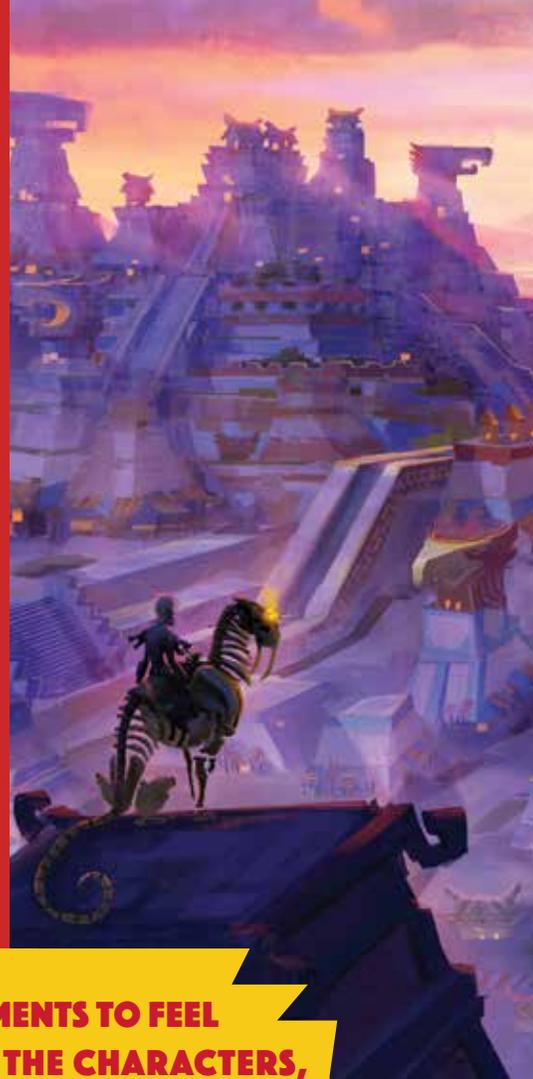
To make these differentiations, the representation of different color palettes was considered early in the process, after assigning color to each character and world. Sullivan explains that the symbolism of the assigned color would influence when a character was more represented in a scene by that character's color palette becoming stronger.

"WE WANTED THE ENVIRONMENTS TO FEEL RICH AND SUPPORTIVE OF THE CHARACTERS, BUT NOT COMPETE WITH [THEM]" -Paul Sullivan

For example, when Maya came into contact with an antagonist, color proportions were used to reflect the dynamics of the relationships and which character was dominant. And in the Kingdom of Teca, where there is a large volcano behind the city—whenever the antagonist came into that world, the volcano changed the color of the sky.

To help the artists understand this storytelling better, Head of Story and Co-Executive Producer Jeff Ranjo explains that there were table reads to give them "a sense of how [scenes] should be played." Then the artists could ask questions or toss out ideas.

The opportunity to take part in the creative process impressed Sequence Director and Story Artist Rie Koga, who bonded with Gutiérrez over their shared love of vintage anime. "Jorge gave us enough information of what he wanted to see, but after ... he gave us lots of freedom. This [was my] first opportunity to work on stories and character development."



"Jorge's thing [is] how much can I get in the show?" says Ranjo. "With the design and effects and the colors and the action. He's gonna throw everything at you ... it's an embarrassment of riches."



The Prince of Bats, Zatt was inspired by Batman, '80s heavy metal albums, and the Mayan bat god Camazotz.

Working this way—unfettered within a framework—resulted in lots of fun results, from a scene done in cutesy Chibi anime depicting Maya's naivete to split-screen fight scenes to emphasize two characters' reactions at the same time. In one case, Gutiérrez wanted to experiment with aspect ratios to simulate a wide screen. He created fake black bars on the top and bottom of the screen, and when the action happens, Ranjo explains, it will break past the bars. "When there's a hit, Maya's Eagle Claw will [seem to] break the screen and go past it. [It gives an] illusion of 3D. To give it more of a visual explosion. Whoa, it's jumping off the screen."

Encouraging his team to push the limits of how to present emotional beats in animation helped Gutiérrez underscore the philosophy that serves as Maya's through-line—If it is to be, it is up to me.

"It's an ancient saying," he explains, "and it translated very well in Spanish, it translated very well in English, so immediately I'm assuming it's going to translate very well all over the world. I love this idea that there's a million things, but it's up to me to make a difference. I love that idea in the story where, yes there's gods, and there's armies, and there's kingdoms, but it comes down to one person." Whatever needs to be done—whether it's saving humanity from underworld gods or reshaping mythology with the use of history, hip-hop, and heavy metal—"You have to do it yourself. [Then] when multiple people understand that, and they make a difference, they make a difference together." ☺



GOOD INFLUENCE

INSPIRED INK

For bad gal Acat, Goddess of Tattoos, Equihua researched Sailor Jerry's, Maori designs, and cholo culture to find tattoos that could come to life and help her fight.

METAL MUSE

There's a reason the underworld looks like an Iron Maiden album cover: It's the perfect setting to reflect Gutiérrez's love of heavy metal and horror movies.

MOTIVATED BY MUNCHAUSEN

For the inspiration behind the fantasy sequences with Maya's three brothers in chapter one, look no further than Terry Gilliam's film version of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*.

SOAP OPERA FLAIR

Maya contains dramatic telenovela moments because, Gutiérrez says: "Our families, it can get a little messy. It's a part of the culture. It's part of a lot of our stories."

JOY RIDE

In traditional fantasies, knights ride horses, so why shouldn't Maya ride a jaguar? This makes it all the more fun when Maya sneaks her dad's Jag out for an adventure.

UNEXPECTED GRACE

Everyone agrees that King Teca is inspired by Gutiérrez. "He can be a bull in a china shop," says Equihua, "but at the same time he can be so graceful. Not a lot of people know this, but Jorge rides a bicycle like a ballerina."

ABOVE: Acat, Goddess of Tattoos, finds her origins in chola culture. "You looked at them from far away—they looked like they would totally take you on," says Equihua. "But they were the sweetest, nicest people. I think Acat reflects that ... She was a kind individual at one point. Something made her change."

Superheroes get it done. This much, we know. Caped, masked, alter ego-ed, or otherwise, these men and women of action arrive on the scene, fully formed and with one purpose: to defeat the bad guy, vanquish evil, right wrongs, and save the day. They never hesitate, deviate, or do anything contrary to their purpose. Superheroes never act in a manner that is anything other than, well, heroic... except when they do.

By Evan Henerson

HERO WORSHIP

In the years since Superman's small-screen debut in 1941, animated superheroes have been walking the line between tradition and innovation.

Filmmaker Bruce Timm recalls the uproar from traditionalist Superman fans over the superhero-to-be killing the villain at the end of Zack Snyder's 2013 live-action film *Man of Steel*. Admittedly, Clark Kent was in a no-win situation. Lives were being threatened, so he had to make a quick decision.

"Break the villain's neck. What else is he going to do?" says Timm. "But boy, when I talked to my friends who worked at DC Comics, they were freaking out. They were like, 'Superman would never do that.'"

Timm, who is a creator, producer, director, writer, and character designer for countless animated superhero shows including the groundbreaking *Batman: The Animated Series* in the early 1990s, had envisioned—years before Snyder's controversial film finale—a similar resolution to a battle between Superman and the monster Doomsday in the direct-to-video animated movie *Superman: Doomsday* in 2007.

"It seemed like justifiable homicide to me," says Timm, "[but DC was] like, 'Nope, you cannot do that. He would never do that. He would find some other way.'"

Admittedly, going solely by his origins in *Action Comics* #1 more than 80 years ago, that argument is accurate. Superman and many of his comic book brethren were not created as vigilantes, executioners, or dispensers of questionable justice. Superheroes battled super villains, vanquished the occasional monster, and kept the moral order of the universe intact.

POINT OF ORIGIN

The idea of a superhero was applied to pulp magazine characters like the “superhuman” Doc Savage, who first appeared on the scene in 1933, according to David W. Tosh, author of *Rise of the Superheroes*. In addition, “there was a character called the Phantom Magician who wore a superhero-like costume in *The Adventures of Patsy* [comic strip] in the mid-1930s. And let’s not forget The Phantom, the costume-wearing hero [operating out of] Africa, which began in 1936. But it seems the term ‘superhero’ pretty much began with comic books, namely Superman.”

Whether in the comics or on Saturday morning TV shows of yore, we tend to think of the Man of Steel as a muscular boy scout. But as midcentury came and went, the superhero landscape began to shift.

“Throughout the 1960s, when all the comics at DC and Marvel started getting a little more adult, it wasn’t so unusual to see Superman losing his temper on a cover and destroying the world,” says Timm. “That was usually a bait-and-switch cover where the story wasn’t really about that. Sometimes Superman is going to take a swim in the deep end, but at the end of the day, you always have to trust that he’s going to make the right decision, the moral choice.”

Batman, on the other hand, is a different kind of hero. A certain generation of viewers may think of the Dark Knight as a benevolent member of the Justice League—one of the good guy *Super Friends* of the Hanna-Barbera-produced animated series that ran from 1973 to 1985. Or the do-gooder hero of the (*Wham! Biff!*) live-action TV series of the mid-1960s.

But the comic book character was considerably more complicated, and the success of the 1989, Tim Burton-directed, live-action movie laid the groundwork for the vigilante Dark Knight to take the animated stage with all his gloominess and angst intact. For *Batman: The Animated Series*, Timm and his team picked up on the film’s retro look and presented Batman as a direct descendant of old characters like The Shadow and The Spider. Indeed, when Batman co-creator Bob Kane dropped by to visit the set, he

MY HERO!

TAG MEMBERS SOUND OFF ON THE SUPES

“I like that Harley Quinn is a flawed character. She’s very capable with her bat, and she can kick ass and she can beat guys, but she’s not just about that. She’s not a one-sided character. She has her ups and downs and she makes mistakes, but then she rectifies and grows from them.”

– Cecilia Aranovich
(*Harley Quinn, DC Super Hero Girls*)



“My biggest influences when it comes to superheroes were actually the X-Men comic books which I just devoured when I was in middle school. They have very intense and complicated interpersonal relationships ... that, mixed with having powers, fighting evil, and even the sophistication of X-Men having to deal with the themes of prejudice, was fascinating to me, and it would not have been if those characters had not be so deeply flawed.”

– Lauren Faust
(*DC Super Hero Girls, The Powerpuff Girls*)





remarked approvingly on a blown-up cover of *The Shadow* over Timm's desk.

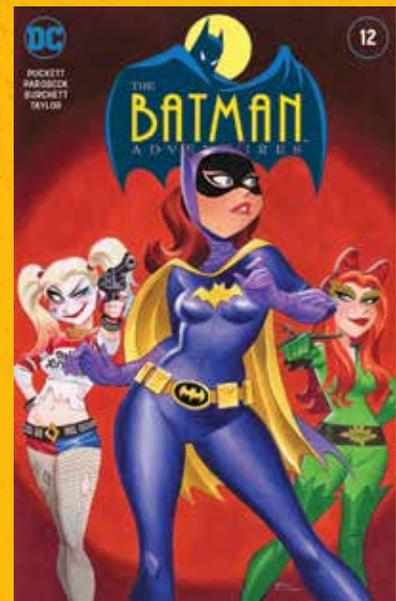
Because the show was pitched toward kids, *Batman: The Animated Series* had to keep things family-friendly enough to get past Standards and Practices. That meant no nudity, no choking, and carefully constructed violence. Anytime a villain fell from a great height, a shot had to be included to show that he was groaning and therefore still alive.

Several years later, when he was piloting a teenage version of Batman through adventures in *Batman Beyond*, the iconic superhero took on new dimensions. "I am always kind of amazed at how versatile and resilient Batman is as a character," Timm says. "It's not even just, 'Oh you can go light or dark.' There's all kinds of weird degrees within the dark sphere. The most recent version, *Batman: Soul of the Dragon*, was set in the 1970s, and was kind of a Blaxploitation Kung Fu movie. And Bruce Wayne was a lot younger and more relatable than any version I had ever done."

HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO

Examining a superhero's younger years, before the character becomes a hero or is in training, has proven popular and opened up new storylines and conundrums for animated superheroes. When she took the helm of the *DC Super Hero Girls* franchise in 2019, writer and Executive Producer Lauren Faust was excited at the prospect of showing not just an ethnically diverse slate of heroes, but also depicting them as flawed, insecure and, yes, even violent.

Supergirl lived in the considerable shadow of her more famous cousin. Wonder Woman, coming as she did from a different culture, didn't know how to act like a typical teenager. Batgirl felt she was a better sidekick to Batman than Robin. In one of the show's early meetings between two future superheroes, Wonder Woman punched Supergirl in the face so hard that she took out the floorboards



Images courtesy of DC.

Bruce Timm has drawn numerous DC comic book covers including variant covers (TOP) and convention exclusive covers (BOTTOM).

underneath Supergirl's head. Welcome to superheroes behaving badly.

"There's what is unexpected from female characters, like a character being bad-tempered or a little bit clueless, but there's also the unexpected when you are going against what fans would like," says Faust, the show's creator. "We really messed with a handful of the characters, and it was exciting to have that kind of freedom."

Faust's childhood love of the superhero genre and her feeling that female characters frequently ended up getting "the short end of the stick" is part of what drew her to shows like *DC Super Hero Girls* and *The Powerpuff Girls*, where she was a writer, supervising director, and storyboard artist. "I wanted to see the authentic experience of girls and women reflected in superhero stories, and also bring that experience of teenage girls to the table," she says. "How does a superhero study for exams? How does she get her driver's license? Wonder Woman can ride a horse like nobody's business, but she can't work a car because she doesn't know anything about machines."

Just as fans had a long wait to see complex female superheroes, they also waited to see Black superheroes. Christopher Lehman, Professor of Ethnic Studies at St. Cloud University, points to the shape-shifting teen Astrea in the 1977 Filmation series *Space Sentinels* as one of the first animated Black superheroes. Husband and wife scientists Superstretch and Microwoman appeared not long after as part of *Tarzan and the Super 7*.

BELOW: In *DC Super Hero Girls* the characters balance secret identities with the awkward challenges of growing up.



Image courtesy of Warner Bros.

MY HERO!



"Brown Hornet was a superhero, he was very proactive, but much like Adam West [of the 1960s Batman TV series], he seemed to have the perfect ability or the perfect device just for [every] occasion. If Batman needed to track a homing pigeon, he just happened to have the Bat Homing Pigeon Tracker in his belt, and Brown Hornet had kind of the same thing. I loved that the Brown Hornet was just out in space, superhero-ing, flying around, meeting aliens. That's way more interesting than a bunch of kids playing in a junk yard."

– **Lynell Forestall** (*Batman: The Brave and the Bold*, *Legion of Super Heroes*)



"Static had so many good sides to him, but then he was also a typical kid. He realized, 'I've got this power. I've got to help people whenever I can.' Plus I think sometimes he would get adventurous and say, 'I can take on that adventure, try to beat this bad guy,' and then, 'Oh, he's got more power than I thought.' Which is what teenagers do, don't they? They say, 'Yeah, I can jump that chasm,' but in the end they realize, 'Oh, I missed.'"

– **Swinton O. Scott III** (*Static Shock*, *Green Lantern: The Animated Series*)





Image courtesy of Sony Pictures Animation.

BELOW: Virgil Hawkin's best friend Richie Foley was one of few people who knew Virgil's secret identity as the superhero Static. **LEFT:** Replacing Peter Parker as Spider-Man, Miles Morales was born and raised in Brooklyn, the son of a Black father and Puerto Rican mother.



The 1970s also featured the Harlem Globetrotters as animated, super-powered hoopsters, and the hugely resourceful Brown Hornet appeared within select episodes of *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*. Black Vulcan joined *Super Friends* starting in the late 1970s. And who among us can forget Hammerman, the musical superhero in magic shoes voiced by rapper MC Hammer in the 1991 series of the same name?

"One thing I noticed about quite a few of these superheroes in animation is that there's a sort of comedic foundation to them. Brown Hornet and the Super Globetrotters are definitely humorous superheroes," says Lehman. "Their adventures are meant to be funny, and, to a certain extent, Hammerman is the same way. Maybe that was the only way that the studios could successfully pitch their series to the networks—if they were able to not have African American superheroes depicted quite so seriously."

The stakes were by no means comedic for Virgil Hawkins, though, the 14-year old Dakota City teen who acquired powers over electricity and magnetism to become the hero Static of *Static Shock*. By the time producer Swinton O. Scott III got to the show in its third season in 2002, Static was a well-established hero both of comics and his own show. The series made a point of embracing issues of inclusivity and diversity. Static went to Africa, teamed up with the Justice League, and fought plenty of bad guys. He also struggled with the challenges that come with living in a single parent household and having to do homework and chores.

Scott sees parallels between Static and another notable teen superhero, the web-slinging Spider-Man whose alter ego, Peter Parker, was originally a more or less typical high schooler, preoccupied with school, girls, and looking after his Aunt May. Although cleaning up the city may have been the right thing to do, the Spidey of comic book fame “would have rather stayed at home or gone on a date with Gwen Stacy,” says Scott. “But he got this power to help people and that went beyond his teenage sensibilities that we all have. He said, ‘I realize I have to do this. This is my duty now.’ I think we effectively put that into *Static Shock*, as well.”

THE NEXT GENERATION

While Spider-Man also experienced a plethora of reinventions in animated TV and in the comics, many point to the baton-passing coolness of the 2018 CG film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, which gave us the first cinematic look at a new hero, Miles Morales.

Miles, like Peter, is a teenager struggling with stuff at home and at school. As he’s learning how to cope with his powers, Miles also has to deal with spider power-endowed men, women, and pigs from alternate universes, all of whom are looking to help him on his journey.

In taking on Miles, Character Designer Shiyoon Kim jumped at the chance to create a character who was multi-ethnic (half Black, half Puerto Rican) and also contributing to a new take on an old superhero. Having previously worked as Lead Character Designer on Disney’s *Big Hero 6*, Kim found himself once again creating an underdog who became a hero—an idea he particularly enjoyed.

What these new superheroes come down to, according to Kim, is the “whole idea that anyone can wear a mask. That really resonated with me.”

As for Bruce Timm, 30 years after *Batman: The Animated Series*, he will resurrect the Dark Knight once again for the new HBO Max/Cartoon Network project, *Batman: Caped Crusader*—a series said to be steeped in the character’s noir roots, and one that’s sure to prove that there’s no end to the exciting—and surprising—turns a superhero’s life can take. 🌀



MY HERO!

“I discovered superheroes through ... the Super Friends. That was my first introduction to the DC universe, and I’m sure, like many kids, it captured my imagination and I think that was also my gateway into comic books in general. So I think for me it was the Justice League. That was my intro to the world of superheroes.”

– **Brandon Vietti**
(*Young Justice, The Batman*)



“Once upon a time when I was younger, I was desperate for anything with a superhero in it. Now they’re everywhere. There are pre-school superhero shows, [and] a show like Batman: The Brave and the Bold that has elements for an older audience. And there’s stuff like Young Justice where, if we’re doing our job right, takes it to a deeper level. I think that it’s going to continue. In essence, the geeks have inherited the earth. Finally!”

– **Greg Weisman**
(*Young Justice, The Spectacular Spider-Man: Attack of the Lizard*)



IN THE RUNNING

TAG DIRECTORS SHARE WHAT THEY LOVE MOST ABOUT THEIR PRIMETIME EMMY-NOMINATED EPISODES.



Image courtesy of Netflix.

BIG MOUTH: “THE NEW ME”

Director: Andres Salaff

“There is a part where Natalie, a character who comes back to camp after having come out as transgender, is reacquainted with her fellow campers. Not knowing that comments about ‘passing’ can be harmful and cringey, they provide her with some unsolicited advice about how to best express herself as ‘girly.’ I think this moment really benefited from the visual nature of animation in conveying Natalie’s feelings.”



Image courtesy of FOX. ©2021 by 20th Television.

BOB’S BURGERS: “WORMS OF IN-REAR-MENT”

Supervising Director: Bernard Derriman

“It’s small but one of my favorite parts of ‘Worms’ is Tina getting her arm stuck in the dress for the whole episode. One of the writers, Wendy Molyneux, originally pitched Tina getting her whole body stuck in the dress, but [the writer of the episode Nora Smith] reduced it to just the arm. It’s a funny sight gag while at the same time being very Tina.”



Image courtesy of Adult Swim.

GENNDY TARTAKOVSKY’S PRIMAL: “PLAGUE OF MADNESS”

Creator, Executive Producer, and Director Genndy Tartakovsky

“My favorite part is the ending. ‘Plague of Madness’ is seemingly very simple, a basic chase cartoon, but not only is the ending amped up and intense, it also finishes with a level of complex emotion. The music is devastating and sad; it helps the audience feel that this was such a senseless, meaningless death. It’s this kind of subtlety that gets me excited about storytelling—told visually with no dialogue, a pure expression of the art form.”



Image courtesy of FOX. ©2021 by 20th Television.

THE SIMPSONS: “THE DAD-FEELINGS LIMITED”

Supervising Director, Mike B. Anderson

“The Dad-Feelings Limited’ is one of my all-time faves. It’s filled with hilarious Simpsons treasures—big laughs, the origin of Comic Book Guy, and a wonderful middle sequence animated in an entirely different style.”



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