Killing Time at Home

Interview with the film-maker: Neil Coslett

Could you describe your way into making short films? What is your background? How did you start off?

I originally studied Graphic Arts at Liverpool John Moore University and the course gave me the opportunity to concentrate on animation as well as illustration and graphics. I enjoyed the film-making process and decided to concentrate on animation as one of my core modules. I made a couple of short animated films and after graduating continued to develop ideas for short animated films. In 2002 I entered one of my ideas into the Channel 4 animation scheme Mesh and was lucky enough to be selected to develop and produce my animation into a three-minute film for broadcast television. The film was broadcast in November 2003 and has since been shown at film festivals worldwide.

How long did you spend working on this project? How long did the filming take? And how long the post-production?

The project through the Channel 4 Mesh scheme was split into two parts. The first three months was spent developing the idea and script and producing a rough animatic (a moving storyboard) to give an idea of how the film would work within the set brief of three minutes. The next three months was spent producing the final version of film: this included rendering the final animation from computer out to digi-beta tape and mixing the music over the final master copy of the film.

I decided to draw and animate the entire film by myself, so the workload was quite intense. I scanned hand-drawn images into computer and rendered them in Adobe Photoshop: the images were then animated through Adobe After Effects. This process was completed within three months, but because animation is a long process, I was working on the film full time.

How do you finance your short films?

Killing Time at Home was financed by Blackwatch Productions. The short animation films from my degree course were completed as part of the course using computers and software available from university at the time. I'm not entirely certain how I will finance my future projects because I want to film using live-action and cameras, which can be a costly process.

How did you come up with the idea for this film?

It's difficult to describe exactly how an idea is formed, but the film developed radically from the original concept. In its initial storyboard state, the animation was simply about a man who found a creature in his medicine cabinet, sitting inside a cup of zinc ointment, which he then trapped inside a snow-globe and mounted upon a shelf mantle.

A requirement of the Mesh scheme was that the film should be interactive through the Internet, so I developed the original idea into the story of a man who actually orders the creature through the Internet and uses the zinc ointment to physically grow him. A spoof website selling these fictional creatures was then created to fulfil the internet/interactive element of the brief. As a result the film evolved into a more interesting result.

As there is no dialogue, the music becomes a very important element in your film. Was it written especially for the film? Who composed it? How did you find the right soundtrack/musicians?

The track 'B+A' by The Beta Band was the soundtrack I originally had in mind for the animation but due to time, costs and copyright issues, I was unable to secure it as the track for the animation. Luckily I knew a local musician, Simon Barber, who could compose and produce the music for the film. This process worked well because I was able to work directly with Simon and make sure the sound synched up with the film correctly. The music was fundamental to the atmosphere of the animation and the final soundtrack works well in enhancing important moments of the film.

Does the 'disposablefriends' website really work? Did you set it up? What happens after one orders a disposablefriend?

The website www.disposablefriends.com was the interactive element of the Mesh brief. As it was an essential part of the film, the website was created and was available on the internet after the film was produced. It included a gallery of other available 'disposable friends' and it was possible to order an online digital version of the Zinc Dude character, who would be delivered via email. There was also an online Zinc Dude chatbot that responded to messages typed to it. Visually, the site was nearly identical to the website shown in the animation with extra pages available to browse online. Unfortunately, the website is no longer available because it was funded by Blackwatch Productions to exist for two years only.

Do you think there is a moral message in your film?

There was not a deliberate attempt to include a moral message in the film, but there are interpretations that can be taken from it. Consumerism and the luxury of society's capability to use something once before destroying it is the predominant message of the film. I also enjoyed showing the results of the main character's isolation, whose only contact to the world was through material possession. But hopefully the film can also be enjoyed without the complication of subliminal messages.

We'd really like to know if there were any ideas for events or characters that were in the original script, but that you didn't film, or scenes that you filmed then either didn't use, or cut substantially - and reasons in each case for doing so.

Because I knew the length of the film was three minutes maximum, I was aware of how much

could or couldn't be added - and animation offers a great deal of control. I don't remember actually removing specific scenes from the film, but certain scenes had to be shortened significantly to make them fit. I would have preferred to have longer scenes to establish exactly what was happening, for example a longer close up of the Embryo Growing Instructions; but having a time limit helped prevent the film from becoming bloated.

Do you have any current and possible future projects?

Presently I have decided to put aside animation as I find the process incredibly difficult and time-consuming. I am very passionate about film-making and I'm currently working on new ideas and scripts for short films that I will hopefully be able to produce as live action.

What tips would you give students wanting to make their own short films?

My advice would be to treat the 'idea' of the film as the main priority and worry about style after content.