CAPTURING CHILDHOOD: EXPLORING IMAGINATIVE PLAY IN ANIMATION

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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This thesis examines the use of imaginative play of children for both the creation of animation and as an influence on the creative processes of the animator. I discuss methods of characterizing play activities and theories of play that can aid the animator in understanding the mental processes employed by children during imaginative play. I discuss how children are represented in animation and how imaginative play can be used to create characters with a greater sense of realism and stronger emotional connections to the viewer. I discuss the animations of John and Faith Hubley based on audio recordings of their children and how theories of play can be used to interpret their work.

I present two thesis films, *Young Mother Nature* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* based on audio recordings of my daughter engaged in imaginative play. I examine my process of creating these animations, and reflect on the influence of play on the creative process.
DEDICATION

To my wife Riza, whose love and support made this possible.

To my parents, for nurturing my creativity and imagination and for teaching me how to be a parent.

And to our daughter Lea, for sharing her imagination with me and for the joy she brings to our lives every day.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to my adviser, Alan Price for his encouragement, guidance and patience throughout my time at ACCAD. It was a privilege to have him as a mentor. I would also like to thank Maria Palazzi for her insightful comments and critiques of my animations and writing. I would like to extend a special thanks to Amy Shuman, for introducing me to the concepts that helped me better understand my work and my own creative processes.
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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Like most parents, I find myself trying to capture moments in my child’s life. I take photographs, videos, and recordings. I save my daughter’s artwork. Recently my wife and I found ourselves unable to part with an early pair of shoes which our daughter had long outgrown. These artifacts represent both the delight and the maudlin sentimentalism parents feel as they realize that their child is growing up.

Most of these artifacts give us access to the physical characteristics of a child at a moment in time. Photos can show us appearances. Recordings can preserve the sound of a voice. Videos can document movement. Occasionally these artifacts allow us to begin to glimpse a child’s inner world, and this occurs most dramatically when we are able to catch a child in the act of imaginative play.

The photo of my daughter Lea feeding her baby dolls (Figure 1.1) does not appear to be very remarkable, but it gives us the outward expression of her imagination. From this photograph we can begin to question what she is experiencing. Does she see herself feeding plastic toy dolls or is she imagining that she is feeding real babies? Does she imagine that the babies are interacting with her? Does my daughter see herself as a toddler or as an adult mother? We cannot know what mental image she had formed when this picture was taken, but our own experiences from childhood tell us that at this moment she may have
transformed her entire world into one of her own creation. Once she moves on to the next activity, this unseen world of her imagination will be gone forever.

Figure 1.1 Lea feeding baby dolls

The ability to take unseen worlds and visualize them has been the major reason why I became interested in animation, and it was natural to see the imaginative play of children as a rich source of material to explore. As a parent, this exploration would allow me to better understand that mysterious little person who is running around our house.

When I first mentioned my interest in exploring childhood and play to my adviser, he pointed me to the animations of John and Faith Hubley, in particular their animations based on audio recordings they made of their children engaged in imaginative play. *Moonbird*, *Windy Day* and *Cockaboody* set out to capture, explore and share these unseen worlds which children create. The Hubleys project the fantasy elements of their children’s inner world
into the real world, allowing the viewer to experience play as we imagine the children are experiencing it. In *Moonbird* the Hubleys’ sons Mark and Hampy describe a midnight excursion to lay a trap for an escaped pet bird. The animation does not show a real world parakeet, but a comical dodo bird which can be lured by candy. In *Windy Day*, their daughters Emily and Georgia perform plays of knights and damsels in distress, speculate about marriage, and discuss life and death. Throughout all of this activity, their internal understanding becomes part of the real world visual images of the animation. Emily and Georgia morph into knights and princesses, brides and grooms and transform their environment to fit their fantasy play. As I watched these animations, I started to feel that they had a larger purpose than simply visually depicting the fantasy elements of their play stories, but I was not able to identify what that larger purpose was. I was strongly drawn to these animations without completely understanding them.

Undoubtedly, the main reason for my attraction to the Hubley animations was my daughter Lea, then three years old. She was just reaching the age where her own creativity was strongly expressing itself and I found her joy of imaginary play a constant source of wonder. I wanted to know what I would find if I set out to capture her inner world, not as an exercise in sentimentality but as an exploration of her unique creativity.

Conducting this exploration in animation will require the use of my own creativity. Using creativity to express the creativity of another individual would suggest the need for some understanding of the two creative processes. All adults were once children, and at some point we too were furiously creating our own imaginary worlds, in much the same way as Lea or the Hubley children. When we grew up we began to lose our affinity for imaginative play, and we started to see reality as reality and nothing more. The ability to
reconnect to the imaginative play of childhood would be a great advantage for an animator. While my project is primarily about using animation to capture and explore the creativity of children through imaginative play, the secondary goal is to find a way for the animator to recapture their own sense of imaginative play, explore how this can be used in the process of creating animations.
CHAPTER 2  METHODOLOGY

My methodology consists of two parts. The first is to conduct a contextual review relating to children and imaginative play in animation. The second part consists of how I will approach and explore the subject of the imaginative play of children in my animation.

2.1 Goals for Contextual Review

One problem which became apparent in an initial survey of animations based of child imaginative play is that the Hubley animations based on the recordings of their children are largely unique. While there are a few examples where animations used unscripted recordings of children, the Hubley animations were the only examples I could find which examined the imaginative world created by children in the act of play and used the children's play stories to drive the narrative of the animation. This led me to examine the following questions as part of my contextual review and project:

2.1.1 Why are the Hubley animations unique?

In order to understand the appeal of the Hubley animations based on the imaginative play of their children, I felt it was necessary to understand what specific qualities made these animations different from other animations which explored either childhood or imagination. First I plan to identify what the Hubley children are revealing about themselves in the
recordings. This could include their wants, needs, motivations and how they view
themselves and the world around them. Second I need to consider how John and Faith
Hubley further shape this message beyond the recordings of their children. In animations
not based on recordings of children, the entire message is the creation of the animators. In
this case the child's wants, motivations and how they view the world are completely formed
by the decisions of the animators. By comparing this information I should be able to
identify the unique properties of the Hubley animations, and more importantly what unique
features are due to the choices of the animators.

2.1.2 What methods can we use to characterize the imaginative play of children?

To determine how children are revealing themselves during play, it is necessary to
have a method to characterize their activity. I need to determine a method to describe what
the children are doing and how this corresponds to the visual activity in the animation.
Once I understand what is happening, the next logical question is why it is happening. Part
of this project would include an examination of the role that imaginative play performs in
childhood development, and how this knowledge can possibly inform the animation. If
understanding what is happening is useful to the animator in developing a representation,
understanding why it is happening is also useful to the parent.

2.2 Project Goals

My intent is to create two animations based off of recordings of my daughter. One
goal of the animations will be for me to find my own unique voice as an animator. Another
goal is to capture a moment in my daughter's creative development. But for the purpose of
this thesis my goal is to apply what I have been able to learn for the Hubley animations, play
theories and analysis techniques to create my own animations and to look for new discoveries during the process of creation. There are two main questions I hope to answer:

2.2.1 How can the imaginative play of children be used by the animator?

Once I can identify and characterize the role of imaginative play in the Hubley animation, the next step is to determine how this information can be used by the animator. To accomplish this I plan to create two animations based on recordings of my daughter at play, and to examine the process of creating these animations. This will include determining ways to analyze the play activities of the child in the source recordings, examining how play theories can provide an understanding of the recordings and how this information can be used to inform the design choices made by the animator.

2.2.2 How can the imaginative play of children inform the artist's creative process?

A related question to how imaginative play can be applied to animation is how understanding imaginative play can be used by the artist to understand the process of creating art. *Windy Day* is noteworthy for displaying two intensely creative processes, the daughters’ narrative world and the visual world created by John and Faith Hubley. The freedom and exuberance in the design and animation of *Windy Day* echoes the freedom and exuberance of the children's play. I felt it was important to examine these connections as part of my process of creating animation and determining whether understanding the creative processes of a child's imaginative play leads me to better understand my own creative processes.
CHAPTER 3 REPRESENTATION OF CHILDREN IN ANIMATION

3.1 Examples of Representation

Few animations are based on unscripted recordings of children, and only the Hubley animations use imaginative play of children to explore the inner world of childhood. To understand what the Hubleys are able to achieve in these animations, it is useful to examine how other animations depict children, what is the source of their depiction, and if they are depicting childhood as it is or as they wish it might be.

Source material for the portrayal of children can come in several forms. First is through the careful observation of children, their mannerisms, play, posture, timing of movements, and unique ways they go about solving tasks. Understanding the motivations and thought processes of children through observation and questioning can also help the animator create believable stories for the viewer. One of the hallmarks of Hayao Miyazaki's animations is his careful attention to the nuanced behaviors of his characters. Miyazaki is well known for basing his characters on real specific individuals, particularly his child characters, and introducing the mannerisms and behaviors of those individuals to his animations. John Lasseter cites Miyazaki’s remarkable sense of character in *My Neighbor Totoro* to illustrate his ability to convey distinct age related characteristics of the two principle child characters.

“In great animation you want to make the animation look like the character is
thinking. That all of the movements of the characters (are) generated by the character’s own thought process. And one of the things is…to show personality, you show that no two people…would do the same action the same way, and in the beginning of this you see Mei the little girl and her sister running around the house. And they’re doing the same thing but you see how vastly different they are. And it says right away what the age of each character (is) …not by what they are saying, but by their actions.” (The Art of Spirited Away 2001)

Another example of Miyazaki achieving a sense of realism with small carefully observed details is in Spirited Away. Glen Keane observes a moment where Chihiro, the 10 year old protagonist, is putting on a pair of shoes. Rather than simply animating the action as having the character run away, Miyazaki adds a small flourish of the girl testing the snugness of the fit by tapping the toes of the shoes. Keane attributes this to Miyazaki watching a real young girl trying on shoes.(The Art of Spirited Away 2001)

Animators can also turn to their memories of childhood, or to the memories of others. The price to be paid for taking this approach is that the portrayal is done through the filter of memory and adult perceptions. Motivations and internal thoughts are no longer strictly that of a child, but what an adult remembers as being important when they were young or what later became important to the adult. In Caroline Leaf’s animation The Street we see the story of Mordecai Richler as a child remembering the death of his grandmother after a long illness. Leaf’s use of sand drawing seems the perfect complement to the idea of memory. She likens her process to a one off performance (Mundi 2007, 54). Each frame is a cycle of creation and destruction, which mimics our own process of creating and the inevitable loss of memories. The film becomes less about the immediate experience of childhood, and more about the childhood we recall as adults.
An alternate source for the portrayal of children is to use something other than children. In Peanuts, Charles Shultz develops his characters with a mixture of childhood and adult attributes. Shultz places adult concerns, intelligence and capacity for reflection into an unfamiliar context (R. Johnson 1989, 120). Like Leaf, Shultz also uses memory of childhood to create his characters. He rarely looked to his own children for inspiration, instead he uses experiences of his adult life to bring a hybrid realism to his characters. The social anxieties of Charlie Brown are the adult social anxieties of Shultz. The pain of unrequited love represented in Charlie Brown’s longing for the Red Haired Girl was not a childhood memory, but a failed adult romance that haunted him for the rest of his life (R. Johnson 1989, 84). His characters have a sense of realism, but not as realistic children.

A similar example of children being modeled on adult behavior can be found in the Ralph Phillips cartoons of Chuck Jones. Ralph is an early grade school boy who is prone to daydreaming in class. At stressful moments he seamlessly retreats into a daydream by means of a cinematic graphic match. When his actions provoke laughter among his classmates he is drawn back to the real world. While this oscillation between fantasy and reality is symptomatic of any bored child, Ralph's fantasies show no insight into the inner world of children. Each fantasy is a standard Hollywood genre; the Western, the Swashbuckling swordfight, the Edgar Rice Burroughs jungle film, the boxing match, each lacks the unique view of this child’s inner world, other than to show what Hollywood entertainment they may have consumed.

The role of children in the story also affects how they are portrayed. Spirited Away is the story of Chihiro, a young girl who becomes caught, along with her parents, in an unseen parallel spirit world. As her parents are transformed into pigs, it is up to Chihiro to survive,
escape and ultimately save her parents. As with most Miyazaki characters, Chihiro is based on a real girl. The real girl, Miyazaki explains

“She’s kind of a lazy bum, which is exactly the way that my favorite 10 year old girls are. ‘You lazy bum’ I want to tell them, but I know their inner resources are as rich as Chihiros” (The Art of Spirited Away, 2001)

The character of Chihiro is not a complete reflection of the child who served as the source material. She is described as being unmotivated, but the character becomes a reflection of what Miyazaki felt she could be. The requirements of the story dictate that the girl must change. It is a tale of a child learning to mature. While the vision of the animation is unique, the story of a child learning to progress beyond childhood to maturity is not.

Animated features such as Pinnochio, Bambi, Dumbo, Jungle Book, and Coraline all involve children maturing in the absence of their parents, usually saving the parents or parent figures as the final test that they have reached maturity. In these cases we are not learning about the inner world of these children, but how their inner world will change to become that of an adult.

Three animations of John and Faith Hubley stop to examine the inner world of childhood without insisting that that world should change. Moonbird, Cockaboody and Windy Day do not follow a traditional story arc, but reveal the children through their own words. The visual component of the animation depicts their world in much the same way that Chuck Jones did with the Ralph Phillips cartoons, moments of reality dissolve into the fantasy world that the children describe. But unlike Ralph Phillips, this fantasy world is unique to these children. It neither projects the Hollywood entertainment fantasies on to the children nor does it express a need for these children to change as was the case with Spirited Away.
The Hubleys give us the ability to understand these children and how they think, imagine and create.

3.2 The Influence of John and Faith Hubley

The major inspiration for my work was the three animations created by John and Faith Hubley based on unscripted audio recordings with their four young children. In commenting on Moonbird (1959), Windy Day (1967) and Cockaboody (1973), John Canemaker said that they “constitute what is perhaps the most profound treatment on childhood development available on film.” (Canemaker 1981) The animations are built around a simple elegant concept of letting the children present themselves through their own imagination and creativity. Because of this, the Hubley animations achieve a sense of reality which I have not felt in any other animation. Of these three films, I felt the strongest connection to Windy Day, due to its startlingly complex visual and verbal activity. After repeatedly watching this animation I became intrigued by how I seemed to gain a stronger sense of the children’s personalities while they were at play.

I found Windy Day both a joy to watch and to listen too. There is a great deal of dynamic activity, both visually and in the playful banter of the children. So much is happening that I felt I had to watch it again and again, each time finding something new. Children at play are inherently fun to watch. In play, sudden and surprising bursts of creativity lead you to wonder about both the source and limits of their imagination. Play also reveals emotions in a clear and dramatic fashion. In Windy Day the personalities of the two children were also clearly expressed during play. Georgia's subversive attempts to derail
the project “I'm tired of doing these dumb plays”, and breaking the performance with baby sounds, contrasts with Emily's patient cajoling, urging her sister along against her own seeming reluctance. I saw Georgia’s refusal to perform as a signal that the animation is telling us that play is a rejection of predefined structures. Play in general has no overt fixed goal, and the animation at first seems to have no fixed story structure, just a sequence of experiences mimicking the process of play. A great deal happens, and we learn a lot about these characters, and the lack of a traditional narrative does not prevent the viewer from enjoying these experiences.

3.2.1 Reality through Play Relationships

As I watched these animations featuring play, I was drawing connections to both my own memories of play and to experiences of play with my then 3 year old daughter Lea. Play is infectious. In Windy Day, when Georgia resists play, Emily can draw her in by continuing the play activity. In the same way, the animation drew me in as a viewer by prompting me to imagine a visual and verbal collaboration with my daughter. I would expect all parents watching Windy Day to wonder what type of playful creativity their children would produce, as I wondered what Lea would create. What would I find in a few minutes of distilled verbal creativity from my daughter? I also wondered about my own connection to play. Since I am more visually than verbally oriented, I thought of the playfulness of the images in Windy Day, and I wondered what I would be able to do with the creative stories of my daughter. I also wondered what it would be like to collaborate on a project with a three year old.
I was drawn to the fact that *Windy Day* was not just collaboration between children and animators, but also between children and parents. Faith Hubley is quoted as saying that “we just decided that we wanted to make small, good films and raise a family.” (Canemaker 1981) *Windy Day* seemed like a perfect synthesis of those two goals, creating art and attention to family. Some of the undeniable appeal of *Windy Day* comes from the relationship between the parents and the children. Though the parent/child relationship is not depicted in the animation, we can infer it through John and Faith’s decision to record their children. First, the decision must have come from careful observation and interaction with the children. These are parents who clearly listen to their children and are interested in what they have to say. The recordings also give us evidence that the father has produced an environment which would foster the creative development of the children. They are encouraged to stage their own plays, they are encouraged to discuss their dreams and recount events of the past. We can also infer that the father joined into these playful dramas as he is periodically mentioned as a character in the play; Emily tells us in character that “we must save the treasure that was stolen from father” and Georgia speculates on how her father will laugh at their performance. *Windy Day* could not have been possible if the parents were not deeply involved in the creative lives of their children.

The Hubleys’ interest in their children’s world of creative play will resonate with any parent who is trying to understand their own children. Children are largely a mystery, and watching them develop and function is a series of small revelations. I am sure one of these revelations for the Hubleys was the sophistication with which Georgia understood the cycle of life and death. It is a horrible subject to begin discussing with a child, particularly when they are old enough to reach the logical conclusion that someday they and their parents will
die. Yet in *Windy Day*, Emily discusses this with a dispassionate understanding that we are born, grow up, and die. Often these revelations come during times of play, where experiments with relationships lead children to new discoveries and questions. If *Windy Day* is about children and play and what we can learn, I was interested in what I could learn about my daughter.

I was also interested in the idea of dual creators in *Windy Day*. Developing ideas for an animation is always a problem. Coming up with something unique in a world of predefined story structures is even more difficult. Yet here is this untapped reservoir of unpredictable creativity. My interest in working with the creative stories and dramas of my daughter was not to avoid finding my own story. The stories in *Windy Day* must have been gathered, selected and edited. In the process of finding these stories John and Faith had to ask themselves what their children's stories were about. These stories were most likely interpreted and analyzed. Eventually the animation can provide a larger story on top of the children’s' stories. For me, this was the interesting aspect of dual creators in *Windy Day*. I felt the Hubleys were using the stories and dramas of Emily and Georgia as building blocks to explore larger themes.

3.2.2 Reality through Speech

The other aspect of *Windy Day* which attracted me was the feeling of realism in the characters of the children. The most obvious source of realism comes from the unscripted recording of the children. As John Hubley stated “we wanted to get the inarticulate quality of children’s dialogue. A lot of time they just aren’t clear. They’re often confused and ambiguous.” (Canemaker 1981) There are many other characteristics of the children’s speech which are exhibited in *Windy Day*. The recordings are filled with the wonderful
natural cadences of the girl’s speech patterns. There is a roundabout verboseness to Georgia’s speech. When she wants to ask if Emily’s character of Prince Joe has a mustache, Georgia says “does she have brown hair on her nose?” There are moments of accidental humor due to a misunderstanding of relationships. When Emily asks “Please Polly you do want to marry me”, Georgia responds “No I don’t. Marry your wife.” We also hear both children break out of the story world. Emily quietly instructs Georgia as she starts the drama again that “you will have to be the dragon”. Georgia is aware that unintended listeners might hear her words as she asks Emily “I’m not sure if I can say this, but who will you marry?” All of these flaws and features of speech solidify their status as authentic children with the audience.

3.2.3 Reality through Fantasy

Imaginative play gives us a deeper sense of the individual child through their fantasy creations. Many children may have the same motivations or emotional connections to certain subjects, but the expression of these connections in fantasy will be unique and represent the product of their experiences, abilities and interests. Imaginative play gives the viewer an indication of what children have been exposed to, including what books have been read to them, what games they have played with other children, what stories they have been told at bedtime and what are the routines of their daily lives. Imaginative play shows us what children are able to create from these influences, and how they are able to adapt and merge existing structures into something new.

In Windy Day we see strong differences between Emily and Georgia is terms of experience, ability and interests. Emily is driven by fantasy play involving human characters involved in romance and adventure. She prefers the highly structured play of a performance
which includes scenes, settings and stable characters who maintain their identities across multiple play sessions. Georgia is driven by fantasy play involving anthropomorphic animals involved in domestic and maternal relationships. She prefers a freer play style and constantly changes identities. Each is able to help the other in a cooperative arrangement, providing their own experiences and interests to experiment with the questions they are trying to answer. The fantasy constructions reveal real characteristics of the children and their inner world in a way which would otherwise be difficult to capture.

The relationship between reality and fantasy in play extends to the visuals of the Hubley animations. Not surprisingly the visuals reflect the creativity and joy of the children's play. The visual style reflects the Hubleys’ experimental animation techniques and their rejection of the Disney style of physical realism. Here characters may be line drawings in one shot or unbordered regions of color in the next. Characters and backgrounds often merge transparently into one unified design. The Hubleys had a history of breaking the rules and conventions of animation, which visually reinforces the theme of play as an activity that breaks rules.

The Hubleys find many ways to visually represent reality and fantasy themes. We repeatedly see Georgia reaching to touch, observe and play with real animals in the animation. From the opening sequence where she is playing with a frog, to her rejecting the organized play of the performance to play with a beetle, to the closing scene where she is poking and prodding a dead fish, the Hubleys alternate between the realistic representation and fantasy expression. They can be a flying groom and bride one second or children slowly enjoying a tire swing the next.
The visual style represents a series of opposites which extends beyond reality and fantasy. I was struck by the style of the drawing in the animation, which finds a balance between primitive and elegant, solid and ethereal, casual drawn and carefully observed. Even the real world representation of the girl’s characters varies in the animation. These representations have an expressionistic quality that aids the recorded voices without competing with them. Georgia can be drawn in a comic fashion as she says “Ladies and gentlemen” [1:02] or with delicate realism as she discusses life beginning as a seed [8:22].

As I read more on how these drawings were created, the filial connection also becomes a factor. Faith Hubley commented that on Windy Day “I inked every drawing, and sent it out for the coloring, because the line is so important.” [Canemaker p62]. The personal connection of mother recreating the children brings another interesting factor to the animation. Line quality was something else that I notice with every viewing. There is a roughness in the frame to frame images that always reminds me that I am watching a sequence of drawings, in a way I never would in a Disney animation. This is also true of the fill colors which flicker unexpectedly. I found that this worked well with the subject of children in the process of playful creation. As I read about the experimental materials used by the Hubleys, oil paint, wax resist, water colors, felt tip pens, I again made connections with child object play in the creation of the art and understand why the visual aspect of the animation is so playful.

While the frame to frame line movement may be choppy, the flow of action works at a dizzying pace. In one 40 second segment in Windy Day Georgia goes from kangaroo to her real world incarnation in the kangaroo’s pouch, to her head on a duck’s body to a complete duck to a rabbit, back to being a real world girl dressed as a bride, to an adult woman dressed
as a bride to a bride with a giraffes head, back to the adult woman bride, to a constantly morphing and growing primitive mask with multiple pairs of eyes back to the woman bride, to a bride with a head of a horned gazelle, to a red lion, to a king, to a top hat wearing groom. These transitions in representation are as playful and creative as anything the children are doing and led me to believe that the playful influence of children would infect and express itself in the work of animators.
CHAPTER 4 CONCEPTS FOR UNDERSTANDING PLAY

4.1 Theories of Play

Any exploration of a topic should begin with a definition, and for the subject of play this presents an interesting problem. Most texts on play begin by stating the difficulty if not impossibility of defining play. In the preface to Brian Sutton-Smith’s *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith discusses the difficulty of defining play by drawing an analogy to Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose*, where the monks, realizing that they could not say what God is, were reduced to defining what he was not (Sutton-Smith 1998, vii). Similarly, in *Play and Early Childhood Development*, James Johnson forgoes a formal definition of play in order to use existing research to identify a list of features which would differentiate play from similar childhood activities such as exploration. Johnson found that nonliterality, intrinsic motivation, process orientation, free choice and positive affect were the defining characteristics of play (J. Johnson 1999, 16). Johnson also cites research by Peter Smith of Sheffield University which found that the most reliable indicator of adults identifying play was nonliterality (J. Johnson 1999, 5).

Nonliterality, or the act of pretending or altering the real world association of a person, object or action, also forms the basis for a definition of make believe play developed by Shlomo Ariel in *Children’s Imaginative Play*. Ariel identified three mental operations which would indicate imaginative play. This includes transforming symbolic meaning of a real
world entity, such as a person, object or action, into an animated mental image. The second operation is verbalizing this transformation. The third operation is disclaiming the seriousness of the transformation (Ariel, 2002, 7).

While theorists have proposed many definitions of play, they have also found many ways to divide play into categories. The process is complicated by a lack of universally accepted terms. Each theorist seems to adopt their own terms for similar or overlapping categories of play. The general categories of play I found most useful were those developed by Jean Piaget which corresponded to his stages of childhood development (J. Johnson 1999, 10). These include

- *practice play*, also called mastery, object or constructivist play – a child's physical interaction and manipulation of objects and the environment
- *symbolic play*, also called imaginative, pretend or make believe play
- *play with rules* – social rules based games and sports.

This paper deals mostly with symbolic play, though I will use the alternate term *imaginative play* throughout this paper. Practice or constructive play will be discussed later as it deals with the process of artistic creation.

In imaginative play a child applies new meaning to a person, object or activity, transforming them into symbols for something else. When Georgia coos like a baby in *Windy Day*, in her mind she ceases to be Georgia and becomes a symbol for a baby. This is the characteristic which James Johnson identified as *nonliterality*. A casual adult observer sees a child pretending to be something else.
Jean Piaget saw children choosing play levels which match their abilities, and imaginative play occurs as children develop the ability to think symbolically. Piaget also saw play as a method children use to deal with more information than they can process. Children learn when they are able to balance the stream of information they acquire about reality, which Piaget refers to as assimilation, with their ability to form mental structures to explain this information, which he refers to as accommodation. When assimilation outpaces accommodation the child uses play to resolve the imbalance. Play represents a holding pattern where children practice applying old mental processes until they are able to create new processes to the incoming information. (J. Johnson 1999, 9)

While Piaget saw play as having a supporting role in cognitive development, Lev Vygotsky saw play as a critical component in how the child develops cognitively, socially and emotionally. Vygotsky’s theories have formed the basis of beliefs that play serves as a laboratory where children are able to perform many tasks at a more advanced level than would be possible in their normal activities. The difference between what children are able to do in typical situations unassisted and what they are able to accomplish in either a play state or with slight adult intervention was termed a zone of proximal development (Karpov 2005, 34). As children create a play world in which to operate, they are able to control the boundaries and conditions for that world, which gives them greater control over their own responses to this world. An example would be a boy who cries uncontrollably when being put to bed. If this boy creates a play episode where he is able to minimize a frightening object, or remove a source of frustration, he can learn to cope with the real life situation. The ability to transform reality allows children to cope and develop. For Vygotsky, the most important feature of play is the ability to transform by the use of symbols. Whether children are
substituting a stick for a gun or their own identities for new roles, play provides a process where child develop their ability to think abstractly. He traces the ability of children to use symbols to discovery through object play (J. Johnson 1999, 10-11).

Other theories help us understand the source of the creative content children use in dramatic play. *Script theory* contends that we organize experiences into scripts which give us a course of action to follow when presented with a similar set of circumstances in the future. Research assumes the existence of children’s play scripts and tries to determine the source of these scripts. Some instances of imaginative play replay scripts based on daily rituals and routines children experience, such as preparing for bed or a trip to the store. Others may result from novel emotional and social exchanges, for instance a stern warning from a parent or playing with a new child at the park. Other scripts may be derived from storybooks or television. Each script may outline a basic structure which the child may embellish with a variety of fantasy characters occupying established roles (Formberg 2006, 88)

Shlomo Ariel contends that dramatic play flows from issues of great emotional concern in a child, and dramatic play offers children and safe method to confront and explore these issues. Ariel argues that the brain gives priority to *emotives*, or networks of emotions, along with their associated thoughts and sensation, with which we become preoccupied. An emotive might concern a child’s doubt about a mother’s love. While this may directly find itself expressed in dramatic play, it may also become expressed indirectly through associated thoughts, such as watching a cat bare its teeth to a kitten that has come to suckle. Ariel found that children use imaginative play to self-regulate the intensity of emotional arousal by moving symbolic representations away from sensitive emotives until they are able to calm themselves, and then return to those emotives in order to continue
their exploration. This cycle of testing and retreating from sensitive emotional connections provides a therapeutic technique to cope with the unbearable (Ariel 2002, 62-66).

4.2 Using Play Theories to Characterize Imaginative Play

Play theories give the animator a way to approach the subject of play. The animator may want to explore why children play, or speculate on the source of imaginative play. They might want to reveal how play helps a child’s cognitive development. The theories listed above, and a multitude not listed here, can be used by the animator to give parents and adults gain a deeper understanding of the activity of play. I believe this is part of what the Hubleys were doing in *Windy Day*.

In Piaget’s theory of play as adaptation, play is a result of assimilation outpacing accommodation, in other words the child is receiving information faster than it can be processed. We can conclude from this that play reveals the subject of what a child is unable to understand. This provides the animator with a motivation for his characters. The child may be playing, but they are using play to explore the possibilities of a subject.

One of the first decisions an animator must make is to select material for the animation, in this case which recordings of the children to use. The conversations selected by the Hubleys on the subject of marriage are designed to show play conforming to the theories of Piaget, that play is an exploration of incompletely understood information. Most of the children's conversations selected for the animation explore what is acceptable for choosing a spouse. The children raise questions about age, gender, family relations and whether your spouse can already be married. They are aware of the rules, but the children
are determined to experiment with them. It cannot be an accident that almost every reference to marriage in Windy Day shows the children testing the boundaries of what can be permitted. They suggest and then reject proposed marriages, replying that they can't marry their sister, their father, someone who is too old, or someone who already has a wife. They know what they cannot do, but play allows them to understand the nature of these rules.

All of this is clearly play from Shlomo Ariel's definition. They start each discussion of marriage from a play performance demonstrating mental abstraction, and they are verbalizing the result. The laughter and teasing of their exchanges declaims seriousness. And as Ariel suggests, we see an emotional investment in the topic. Later in the animation we see a similar example of play as exploration in the recurring theme of death. By carefully selecting and organizing material, the animator is able to embed theories of play in the animation and to reveal the child's motivation to play to the viewer.

Using play theories to reveal the motivation to play can be seen more clearly if we again compare Windy Day to the Chuck Jones' Ralph Philips cartoon From A to Z-Z-Z-Z. On the surface these animations are very similar. They both depict children engaged in imaginative play and they both visually show the children navigating reality and fantasy environments. One major difference between the two animations is motivation. As previously mentioned, Ralph Philips play is nothing more than standard Hollywood film plots, and we have no indication that Ralph has any emotional investment in these subjects other than their entertainment value. For the Hubley girls, play has an entertainment component, but the viewer is shown that play is emotionally important and involving issues with which there is a desire for greater understanding, and the characters feel that these issues will have a personal bearing on their lives. When viewers are able to understand the
emotions of the characters, they are able to form a greater emotional connection to the characters.

4.3 Linking Play and the Animator’s Creativity

Aside from the many insights play theories and frame analysis may give animator, a further question which interested me was how a child's process of imaginative play relates to the imaginative processes of creating an animation. In short, can creating an animation be a form of play? When I earlier introduced Shlomo Ariel's definition of play, I was interested in the separation of the mental abstraction of the real world entity from the verbalization of the transformation. This separation is important to the animator since all we really know about the child's play world is the verbalization (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Flow chart of abstraction in imaginative play
We know the child has formed a mental image of the fantasy creation, but we can never be sure what that mental image is. Ariel also describes this transformation in semiotic terms. In his definition, the real world object is the signified and the mental image constructed in imaginative play is the signified. The verbalization is our view of the signified content of play.

To the animator approaching a recording of imaginative play, the verbalization is the only concrete entity we have to work with. As the animator forms his or her own mental representation of the recording, the animator is now creating a mental image that does not reference a real world object, person or action, but the words of the recording itself. Here the verbalization is the signified and the animator’s mental image is the signifier (Figure 4.2). What had been real world objects to the child also becomes a signifier to the verbalization. The Hubleys may create cartoons of Emily and Georgia, but these again are only symbols, or signifiers of the real Emily and Georgia of the verbalization. The remaining question is whether the Hubleys disclaim seriousness in *Windy Day*. I believe they do, through the use of humor. The relationship of Ariel's play definition for the animator changes to figure 2.
Figure 4.2 Flow chart of abstraction to animation

If we accept Ariel’s definition, the animator is performing the same operations as a child engaged in imaginative play. Furthermore, as a child brings their own play scripts and sets of emotives to the transformations occurring in imaginative play, the animators will bring their own unique set of play scripts and emotives to their transformations. The inclusion of humor also contributes to the playful feel of the animation. Humorous visual cues can make some episodes of Georgia discussing death seem playful, as with the description of the dead rabbit. Where visual cues of humor are missing, such as Georgia relating the dream of death, the animation no longer reads as play, but instead reads as tragedy or hallucination.

If these two flows show a similar set of operations, why does the process of creating animation not always feel like play? For the child, this is a natural activity. For the artist, creation can be endlessly frustrating. This was a question I intend to explore as part of my process of creating animations.
CHAPTER 5 FRAME ANALYSIS

5.1 Understanding Frame Analysis

Play theories give us an overview of play activity. They propose answers to why and how play is occurring, but they generally do not give us the specifics of what actions are involved in imaginative play. Knowing what is occurring helps the animator determine how to represent the activity.

An animation of imaginative play can be seen as a visualization problem. As a child describes the imaginary play world, it is the job of the animator to visually bring this world to life. As with any visualization problem, the ability to do this in a convincing manner is greatly enhanced if the animator understands what is happening in the source material.

This does not seem to be much of a problem. The expression “as simple as child’s play” would naturally lead one to believe that play must be simple. One would think that any activity a child can perform without training could not possibly be complex, but as we watch Windy Day, we see the play of Emily and Georgia expressed in a dazzling variety of fast paced visual images. Either the Hubleys are creating complexity out of simplicity or there is more to play than we realize.

A method of characterizing imaginative play allows the animator to describe what is occurring in the source recording and how that activity changes over time. One method of analysis which is designed to answer the question “what is it that is going on here” is the
work of Erving Goffman and his concept of Frame Analysis. Goffman claims that meaning can only be applied to events if the mental frame of the participant is understood. This would seem to be an ideal method of separating the different ways Emily and Georgia relate to each other in Windy Day, e.g. as sisters, performers, and the multiple identities they adopt in the course of play.

Goffman states that his aim is to

isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events and to analyze the special vulnerabilities to which these frames and references are subject. I start with the fact that from an individual’s particular point of view, while one thing may momentarily appear to be what is really going on, in fact what is really happening is plainly a joke, or a dream, or an accident, or a mistake, or a misunderstanding, or a deception, or a theatrical performance, and so forth. And attention will be directed to what it is about our sense of what is going on that makes it so vulnerable to the need for these various rereading (Goffman 1974, 10).

A child engaged in role play adopts a particular mental frame which informs his or her communications. An actor performing in a theater adopts a different mental frame. But what about a child involved in imaginative play? In Windy Day we see a constant array of roles and relationships. Frame analysis provides a method to track these changing roles and to allow the animator to view the structure of the activity.

Goffman starts frame analysis with the most basic mental state which a person can hold, which is their awareness of reality. The laws of gravity, the physical condition of objects or people, the ordering of events in time all form our understanding of events and conditions which are not open to interpretation. Goffman refers to this untransformed reality as a primary frame (Goffman 1974, 21).
The meanings we attach to a primary frame can be transformed by a key, an additional level of interpretation that inherits the relationships established in a primary frame, but transforms the applied meaning (Goffman 1974, 44). Keys can be applied on top of each other, a process Goffman calls rekeying or lamination, in which the new key inherits the relationships of the subordinate key, and adds a new transformation of meanings (Goffman 1974, 82).

A child emptying a box of books is in her primary frame. If she imagines the box is a rocket ship and she is an astronaut she has entered a second frame. If she startsemptying other boxes and is delivering books to the surrounding planets, what meaning does she apply to the boxes? Are they just boxes or do they also become rockets? Or are they both boxes and rockets at the same time? Or are they something entirely new? Goffman would say that she has rekeyed the play astronaut frame to create a third frame. He does not tell us what she is thinking, only that she has created a new mental frame, inheriting the properties of the previous frame, which allows her to change her interpretation of the boxes.

As the name suggests, a frame has clearly defined boundaries. An activity that takes a participant in or out of a frame is termed a cue or rim activity (Goffman 1974, 82). The exit cue may be dramatic enough that the participant is temporarily unable to occupy any frame, a condition Goffman refers to as flooding out (Goffman 1974, 350).

5.2 Frame Analysis applied to Windy Day

Applying this analysis to the dialogue in Windy Day allows us to examine three areas of the animation. First, how are the children attaching meaning to their activities in the
dialogue? Second, how does the animator attach meaning to visual images in relation to the framework expressed in the children’s dialogue, and third, how does the animator attach meaning to editing choices in the dialogue.

5.2.1 Verbal Expression of Frames

Examining how the children create and navigate frames allows us to understand how the children are employing varied interpretations of events, applying different roles to themselves and others, and to appreciate how well children are able to operate socially in these changing conditions. In Windy Day we have a recorded artifact of the Hubleys’ daughters, Emily and Georgia responding to what we can infer is their father’s request that they perform a play. Casually listening to the exchange, one would assume that there is little apparent variety to their frames, as the children are either themselves or they acquire the roles of characters in the play.

The shifts in frames can be detected by identifying cues as the changes in associations between the speaker, other characters and the environment, both real and imagined. In a way, the frame can be seen as the set of associations the speaker forms with other participants, characters, and their environment at any given point in time, and the interpretation of events by the speaker becomes a function of these associations. For example, a dog who has formed a familiar association with another dog may interpret a nip as playful, while an unfamiliar relationship may cause the same nip to be interpreted as an act of aggression, and the relationship of a puppy to an adult may cause the nip to be read as a parental correction. The message in each case is the same, but the relationship to the
addresser determines the significance applied by the addressee.

5.2.2 Examples of Frame Transition in *Windy Day*

The viewer can track shifts in associations to understand how frames are formed in *Windy Day*. To demonstrate what frame analysis is able to reveal, I think it would be useful to examine the frame shifts occurring in a 60 second segment of the animation.

The primary frame on which is animation is built is based on two young sisters being recorded by their parents. The reality of the recording is the central untransformed reality of the animation, and forms the anchoring of activity. The animation starts as both Emily and Georgia negotiate about performing a play [0:40]. This forms the primary frame. In this frame both are sisters in which they relate to each other as sisters. When Emily and Georgia announce “Ladies and Gentlemen”, we have the first lamination, as a second performance frame is created [0:59]. Now they relate to themselves and each other as participants in a performance introducing the play to the audience, and they occupy a place both within and outside of the play world. The performance introduction frame is broken when Emily tells Georgia to “quit making faces” [1:16], signaling that she is now relating to Georgia as a sister again. Georgia, whose out of character actions led Emily to break the performance introduction frame, establishes a new frame which exhibits a new combination of associations. When Georgia says “let them go ha ha ha ha, and daddy will go hoo hoo hoo hoo” [1:24], she is part of the play world relating to a fantasy audience which includes her real father, but is also addressing Emily not as a performer but as someone outside of the play. When Emily returns to state “Princess Jane is Joe’s sister”, she is returning to the frame where she is introducing the play [1:32]. But Georgia interrupts by stating “I want to
see what she looks like”, signaling that she is now outside the play looking in [1:35]. Emily replies by stating that “She’s is a very pretty girl. She looks just like you.” Here Emily joins Georgia outside the play world observing the performance, but Emily is simultaneously seeing Jane character, and Georgia the sister as the performer of the Jane character.

In all of these shifts, which take about a minute in real-time, neither Emily nor Georgia needs to explicitly communicate changes in frame to each other. Each is able to instinctively understand their own cues and shifting associations and the shifting associations of the other.

5.2.3 Visual Expression of Frames

The ease with which children accomplish this processing coupled with the universal nature of imaginative play causes adults to miss this phenomenon. For the animator, the interesting issue concerns visual images and how these relate to the children’s dialogue. Here the set of relationships exhibited by the spoken recording of the daughters is joined by the visual images of the animator. The animation communicates to the viewer through two code systems; one, the spoken product of the children and the second the visual product of the animators. Each initially addresses a different audience. The daughters are performing, reluctantly in the case of Georgia, for the father. The father and mother animation team is producing visual images for a future audience. Each contains a message that references the frames of the children, implicitly in the case of the children's dialogue, and more explicitly in the case of the animators. The Hubleys use of visual images exposes the complexity and underlying structure of frame creation and expresses the unspoken qualities of frame.
5.2.4 Using Visuals to Expose Frame Complexity

In *Windy Day* we also see the Hubleys’ visual style aid our understanding of childhood perceptions by exposing the framing system employed by their children. By communicating these relationships in a different from the Hubleys manage to at once highlight the experience and to reveal the complexity of the frame transitions. While we are accustom to children verbally switching roles and associations, we are not accustom to seeing appearances physically transform. We see Emily and Georgia represented as children/sisters in an environment representing the primary frame, and they morph into the characters they are intending to play in the performance frame. The Hubleys go beyond this to provide a range of visual devices which show the more nuanced state of the frames. Props, settings, costumes, and characters morph in a great variety of combinations to produce an organic flow of images which prevent the viewer from dismissing the activities of the children as switches between reality and fantasy.

One sequence where the visuals add information to the verbal frame transitions occurs when Emily introduces the first scene “which takes place in the thinking room” [1:46]. Instead of the abrupt verbal transition, the visuals depict a gradual transition which contains additional information. Emily first morphs into a fantasy character, followed by the stage morphing into a castle. We then see Georgia react with delight and jump into the castle setting. Once there Georgia morphs into her fantasy character. In place of the abrupt verbally expressed frame change, the Hubleys use visual images to expose the underlying process of frame development, communication and acceptance. We see Emily construct the frame, Georgia react to the new frame, Georgia enter the new frame and adapt her role to
accommodate the frame.

5.2.5 Using Visuals to Express the Properties of Frames

The Hubleys also use the dichotomy between the verbally and visually expressed frames to communicate the expressive properties of the children’s frames to the viewer. This is seen most clearly in the use of the floral crown which is passed between the two daughters. This floral crown transforms to a metal performance prop crown to signal that the wearer has transitioned into the play world. But the crown transformations do not completely match the verbal frames communicated by the children. In several instances the metal prop crown flashes in and out mid-sentence [0:54, 2:04], like the intermittent flicker of a poorly connected light bulb. In another instance, the floral crown expands in size to be used as a jump rope by Georgia [2:08]. Neither of these examples are reflections of the verbal frames, nor do these expose the complexity or structural properties of the frames as seen in previous examples. Instead these examples seem to be speculations about properties of the children’s frames. The flickering expresses to the viewer that childhood frame transitions are spontaneously and effortlessly forming and dissolving, continuously operating even when they are not being expressed by the child. The floral crown as jump rope expresses the playful nature of the frame transitions; they are mental play activities in the same way that jumping rope is a physical play activity.

The expressive use of verbal/visual frame dichotomy can also be seen in Georgia’s description of how the family discovers and buries a dead rabbit [3:26 to 3:50]. While Georgia tells the story in a jovial, matter of fact way which contains no hint of remorse, two visual images make significant changes to how the viewer interprets Georgia’s verbal
account. First, the visual frame transition which opens the sequence shows Georgia morphing into the rabbit, which implies that Georgia is assuming the role of the rabbit, and drawing some level of equivalence between herself and the rabbit. The second is the image is of a motionless, morose Georgia at the end of the sequence. This is clearly at odds with the almost cheerful voice which precedes the image. Between these bracketing images, the visuals match Georgia’s jovial tone; a cartoon rabbit with “X”ed out eyes, comically and stiffly falling down dead. But the transition from jovial to morose is jarring, forcing the viewer to question the cause for the shift in tone. The Hubleys use of visuals tells us that something about the nature of death has been revealed to Georgia.

5.2.6 Communicating Larger Messages through Sequences of Frames

Death is a recurring theme in the animation, and a surprising theme that one would not consider to be a natural subject for an animation about children. In addition to the rabbit, death is featured in Georgia’s dream sequence from [6:50 to 7:20], Emily’s battle with the dragon [4:30 to 4:50] and with Emily as they discuss the death of the seed [8:17 to 8:50]. Each sequence shows Georgia applying different meanings to the concept of death, and in each sequence the Hubleys adopt a different visual cue to reflect the changing attitudes shown by the young child. In the dead rabbit sequence, death is comical and initiates a ceremony frame which is somewhat akin to the performances produced by the children earlier in the animation. Each child in the family participates in the burial ceremony, Hampy puts the rabbit in a newspaper, Mark digs the grave and Emily and Georgia make the signs. The ceremony demonstrates a level of coordination that suggests some degree of
supervision by the parents, in the same way that Emily felt she "had to" participate in the plays for their parents. The comical visual cue of the rabbit with 'X'ed out eyes reinforces the cheerful tone which Georgia uses to recount the event. There is no sense of the finality of death until the visual image of a saddened Georgia at the end of the sequence changes how we perceive Georgia's emotional state. This visual image also forms the bracket of the frame activity, and implies that Georgia may be starting to understand the nature of death.

The battle sequence between Emily as Prince Joe and Georgia as the dragon shows death as theater. Even within the confines of the frame, the finality of death is rejected. No matter how Prince Joe slices and dices the dragon, it manages to maintain some degree of life. The Hubleys use the final grisly remnant of the dragon as their visual cue for this sequence, the amorphous lump using its one eye to survey the carnage and to finally look imploringly at the viewer. The lump, like the rabbit before it, is still comical, but displays a hint of sadness at its plight.

Georgia's account of her dream of death begins with a decidedly different tone than humorous view of death in the first two sequences. Here she states that her dream was very scary. Georgia recounts the experience as "I had a dream a long time ago, and it was a very scary dream. And if I go down somewhere in one of the buildings I would die. Somebody would shoot me. So someone shot me but I didn't die and it was very nice." Here for the first time death is being verbal acknowledges as being something to be afraid of, but ultimately is not final. Georgia was dead, but did not die. The visual cue, the nebulous hovering black form, while ominous is decidedly abstract and not grounded in the physical world.

The final sequence on death starts with the subject of where babies come from.
When Georgia plays with the idea of the parent’s planting the seed to make the baby, she forms an understanding that the inevitable result of the birth of the seed will be the eventual death of the seed. "The seed dies." Emily replies "But the seed is the baby and you're the baby. Then you grow up". To which Georgia responds "Then when you're finished grown up, you die."

Here the visual cue for death is presented in its most graphic and elemental state, a carcass of a fish being eaten by insects. The children examine the dead fish dispassionately and unflinchingly, prodding it with a stick. There is neither the laughter nor the fear of the previous sequences, only the knowledge that you are born, you live and you die. To Goffman, the children have gone through a repeated cycle of applying and removing keys to the natural primary framework of death. The comic ceremony, the theater, and the dream are all tried and ultimately rejected. In each case the untransformed reality is that something is dead and will not come back to life. In the first three sequences Georgia has laminated these experiences with a variety of keys that give death different meanings. In the end Georgia has learned that death is final. This is the untransformed reality at the heart of a primary frame of the natural process of life and death.

The Hubleys must have had a reason to select these sequences and to present them in the order they ultimately chose. Rather than forming a series of experiences of childhood, this order implies a gradual increase in Georgia's understanding of the nature of life and death, and finally reaching that understanding forms the climax of the piece, Georgia's understanding of the adult world. The unspoken reference to death in the piece is that Georgia's maturation is the beginning of the death of childhood.

Using Goffman's analysis, this transition from childhood to the adult world
portrayed by the Hubleys would involve stripping the fanciful exuberant keys until we are left with the primary framework of reality. After Georgia's realization, the imaginative visual transformations employed by the Hubleys to match the children's frames are no longer used. Gone are the characters of medieval drama, fantasy animals, veiled brides and disruptive babies. In their place is the one transformation the children can muster; Emily is now only able to visually transform into an old woman.

If maturing means adults suffer a greatly diminished capacity to create and enjoy these imaginative keys and live largely in the world of primary frames, we can see the first signs of this in how the Georgia and Emily react differently in their rim activity. For Emily, the more mature of the two children, the frames are not spontaneous, and are seen as an obligation. From her opening line “Georgia, we have to do the play now”, to her reply to Georgia’s refusal to perform “But Georgia we have to”, to her acknowledgment of Georgia’s comment that she is tired of these dumb plays “Oh, I know. Just do it”, we understand that this is something she is being directed to do. Georgia, on the other hand, uses every means available to break the frames. She makes faces, uses wildly exaggerated voices, breaks character, and floods out in both fits of laughter and tears. Here the theme of the loss of childhood is portrayed as a rejection of fanciful and imaginative frames is being established.

This reading would be consistent with other features of the animation. There is an understated visual coldness which develops as the animation progresses. The blue and green hues seen at the beginning of the animation give way to a warm muted pallet which suggests that summer has ended and fall has arrived. The vegetation appears stiff and brittle. Even the beached diving platform which serves as the stage for the girls performances suggests that it has been removed from the water in anticipation of colder weather. After Georgia
announces that "when you're finished grown up, you die", Emily responds “But that’s after it had its life”. We then hear the wind blow. This wind has a mournful quality, hollow and devoid of life, in marked contrast to the cheerful chorus of birdsong and animal noises which opens the animation. Georgia crosses her arms as if to indicate that it is a cold wind blowing. She then turns to answer the ringing bell.

The coldness is not reflected in the manner of the children. Growing up and functioning in the adult world is what they are striving to do. Emily and Georgia are laughing and playing until the end. Georgia recounts the development of the seed, “It grew and grew until it was six years old, and then it played and played and played until it was seven years old and then it played and played and played until it was eight years old and you became a little old lady.” As Emily morphs into an old woman, the sisters fade to ghostly silhouettes as the animation ends. The coldness is instead felt by their parents, the animators, as they realize that this cherished time will soon end. This is the paradox felt by most parents as on one hand we urge our children on in their development, but on the other we lament the passing of these stages of childhood. The tension between these two opposing desires can be felt in the piece and drives it forward in a way that a series of random childhood expressions of play would not.

This series shows the power of editing to form a larger narrative out of assembled portions of dialogue, in this case not from the content of the dialogue, but from the frames employed by the children as they were creating the dialogue. The result is a narrative that is felt rather than understood.
CHAPTER 6 SYNTHESIS

6.1 Young Mother Nature

6.1.1 Genesis

My decision to create an animation based on recordings of my daughter grew out of several interests. I found the idea of working with recordings of my daughter’s imaginative stories to be very appealing. One of the most joyful functions of a parent is to watch the continuous development of your child's personality, skills and abilities. This animation offered me a chance to capture and preserve an artifact of her personality and verbal development at a moment in time. Anyone who has watched an ebullient grade schooler transform into a sullen teenager knows that there is something special about early childhood, and that these moments have to be enjoyed now because they will soon be lost. This would also be a chance to capture our relationship as father and daughter, both through our verbal exchanges and the product of our creativity. Most importantly, the project would also be an opportunity to learn about my daughter through her creativity and imagination and to learn about how we influence each other. I also saw this project potentially inspiring other parents to work with their children in the way that Windy Day inspired me to work with my daughter.
As a father I found the imaginative play of my daughter to be one of the great mysteries of being a parent. One question I was interested in answering was whether we can read anything into the choices children make during imaginative play. When a child pretends to be a cowboy, or a mother with a baby, or a kitten, or a monster, is it reasonable to draw conclusions to how they view themselves? Likewise, can we draw conclusions based on how a child operates in one of those roles or how they interact with others during play? What can we make of the fantasy environments they may relate to us? Is it reasonable to speculate about their wants and needs? Does this tell us how we as parents and society are forming a child’s own self-image? Or is play simply just play, a joyous exercise with no serious goal.

Aside from what play might tell us about children, I was also interested in the question of why adults are drawn to the imaginative play of children. From 1952 to 1970 Art Linkletter hosted a daily variety show called House Party, which has since been remembered for a feature which became known as “Kids Say the Darndest Things”. As
children were interviewed they used their own nascent reasoning skills and understanding of the world around them to answer Linkletter's questions. These answers were often unexpected and humorous and the proved to have an enduring interest with the public. Whether we are fascinated by the development of a child's reasoning skills or the product of their imaginative play, we as adults are watching something that is both completely foreign to our own world and an integral stage which we all passed through in our own process of becoming adults.

The product of imaginative play can also be seen as storytelling. It was clear to me from viewing *Windy Day* that a child at play is a story teller, in every way that an animator or film maker is a story teller. They create heroes and villains. They create and resolve conflicts. They create their own universe out of elements from reality and fantasy and create the rules which will govern their universe. They step out of character to direct the actions of other players. Working with the stories of children is a chance to experience story telling at its most elemental and primitive state, but also offering the richness which has not been limited by conventions and rules we learn later in life.

My interest in creating an animation based on my daughter's imaginative play was also influenced by my feeling of the unique function animation plays as a visual medium. I always felt that the great power of animation, as opposed to other mediums like film and theater, is its ability to explore unseen worlds, and the imagination of a child offers a novel unseen world with which to work. While a child may describe what they are imagining, any visualization of their imagination would still require a great deal of speculation, and this speculation could only be realized through the imagination of the animator. I felt this layering of imagination would provide a great opportunity to create something unique.
6.1.2 Problem Solving

At the beginning of the process of recording I thought that I was trying to discover Lea’s stories, but afterwards I found that this was not the case. Initially I was trying to dictate the subject matter of the recordings and to capture Lea discussing my chosen subject. At first I tried to steer Lea to the subject of seeds. I chose seeds for a number of reasons. Seeds are always a subject of fascination and play for Lea when we visit the park. They offer an amazing array of forms and characteristics, from acorns and their caps to jacketed hickory nuts to maple helicopter seeds to milk weed and dandelion tuffs, to burrs sticking on our pant legs. I was also drawn to the characteristics of seeds and how they could be expressed in an animation. But the most important connection for me was how seeds could be used as an interesting metaphor for our relationship as father and daughter. Partially this was a result of watching *Windy Day*, where the children’s discussions of their evolving attitudes on life and death became the most moving and poignant moments of the animation.

While my plan was to record Lea talking about seeds, I soon found that playing with seeds did not inspire her to create any stories. After several trips to the park and learning to be patient and wait for her stories to develop, I noticed that playing with simple physical object proved to be the catalyst for her story telling. In one unused story, Lea picked up a wood chip with a little paint and began to weave a story about providing a plaything for a crying baby bird. The episode, lasting 20 minutes during which we continuously walked in a circle, was not an unbroken narrative but a continuous retelling and refinement of the basic idea of Lea helping a baby animal in distress. Often she would stop to ask me if she was
doing a good thing by giving this toy to the crying bird. In another episode that would form the second half of Young Mother Nature, Lea stopped in the middle of a park hiking trail, sat down and started to scrape together a small pile of dirt. This prompted her to start talking about building a house for the ants.

The immediate connection I noticed between these two episodes was the theme of Lea providing for the animals of the park, in one case toys and the other shelter, which caused me to imagine her seeing herself as a young Mother Nature. This also led me to want to understand the source of these stories, if this theme was a coincidence or an indication of something children commonly experience. I was also left to wonder why playing with the wood chip and the dirt pile lead to imaginative stories while my efforts to engage her to play with the seeds did not.

My method for working with these recordings was to listen to the entire range of recordings for a given project and select portions which exhibited some type of interesting attribute, possibly an interesting example of creativity, a strong visual image or items related to a theme I wanted to explore. I tend to want to edit myself out of the recordings to focus on her play and the stories she creates, but in Young Mother Nature that was not possible. In my second animation Portrait of the Artist as a Young Lady Lea’s responses were complete enough that my prompting questions were not necessary to provide context for her answers. In retrospect, I think it was fortunate that Young Mother Nature is a dialogue between father and daughter in that this situation reveals a social aspect about her character that would otherwise be missing.

Once a collection of verbal segments is gathered, I attempt to order these to find the story I would like to develop. If I find a recurring theme, I concentrate on segments which
directly related to it. I look for a general story arc within the segments and continue to reorder the remaining segments to fit the arc. As this begins to develop I again return to the unedited recordings to look for additional segments which might aid the developing story.

In *Young Mother Nature* the character design of the Lea character was consistent with the conventional “cute” characters proportions as defined by Preston Blaire. This was judged to best connote a 3 year old toddler. These proportions include an oversized head, full round belly area, small hands and feet. The character model varies from convention in the texturing and the portrayal of the eyes. These features were used to both imply that the character is a child’s created object, in the same way that the story is a created object, and to make connections to the world of children’s art.

For *Young Mother Nature*, this world of children’s art was considered to include thick opaque paint and scribbled pencil lines. The textures were generated from scans of white gesso painted surfaces, some of which were painted by the Lea. The gesso surfaces were rubbed with sumi ink to provide strong contrasts and bring out the details of the brush stroke, and then were scanned and used as Maya bump maps. These surfaces were then washed to remove the sumi ink and over painted with acrylic hues and rescanned to generate the Maya color maps. The resulting textures produced a convincing impression of thick paint loosely applied with strong brush strokes and transformed the Lea character from traditional 3D model to something which more resembled a doll or puppet. The result is that the character is less of an autonomous being and more a creation in order to be more consistent with the created world the real Lea is constructing with imaginative play (Figure 6.2).
Figure 6.2 Lea constructing fantasy world

The method of representing eyes of the Lea character was designed again to reinforce the feeling that this character is a created object. Traditionally eyes of 3D animated characters tend to be moderately to highly realistic, including irises, pupils and functioning eyelids. The eyes tend to be the visual entry point to any model, and by reducing the eye to a more primitive symbolic representation the character becomes further abstracted. When animated, these primitive symbolic eyes have the potential to be fully expressive, as can be seen by examining Peanuts or Calvin and Hobbes comics which also use simple lines, circles and dots to represent the eyes of the characters (Figure 6.3). In the Lea models the default eyes take the form of empty scribbled ovals, reminiscent of both Little Orphan Annie and Calvin and Hobbes. Again the result is to give the Lea model the feeling that she is creating herself.
The father character is intended to not to intrude on to the created world. He is generic in design, with proportions closer to that of a real adult. In the classification of Preston Blaire, this character has no features that would be consistent with either a pugnacious, goofy or screwball character. The line of action is straight and vertical. This character is not intended to draw the eye but instead is meant to blend with the background. The father character shares both the texturing and eyes of the Lea character, and is also intended to be a creation of Lea through her story.

After the initial monologue or dialogue has begun to take shape, I start to plan the storyboards for the project. I have found this to be one of the most unexpectedly difficult steps of the process.

My natural instinct is to follow the verbal soundtrack too literally, for example if Lea describes A, I depict A, if she describes B, I depict B. After my initial animatic was developed I tried to examine how other animators deviate from a strict literal translation of the text and attempt to categorize the findings. Two sources I am looking at are the works of Adam Elliot and the Charlie and Lola animated television series based on the children’s
books of Lauren Child. Adam Elliot’s *Uncle, Cousin, Brother* and *Harvey Krumpet* all work off of a voice over narration and differences between the literal voice over descriptions of the story and the visual representation of those events are often subtle, depicting implied actions or the spoken words extrapolated to their logical conclusion. Charlie and Lola series extends the visual style of the Lauren Child books, using more dramatic devices to depict the world of the young child. This includes dynamically changing split screens, described actions operating as wipe cuts, or the speaker becoming the subject of the speech. For example, if Lola is talking about plants needing sunlight to go, we see that Lola’s face dissolves into a graphic match of Lola as the sun (Fig 9).

After I settled on the content and structure of the recording, I started to construct the animatic for the animation. Initially I was not thinking of the larger themes and theories of play, and of generational influences. It was later that one of my advisers Prof. Shuman pointed out that the edited dialogue contains a transition from the father using fantasy play to the child adopting that role. The father initiates the state of play in the first half, setting the stage for how play begins, even while Lea rejects the overtures to play. In the second half Lea drives the play, implying that the father's invitation to play influenced that behavior in the daughter.

I wanted the establishing shot to present several relationships. The most obvious is that this is a time of bonding between the father and daughter. I also wanted to express how both characters experience the woods. Adults typically experience the woods as a whole environment, looking at the height of the trees and searching through the tangle of underbrush. Children are more interested in the immediate area that they can touch. For me, a walk in the woods is a slow enjoyment of the surroundings. For Lea it is the joy of
movement, dancing, jumping, skipping as she moves from point to point to explore what can be found on the ground.

In the second shot, I bring the focus in on Lea. This was done for two reasons. I did not initially intend to feature myself in the animation, preferring to just work with Lea. Unable to find enough useful solo dialogue I brought myself in as what I considered to be a background character. The second reason is that I decided to save time and prepared a limited model of the father without mouth animation, and planned to not shoot the father's face as he was talking. This decision influenced some of the camera positions and location of the father model.

In the second shot [0:14] I was drawn to Lea's emphatic cries that the leaves were falling. My first reaction on hearing this was that it sounded like a warning. Here I chose to play with that aspect and to frame the shot as an attack of leaves, showing Lea small and vulnerable, and the target of the swirling leaves. The position of the father is a problem in shot 3 [0:27], but would be solved with a suggestion from a class critique that shooting over the father's shoulder to both make better use of his scale, reinforcing the impression of Lea as being small and vulnerable and still take into account the limitations of the father model. One consideration when reflecting on the animation is if I should have given the father a more prominent role. If this piece is about a parental influence on play, it might have been more effective if the father would have been seen speaking to highlight his role and being more of a physical presence in the first portion of the animation.

In shot 4 [0:33] I introduce Lea's tactile response to the woods, and the natural reaction to the attacking leaves, which would be to first dodge them, then to pick up a fallen leaf and examine it, as if she was trying to determine why this leaf was so threatening. In
shot 5 the father signals an interest in play “Are we going to put (the leaves) back on after they're done falling?” In this shot I try to play off of the comic elements of Lea's emphatic denial that leaves can be reattached.

Shot 6 is another example where my decision to marginalize the father character weakens the shot. Here I intended to use Lea's jump as an exclamation point to her statement that the father's suggestions will not work, and again tried to minimize the role of the father. But as I review my thoughts about this shot, I can see the need for some degree of physical interaction to mimic the verbal interaction between the two characters. This also would have visually anticipated the exchange in shot 7.

Shot 7 [0:54] was the first point where I started to think of different possibilities other than having the models act out the recorded dialogue. When my adviser first heard this portion of the recording he suggested that I show Lea trying to do what I was suggesting, attaching the leaves back on the tree, rather than simply animating the models engaged in the dialogue. In the final shot I chose a slight variation on this idea, slowing Lea in static poses illustrating the father's proposals, while returning the leaves to realistic dynamic motion when Lea verbally rejected the idea of fantasy. This introduced a visual element missing from the preceding shots and highlighted the differences between the play state of the father and Lea's refusal to abandon reality.

From the beginning I saw the second portion of the animation as Lea's world. At this point Lea drives the play element and since she does not directly refer to the father, he does not function as a character in the story she is creating. Because of this I was completely comfortable leaving him out visually in this portion of the animation. Shot 8 [1:01] mimics
the establishing shot that opens the animation, but this time I chose to have Lea navigates the environment alone. Here the father functions as the unseen audience.

In shot 9 [1:07] and 10 I show Lea doing what she was actually doing as I was recording her, scooping a little pile of dirt together in the middle of a hiking trail in the park. This is the real physical ant house she is creating, and to her imagination equivalent to an actual ant hill. I felt it was important to focus on her hands to again show the childhood need to physically touch the environment, but also because Lea's most interesting and elaborate stories result from her actually touching something during the recording process, for instance when Lea plays in the dirt, and in a later unused recording where she picks up a wood chip which inspires a story about providing a toy for a crying bird. For Lea the act of touching is not simple exploring, but a trigger that either releases her imagination or helps her to express it verbally.

As Lea begins to tell the story of building a house for the ants, I was impressed how it grew organically and effortlessly. I felt that the house which she was creating should also grow in a similar manner, first morphing from the real world ant house into a house that a little girl would relate to, with walls, a conventional roof, a door, windows and shutters, and then branching as growing to match the ever increasing scope of the structure.

As Lea starts to describe the animals talking to her in shot 11 [1:47], I felt that she was becoming more integrated into the story, no longer acting as an omnipotent creator but as a participant. To show this I have her transition from her sitting position around the house to occupying a position of the outside of the house. The graphic match dissolve maintains her size and position relative to the frame, and I felt this would give the viewer the impression that she is unaware of her change in status in her story.
In shot 12 [2:01] Lea starts to talk about the house being suitable for larger animals. It was clear to me that the story had advanced beyond ants. Whatever she was visualizing was no longer physically present in the park, and it was necessary to remove her character from the park. I saw Lea as being completely enveloped in her story world. By zooming into the structure and showing her in an elaborate interior, I wanted to give the viewer the impression that she had been consumed by her own story. The dogs and squirrels added another dimension to the story, and a different type of structure could express that different dimension. I felt pop-up book structures would work for two reasons. First, I felt that they would stylistically connect to the paper cut-out vegetation used earlier in the animation and also offer another connection to the visual world of children's art.

When Lea says she will not live in the house, I felt she was no longer enveloped in the story, and returned her to the park setting in shot 13 [2:17]. Since she is not overtly acknowledging the transition I again chose to use the graphic match dissolve, this time to bring her back to the park. As Lea starts to change the nature of the relationship with the animals from provider to employee, I felt the story had reached equilibrium. The scope of the house and Lea's imagination was no longer expanding, but had settled into an understanding of how she was socially relating to the animals. Here I felt the reality of the physical surroundings were merging with the fantasy role of the animals, and shots 14 [2:22] and 15 show that mixture of real park setting with fantasy social animals.

The lollipop sequence [2:35] was influenced by work on my second animation. In that animation I was looking for ways to create more interesting visual structures to accompany the recordings. Among many suggestions from my adviser was that I look for ways to link themes from one portion of the animation to another, giving the overall piece a
sense of unity. In my earlier animatic, Lea's description of how the ants and squirrels pay her bothered me as being particularly slow and lifeless. When I returned to Young Mother Nature after working on my second animation I tried to apply some of those lessons to give this sequence more lively pacing. When looking for connections to lollipops and falling leaves, I remembered an old Peanuts cartoon where Linus jumps into a pile of leaves while holding a wet sucker. I decided to use a variation of this where the last falling leaf drifts down and sticks to Lea's lollipop.

6.1.3 Results

One of the first questions I had to ask myself as I was completing YMN was what had I captured in this animation? In some ways it is similar to a snapshot, a record of one moment in my daughter's development. But unlike a photograph which can be taken casually and repeatedly, this animation represents my work over a three year period, during which Lea has gone from 3 years old to a 6 year old girl. It crossed my mind that there must be easier ways to document your child's life, so I have to believe that I have accomplished more than simply adding images to a recording of her voice.

One facet of what YMN accomplishes is in what the animation has been able to capture, and determining what it has captured depends to some degree on who is viewing it. One of the most frequent comments I have received was that this will be something my daughter will have for the rest of her life. This made me wonder how this will be of value to her. One possibility is in the recording. As she starts to gather a pile of dirt she says “I'm doing hard work here, so I just can't play with you right now.” This is a line she had heard
from me more than once, and it is always painful for me to hear it repeated by my daughter. The tradeoff was that while I was working on her cartoon, I was not spending time with her. When I initially thought of this as an opportunity to work with her, I didn’t realize that the vast majority of time I would be working alone. To some extent this animation captures times when we were not playing together.

Another frequent comment I receive is “what does your daughter think of this?” For a long time she was cool to the idea of the animation, and would not offer any comments as I showed her the work in progress. But as the animation started to near completion, she started to take an interest. This was particularly evident when she started going to kindergarten. I started adding a short hand drawn note and cartoon into her lunch bag each day, so she would know that we were thinking of her at school, and to help her with her reading skills. At first, like the animation, she didn’t seem to be that interested. Soon her classmates saw the cartoons and started to ask if I could draw notes for them, or wondered why their parents weren’t putting cartoons in their lunch bags. After this, Lea started to look forward to the notes. In the same way, she is starting to understand that not all children are featured in their own animation. How Lea will eventually view the animation probably will not be known for years.

From my point of view, the value of the animation was the fact that this was a project on which we both contributed. Part of what is captured is how a child’s creativity can influence a parent. Lea’s story and imaginative play provided the foundation which I could build on. From here I was free to imagine what she was imagining, or imagine her occupying and playing in this world. Eventually the visual world I constructed on her foundation became a world that I could play with. At one point my adviser ask me why I
wasn’t making progress on the shot with the pop up houses (Figure 6.4), telling me that every time he comes in the room I’m scrubbing back and forth over the same sequence. What could I say? Part of this was my effort to find a more interesting way to use the pop up houses, but once the technical work of constructing and animating these structures has been completed, it is hard not to play with them. In those moments I felt connected to the experience of a child playing with a handful of dirt and discovering endless possibilities.

Figure 6.4  Pop up houses in YMN

What I think is ultimately captured in the animation are two play relationships. The first is the concurrent play of Lea and me in our dialogue. While I might have prompted fantasy play by talking about gluing, taping and stapling leaves back to the tree, Lea delves deeper into fantasy play in the remaining portion of the animation. My questions push and prod her story telling in different directions while she rewards me with accounts of her ever expanding play world. While I never enter her imaginary world as a character, I am a
privileged observer to all she creates, and I feel this is an experience the animation shares with the viewer.

The second play relationship is sequential. After our recorded session is done, I am in essence playing with the product of her play. I play with the concepts she creates, as I make my own mental images of the houses and animals she is imagining. When these mental imagines take a quasi-physical form in Maya, I play with those too. Rotating them, exploring them from different angles, grouping them together and seeing how I can make them move. This does not seem fundamentally different than a child turning a toy car over and over in their hands, or a child walking around a stack of blocks admiring the structure from all sides, or Lea grouping and regrouping her stuffed animals. The main difference is that a parent usually hands a toy to a child. In YMN Lea handed her play stories to me.

The other goal when creating any artwork is what you learned in the process of creation. In YMN, one of my goals was to understand my daughter and her process of imaginative play better. One question which I felt goes to the heart of the animation is where do her stories come from? It is a point that came from considering script theory, which holds that we learn the structures of imaginative play from an external source, such as experience, events, or media. This was not something I felt was very plausible, since imagination to me has always seemed as unique as a fingerprint. But I still felt it was worth exploring to see if I could find a something which could account for Lea’s stories. I was reminded of one play story I told my daughter as I was talking to my wife about a vacation we had taken years earlier.

In the summer of 2008 on a family vacation to Colorado, my wife, Lea and I visited the Cheyenne Mountain Springs Zoo in Colorado Springs. This zoo was much like any
other zoo, except that it was built on the side of a mountain. You could gradually explore the zoo on foot, climb its many levels and comfortably ride back to the entrance on a ski lift. Toward the end of the day Lea was exhausted and ready for a nap. While riding the ski lift back to the car, Lea dropped one of her favorite hair ties, and like most exhausted children, this loss was enough to send her into a fit of crying. There are many ways to console a crying child, holding and rocking them, or distracting them with a toy or ice cream. Instead I started to make up a story about the hair tie. I told her that I saw it drop into the monkey cage and how surprised the monkeys were by this strange new gift from a girl who flew over their cage. I told her how they experimented with the hair tie, hanging it on their fingers, ears and toes until they figured out that it was meant to be placed in their hair. I told her how they reacted to the gift, learned to share it, and how the monkeys told the story of the flying gift girl to the other animals in the zoo. The story took a few minutes to tell and did the trick, she stopped crying. But then she wanted to hear the story again as we carried her to the car. And again as we drove to the hotel. And again at the hotel. Each time she corrected me if the details of the story had changed, or she asked questions so I could clarify certain points. For weeks afterward she would continue to ask questions about the story “tell me why I did a good thing giving the hair tie to the monkeys.” Eventually the story had acquired a strange reality of its own.

Telling Lea stories to distract her from a moment of crying became my preferred method of dealing with these problems, and it continues to work years later for other episodes like scraped knees, and other moments of disappointment. These stories usually featured animals and Lea. Stories of Lea teaching the large deer to share food with the little fawns, or otters performing elaborate tricks because it broke their hearts to see such a cute
little girl crying. Usually these stories would leave the same impression on her, and lead her to insist that they be told again and again.

When I started to record Lea in the fall of 2008 as source material for an animation, I never connected my stories to hers. Part of me does not want there to be a connection, and to see her expressions of imaginative play as uniquely her own. But our stories are similar in structure, as both revolve around Lea providing for and interacting in social dramas with animals, and it is normal to expect parents to have some influence on the development of their children. There is a good chance that I influenced how Lea formed her patterns of imaginative play. The next question was, what formed my patterns of play? I never read or was told how a story could be an effective way to console a crying child, but something must have influenced me.

One of my mother's favorite stories was when I was a child and playing with my friend Tyler in our kitchen. When my mother turned and told us that she was going to put us in a pot and cook us, I laughed, but my friend Tyler ran screaming all the way home. What my mother always commented on was that you could tell that Tyler's family must have never played those types of games in his house. Imaginative play and storytelling was not something Tyler learned from his parents. The implication was that I did learn these things from my parents.

If there are patterns of play which run from generation to generation, it still doesn't explain why this particular type of story struck a chord with Lea over other play stories and games we shared, and why this story may have expressed itself in the play stories she told me in the park. In Colorado Springs, my story had her give a gift to the monkeys in the zoo. In our recording in the park she was giving toys to the baby birds and houses to the ants. If
this is a play script she learned from me, why was the theme of giving the one that she chose to explore?

When I look at Piaget's theory, where play is the result of a child assimilating more information than their mental patterns are able to accommodate, it does not seem very surprising that the subject of giving would be of interest to a child. Childhood is such a long period of helplessness that giving is necessary for their survival. They are given food, shelter, toys, attention, warmth, and caring. They need to be changed and cleaned. Are Lea's play stories her way of trying to manage all of this information until she is able to understand these actions?

Vygotsky's theory of the *zone of proximal development* would see Lea's play as a simulated environment where she can explore the theme of giving and nurturing in an imaginary environment of her own creation and referencing the relationship with which she is most familiar, that of parent and child. If this is the case, it is possible to imagine the dialogue in YMN taking on a new meaning. When Lea says that she is working for the ants, is she wondering if parenting is a type of work? Is she trying to determine what motivates parents? When she expands the scope of the house to include other animals, is she trying to find the boundaries of being a parent? Is she trying to figure out why parents care for some children and not others? When the ant rejects the house, is she now wondering how the parent will deal with rejection from the child?

While I felt I benefited as a parent from understanding the theoretical possibilities behind child play, I felt too much analysis was limiting as an animator. What was lost was the magic and the mystery behind a child play. While the theories may help parents from an academic standpoint, I did think they added to enjoyment one might receive when watching
YMN and finding themselves part of a child's play world and a parent's enjoyment of being part of that world.

One lesson I learned about opening my imagination came from watching how Lea developed her stories. I noticed that Lea’s most imaginative and sustained stories came as a result of her touching simple objects such as dirt and wood chips as opposed to objects with more complicated symbolic associations like seeds. The less she has to work with, the more she seemed to create. In the same way, attaching too many theoretical associations to Lea’s stories would leave the animator with less to create. If the appeal of a child’s imaginative stories is more a result of the magic and mystery of imagination, and less about the role of play in a child’s development, then the animator should emphasize the mystery of play.

6.2 Portrait of the Artist as a Young Lady

6.2.1 Genesis

POTA was initially intended to be a quick project to help me develop my character animation skills. Like YMN, this animation would be based on recordings of my daughter Lea, then 4 years old. In YMN I created visual images in response to Lea’s verbal play stories. For POTA I planned to reverse the process to see how Lea would create play stories in response to a set of mental images that I had created. I had no expectation for what might or might not happen, but I though the change could reveal something about both of our creative processes.
The images which I had in mind for this project were mental images I had had since I was a child. Anytime I held a paint brush I would imagine painting in the air and having the resulting brush strokes become three dimensional structures, and I could imagine interacting with these structures. I was also interested in exploring my own sense of play in creating art, and for me this image was play. I wanted to create this just for the pure joy of seeing the result, independent from the animation, in much the same way that I remember building structures out of blocks as a child, creating not for any fixed goal other than the opportunity to experience the creation.

I thought a general theme for the animation would be Lea talking about creating art and I planned to record her in the act of painting and drawing and also to have her respond to my short animation clips of a Lea character painting in the air and interacting with the structures she created. My initial idea was for her to talk about color, types of lines she was drawing, and maybe create a story from what she was drawing, and to use her recordings to inspire other ways in which I could animate her paintings and interacting with the results.

6.2.2 Problem Solving

The major problem I had to overcome in POTA was myself, or at least two attitudes I took into the recording sessions with Lea. The first was that I felt I knew what I wanted out of the recordings and the second was that since I thought I knew what I wanted I was not listening openly to the conversations I was having with my daughter. The following exchange illustrates some of the problems I was creating during the recordings.
Lea: I'm painting green grass on me.

Me: What else do you like to paint on yourself?

Lea: Ares.

Me: Now when do you use blue? When do you like to use blue?

Lea: At 2:30 and 9.

(Pause)

Lea: 2:30 and 9!

Lea: I love blue because they have (singing) when they have, when they have, then they had, they had a party!

Me: Tell me more things about blue.

Lea: The sea is blue and I like to draw the sea.

Me: And what do you put in the sea?

Lea: Chlorine.

The problem with looking too hard for something specific is that you miss all of the other possibilities. At the time I'm sure that I was aware of the humor in Lea’s exchanges, but I’m sure I was also dismissing the dialogue as something I could not use in an animation. I can remember thinking at the time we were recording that there was not much I could do with her painting Ares, it was too obscure and not very believable, but instead of being patient and letting the idea develop, I doggedly returned to the questions I imagined would produce better results. Similarly, I breezed over some wonderfully comic moments because I didn't know what to do with them or how to continue. I may not have wanted to make an animation about a quick witted child and her rather clueless father, but I should have been
focusing more about what was occurring during the recordings and less about how I was
going to use them. Instead, I continued to press a question to which Lea was not willing or
able to respond in a way that I wanted.

What I chose to take from these recordings was something different from the
sustained dialogue of YMN. In hind sight, I could have focused on the playfulness of the
child in contrast to the strange unimaginative questions of the father. One problem with
this approach is that I do not think an audience would be able to understand what the father
character was trying to do. After reading our exchanges a year later, I am not sure I even
know what I was trying to do. In any event, I was hoping to capture the joy of play which
was present in Windy Day, not to show how an unimaginative parent could try to dampen
that joy. Yet in Windy Day, the Hubleys were confronted with the similar situation when
Georgia openly rebels and says “I'm tired of doing these dumb plays” and again when she
breaks Emily's performance by making baby sounds. The Hubleys embraced these
moments. I, on the other hand, was not quite secure enough to use myself in this type of
story.

Fortunately, Lea was still able to create portions of stories on the subject of painting
which I found extremely interesting. While my questioning in YMN helped her to sustain
her stories, here my insistence on redirecting her creativity led to a fragmented recording.
But I could see how these fragments could become a mosaic on how she experienced paint.
The first half of the animation is constructed from little episodes where Lea's narrative
creations drive her desire to paint.

What did not occur during the recordings, which I was hoping to see happen, was
for Lea to create stories to match sample play animations I created. Two of these
animations are included in POTA. The first is the Lea character spinning with a giant paint brush to create a water color helix (Figure 6.5) which surrounds her in 3D space. The second was Lea painting a larger than life sized girl, which walks away after Lea finishes painting her. In both cases I showed Lea the animations, recorder in hand, and in both cases she had nothing to say about them. I at least expected a “that was neat” or “I'd like to do that”, but there was no response. I was somewhat disappointed since I assumed that Lea would share my excitement over these play images.

Looking back there could be a number of explanations. The first is that children today have seen so many cartoons and computer generated images that it is almost impossible to create something that is surprising. The other is that, like in YMN, Lea’s sense of play is strongest when she has the least to work with. In YMN the most nondescript items, a wood chip or a pile of dirt, items with little symbolic associations, generated the
most sustained and involved stories, as if she worked best with a blank canvass. Items with more symbolic complexity, like seeds, did not seem to give her the same level of inspiration. Here, the prepared animation may not have provided her with the blank canvas she needed, and gave her no room with which to play.

While the animations did not inspire Lea to create play stories, they did create opportunities for serendipitous connections between my images and previously recorded story fragments. While preparing for an open house presentation and realizing that my play animations did not have any dialogue, I reviewed some of my recordings and found a story fragment that I never knew how to use. “She was a blue little girl, as blue as possible, as blue as a blue ocean. And she was crying and crying”. When I applied this to the shot of the Lea Character painting the large figure (Figure 6.6), I felt that it was a perfect fit. In addition to the surprising poetic language, it provided logic to the action of the painted figure leaving the screen. The story fragment gave the shot drama and a back story. Why was she crying? Because no one ever paid attention to her. All of this was accomplished with an amazing economy of words. The Lea character waves goodbye leaving the conflict unresolved as she confronts the next task. While I was initially disappointed that my paint images did not form a connection for Lea, the delight in finding this accidental marriage of story and image more than made up for it.
After many recording sessions I finally asked Lea the question I should have started with: why do you like paint? Once my question had Lea thinking of paint as a tangible object and not as an activity, the flood gates opened. Lea found paint most interesting when it was stripped of its symbolic properties. Asking her about colors, shapes, and subjects of paintings was asking her to talk about what meaning we could apply to the use of paint, and this did not seem to hold her interest. But once Lea was asked to talk about paint as paint, her interest was immediately engaged. “I like messy things. And paint is one of the messy things”. The possibilities of how to use the paint also opened up (Figure 6.7) You can put it on yourself; “That's why I like to slime up!” And when you are done you can spit it out on everyone and everything else.
Figure 6.7  Paint is messy in POTA

Another feature that should have been obvious to me as I was originally questioning Lea was the need to create a playful environment. That happened naturally in YMN, but as I was questioning Lea for POTA about color and subject matter, I was investing the process with a seriousness that was counterproductive. This is even hinted at in the opening segment of the animation. Lea says “when I was young I loved to paint, and when I grew up I still painted and I painted beautiful pictures.” I was originally attracted to this line because of what I saw as the unintended humor of a 6 year old reminiscing about when she was young, but this may have been a response to my treating her more as an adult than as a child. The third condition of Shlomo Ariel's definition of play was a disclaiming of seriousness, and I should have known that seriousness had no place in a successful play environment.

The other feature that ties Lea's sustained narrative of messy paint to her other sustained narratives is that she is able to assume a starring role in the story. The YMN narratives were about her relationship to the animals of the woods; what she was building
for them, what she was making for them, what they gave her, how they reacted to what she made. Even if I asked these questions, they successfully engaged her interest and allowed the story to continue. Similarly, talking about paint as an object allowed Lea to see herself as the person who manipulates the object as opposed to the person who comments on the subject of the painting. If starting with an object free of symbolic associations gives Lea a blank canvas to work with, it also gives her a better opportunity to project herself on to that canvas.

What makes this passage unique is that Lea at first is not trying to make the object more than it is. In YMN a simple pile of dirt becomes an ever expanding structure to house the animals of the forest. Here paint never stops being paint. In YMN Lea is engaged in symbolic play, where she provides new meanings to objects. In this portion of POTA Lea is talking about object play, the joy of exploring the properties and possibilities of the object itself.

I was engaged by this passage in a different way than I had been in other segments of POTA or YMN. While I had been struggling with being too literal in my translation of the recordings to visual images, here there was not a great deal of literal to deal with. Lea describes paint as being messy. She mentioned that she likes to slime up. She said paint was slippery, slimy, gummy, gimy. Here I felt a freedom to start to explore images that were not confined to the narrative or to find devices to break that confinement.

Children can find unlimited opportunities for messiness. In addition to painting on herself, Lea has an affinity for splashing in puddles. This image when combine with the iconic representation of eight colored ovals in a child's watercolor tray suggested itself to me as I listened to her talk about paint being messy. “Slippery slimy gummy gimy” has no fixed
literal images, but slippery suggested a slide at the park. A child covered in paint, as Lea
often is, would certainly enjoy painting by the seat of her pants.

I found this sequence to be one of the most satisfying parts of my animation for two
reasons. The first is the way these images naturally suggested themselves to me. I believe
what made this feel natural was directly related to the conditions that allowed Lea to create
her sustained narratives. Lea felt most comfortable creating play worlds when she had the
least to work with and seemed to feel most free in creating her own symbolic associations
when there were few established associations to be removed. Similarly, I believe I was most
free in creating my visual world when the recordings suggested no literal counterpart.
Creating this portion of the animation was closest to what Lea experienced when she creates
her play stories.

I think the joy that is found in play is expressed in other facets of this sequence. I
felt that my character animation was more expressive and exuberant in this sequence than in
other animated passages which I had created to that point. I also started to look for
different means to create the animation, particularly the use of hand drawn animation in the
sequence. I had increasingly been impressed with what I saw as the spontaneous nature of
hand drawn animation, particularly in Windy Day, where a dozen drawings could replace the
technological infrastructure needed to create mathematically precise effects. In POTA,
animating messy paint was going to require fluid effects in a 3D animation package, an
operation where the animator would feel as if he were manipulating countless knobs on a
large black box until a convincing representation of fluid could be created.

The other possibility was to create paint by hand, frame by frame. After years of
using software to create animations, working by hand was incredibly liberating. I believe the
playful attitude which allowed Lea to create her most exuberant stories allowed me to produce what I felt were my most exuberant images and in turn find the most playful solutions to brings those images to life.
CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSIONS – PLAY AND THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

My attempts to find playful solutions became the underlying thread in my process. As I followed this thread I began to see the relationship I hoped to find between play and the artist’s creative process. This relationship can be summarized as:

- Object play by the artist leads to proficiency.
- The artist can experience a cycle between play and greater proficiency.
- When artists project themselves into object space they experience imaginative play.
- Imaginative play frees you from a literal interpretation of the source material.
- Limiting the source material to its basic components provides the animator with a larger solution space to explore.

While adults are often able to dismiss play as being a simple childhood activity, even the casual viewer finds themselves drawn to children engaged in imaginative play. I believe that adults sense the freedom and joy in play, but feel that once they mature this avenue is no longer open to them, and that play can only be enjoyed vicariously through children. Recently there has been interest in harnessing imaginative play activities to help adults become more creative in the work place (S. Brown 2009, 134-141), and slowly attitudes about play are starting to change. I am sure some work place activities lend themselves better to play solutions than others. After I had spent many joyless years working for computer companies, I suspect that there would not have been much room for exploration.
through play in our work schedules, and if time had been available we would never have been able to reach the point where we could disclaim the seriousness of the activity, as Shlomo Ariel suggested as a necessary condition of play.

When I first started to create animation I immediately felt a connection to play. The first project I made at ACCAD was a simple expression linking the movement of a sequence of objects. This project should have served no purpose other than to demonstrate a feature in the animation software. But the result also functioned as a toy, and once you have a toy you want to explore the limits and possibilities of how you can use it. One creation led to another, each offering new opportunities for play. There is a joy to experiencing this exploration, what Johnson referred to as positive affect, the reward for performing the task (J. Johnson 1999, 17). Unfortunately the word toy, like play, is often used as a derogatory term, implying uselessness, and this is unfortunate in the case of animation, because I think viewing our creations as toys has two distinct benefits.

First, creating objects and constructs in animation software functions in much the same way that object play does for children. We learn through experimentation and exploring the limits and possibilities of the software. Play leads to proficiency, and as we become more proficient we are able to construct more elaborate toys. The joy of experiencing the creation drives the play-proficiency cycle.

The second benefit from thinking of these creations as toys is in finding applications for their use in animations. A child stacking blocks to form a structure is involved in object play. As they do this they develop better hand eye coordination, motor control and a rudimentary understanding of balance and center of gravity. As their skills improve they are able to build larger and more complex structures. But they also begin to engage their
creations in a more abstract way. The tower may become a mountain on the moon or a castle under the sea. There is a natural progression from object play to imaginary play which occurs when children are able to project themselves into the toy environment. A child may initially enjoy the physical sensation of rolling a toy car across the floor, but soon they will want to occupy the toy car and will imagine doing so. When I create an animated object, I feel the limitations of manipulating it with key frame values and slider controls. I want to be in the object space experiencing it directly.

Animators who spend time playing with their creations move from developing their proficiency in using software tools to seeing possible applications in a finished animation. Like the child, they have to be able to project themselves into the world of the objects they are creating. It isn't enough to just be able to manipulate the toy; you have to also be able to experience the toy through the frame of imaginative play.

Imaginative play helps both the child and the animator to develop a narrative around their creations. In YMN Lea is playing with a pile of dirt. But as she talks about building a house for ants, dogs and squirrels, you begin to sense that she is with them in that imaginary structure. Explaining her presence in this world becomes the root of her story. The animator can follow this same path in moving from creating objects, to experiencing the objects, to the logical sequence of events which forms the narrative of an animation.

Both YMN and POTA have instances of toys which became part of the narrative. Much of POTA developed from a play image which I implemented as a toy; the brush that paints structures in thin air. One of the most satisfying sequences I created in YMN involved the room of pop-up houses, which was in its entirety an imagined room of toys. In YMN the organic growing ant house became a play object. It wasn't until later that I
realized that I had mentally experienced this object in the same way that I depicted Lea interacting with it, first building it as small object to be manipulated, and then seeing the structure as an occupant, walking around it, climbing the staircases, and finally entering the structure. Without realizing it at the time I was using imaginative play to layout part of my animation.

Playing with the ant house would lead to solutions to problems in the animation. During the lollipop sequence, I was bothered by the lack of continuity in my animatic. The ants were circling Lea at one moment, and then an ant was sitting on a house preparing to hand Lea a lollipop. After playing with the ant house I realized that it could function as an elevator. The ant could climb on the ant hill and the house could lift the ant up to Lea's eye level.

Once I was able to project myself into the scene, imaginative play would take over from object play. I could imagine Lea and the ant interacting as ants would, by touching antennas. Instead of an antenna, Lea would use her finger to touch the ant's antenna, and activate the motion of the house. By engaging with the scene and characters in imaginative play, I was able to produce a logical flow of events to a problem I was otherwise unable to solve.

Another instance where I was able to solve a problem in my animation with imaginative play involved the squirrel giving Lea acorns. For the longest time I was unable to erase the image of a squirrel handing Lea acorns. One day I decided to reduce the exchange to the bare components, a squirrel, Lea and acorns. Once I removed the word “give” I was able to imagine many other possibilities. By projecting myself into the scene, I could see trees, leaves, and branches and create play scenarios with a logical sequence of
events. The squirrel would naturally be up in the tree, with acorns. He would “give” them to Lea by shaking them out of the tree.

This process of creation has similarities to the process used by Lea in imaginative play. Lea is able to do more with less. If I burden her with too many associations, she was not able to create. In the same way, I found myself unable to create when I locked on to a particular association. If I boiled the scene down to its basic components, I could free myself of my initial literal interpretation.

Another similarity is having the ability to project one’s self into the scene. Lea builds her imaginary play worlds around herself, and she inhabits these worlds as she creates her stories. If I ask her “tell me about the color blue” I will get nothing back, because I have not left a role for her to work with. But if I ask “why do you like to paint”, the role is available and she is able to create a world and a story around it. She develops these stories when she occupies the play world. “Nobody buys my paints because they are too messy, and they go boo boo!” Entering the play world allows you to see relationships which might not otherwise be obvious.

A child’s play world is largely private, and our only glimpse into this world comes when the imaginary extends into the real world, either through spoken words, art or physical movement. The animator is creating a public world, which is meant to be shared in all details. But the animator is sharing not just the play world, but the experience of being in the play world.

For the audience, this experience should reflect the experience of a child at play. Children explore their play world in a series of effortless transitions, forming and reforming as naturally as they breathe. Their explorations are undirected and casual. Adults conduct
their searches in a more pragmatic way. They generally know what they are looking for, and their imaginative transitions of play are bound to be more deliberate and targeted. If animators are to capture the experience of children engaged in imaginative play, they need to convincingly represent the ease and freedom of play.

How convincingly the animator can convey this experience to the viewer depends on how well he or she understands this experience. Play theories and frame analysis can only take the animator so far. The experience has to come first hand. Probably the best argument for play in developing the animation is that it allows the animator not to simply interpret the child's play world, but to give the viewer access to both the child's and the animator's experience of play.
LIST OF REFERENCES


