Toy Stories
Stop-motion Adventures in the Classroom

MYKE BARTLETT explains how students can draw inspiration from Aardman’s plasticine pirates in order to make their own animated magic.
Given the flexibility of plasticine animation (pun absolutely intended), it’s surprising that Aardman’s stop-motion films to date have all been contained, small-scale affairs. *Chicken Run* (Peter Lord & Nick Park, 2000) is confined to the coop, while Nick Park’s *Wallace & Gromit* films inhabit a quaint, vaguely toy-town version of a quiet English town. New film *The Pirates! Band of Misfits* (Peter Lord & Jeff Newitt, 2012), however, sets sail for the high seas.

We follow the adventures of the Pirate Captain (Hugh Grant), whose ambition to be Pirate of the Year far outstrips his ability. While his rivals are raking in outrageous quantities of booty and commanding seven-figure prices on their heads, our captain is flat broke and is worth a pittance, dead or alive. His luck turns when an encounter with Charles Darwin (David Tennant) leads him to realise that the ship’s ‘parrot’ Polly might just be priceless. From there it’s off to London and, supposedly, fame and fortune.

While the film makes use of traditional, stop-motion and computer animation to tell its tale, the majority of the work is done with handcrafted plasticine. As with other Aardman films, the real joy is in the level of detail given to their miniatures. There is almost too much background detail to take in on a single viewing, as the tiny sets are packed with puns and in-jokes. Pirate hideaway Blood Island is crowded with humorously titled shops and hotels, while the walls of Victorian London are plastered with advertisements for such questionable products as Urchin-Be-Gone spray.

Hands-on filmmaking

There is a very particular pleasure in the tactile nature of these films. Even the traditionally animated sequences in *Pirates* reflect this, as our heroes’ ship is delayed in its journey by a fold in the map of the world. While we’re watching something that is obviously false, it’s something that also feels unquestionably real. We admire the craftsmanship of the animators with an affection we’re unlikely to bestow on their computer-based comrades. In an environment awash with spectacle, stop-motion animation still seems a true marvel; a scene as simple as Gromit standing in the rain, with cold water dripping from his shiny, plastic nose, verges on the miraculous.

While part of this pleasure is in the cleverness of the animation, the rest stems from the medium’s simplicity. We might wonder how a sequence was created but we understand the basics. Bringing an illustration to life might seem beyond most of us, but moving a physical object, frame by frame, seems enticingly possible. Really, it feels like an artistic echo of the play most of us engaged in – with Barbies, toy cars or action figures – at a very early age. Here, we delight in the transformation of this hands-on play into something that mimics that other form of entertainment – the silver screen.

Sincere, small-scale flattery

The Aardman films have always been unapologetically indebted to the cinematic. Fleeting references and comic homages ensured that the *Wallace & Gromit* films felt like movies long before they graduated from television to the big screen. Whether it’s *A Close Shave* (1995) giving a nod to Michael Anderson’s *The Dam Busters* (1955) or John Sturges’ *The Great Escape* (1963), Wallace (Peter Sallis) and Piella (Sally Lindsay) reliving a key moment from Jerry Zucker’s 1990 film *Ghost* (in the 2008 short *A Matter of Loaf and Death*) or merely the frequently
Hitchcockian cinematography, these animations have sought to take – and often steal – their cues from the celluloid big-hitters.

*Pirates* is no different. Here, Queen Victoria is recast as a Bond villain, complete with a gadget-filled lair and improbable, grandiose transport. The action sequences mimic big-budget blockbusters: our heroes dangle from airships, duel to the (near-) death and tumble towards spinning propellers.

What is most impressive about such sequences is the aforementioned tactile quality. They have, in a very real sense, been built. The high-speed train chase in *The Wrong Trousers* (1993), for instance, was actually shot at no speed at all - the plasticine stars were painstakingly pushed forward frame by frame. There is little or no computer trickery at play.

The most notable of *Pirates’* action sequences occurs towards the middle of the film, as Charles Darwin (and monkey) attempt to steal precious Polly from the pirates. Despite taking place in the confines of Darwin's house, there's an exciting chase in a bathtub down several flights of stairs, as a large stone idol tumbles in hot pursuit.

The most obvious reference here is to not one but two Indiana Jones films. The tumbling stone idol recalls the stone that threatens to flatten Harrison Ford in the opening sequence of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981), while the bathtub rollercoaster seems to borrow from Indy's daring escape from the eponymous *Temple of Doom* (Steven Spielberg, 1984), in which our heroes ride a mine cart along an implausibly exciting set of rails.

From the classic to the comic

Just as history repeats as farce, these homages transform the action genre into comedy. As such, their success in large part relies on the viewer’s knowledge of cinema. A novice (or child] might enjoy the exaggerated stunts, but those in the know (or a parent) will titter at the familiar made ridiculous.

Perhaps the best examples of Aardman spoofs come from *A Matter of Loaf and Death* - a title that itself tweaks a classic British film. At one point, Gromit runs from one side of the house to the other, trying to dispose of a sparking bomb. On one side, ducks circle in a pond, while on the other, nuns walk along the pavement, carrying kittens. It's a surprisingly literal homage to the camp *Batman* (Leslie H Martinson, 1966) movie starring Adam West, in which our hero sprints around on a pier, despairing to camera that 'Some days, you just can't get rid of a bomb.'

Later, Gromit battles villainess Piella in a forklift truck clad in oven mitts. Here, the film references the climactic sequence in *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), in which Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) smacks down the alien queen with the help of similar equipment (sans oven mitts). One shot in particular, in which Gromit and truck are backlit, affectionately mimics the sci-fi film’s cinematography.
START MAKING
stop-motion

The Aardman homages offer a template for a useful class activity in which students can use available technology to create a comedy version of a sequence from a Hollywood film. While there is scope for the more creative students to craft their own models, it would be just as easy to use existing toys and play sets. The stunning parkour sequence from the opening of *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006), for example, could be recreated using either Lego or dinosaur toys (or a combination of both). The crucial part of the activity will be in the planning and execution of an animation that clearly references filmic style and technique.

1. Preparation

Aardman DVDs provide a rich source of inspiration when it comes to creating stop-motion animation. The behind-the-scenes feature on *A Matter of Loaf and Death* is particularly useful in this regard, but similar features exist on *Wallace & Gromit in the Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (Nick Park & Steve Box, 2005) and, looking further afield, on the DVD of Wes Anderson’s *Fantastic Mr Fox* (2009).

Students can view these documentaries in tandem with the features they discuss. They could also view snippets from the films referenced in Aardman films – specifically *Aliens*, *Batman* and *Ghost*. Where does the comedy come from in these homages? Is it merely imitation? How can something serious be made to look ridiculous?

2. Equipment

Students will need access to video cameras, digital still cameras, microphones, some blank DVDs and a computer. There is a range of software available to transform a collection of still images into a movie, but Apple’s iMovie might offer the simplest route. (Windows users might try Blender, a free open-source animation and graphic manipulation program.)

3. Storyboarding

Students will need to create two storyboards. First, they should create a storyboard of their chosen sequence, translating the shots used in, say, the *Casino Royale* chase into a series of sketches. This done, students can think about how they will recreate this sequence to humorous effect. Who will their characters be? Will they include references from other films? Will there be any dialogue? Will they be using toys or creating their own plasticine models?

If students are creating their own models, they should do so at this stage. They should try to keep the models simple, though faces should have a few different features capable of movement and expression – eyes, mouth, ears, nose, eyebrows. The bigger these features, the easier they will be to animate successfully.

Armed with a script, students can complete their second storyboard. This time, they are planning shots for their own animation.
4. Acting out the sequence

The documentary about *A Matter of Loaf and Death – How They Donut* reveals an interesting additional step before starting the animation process. We see director Nick Park film himself acting out scenes in order to provide a guide for movement and expression. Students can use a video camera to perform a live-action version of their scene. This should be a minimalist affair – no costumes, props or sets. Any movement should be mimed, removing any temptation for students to record themselves attempting dangerous stunts.

5. Building

As stated above, one of the joys of Aardman films is their attention to background detail, so it is important that students include sets. Students should create simple, two-dimensional sets (either by hand or using a computer), perhaps with a few additional props. This is an excellent opportunity to include visual gags for the keen-eyed viewer.

6. Shooting

Armed with a storyboard, a script, a set, some models and a digital camera, students are ready to start filming their sequences. This process is simple, if time consuming. Film typically runs at a speed of twenty-four frames per second, which means twenty-four individual shots are required to create a seamless second of motion. Realistically, students won’t need that many – twelve to sixteen frames per second will probably be more than adequate for this task.

Some experimentation will be required in order for students to time their sequences correctly. It’s a good idea to shoot a short dummy sequence in which an object is moved around the set to gauge speeds. Students should also be careful to include a pause at the beginning and end of sequences. This involves shooting twelve to sixteen frames before any movement begins. (Students will be able to copy and paste frames in during the editing process if they need to extend these pauses.)

Advanced students should experiment with moving the camera during a scene to create zooming, tracking or dolly shots. Again, *How They Donut* shows how this can be done to great effect.

Shooting will take several sessions and should perhaps be continued outside of class time, if students are able to access the equipment. Students should view their work in iMovie regularly, so they will be able to reshoot any unsatisfactory sequences. Make sure they save regularly and back up, back up, back up. Copies of the individual frames and the movie file should be kept in at least three different locations.
7. Editing

The editing process can begin while filming is still taking place. That way, students will have a good idea of how successful their shoots have been and how they can improve future sequences. It will also give them the encouragement to be bolder in terms of what they hope to achieve.

If Macs are being used, the easiest way to begin editing is to import the image files from the camera into iPhoto. Create a new photo album, naming the film and the scene in question, and drag the pictures into it. (For PC users, simply copy the files from the camera to the appropriate folder.)

Then open iMovie and create a new project. You should be able to see the album you created in iPhoto. If you can't, hit the little camera icon and drag the album across to the project window. There you will be able to see the individual frames. Make sure they are all in the correct order.

An excellent video tutorial to help with the fiddly details is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loosomMVNbM>. I recommend showing this to students before editing begins.

Two important steps are worth mentioning now, however. First, tell iMovie to show the full frame (all of the picture). Then, tell it to play each frame for a very short time (probably 0.3 to 0.5 seconds). Both of these instructions can be given by selecting all of the imported photos and clicking on the settings icon that appears.

Once students are happy with a sequence, they can set about recording dialogue. This can be done in a couple of ways. The easiest might be to use iMovie (or your chosen software) to record the dialogue directly into the movie file. Alternatively, students can record dialogue using a free program such as Audacity. Both options will involve plugging a microphone into the computer.

Dialogue should be recorded while watching the sequence in order to ensure that timing is correct. A few takes might be needed. If using Audacity, students will be able to easily edit together the best elements of each take.

9. Adding final elements

With the visuals edited and the soundtrack recorded, it's time to piece it all together. In addition to dialogue, students will need to source (or record) sound effects and music. These can easily be dragged across to the timeline from iTunes or another folder. If students desire, they can also add titles and credits at this stage using the options iMovie offers.

10. Exporting

Once completed, the film should be exported. Again, iMovie makes this very simple. The project can be 'shared' to DVD or the iTunes library. Students should burn the finished product to disc and submit it with copies of their script and storyboards.

All that remains now is the grand premiere. Students have (hopefully) earned a special occasion after all that hard work, but both red carpet and popcorn are optional.
Moving on

Aardman’s latest animated adventure is an enjoyable reminder of the power of stop-motion. At once simple and ingenious, it’s a form of animation that can be easily recreated by amateur directors. As such, *The Pirates! Band of Misfits* might just provide the necessary inspiration to encourage a new generation of animators to pick up a camera.

Myke Bartlett is a freelance writer and former teacher. His young adult novel *Fire in the Sea* was published in August 2012.

Useful links

- **Blender (for PC):**
  http://www.blender.org/download/get-blender/

- **iMovie (for Mac):**

- **Audacity (for Mac or PC):**
  http://audacity.sourceforge.net/

- **A video guide to using iMovie for stop-motion:**
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo040mMVbM

- **A video tutorial on using Blender for stop-motion:**
  http://www.kramerklaymation.bravehost.com/blendersequencetutorial.html

- **A guide to using iMovie (slightly outdated but still useful):**
Copyright of Screen Education is the property of ATOM Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.