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Innovation and Legacy of Shrek

Animation as a art form has always been one where innovation and technology is at the forefront. Since the early 1900s we've seen innovations such as cel animation and multi-plane cameras that allow artists to create animated films with more speed and realism than ever before. The late 80s and early 90s saw advancements in computer generated imagery, or CGI. This allowed artists to animate lifelike three-dimensional characters using only a computer. Many of these films were huge hits and changed not only the course of animation history, but film history entirely. Shrek, a 2001 film by DreamWorks Animation Studio was one of if not the most influential of these early animated films, with the story and technological innovation moving the medium forward in unprecedented ways.

In the early 1990s, with the release of their hit film Toy Story, Pixar Animation Studios, in partnership with Walt Disney Studios, quickly established dominance in the space. Fueled by an unceremonious split from The Walt Disney Company, Jeffery Katzenberg founded DreamWorks Animation. (Butkovic) With the founding of DreamWorks Katzenberg wanted "to be the anti-Disney" and to start he had "poached plenty of Disney animators by promising a home for boundless creativity." (Butkovic) As one of his first projects, Katzenberg hired a group of young creators who specialized in 3D motion capture to create Shrek, an edgy children's film for a low budget of twenty million dollars. (Butkovic)

With early development of the film struggling, Katzenberg was still determined to get a CGI film released. His vendetta against Disney loomed large and led him to work with Pacific Data Imagery, pioneers in the field of CGI, to emulate the Disney/Pixar relationship and beat Pixar's latest film, "A Bug's Life" to the box office. (Butkovic) As a result, DreamWorks and Pacific Data Imagery started working on "Antz" a film with almost an identical story to "A Bugs Life." Katzenberg was successful in his mission as "Antz" got to the box office a full two months earlier than Disney's film. (Butkovic) After its release, Katzenberg shifted the studios main focus to "Shrek", determined to make a film that would put DreamWorks on the map. (Butkovic)

Prior to "Shrek", the other successful CGI films had featured characters with hard exterior, mainly toys and insects in basic environments. (Harrison) The development team working on "Shrek" wanted to push these types of films forward presenting new challenges for the animation team. (Cherelus) The film was to feature "soft" characters, including an ogre, a donkey with realistic fur, and perhaps most challenging of all a heavily featured animated human. (Cherelus)

Adding another challenge, the film featured multiple complex environments. At the time, the visual effects supervisor referred to "a level of complexity in the movie that hasn't been done before." (Cherelus) For example, the movie involved "36 separate in-film locations, which Dreamworks claims is more than any previous computer animated feature." (Tracy)

In addition to the complex environments the animators were determined to make the characters as lifelike as possible. This involved creating complex facial expressions as well as realistic hair and fur. (Cherelus) Facial expressions were a specialty of PDI, yet they had to develop their proprietary facial animation program even further to achieve the results that the team was looking for. (Tracy) "Shrek" was also one of the first examples of a CGI film that

features an animal with realistic looking fur. (Cherelus) The visual effects artists wanted to ensure the donkey characters fur flowed naturally and reacted to the environment around it.

(Tracy)

Dreamworks had high hopes for their film, it was accepted to compete for the Palm d'Or at Cannes film festival. This was the first time an American animated film had every competed for the coveted prize. (Cherelus) Despite losing the award and an audience confused by the satire and “adult” jokes in the film, the movie found success at the box office. It opened at number one earning 500 million dollars domestically. (Cherelus) “Shrek” went on to win the very first Oscar for best animated feature, beating out “Monsters, Inc.” a Disney/Pixar film. (Cherelus) The film went on to inspire numerous spinoffs and three sequels – something we see regularly now with popular films.

“Shrek” was one of the first modern examples of satire in a children’s film. This style of humor made the film popular with adult audiences and Hollywood took notice. Riffing on the fantasy genre the film “shot the idea of Monty Python and Princess Bride into animation.”

(Butkovic) It inspired a whole generation of children’s films based on adult ideas and concepts, successful films such as “Minions”, “Boss Baby” and “The Emoji Movie” can be linked to the same type of humor found in any of the “Shrek movies. (Butkovic) Animation historian Sam Summer described the effect of Shrek on the film industry well in his book “Dreamworks Animation: Intertextuality and Aesthetics in ‘Shrek’ and Beyond. He coins this effect on the industry as “the Shrekoning, indicating a shift toward satire, parody, and pastiche in these types of movies. Though its influence would not be immediately apparent – animated features, after all, take years to make – it signaled a new set of expectations for children’s movies that would surface over time.” (Butkovic)

The technological innovations and experimentation with storytelling in “Shrek” set a precedent for two decades of animated children’s films. Some characters everyone knows and loves today, such as the “Minions” from “Despicable Me” are at the forefront of pop culture and are directly influenced by Shrek and the ensuing franchise.

Works Cited

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