

animWATCH

INTERVIEWS

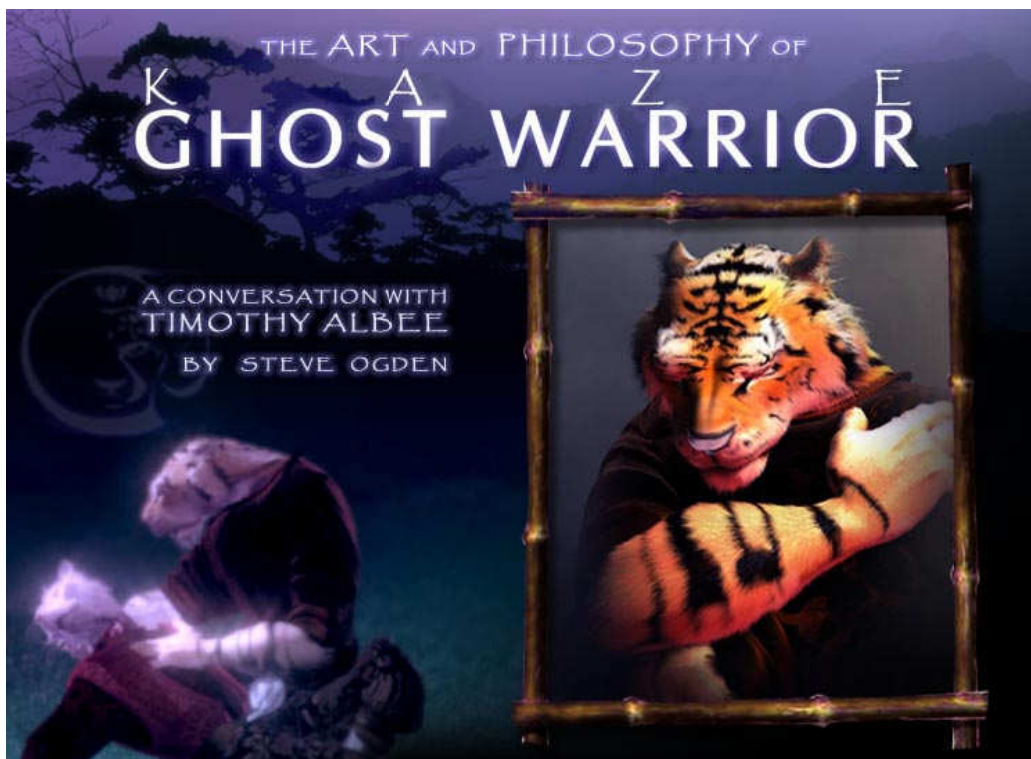
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There was an article in the January 2004 issue of 3D World magazine about Kaze, Ghost Warrior and Timothy Albee's extreme quest to make the film. In the article, Albee spoke at length about his microstudio approach to developing films, an approach characterized by eschewing full-time employment in favour of austerity, focus, and full-time dedication to making a film using hyper-efficient techniques.

His comments resonated strongly with me. One of the founding principles of AnimWatch is the assertion that the tools for making films have fallen within the reach of pretty much anyone with a computer. Our ability to bring our films to life is for the first time limited mainly by our talents, time, imagination, and devotion to the stories we desire to tell, rather than being limited by access to the tools of the trade. I wrote a letter to the editor regarding that article, praising Albee's assertions and wondering publicly if we weren't all witnessing the advent of the Animation Microstudio. 3D World ran my letter the following month.

In response I got an angry note from a reader who seemed to fear the spread of Albee's process would lead to the devaluation of artists in the eyes of distributors (if artists are willing to live and work so cheaply in the name of their art, why pay them for their films when they complete them?) He said Albee's ideas were dangerous, and for agreeing with them, I was "a dangerous man".

Well, as much as I like the notion of myself as a dangerous man, I am aware that most people are unable or unwilling to take the drastic measures Albee took, and I certainly wouldn't recommend it to everyone. Still, his point remains: you *can* make your film if you are willing to make some sacrifices, and the greater the sacrifice, the faster you reach your goal.

Timothy Albee made a lot of sacrifices for Kaze, but I don't think even *he* would recommend such a lifestyle for everybody. (Oh, did I neglect to mention the part about Timothy living in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness with no running water?) I have always suspected that Albee did what he did partly to make a point. And in fact, he has turned his experience into a book on the subject of independent microstudio production, ([CGI Filmmaking: The Creation of](#)

[Ghost Warrior](#)) which I would recommend to anyone who wants to know more about just what it took for one man to make a 23 minute film by himself in 6 months on two computers with a budget of \$5,000.



Meanwhile, the [DVD](#) is out and you can judge for yourself the fruits of his labour. The feelings of this ex-Disney animator toward the bloated Hollywood / Big Studio way of doing things are obvious: there are pages of credits at the end of the film, including "Assistant to Mr. Albee", and pretty much every role aside from Mac Reiter's programming, is credited to Timothy Albee. It's almost as if he's screaming back at the establishment, "LOOK what can be done by fewer -- for less!" Assistant to Mr. Albee, indeed.

Recently, Timothy waxed philosophic on the subject with us. His typically thorough and spiritual answers to our questions are featured below.

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OGDEN: What informed the film's Asian look?

ALBEE: I've always felt a strong pull to things Asian. The ideals of Honor, and Duty are things I hold close and dear to my own heart. (The best any filmmaker can hope to achieve is done through adhering to the things of deep importance to him/her; by making the film that s/he her/himself has always wanted to see.)

OGDEN: As a one-man operation, it's possible to do a lot less preproduction than larger studios with armies of people. How much preproduction work did you put in -- like design of characters and environments, and so on?

ALBEE: After the script was locked in place, I did about four months worth of pre-production on "Kaze, Ghost Warrior." These four months encompassed doing the designs for the characters, dialogue recording, the storyboards, the Animatic (the storyboards after being scanned, timed and edited on video), character modeling, environmental modeling, surfacing/shading, preliminary lighting, software development and Pipeline Test (the trailer).

There were many things that made the process much easier because the way the 3D and 2D tools I chose allowed me to be an artist, and not force me to be a programmer/technician.

I field a lot of questions about why, after having used all the major software packages in production environments, I choose to use LightWave 3D. In short, it doesn't get in my way when I'm working.

I've got a very short fuse for things that promise the sun, the moon and the stars and then fall short when it comes time to deliver. The only package that has come through for me under the intensity to which I subject my tools has been LightWave.

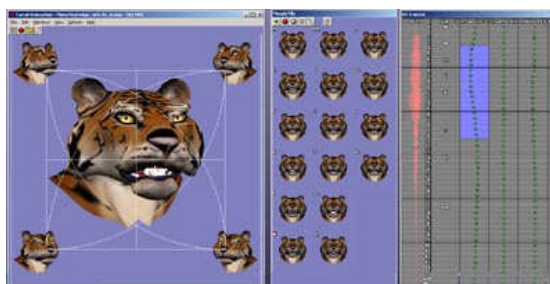
Not only does it hold together under intense pressure, but it also has some streamlining built into it that without, I'd never have been able to do "KGW." For instance, the way in which LW stores both its Point Weighting and Morph Targets (as "Deltas" from the Point's original position), I was able to "take my time" and get Itsua, the innkeeper, completely built and Rigged in 1.5 weeks, and then use his points to create all 16 other characters in a matter of half-a-week!

The secret is to *remember* the things you've always wished for,



whether it be in stories to be told, or tools to create those stories. We're all very similar when it comes down to it, and a tool that one person has always wished existed will quite often be exactly what another has also wished for - even if they, themselves, haven't thought enough about it to put it into precise terms! (The same holds true for stories as well.)

A major factor which made the film possible was in working together with Mac Reiter, the programmer for "TA Facial Animation." Mac took the project in-hand and pushed my ideas far beyond what I'd hoped could exist. "TA Facial Animation" blends together the best of Traditional and 3D animation techniques that even in pre-pre-alpha allowed me to do in about fifteen minutes what I would have needed two days to do by hand, (what a Disney animator on "Dinosaur" would have been given four days to do).



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The response to "TA Facial Animation" has been breathtaking. I've shown it in LA and on my tour of Germany and Poland, and crowds have just gasped when they've seen the speed and ease of complete control over every aspect of facial animation this tool facilitates. Plus, even if you've "only" been a Traditional animator up to this point, the Exposure-Sheet tools let you work without ever having to touch a Graph Editor window!

Most noteworthy, as seen in the screen-cap, we're getting over 100FPS on a real-time level 2 Sub-D with the film-version Kaze head model on a "game-quality" NVIDIA graphics card. (NOTE: TA Facial Animation will be on sale from KURV Studios around Christmas 2004. The screenshot above is from an early Alpha version.)

OGDEN: How extensively did you storyboard the film?

ALBEE: Every camera angle and change was drawn in storyboarding, every camera movement was animated in the Animatic.

You've got to do this if you want to "Never Move Backwards."

It's a problem, even (especially) with "big studios," that most want to get rolling on things before they're really ready to do so. But making sure that you've got everything all planned out beforehand, taking a few extra weeks, (or even months,) can save years and/or \$M in production. (Anyone out there remember that Disney's *Kingdom of the Sun* was completely done in rough animation before it was *re-done* as *The Emperor's New Groove*?)

There's no excuse for having an artist do something more than once, especially when it was just fine the first time, simply because *management* doesn't have its act together.

This kind of mentality *kills* artist's spirits and results in artists not daring to put their hearts into their work, which itself results in scenes that are simply passable at best.

The great masterworks of animation are such because the artists were allowed to fall in love with their Scenes and Characters, confident that should the animation be in-character and the scenes support the carefully pre-planned vision of the film, that their work would be respected and retained.

With the skills I see in the artists I've trained, I know that my

own skills as an animator and modeler will be surpassed in five to ten years. It is my goal to by then have created a studio that does for other artists, that which I always wished had been available for me.

So, I guess in response to someone asking me how extensively they should storyboard *their* film, I'd have to answer, "How good do you want your film to be?"

After the script was finalized, a shot-list was made depicting every camera change in the film. From the shot-list, every change in camera angle was drawn. Then, using the amazingly simple camera-movement tools within the VT[3]'s editing suite, I was able to animate all camera movements in *real-time* while cutting-together the animatic from the scanned storyboards.



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OGDEN: Why did you make the characters animals instead of humans?

ALBEE: Partly for the sake of Myth. (You can make a stronger connection with the audience when they don't think you're talking directly about them.) Partly for the sake of beauty and allegory (poetry). And partly because that's just what felt right. In the end, that's the most important reason - doing something because it *feels right*.

An artist may not be able to explain in a doctoral thesis why something needs to be the way it does, and that does not negate the importance of that being the way it is. Often times, artists discover years later, the reasoning behind certain aspects of their work that just felt right at the point of creation.

Filmmaking may involve a great many highly technical things... and at its core, it must retain the creative focus, the artistic integrity of these bits of wisdom that may be beyond the current lexical ability for the artist him/herself to explain.

OGDEN: How did you decide which characters would be which animals? What significance is there storywise which character is what kind of animal?

ALBEE: The characters decided for themselves.

I did sheets and sheets of sketches for several weeks, just getting down all permutations of ideas. Then, pulled elements that "felt right" from the sketches for each character.

There is much significance in the "Primary" and "Secondary" species for each character. Non-human animals as we know them are archetypal, even though as individuals they have vast ranges of personalities.

Kaze, being a Tiger, must deal with things that are natural or reflexive to tigers as we know them... the impulse to attack from behind, being solitary, etc. Kaze's focus for Honor and reaching beyond these building-blocks sets up the opportunity for great allegorical stories for us all to reach beyond what is innate within our own personalities, but that which may not be what we would wish to be.

OGDEN: Did the story come from the characters or vice versa?

ALBEE: One creates the other.

The stories have been with me since adolescence, existing in many different forms and against many different "backdrops."

I believe that the best work comes *through* us, not *from* us. And so, I've let these and other stories play through me, making notes of the things that I feel are successful to my sense of storytelling.

Eventually, the stories are concise enough to be written down as their evolution begins to solidify into a story worthy of the commitment of what it takes to make a film.

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OGDEN: In the supplemental materials on the DVD, you spoke of the recording process as if you were almost channeling the characters when you recorded the voices. Where do you think the characters and their voices came from? Did you already know the voice of the character when you wrote the screenplay?

ALBEE: The "where" isn't important. What is important is that feeling comfortable believing and feeling as I do, I am able to do some pretty good work - and that's really what matters.

The exploration of high-energy physics is something I've enjoyed, especially the theories that lend credibility to the probabilities of alternate dimensions, or the re-combining of what we know of as dimensional vectors to *measure* space/time in different ways, resulting in different perceptions of what we consider "material" and "reality."

OGDEN: There is a tantalizing scene in the trailer for this film which I do not think showed up in the final movie... that of Kaze climbing out of a window and saying over his shoulder, "You couldn't kill me when I was alive. What makes you think you can now?" Was that a scene that got cut, or something you did just for the trailer, or something else?

ALBEE: A lot of people ask about that Scene. That's from Sequence 5, which turned-out to be a long-ish anticlimax to the film that shaped the ending in a much softer fashion than what I had wanted.

When I began viewing the animatic with more and more of it having been replaced by the final footage, I realized that the drama of the film would be much stronger, much more holding the feeling I wanted, by ending after Sequence 4.

Not to worry, though, all the work that was done for Sq05 is preserved, and will be used to begin the second episode of the "Kaze, Ghost Warrior" series.

How that Scene made it into the trailer is that the trailer itself was the Production Pipeline Test - done before Production itself was begun.

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OGDEN: Your challenge -- one man, two computers, 6 months -- includes a development budget of \$5k. Did that cover everything? Living expenses, film prints, cost of software and computers... what exactly figures into your 6 month development budget?

ALBEE: There were no film prints, (which would be ~\$9K for the master alone).

Computer hardware and software were acquired in direct trade for my own services, writing, design, animation, etc. (I found it interesting in that working for "real" goods and services, [as opposed to the largely *symbolic* concept of currency,] my own sense of self-worth as an artist increased dramatically.)

The \$5K covered my expenses for the six months of Production.



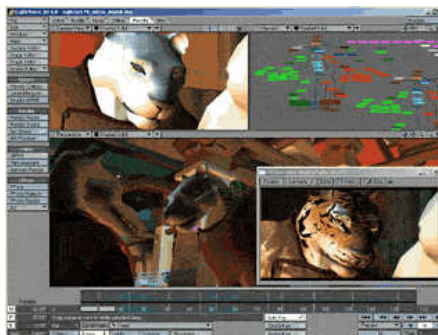
OGDEN: Did you set out specifically to prove the effectiveness of the Albee Microstudio Method, or did you operate within those parameters out of necessity?

ALBEE: There are so many talented people who could do so much, if they only believed in the power they themselves have within their hands. I had to do "KGW" in this manner to prove beyond the shadow of any doubt that this is indeed possible, that even if there were no one else a dedicated animator could ask for help, that a beautiful, powerful, feature-quality film could be made in a reasonable amount of time, and on a reasonable budget.

Many people who've read my book, "[CGI Filmmaking](#)," have e-mailed me telling me that while their friends and co-workers have told them to "get real" and stick to being a cog in a great machine, they see now how they, themselves, can do the exact same thing I did, with their own stories!

This is far beyond what just one filmmaker can do, far beyond just one film or just one series. This is about the Dreamers of this world taking the power within their own hands to make the films that they, themselves, have always wanted to see. This is about making these Dreams a reality, and still remaining free from the big-studio snares.

I had to show that this was possible, with the production of "KGW," otherwise it would just remain a theory... and I'd never ask someone to do something I wasn't fully prepared to do, myself.



OGDEN: What things would you have done differently on the film? How did you let go of those things and just ship it?

ALBEE: Aside from the fact that hardware and software have made improvements over the course of production, my only managerial decision would be to have asked more footage of myself at the outset of the film.

At first, I was averaging about seven seconds of completed footage a day. During the last month and a half of Production, I was averaging between 35 and 45 seconds of completed footage per work-day.

I knew from the outset that I'd not be able to do more than a good rough animation for each scene, (spending on average only 4 hours per scene). The overall ambience of the piece, the storytelling, the motion all work together to support a

contiguity within the film so everything looks like it fits.

This is just planning, knowing your abilities beforehand and working within them to create a cohesiveness that fills the entirety of the vision.

OGDEN: Were you ever tempted to stop working on Kaze and work on something else instead halfway through? How did you get through that?

ALBEE: Oh, you mean the "Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul." Yeah. Every artist goes through that.

I just kept my focus on remembering that the months of planning and work merited more than the days of doubt.

You've heard that saying, "An object in motion tends to stay in motion..."? *Inertia* works with mental and emotional forces just as well as with physical ones. Just keep moving... and when you notice your Focus not where you *want* it to be, without criticizing yourself, just guide your Focus back to where you wish it. (With enough practice at this, your Focus will cease to need as much of this kind of guidance.)

OGDEN: What do you hope people take away from the film when they are done watching it?

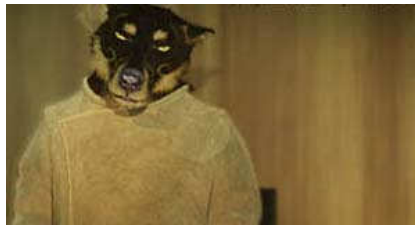
ALBEE: A sense of hope... a sense of possibility... a sense of a larger "canvas" extending beyond the boundaries of the screen, that they themselves may be able to find a part of at some point in their life, (allegorically speaking).

This is purposefully not a film that lays all its secrets bare upon the first watching. I've had people tell me that they're still picking up on things "hidden" in transitions even after their fiftieth viewing.

I've had hard-as-nails ex-military people at screenings turn to me afterwards with tears in their eyes for having touched aspects that they, themselves, lived in the field.

I've had teens tell me that somehow they have something to hold to in their own lives...

I'm just a conduit. Doing my job means allowing this focus to come *through* me as clearly as possible... even I continue to find meaning within this story, every single time I see it.



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OGDEN: What do you think the future of animation is?

ALBEE: Freedom.

I believe that Traditional Animation will exist as a choice, in much the same way that theatre exists as choice.

And for many who, within the Big Studio way of doing things, may have had their creative careers relegated to being second banana to the "stars" of animation. With the computer being able to handle the grunt-work of a hundred or more highly-skilled artist / technicians, they can then be their own stars and leads.

I believe that there are hundreds of Walt Disneys and Hayao Miyazakis out there that have been, for whatever reasons, squashed and constrained into cubicles of disbelief and disregard.

Sure, it may be harsh at first, having to fend for one's self after a cushy job within a big studio... but think of the possibilities when those Dreamers start to take their own Dreams in hand and tell the kinds of stories that they, themselves, have always wanted to have been told!

Take a look at John Lasseter and Tim Burton! Given the chances to do what they always wanted to do, they've shown far more brightly than they ever could have, had they remained as bits-and-pieces within the Corporate Machine that exists where the art and guidance of Walt Disney once flourished.

OGDEN: How did you get involved with your distributor (KURV Studios)?

ALBEE: [KURV Studios](#) came about, in part, out of discussions with my editor at Wordware, about how frustrating it was that people who've read the series of books I've written on animation and Filmmaking, would still have a fight ahead of them to get distribution. KURV Studios exists as a place for training, an option for distribution, and perhaps soon, a hub for networking.

OGDEN: What are you working on next?

ALBEE: A the moment, I've been doing a fair amount of consulting work, setting up production pipelines, inspirational lectures and the like.

I'm in the process of securing funding for the Kaze feature film, and all the fun stuff that must happen before a production can begin. After the "Kaze" feature, there's the "Kaze, Ghost Warrior" series and another feature film with the working title of "Wolfpack," in varying stages of pre-production.

The big picture ideal is to have TA Animation be a place where people can come to learn animation within an actual production environment. Many people come out of film school and try to enter into the workplace, only to find that the education they had paid lots of money for was not what studios are looking for.

Teamwork, integration, ingenuity and integrity are the hallmark of both good artists and good leadership. And the only way you can get this is to be a part of a strong, cohesive production team - ideally, right from the beginning.



OGDEN: Thank you for talking to us.

ALBEE: Thanks very much for the opportunity! I wish your readers the best in grabbing hold of their Dreams with both hands and doing all they need to do to bring them into a Reality we all can enjoy!



"**Kaze, Ghost Warrior**" by Timothy Albee Animation was first profiled in AnimWatch [Spotlight](#) June, 2004. Many thanks to Timothy Albee and Wes Beckwith for their valuable assistance on this feature.