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Best of Show: Charlex's *One Rat Short* By Michael Mallory

Most filmmakers employ rats when they want to disgust the audience. Those at the Manhattan-based Charlex, however, are using them to move the audience.

One Rat Short, the 2006 SIGGRAPH Computer Animation Festival Best of Show, is a startlingly evocative and effective love story between a gutter rat and a white lab rat. It is also the Emmy-winning commercial shop's first longer-form narrative film, and came about as a recruiting tool, according to writer/director Alex Weil, also Charlex's founder and creative director.

"I was competing with people who do features and entertainment work, so if I wanted to get talent in here I would have to do something besides commercials that had an edge to it," Weil says. Starting out with a more comedic tone, the project's look evolved into a much more gritty, high-contrast, hand-held one that juxtaposes grim mean streets with a starkly futuristic research lab.

And turning photorealistic rats into convincing romantic leads was no easy task. "So much of it had to do with how we shot them, how we staged the scene," says lead animator Pat Porter. "All of the parts — the music, the lighting, the staging — came together to let their emotions come through." Some artfully acted head movements and a lot of restraint also helped.

"The first few passes, we did a lot with the faces, but it looked cartoony," adds lead animator Tony Tabtong. "We found if we held back, we could get a lot more emotion out of it."

The team used both Autodesk Maya 6 and 7 to animate and Mental Ray for the rendering, as well as many proprietary tweaks, notably shaders. While changing software versions mid-stream is never recommended, the film's producer and art director Bryan Godwin notes, "There were numerous advancements in the export technology and hooks for Mental Ray in version 7 that were worth going through the torture of upgrading."

The SIGGRAPH Best of Show award is just the first stop on the Festival trail for *One Rat Short*, which might ultimately lead to long-form film production, according to executive producer Chris Byrnes. "I don't say it lightly, but we feel we know we can do an independent feature film," Byrnes says. "We have the talent and the crew, and we learned enough."

