



Alex Weil's CG Labor of Love and Rats

One Rat Short Wins Siggraph Festival

By Matt Armstrong

Over three years in the making, design and digital production studio Charlex is taking the film festival circuit by storm with its 10-minute CG animated film *One Rat Short*. In addition to being invited to the Los Angeles Film Festival, CineVegas, Melbourne IFF, Palm Springs Short Film Festival and a Jury selection at the Cannes Short Film Corner, *One Rat Short* won the Best of Show Award at the Siggraph 2006 Computer Animation Festival.

The remarkable short combines a number of diametrically opposed elements and fuses them together. There is the main love story between characters (rats), which repulse most people. The environments of the film pit the filthy world of a New York Subway and an eerily clean, white laboratory. There are beautifully poetic camera moves following a food wrapper and frenetic 'handheld' sequences. Even the genre and story is mixed: the film starts as film noir, moves to science fiction before resolving as a love story.

Alex Weil, director of *One Rat Short* and executive creative director at Charlex, spoke with us about the unique process of producing the film, the choices that were made, and those discarded, and what this initiative seeks to achieve for the New York shop, heretofore solidly grounded in the realm of commercials.

I heard you have been quite busy lately traveling the festival circuit?

AW: I've been to festivals all over the world, Europe, Africa, all over the States. I just want to bring it in front of audiences in the big screen. We put so much work into this and to get the feedback from a live audience at a festival, I've never felt anything quite like that.

Plus winning the Siggraph festival must have been nice.

AW: Winning the Siggraph award was huge for us because the other nominees were companies like Pixar, DreamWorks and Weta. By winning Siggraph we've qualified for review by the Oscar committee.

Was this a collective effort by everyone at Charlex?

AW: It started out as a collective endeavor. But what had to happen is I had to break it off because it was getting to be too overwhelming for the company. I took out new space in the building, brought over some Charlex employees, who I then replaced with others, and hired some freelancers. I hired Todd Winter who became the Director of Photography. In all, we had about 15 people working on it full-time for about a year. It was about two years pre-production, one year in production

I saw an early version of this years ago when it was entitled *LabRatz* and looked like animated charcoal drawings, which is a much different look than *One Rat Short*. Can you talk about the creative process and how the story developed?

AW: The creation was unusual and a lot of it has to do with the way I work. One of the reasons it took so long and had so many early versions is because at first I tried work the way that I saw it being done at places like Pixar. A lot of the people here have worked at places like DreamWorks, so the pressure was on me to work that way: storyboard it, do the animatic, present the boards and so on. But I have never worked that way. I work standing up, in-camera. This movie was largely created with me working directly with animators and models, building the scenes in-camera and stringing them together with an editor all live. There were no 2D versions, I built the film entirely in-camera.

What about the early version of *LabRatz* that was 2D?

AW: I ditched the board completely. It wasn't working. It took a while to spit the story out. As I did, I started to create the scenes. And as I created the scenes I started to understand the particular language of the movie.

I always like when people tell me, "I like the rats' expressions." But the rats don't make any expressions, it's all just staging, how they are posed, the mood, the sound effects and music. You can't board that, at least I can't. Maybe next time I will, but I couldn't do it on this. When you board a film it's like you are working within a form. What we ended up creating was more organic and I just couldn't invent it on paper.

What were some of the films that influenced the story and style of *One Rat Short*?

AW: My favorite movies are *Cinema Paradiso* and *Apocalypse Now*. The short film *The Red Balloon* was a big influence on this film. *2001: A Space Odyssey* and original *Alien* both used that stark white look that I love. It was also heavily influenced by my love for all the film noir films of the 30s, 40s and 50s. Visually I wanted a film noir look and feel.

With the camera I tried to make it so the viewer felt they were really in that space instead of just watching it. You can't do that too much because it gets too nutty but I really wanted to play with perspective and shadow to help the audience identify with the characters.

One of my goals was to combine the revulsion towards rats with the good feeling of a love story, just as an experiment. Revulsion plus Love equals Question Mark. I don't know what it equals but it was an interesting question to explore.

Technically what tools were used?

AW: Everything was done in Autodesk Maya, processed with Mental Ray. It was all off-the-shelf software with the exception of little pieces of code here and there for things like the hair.

What made you want to invest so much time and energy into this short film? Is Charlex going to move into CG feature films rather than just being a commercial house?

AW: It certainly is part of the gameplan at Charlex to establish a film production company and we are seeking to develop properties for a feature. So hopefully exposure for this film will bring us the credibility and contacts to do a feature. As far as texturally I feel like there could be a feature that looked and felt like this film.

Another one of my goals was to make a CG film that looked like no other. And also had a storyline that was like no other. That's why I couldn't help but put a sad ending on it. I just had to. A happy ending would have been stupid.

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