



Visual Comedy in Animation

Translating written comedy into visual medium

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ABSTRACT

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Visual Comedy in Animation: Translating written comedy into visual medium

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The purpose of this thesis was to conduct research on how to write a comedy story and successfully translate the story into visual format with the knowledge on different elements of visual comedy in animation. Different elements of visual comedy were researched and further explained to understand how these elements work to create a comical effect.

Different elements of visual comedy included character, setting, slapsticks, camera work, timing and audio and voice work. The usage of these elements was explained with the help of literary books and videos on the topic. Examples from existing animated films were given to support the information. A case study was conducted to analyse how these elements work together to create a comical outcome.

In a practical part of the thesis, a comedy script was written and translated to a format of an animatic. With the animatic, the purpose was to demonstrate understanding of the elements of visual comedy and how to use them effectively together in personal work.

Key words: visual comedy, animation, comedy, writing, script

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1 INTRODUCTION

Many generations have been watching films made by household names such as Walt Disney and DreamWorks Animation, being entertained and amused by variety of stories and characters on the screen. Taking my first steps in the industry within past two years, I have been able to take a closer look at how this medium works and how the films are made. Eventually, my work made me wonder the aspect of comedy in animation. How is comedy created? What in what we see on the screen amuses us, and how that can be achieved?

In this thesis, my objective is to conduct research on comedy first and foremost from the visual perspective but also from the written. In my study of the written comedy, I will examine what kind of structures and rules are to be considered to achieve a story that can make the audience laugh.

In my research for the visual aspect, I will examine six different elements of visual comedy that include: characters, setting, slapsticks, camera work, timing and audio and voice work. I explain how these elements are to be used in a comedic sense and how they work together to achieve a funny piece of animation. After explaining and gaining understanding on these elements, I will conduct a case study to analyse how an already existing film has been using these elements and if there is something that could have been done differently to make the end product even funnier.

In the practical part of the thesis, I will explain the process of creating my own project titled Cat vs Burglar. In this project, I wrote a comedy script using the knowledge I learned from my research on how to write a comedy story. After the script was completed, I created an animatic to showcase how the story can be translated into visual medium by utilising all of the six elements of visual comedy.

2 WRITING COMEDY

2.1 Principles of comedy writing

When writing a comedy story specifically for animation, there are elements that are to be paid attention to. When choosing a story idea for the animation, the idea should primarily be visual (Wright 2013). Animation in the end, is first and foremost a visual medium.

However, visual idea alone won't create a story. When it comes to writing a comedy story, or any story, there are structures and principles to know before starting to write.

2.1.1 Story structure

Story structure means a method of constructing a story from the beginning to the end with series of occurrences of the main character's life (McKee 2014). Well-known screenwriting teacher, Robert McKee, in his book *Story: substance, structure, style, and the principles of screenwriting* (2014), divides the story structure into five parts:

1. Inciting incident
2. Progressive complications
3. Crisis
4. Climax
5. Resolution

The first part of the story structure, inciting incident, happens at the beginning of the story. Inciting incident is an event in the story which changes the life of the main character and sets the story in motion. This change can be caused by the main character themselves or happen to the main character by outer forces. What is essential with inciting incident, is that it requires a reaction from the main character who will actively try to restore their changed life back to what it used to be. (McKee 2014.)

Progressive complications come after the inciting incident. Progressive complications are series of events that create new conflict in the life of a main character who has started their active mission in the result of inciting incident. These series of events also present how the main antagonistic force in the story becomes stronger while interfering the mission of the main character. (McKee 2014.)

After the progressive complications follows crisis. Crisis is the part in the story that presents the most pivotal moment in the main character's journey. This moment presents the final choice for the main character which can either result as victory or failure. This is also the moment of ultimate confrontation of the main character and the villain of the story. (McKee 2014.)

After crisis, the next section of the story is climax. Climax works as the final verdict for the course of the story and the faith of the characters. Climax, depending on the story that is told, can be any type of event as long as it is meaningful for the story. With meaning, the story creates value in the minds of the audience. (McKee 2014.)

Resolution is the final part of the story structure. This part of the story is used to create final images of the story and, in some cases, show how the effects of climax affected the story's world and characters. For the audience, resolution offers time to comprehend what was the final result and the meaning of it. (McKee 2014.)

2.1.2 Drama principles

When it comes to writing comedy, one important aspect is to understand drama and drama rules (DePaul 2016). Comedy screenwriter Greg DePaul, in his book *Bring the Funny* (2016), has gathered four important drama rules which should be included to a comedy story. These rules are:

1. Conflict
2. Tension
3. Escalation
4. Stakes

To create conflict in a story, we start with characters and their goals, things that they want to have and accomplish in the story. Conflict is created when the characters are challenged by obstacles along their journey which prevents them from getting what they want. This can also be thought as farce. (DePaul 2016.) In farce, characters encounter coincidences that make them act and do decisions which eventually only make their situation more challenging and therefore more difficult for them to achieve their goal (Lyons 2015). In comedy, it is also common that the character's need to achieve their goal rises to a level of extreme, being almost ridiculous (Truby 2022).

Tension comes after we have created conflict in the story. Tension is used to create uncertainty in the mind of a viewer. Uncertainty makes viewers wonder and be more alert to what is going to happen as the funny events keep evolving one after another. (DePaul 2016.) The highest point of tension occurs during the crisis part in the story structure (McKee 2014).

The third rule, escalation, is used to make tension stronger. In a comedy story, escalation can be shown in humour and situations the characters find themselves in, and how these situations are getting more and more hilarious and absurd as the story progresses. Escalation can be something viewers can expect or be something surprising in a story. (DePaul 2016.)

The final drama rule is stakes. In a comedy story, stakes make the story personal to the characters: what can they lose or gain in the story? When characters care about the outcome it will also make the audience care what is going to happen. Without stakes, the result of the story won't hold much meaning to the spectator nor the characters which makes it a very important part of comedy writing.

(DePaul 2016.)

These drama rules are essential for comedy, however, an important difference between drama and comedy is the main character's story arc. In drama, the character's arc decreases before the very end of the story of character revelation, the long-awaited success, whereas in comedy, this type of arc occurs many times over and over during the story. With these highs and lows, the character is put in a laughter inducing situation from which they compose themselves to continue their journey before the next funny situation. (Truby 2022.)

2.1.3 Conceit

Conceit has to be considered when starting to work with the story idea. Conceit can be described as the improbable world or idea in the story which writers want viewers to believe without a need to rationalize or explain it. What is important about conceit, is to introduce the improbable idea early instead too late in the story. Otherwise, the viewer might not accept what is presented to them.

(DePaul 2016.)

An example of this can be seen in the film *Incredibles* (2004). At the beginning of the movie, we are shown interviews of three superheroes: Mr. Incredible, Elastigirl and Frozone, where they explain what their lives are like as humans with superpowers. With this, viewers understand that the ordinary world in the film has a fantastical element of superheroes. If the aspect of superheroes would have been introduced later in the story, after showing the world as completely normal, viewers could think that as too improbable to happen.

2.1.4 Gapping

Gapping is a useful tool for storytelling and screenwriting. Gapping means a part in a story which is not shown in the written script or in the final film on screen. However, a gap in a story is something that can be understood by the viewer by showing what has happened in the story before the gap. (DePaul 2016.)

The film *Ratatouille* by Walt Disney and Pixar (2007) shows a good example of gapping. In the story, a kitchen help Linguini has been put to a test to create a soup which, unknown to other human characters but Linguini, was made by a skilful rat Remy. Linguini is on the edge of Seine in Paris, about to drown Remy in a glass jar, and puts the jar down on the edge of the river. Then he accidentally dodges the jar into Seine and jumps after it. After that there is a cut, the gap, and the next thing viewers see is drenched Linguini in the same spot where he was before jumping to the river.



PICTURE 1. Example of a gap in *Ratatouille* (Walt Disney Pictures & Pixar Animation Studios 2007)

This drastic change of condition of the characters in similar shots creates humour. With the gap, the action of Linguini getting the jar back and getting himself back to dry land with Remy is left out but can be expected to have happened based on what was shown before. If these actions would have been included, the scene could have felt unnecessary long and not as funny as with the gap. Essentially, a gap offers a good way to simplify the story and focus on what is important, and like in the case of comedy, what is funny.

3 CREATING VISUAL COMEDY FOR ANIMATION

3.1 Elements of visual comedy

When writing a comedy script, it is important to be aware of different visual comedy elements. These elements can and should affect the writing to make a successful visual comedy for animation that makes the audience laugh. In this section, I examine six different elements of visual comedy: characters, setting, slapsticks, camera work, timing and audio and voice work, and how these elements work best together to create the best visual comedy product.

3.1.1 Characters

Characters are the main source of visual comedy. When designing characters for visual comedy, it is important to not only concentrate on character's visual appearance but also to the character's inner qualities: personality, attitude, and behaviour. When designing both inner and outer qualities for comedy, it is important to remember exaggeration. For instance, a realistic looking character can be hard to animate to perform funny antics than a character that is more cartoony, especially in the medium of animation. (Wright 2013).

When the comedy story has more than one character, it is important to create these characters to be distinct from each other. More there are differences between the characters more conflict and interest it creates in the story. Characters who are alike cannot create as much interesting friction and potential for comedy than characters who showcase differences in their attitudes, visual appearances, values, and experiences. (Wright 213.) An example of distinctive characters can be seen in the film *Brave* by Walt Disney and Pixar (2012) in the picture 2. The three clan chiefs are all different in terms of visual appearance, and in the way they present themselves in a situation where they are competing whose son can win the hand of a princess. One standing strong, one standing on a stool, and one relaxing in the middle.



PICTURE 2. Example of distinctive characters in Brave (Walt Disney Pictures & Pixar Animation Studios 2012)

Related to character's inner qualities, one of the ways to create comedy is with characters reactions (Wright 2013). With characters, a philosopher Henri Bergson discovered a way to create comedy by having characters' ideal existence lowered back to reality. This occurrence requires a reaction from the characters, and these different types of reactions work as the source for comedy. (Truby 2022.) These reactions are:

1. Child
2. Machine
3. Animal

With child reaction, an adult character shows emotions which are considered too strong and dramatic for a situation. This reaction includes a child-like expression of emotions, such as crying. (Truby 2022.) An example of this type of reaction can be seen in the film Emperor's New Groove by Walt Disney (2000) by the character Kronk. Kronk is the hunky henchman of the main villain who, on the side of his strong and bodyguard-like role, likes baking. When the villain Yzma reveals she doesn't like his baking, this makes Kronk gasp and cry. This presents well how Kronk's ideal existence is lowered back to reality and making him react like a child. Kronk's dramatic reaction in this particular situation, which is merely an ordinary difference in taste, makes Kronk a very comical character.

A contrary reaction to the child is the machine reaction. With machine reaction, a character presents hardly any reaction than what could be expected to a situation. (Truby 2022.) An example of a machine reaction can be seen presented in the film *Madagascar 2* by DreamWorks (2008) by the penguin characters who are working as the pilots of an airplane. In this scene, signals of the plane are indicating something is wrong but the penguins, who are unfamiliar to the mechanics of an aircraft, are not bothered by them. The two engines of the plane are failing, to which, one of the penguins states as a sigh of relief “This is engine is no longer on fire” while pointing out of the window to a fuming engine as seen in picture 3. The penguins’ atypical calmness and confidence in this situation works as a great source of comedy.



PICTURE 3. Machine type reaction in *Madagascar 2* (DreamWorks Animation & Pacific Data Images (PDI) 2008)

The third reaction, animal, is defined by story teacher John Truby in his book *The Anatomy of Genres* (2022) as “when we see people doing the basic bodily functions humans share with animals. Examples are “bathroom humor” and any “dirty joke” involving sex.“. A character showcasing this type of reaction in animation can be seen by the character Shrek in the film *Shrek* by DreamWorks (2001) in picture 4. At the beginning of the film, we are presented a fairy-tale book from which one of the pages is ripped off by Shrek who belittles the story and uses the ripped page as a toilet paper in his outhouse. When he exits the outhouse, he has still one of the story book’s pages stuck in his feet similar way that can happen to a toilet paper. This type of character reaction portrays really well what type of funny character Shrek is and showcases a good example of an animal type of character reaction.



PICTURE 4. Animal type reaction in Shrek (DreamWorks Animation & Dreamworks Pictures & Pacific Data Images (PDI) 2001)

3.1.2 Setting

Characters are fundamental when we are focusing on physical comedy making it also important to choose a location or situation where they can act out their funny performance. A well-chosen context can offer many different possibilities that affect the character and their antics but also make possible for the character to affect their surroundings. (Lyons 2015.)

Chosen environment can be anything from extraordinary to normal and mundane. Extraordinary universes and situations are often seen in animated films, but mundane environments can also be good material for physical comedy. An environment or situation that the viewer has experienced themselves in their ordinary lives can help them to identify and relate to where the situation takes place. (Lyons 2015.)

A good example of a mundane situation and location used for comedy can be found in the Walt Disney film Zootopia (2016). In the story, the police officer Judy Hopps and conman Nick Wilde are trying to solve a case which leads them to a place called DMV, Department of Mammal Vehicle, which resembles something of a department of motor vehicles we know. These places are typically known to be frustrating with long waiting time which is also utilized in the scene by making the employees sloths. Main physical comedy comes from the slow-motion action

of the sloths paired up with typically swift moving Judy who is working against the clock, and Nick who is utilizing the slowness of the employees to tease her. The interaction between the two main characters and the desk clerk sloth Dash offers a lot of funny moments in this location.



PICTURE 5. A funny setting in Zootopia (Walt Disney Pictures & Walt Disney Animation Studios 2016)

When a character is set on a situation and location, the way they can interact with their environment can be by usage of props. Property, props in short, are a big part of physical comedy and can vary from small objects to big means of transportation. (Lyons 2015.)

There are many ways for characters to use props in a comedy scene. One of the ways is to make an item, the prop, valuable for the characters and make it out of reach for them to create a sense of chase. Props can also behave in a surprising manner than how they normally would or be placed in a way you wouldn't expect. In addition, it is also possible to use a well-known item in a completely new and surprising way than how they would normally be used. (Lyons 2015).

An example of a new way of using a well-known item can be found in the DreamWorks movie Kung Fu Panda (2008) during the final battle scene of the main character Po and the villain Tai Lung. Po is known for his good appetite for food in the story, and during the battle he discovers noodles in the town and uses one of them as if it was resembling a whip or rope to catch an important scroll. Later, Po eats the noodle as seen in picture 6. This shows two ways of using a known item, the expected and unexpected way.



PICTURE 6. Po's usage of a noodle string in Kung Fu Panda (DreamWorks Animation 2008)

3.1.3 Slapsticks

Slapstick comedy is created with gags, timed visual jokes, which have long roots reaching all the way back to the era of vaudeville, silent films, and comedy actors such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Typical for slapstick comedy are gags where the characters seemingly get hurt. Even so, the guideline for physical comedy often is that no one gets injured. (Lyons 2015.)

Pain, however, is something that the characters can experience (Lyons 2015). Pain is something which the audience can relate to as well. When it comes to portraying pain in slapsticks, it is important to remember not to make the pain nor the character's reaction to the pain resemble what would realistically happen (Lyons 2015). Especially in animation, it is not uncommon for characters to be in pain and defeated in one shot but in the following shots be back to normal (Lyons 2015). Animation itself often offers possibilities for breaking the logic and the laws of physics (Wright 2013).

An example of a slapstick scene showcasing injury can be found in the movie *Tangled* by Walt Disney (2010) shown in picture 7. In this scene, Rapunzel tries to hide Flynn Rider in her wardrobe so that her mother won't find him. Rapunzel, not being the most physically strong character, tries many ways to get Flynn inside the wardrobe. She pushes him on the ground, poses him inside the wardrobe in a very uncomfortable poses, and finally manages to close the doors but accidentally leaves his fingers between the doors. Seeing this, she pushes the fingers inside one after one. Realistically, all this would make a person injured, but later, when we see Flynn out of the wardrobe, he is completely unharmed.



PICTURE 7. Slapstick type injuries in *Tangled* (Walt Disney Animation Studios & Walt Disney Pictures 2010)

However, in slapsticks, humour does not simply rise from pain but needs a proper target. When a character gets hurt at the end of a physical joke, it is good to pay attention who this character would be. It is often found more amusing when something happens to a character who is unpleasant compared to something happening to character the viewers are rooting for. (Lyons 2015.) Jonathan Lyons, in his book *Comedy for Animators* (2015), also describes this as “a seemingly magical act of instant karma”, meaning how unpleasant characters are made the victim of a physical joke by their unpleasant actions. In *Tangled*, if Rapunzel, the sweet main character, and a victim to a villain, had been the one having her fingers left between the wardrobe doors, we wouldn't find it as funny as if it was Flynn, a cunning thief on the run.

Alongside pain and injury, one of the key elements of slapstick comedy are also blows taken by the characters. With blows, it is important to remember to show what takes place before and after and use the aftermath of the blow to present a funny character reaction and differences in these reactions depending on the character taking the blow. (Lyons 2015.)

A good example of a blow and reaction can be seen in the Walt Disney film *Mulan* (1998). In the scene, Mushu, the dragon sidekick gets a hit on his face from a gong thrown by one of the ancestors. Before the hit, we are shown one the ancestors throwing Mushu out of the temple, forcing him to go on a mission. However, Mushu persistently peeks behind the pillar tormenting the ancestors with yet another question, and that is when the gong flies to his face. When the gong falls down, we are left with a silly face and pose of Mushu as seen in picture 8.



PICTURE 8. Mushu's reaction after the blow in *Mulan* (Walt Disney Animation Studios & Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida & Walt Disney Pictures 1998)

However, slapstick comedy doesn't have to merely showcase jokes that are physical and injuring as long as the jokes remain visual. For instance, visual jokes can arise from characters and their mistakes. One way for mistakes to happen is by having the character's mind be tightly fixed on something which makes them clueless to what is happening. Another way can also have something preventing the character to see what is around them. (Lyons 2015.)

Both of these mistakes can be seen in the Walt Disney film *Emperor's New Groove* (2000). In the diner scene, the main character Kuzco coincidentally eats in a diner at the same moment as the villain Yzma. Kuzco and Yzma are both very

focused on getting their food and by taking turns lifting their tall menus they prevent themselves to see how the person they have been chasing is sitting right in front of them as seen in picture 9.



PICTURE 9. Visual joke in Emperor's New Groove (Walt Disney Animation Studios & Walt Disney Pictures 2000)

3.1.4 Camera work

Camera work not only captures the gag for the audience but has a crucial part of making the gag work. No matter how funny the gag is, if presented with wrong camera work, the joke may not reach its full comical potential. (Every Frame a Painting 2015.) In this section, I am examining commonly used camera work in visual comedy and the purpose they serve to make visual comedy successful on screen.

When planning the camera work for a gag, it is useful to think what the audience should be able to see to understand the joke. For instance, long shots are useful to capture visual gags that require space for action, and especially gags that use props of bigger scale (Lyons 2015). This type of usage of camera work can be dated back to the era of silent film, and to film makers like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Keaton, in his films, utilized big props such as different types of transportation, which he was able to capture with long shots. Chaplin, alternatively, relied more often on medium shots because of his usage of smaller props. (Lyons 2015.)

A good example of a usage of a long shot can be seen in the film *Emperor's New Groove*. When Kuzco and Yzma are in the diner, they go around revolving doors connected to kitchen to tell Kronk their order. Here, a long shot enables capturing the merry-go-around style of action Yzma and Kuzco are performing. Medium shot or close up wouldn't work as well as the door, the action and all of the characters wouldn't be completely visible for the audience.



PICTURE 10. Usage of a long shot in *Emperor's New Groove* (Walt Disney Animation Studios & Walt Disney Pictures 2000)

Camera angle is also essential when filming visual comedy. Not every angle works with a gag in question, and it is essential to find the one that works the best. However, it is important to remember to choose one angle for one visual gag. When the angle changes, it means a cut to a new joke. (Every Frame a Painting 2015.)

An example of a camera angle can be found from the film *Ratatouille*. The gag takes place when the camera follows Remy moving between building walls. Remy goes past a hole to an apartment where a woman is pointing a man with a gun. Remy keeps running but then a bullet shoots through the ceiling making Remy turn back to see what happened. The man and woman are fighting over the gun but then end up falling to a romantic embrace. This makes Remy roll his eyes and continue his journey. The gag is filmed from one angle above all of the characters, and this is changed only when the gag is over. If the camera angle had changed during the shot, for example framing off the hole and only concentrate on Remy, it would have lost the meaning of the joke and what is funny.



PICTURE 11. One angle for a gag in movie Ratatouille (Walt Disney Pictures & Pixar Animation Studios 2007)

When it comes to choosing the correct angle, it is important to keep in mind that the angle allows the audience to follow character reactions (Every Frame a Painting 2015). This can be seen in both movie examples mentioned earlier. When Yzma and Kuzco are going around the door, the audience can follow the reactions of all three characters. In Ratatouille, we can see Remy's reaction even when the camera is placed above him. Seeing Remy's reaction and eye roll to the silly behaviour of humans creates laughter.

Another way to use camera for comical purpose is having elements entering or exiting the camera frame (Every Frame a Painting 2015). An example of this type of camera work can be seen in the movie Tangled in picture 12. The character Flynn Rider is asked to sing about his dreams like all the other thieves in a tavern, but he refuses. Then dozens of blades enter the frame to threaten him. Cut to the next shot, and Flynn enters the frame singing and dancing on the top of the table. Why this is comedic could be because of the element of surprise and anticipation. Empty space is left for something to possibly enter, in this case either blades or Flynn himself.



PICTURE 12. Elements entering the camera frame in Tangled (Walt Disney Animation Studios & Walt Disney Pictures 2010)

3.1.5 Timing

In comedy, timing means the usage of rhythm and pacing to present a joke in the funniest way possible. Rhythm and pacing can have a significant effect to a joke and can change how the joke is perceived by the audience. (MasterClass N.d.)

With pacing and rhythm, the goal is to understand how fast or slow parts of the joke are presented. In stand-up comedy, this means how slow or fast the comedian tells the joke. (MasterClass N.d.) In visual comedy, this could be understood as how quickly or slowly the events of the gag are presented to the audience.

Pauses are also an important element for a good comedic timing. Most commonly, pauses are used either before or after the funniest, final part of a joke. Before the funniest part, the pause can heighten the impact of the joke, and after the joke, the pause allows a moment for the audience to laugh.

(MasterClass N.d.)

An example of a comical timing can be seen in the film Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas by DreamWorks (2003). In a scene, where the two main characters Sinbad and Marina are hiding from a monstrous bird, Sinbad tries to show how

capable he is to get them out of danger with his knife handling skills. While showcasing his skills, he accidentally throws the knife into the roof of their hideout. Cut to the outside of the hideout, there is a pause which after the roof collapses and reveals Sinbad and Marina. Another quick pause and the bird's face enters the camera frame noticing what has happened. This shows really well how the editing of shots and the pacing of events helps with timing the scene for a funny outcome.



PICTURE 13. Timing in Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas (Dreamworks Pictures & DreamWorks Animation 2003)

3.1.6 Audio and voice work

Characters are an essential part of visual comedy with the actions they can perform. However, one big contributor can also be character voice. Voice can tell a lot about the personality of the character (Lyons 2015). With better understanding of character's personality, it can be a useful element for the work of a character animator who creates the movement to match the character. (Hayes 2013). Additionally, character voice can also be a source of laughter (Lyons 2015).

An example of a comical character voice can be seen in the movie Zootopia. The scammer Nick is shown walking around the town with his child, a small white fox, who presents himself as cute and endearing. For the audience's surprise, when there is a moment for the child to speak for the first time, the voice turns out to belong to a grown man with a deep throat voice. Along with the voice, all the childish qualities disappear, and the character presents his true self as an angry and easily aggravated adult. This surprise makes it funny for the audience.



PICTURE 14. Finnick the fox presenting a comical voice in Zootopia (Walt Disney Pictures & Walt Disney Animation Studios 2016)

In addition to character's voice, comedy can also be created with funny additional audio. This can include funny special effects sounds. (The Royal Ocean Film... 2016.)

An example of a usage of special effects sounds can be seen in the film Mulan. In the scene, captain Shang is meddling a fight in the army camp. Hearing Shang's voice, all the soldiers stop what they are doing, and everyone goes silent. When the silence has stayed for a moment, one of the soldiers throws final punch to another soldier, thus breaking the silence. The sound of the punch in silence works as a source of laughter, paired together with the eye contact of the soldiers that stay respectfully towards captain Shang at all time as seen in picture 15.



PICTURE 15. A scene in the film *Mulan* that utilises a sound effect as a source of comedy (Walt Disney Animation Studios & Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida & Walt Disney Pictures 1998)

3.2 Visual comedy case study

Visual comedy can be divided into many separate elements: characters, setting, slapsticks, camera work, timing and audio and voice work. However, these elements do not work separately to create visual comedy. Characters can't perform gags without the setting, and the gag can't make the audience laugh without capturing it with correct camera work. To accomplish a successful gag, rules and possibilities of slapsticks and timing are to be considered as well, and audio offers the final touch.

To examine how visual comedy elements are used together, I analysed one sequence from the movie *Luck by Skydance Animation* (2022). The sequence follows the morning routine of the main character Sam, who is incredibly unlucky, and who tries to get to her new job on time while enduring challenges her bad luck creates for her.

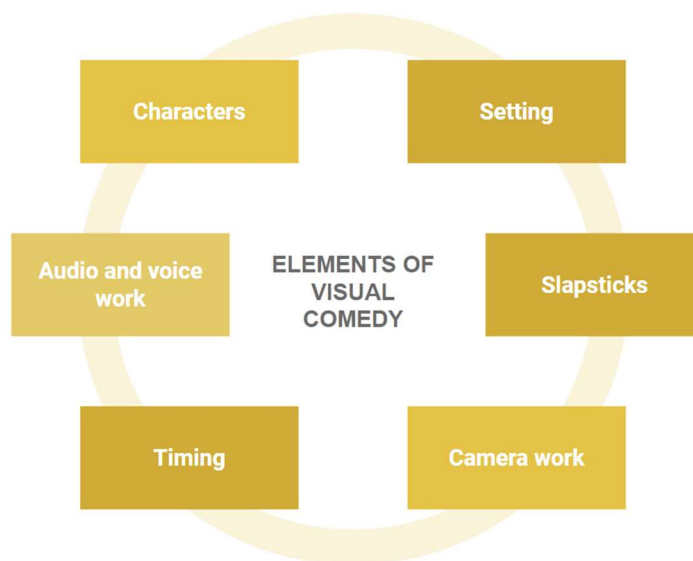


CHART 1. Elements of visual comedy

The sequence shows Sam waking up to notice how a street cleaner is blowing dry leaves into her apartment with a leaf blower. Sam hastily gets up to close the window, but leaves enter her apartment from the window next to the other. She closes the second window but accidentally shoves a lamp off from the desk. She manages to grab the lamp but ends up falling on to wall bed which closes into the wall her inside. Not defeated, she pushes the bed open with her feet as seen in picture 16.



PICTURE 16. Screen captures of a gag from the film Luck (Skydance Animation & Apple Original Films & Ilion Animation Studios 2022)

In this sequence, the camera action is designed to follow Sam's action and props provided by the setting. Across the shot, there are many props in the room that Sam is interacting with: the two windows, desk lamp, chair and the biggest prop, the wall bed. Because Sam is moving around the room and interacting with a big prop in style of Buster Keaton, the best choice is to use a wide shot to allow room for Sam's movement and capture the bed inside camera frame.

As an addition to the camera work, the sequence is a continuous shot from one camera angle. If there had been a change of angle in the middle of this shot it would have not made the sequence feel like one complete joke, but rather jokes

that are separated. With one low angle that follows the movements of Sam with a subtle camera move, the events are shown building towards the funniest part of the gag when Sam is swallowed by the bed.

To add more comedy into the scene, the camera could have enabled the audience to see more of Sam's facial expressions during the sequence. Most of the sequence, we see Sam's back until the very end of the scene. To see her facial expressions, the setting, camera, or the action should have been designed differently but it would have made the sequence more comical. However, when we see Sam's reaction after she has unfolded herself from the wall, her reaction could be described as a machine type of reaction. With a machine type reaction, the character reacts to the situation a way you wouldn't expect. After all the incidents leading to the bed folding into the wall, we could expect Sam to show shock or disbelief to what has happened to her. But in the story, Sam is used to bad luck. Because of this, she is not faced with what happened. For the audience, that is surprising and funny.

In terms of visual comedy, we can study character personality and character reactions. More exaggerated the character and their reactions more laughter is created. In the gag, Sam presents more neutral reactions and personality traits. This sequence could have reached more comical effect by presenting more exaggerated reactions or personality traits of Sam.

In terms of slapsticks, the sequence follows the guidelines of how a character can showcase pain or injury. When Sam ends up folded into the wall with the bed, in reality, this could hurt a person, but here, when the bed has been pushed back open Sam is unharmed and showing no realistic pain nor injury. This keeps the scene light-hearted and focused on the comical aspect of the scene.

When examining voice work, Sam's voice isn't heard apart from few gasps or grunts. A funny character voice or more exaggerated audible reactions during the gag could have made this sequence more comical. In terms of audio, the audio itself isn't used as a source of comedy. In my opinion, the sounds of a leaf blower could have offered humour if utilised when Sam tries to close the windows. It

would have made more impactful the moment when the second window opens, letting in the leaves and loud noise which Sam tries to shut down again.

Timing in this sequence works together with the music. When we have reached the final part of the joke, Sam getting folded into the wall, the music stops, and no action is shown for a few seconds. This pause gives an opportunity for the audience to understand what happened and have a moment for laughing.

Timing has also been used to pace the action and events happening in the scene. When Sam rushes to close the window, immediately the other window opens. Then Sam steps on a chair, catches the lamp from falling to the ground and then drops on the bed and gets folded into the wall. All of these incidents happen quickly one after the other. Correct timing enables the audience to follow what is happening even if the pacing is quick while keeping the gag interesting and funny. Showing these incidents occurring too slow could have made the scene feel dragging and less funny.

4 PROJECT: CAT VS BURGLAR

4.1 Project idea

For my thesis project, the idea of translating written comedy into visual medium came from my work as a pre-visualization artist in the animation industry. I have been working in the industry for almost two years, first starting as an intern and continuing as an employee. Occasionally in my work, I had to read a script and translate the script into visual format to illustrate how the written story would look like on the screen. In this workflow, I found comedy parts of the story the most challenging to visualize. This inspired me to have it as a topic for my thesis.

For the project part of my thesis, I wanted to recreate similar situation where I would translate a script into visual format, first by writing a script and then making it into an animatic. Animatics are videos made from storyboards, individual drawings of the story, which are played one after another in a video format like an animation. Animatics can resemble well how the story could play as finished product, showing transitions, pacing with optional usage of audio. (Sullivan & Schumer 2013.) This is something I had also created in my professional work.

4.2 Writing the story

Before beginning to create the animatic, I started by writing the story. The story tells of Burglar who breaks into a house in the middle of the day, thinking no one is home, but ends up going head-to-head with an aggressive and loyal house cat. Meanwhile, the owner of the house happens to be asleep in the same room but wearing noise cancelling headphones that play music.

The final length of the script (Appendix 1) ended up being two and half pages. I wanted the story to have little to no dialogue and focus on the visual storytelling as much as possible, and the final version ended up having no dialogue at all.

My research also naturally shaped the story while writing it. One of the things that changed was the role of Cat guarding the belongings of his home. Being reminded of stakes and their importance to a story, I thought that Cat losing a household item didn't bring enough personal stakes to make the story funny. This is why I also added the third character to the story: the old man. Burglar was going to steal a picture frame holding a picture which shows the deep love between Cat and the old man, and that, I feel made the situation more personal and important to Cat.

Adding the owner of the house also helped to bring more tension to the story, tension being an important factor in comedy as learned in earlier chapters. The presence of the owner and the possibility for him to wake up and catch Burglar heightened the tension. The owner in my mind was resembling something to a ticking time bomb that could blow up any minute if Burglar wasn't careful.

During my research, I came across an often-featured story structure in comedy: rivalry, as named by the author Jonathan Lyons in his book *Comedy for Animators* (2015). My story of a cat who goes against a burglar seemed what would fit into this structure. Distinctive element of rivalry is a conflict between two characters from which the other ends up victorious. The characters are also more or less equal as competitors. Typical difference for the two characters is one being more righteous figure against a character who is a mischief-maker. In rivalry, the conflict can manifest from anything if it is established why the conflict matters to both characters. (Lyons 2015.) In my story, Cat and Burglar are equal parties, visually very different but with unique skills and characteristics that make them challenge one another. Cat, in the story, has the role of a righteous character, fighting to protect the belongings of his owner. Burglar poses as the mischief-maker, disturbing the peace of the house and trying to take what is not his. The main source of conflict is the beautiful picture frame of Cat and his owner in a warm hug. For Burglar, stealing the picture frame would mean earning money, his living, but for Cat, maintaining the frame would mean the happiness of him and his owner.

I also utilized the five-part story structure in my story. The first one, inciting incident, happens when Burglar enters the house and is noticed by Cat. With this event, the lives of both Burglar and cat are changed for the rest of the story: Burglar interrupting the peace of Cat and his owner, and Cat interrupting Burglar's gig.

After the inciting incident comes progressive complications. These complications are the many confrontations of Cat and Burglar over the ownership of the beautiful picture frame. The two wrestles, have a tug-of-war with the frame, Burglar getting hit by Cat and the two making the swivel armchair spin out of control and the wire of the headphones getting spin around the chair and the old man. During these progressive complications, the character arcs of Burglar and Cat take many highs and lows which was explained to be an important difference between a comedy and drama story. In drama, there is one big arc for the character, but in comedy, there are multiple.

After the progressive complications comes the crisis: the old man waking up. The old man waking up creates a moment for Cat to make the old man realize Burglar in the house and thus save the day. Yet, this does not go according to Cat's plan, as the clueless old man falls back to sleep with Cat in his tight embrace which gives an opportunity for Burglar to leave with the picture frame.

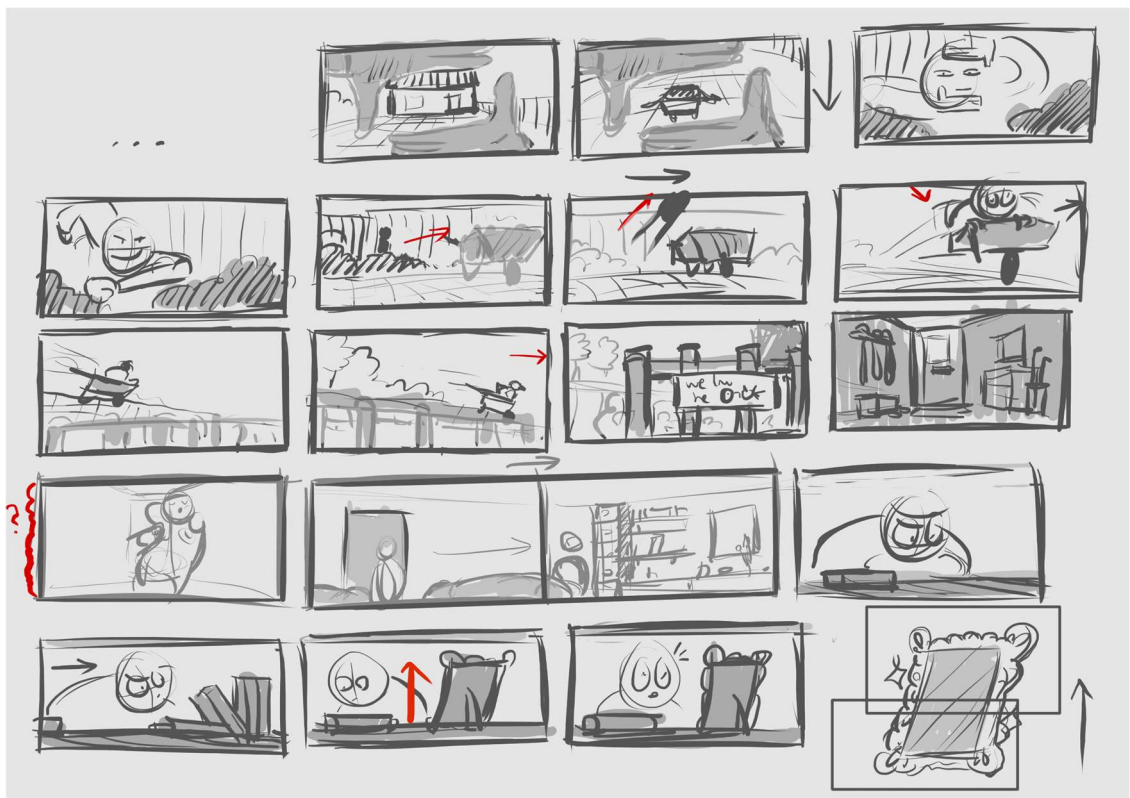
After the crisis comes the climax, the final solution for the story and the characters. This is the moment when Cat, after struggling to get free from the embrace of the old man, attacks Burglar who is about to walk away with the picture frame. Burglar, not knowing Cat has managed to get free, has no time to react to Cat's final attack.

The final part of the story structure is resolution: victory of Cat. Cat, beaten and injured, puts the picture frame back on the shelf where it belongs. He climbs back to the old man's lap while Burglar is tied and gagged to the other swivel armchair with the wire of the headphones. As a resolution, the story has a happy and light-hearted ending.

4.3 Creating the animatic

After completing the final version of the script, I started the work on the animatic. The programme I used to create the animatic was a drawing and 2d animation programme Krita which I had learned to use when working as a pre-visualization artist.

Before starting to create the proper animatic, I drew rough thumbnail sketches of the script. Thumbnails worked as a blueprint for my work and helped me understand how the script would look visually and if everything worked together before committing to final ideas.



PICTURE 17. A section of thumbnail sketches

After drawing the thumbnails, I analysed the ideas with the elements of visual comedy in my mind. This way I tried to realize if there were shots or story points that I could have exaggerated more or find funnier ways to visually convey the story to the audience. At this stage, I revised the script one more time and made final changes according to new ideas I had from thumbnails. For instance, when sketching the scene where Burglar peeks in through the mail slot and then picks

the lock, I realised this moment was relying too much on the audio instead of visuals. Because of this, I added a dog door to the door which Burglar ends up using as a primary source of letting himself in the house.

There were also challenges when visualizing the script. When drawing the animatic, sometimes what was written did not work similarly in a visual format. These instances had a lot to do with pacing or the action and character performance. These occasions reminded me about an interview of a Sony Pictures Animation storyboard artist, Patrick Harpin, who explained that sometimes the storyboard artist has to take freedom from the script and create something novel instead of following the script to the point (Sony Pictures Animation 2014). Instead of feeling there was an error in the script, I tried to think that the script was the foundation that I could use to build the rest of the script visually and made some changes if needed. Similarly in my own work experience, it was not uncommon for writers or directors to change the script after the writing step had ended. This also affected my job when I had to revisualize what was changed in the script. Similar creative flow and way of working could be identified in my project as well.

4.4 Using the elements of visual comedy

In this section, it is explained how the six elements of visual comedy were utilised in my project. Some of the design decisions presented in this section I had already made before I drew the animatic but, as they are part of the visual comedy elements, I talk about them together in this section.

- Characters

When designing the look of Cat, I wanted to showcase his personality in the visuals and aspired not to make Cat look too cute or fluffy because of his feisty attitude towards Burglar. Heart pendant in his collar shows how important he is to the old man and how special their relationship is. When designing Burglar, I wanted him to look very different to Cat. I designed him to be bigger and bulkier and, to give him a unique look, used a classic thief knit cap not only as an accessory but working as his eyebrows.



PICTURE 18. Character designs of Burglar and Cat

Cat and Burglar also showcase differences in terms of their values, personality, and behaviour, which was learned in previous chapters, is important in creating friction between characters and thus more possibilities for comedy. Cat showcases more aggressive and passionate attitude to the situation, whereas Burglar,

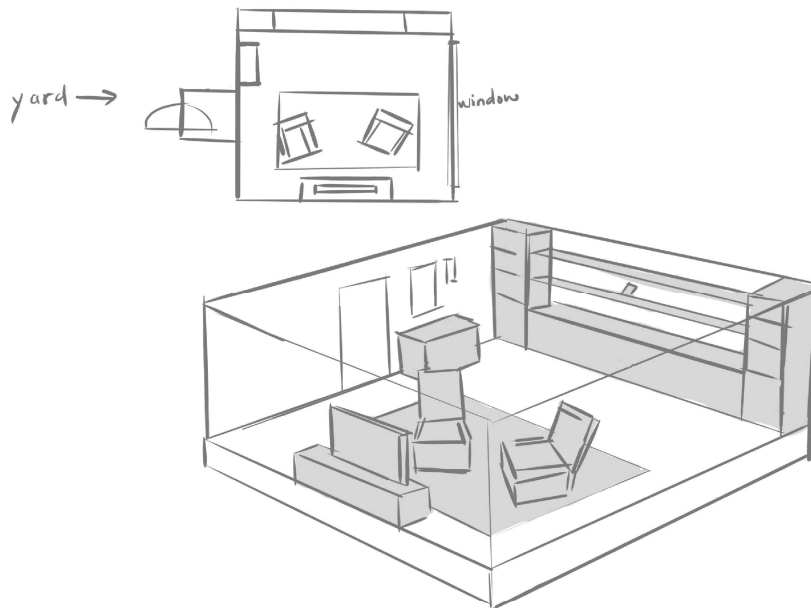
even though capable to fight, showcases more child-like curiosity and behaviour and favours to be stealthy over initiating direct combat at the beginning of the story.

In terms of character reactions and emotions, I aspired to always have the characters face the camera and not be hidden or shown as a profile to convey their emotions in a clearest way. However, when looking at the three possible ways to lower the characters' ideal existence back to reality, and the reactions it can create: child, machine, and animal, this was an area I could have explored more with the character reactions.

- Setting

Knowing I wanted to have the story take place mostly in one location, the living room, and make the living room offer as many visual comedy possibilities as possible. I designed the location from the perspective of props, how they would be placed and how the characters would interact with them. Props in the living room were the two swivel armchairs, the picture frame, and the wire of the headphones. Wire of the headphones showcases multiple ways of using a prop, both in an expected and surprising way: as a way for the old man to listen to music but also to work as a rope to twist around the chairs and, at the end of the story, Burglar. Also in the garden, the wheelbarrow is expected to work in one way but in the hands of Burglar it can turn into a sneaky and fast way of transportation.

Before starting to draw the animatic, I created a location plan of the living room. This is a useful tool to help understand where the characters would be and if there are good and understandable placements for the camera (Pantoja 2020). There was a challenge especially with the swivel armchairs which were a big part of the comedy action. It was important to have them placed in the location so that the action and camera work were possible without for example crossing the camera line during the story.



PICTURE 19. Location plan of the living room

- Slapsticks

In the story and the animatic, I tried to follow the slapstick guidelines which were explained in the earlier section of the thesis. In slapsticks, the characters can get hurt but not show injuries or pain that is too realistic. In the story, Burglar and Cat are fighting and wrestling many times, but either of them shows realistic injuries or pain. For instance, when Cat jumps and knocks Burglar to the ground, Burglar stands up without injuries. Similarly, when Cat and Burglar are wrestling in the background while the old man is sleeping in the foreground, neither of the two get injured. Only times when the characters show injuries are at the end of the story, Cat with one black eye and tangled fur and Burglar being tight to the arm-chair with scratches on his face. I tried to make these injuries more comical and not too serious and leave the way they happened into the minds of the viewer.

Choosing the right target for comedic injuries was also essential part of slapstick comedy. This is why Burglar, the mischief-maker, is the only one in the story that gets hit. At the end of the story, Burglar and Cat have both visual wounds on them, but Cat is never shown being hit by Burglar. Instead, Cat hits Burglar with the picture frame and also knocks him down to the ground as a righteous character.

Slapstick gags can also be visual and not injuring. This could happen by having the character's mind being fixated to something which makes them clueless to their surroundings as explained in the earlier chapters. In the animatic, this type of visual gag is shown when Burglar is shaking the picture frame so Cat would let go. Even when Cat has lost his grip, Burglar keeps shaking the frame vigorously for some time before realising he has got the frame. Even after that, being taken by the victory, Burglar fails to notice that Cat ended up falling into his bag. The old man is also part of many visual gags where he is completely clueless to what is happening around him because of his headphones and being asleep.

- Camera work

It was examined that one gag should be paired with one camera angle, and changing this angle would mean a change to a new gag. This is also what I tried in the animatic. For instance, the gag at the front door does not change the camera angle until Burglar leaves the space. Similarly, when Burglar shakes the picture frame and ends up putting it in the bag with Cat who uses it to hit Burglar, the camera angle does not change until the final hit has happened.

I used long shots and medium shots according to action and the props. When the shots showcased action with the swivel armchairs, for instance when the armchair was spinning and the wire of the headphones was twisting around it, I used a long shot to capture this action. When the picture frame was in the centre of action, I more often relied on medium shots because of the scale of the picture frame, and also because the frame would be in the same level as the characters' faces. This made showing only the top half of the characters necessary, instead of showing them in full with long shots.

- Timing

Timing needed a lot of testing in terms of editing to find how fast the action and the events should occur. Among the fast-paced action, I tried to leave pauses for laughing, for instance when Cat knocks down Burglar and only the picture frame is shown spinning in the air for a moment as the only action.

I also tried to build up the tension with fast paced shots when the wire of the headphones is getting detached from the stereo. I showed the wire getting tight, the plug getting more detached from the stereo and the reactions of Burglar and Cat before the plug detaches. To use the tension for the final impact, the action was paused for a second right before the wire detaches from the stereo. Similarly, when showing Cat preparing to hit Burglar with the picture frame, there is a pause in action before the actual hit happens as a moment of anticipation and to have more powerful impact with the hit.

- Audio

For the audio, I collaborated with a music production student Brandon Emene who created the special effects sounds, background music, foley sounds and character voices. I explained him my wishes and by his request also offered references which I found from already existing animation films. He also inquired if the sound effects would be more realistic or cartoony, and for the final audio, I leaned more towards cartoony than realistic sounds for comedy purposes.

During the creation of audio, it was an interesting challenge to think which parts of the action or gags benefited from a funny sound effect and which parts worked by relying mainly on the visuals. Character voices were another important part of the audio as Cat and Burglar do not speak or have dialogue, but with few grunts and gasps their personalities felt more distinct.

One of the important parts of the audio was the classical music the old man listens in his headphones. When writing the story, I knew the classical music would be essential during the gag when Burglar and Cat are fighting in the background and the old man sleeps in the foreground. This was the first time in the story when the audience would get an insight of the old man's world and how he has no clue about the war between Cat and Burglar. With this contrast, I tried to create a source of comedy.

The animatic can be seen on YouTube via the link:

<https://youtu.be/UwwdjGRNkp8>

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this thesis was to gain a better understanding on how to create visual comedy in animation, a challenge I have faced in my work in the animation industry. Although the end product is of visual medium, the understanding of visual comedy begins from the story and story writing: how to write a comedy script. Surprisingly, a comedy story, with the purpose of making people laugh, is written by using principles and rules of drama for the comedy effect. In addition to drama rules, comedy story needs understanding on basics such as story structure, conceit, and gapping.

After understanding written comedy, the next step was to translate the story into visual medium of animation. To translate the story successfully to a visual medium, gaining knowledge on different elements of visual comedy was needed. These elements included characters, setting, slapsticks, camera work, timing and audio and voice work and how the best comic effect was created when all of these elements were utilized together. Disregarding or lacking in one of the elements can affect significantly how funny the end result is as was discovered in the film case study. To create a successful visual comedy, the key is to find a mixture of correct visual comedy elements that compliment and emphasize each other.

In the practical part of the thesis, the animatic, I demonstrated how capable I was to apply this new knowledge in my work. I was not able to translate the entire script into animatic but, with what I created, I think I was capable to demonstrate my understanding on how to create gags and use visual comedy elements to create amusement. Additionally, collaborating with a music student helped to understand how audio can be utilized to bring out the fun in the story.

For future research, visual comedy elements could be researched even further. Character appearance, what type of features and mannerisms make character visually funny, and camera work and techniques could offer more worthy knowledge. Analysing and case studying more already existing gags in animation films could also offer plenty of material to learn from and adapt in professional work in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. The script

1. EXT. GARDEN OF THE HOUSE - DAY

All seems peaceful in a quiet suburban neighbourhood until a dark figure moves in the bushes at the back of a garden.

A man, BURGLAR, scopes a house from his hideout.

He frames the target with his hands like a picture in a frame. He gives the final last look to his left and right and bolts. He runs to the garden and jumps inside a wheelbarrow sending it to a move. Burglar travels across the garden all the way to the front door of the house, and past a sign on the garden fence that has faces of a cat and a man next to a text saying: we live here.

2. INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Mail slot of the front door opens and Burglar peeks in eyes wide. He closes the slot, then peeks in from the dog door. He closes the dog door and this time his hand comes from the door to reach the door handle. He let's himself in.

Burglar whistles, sweeps his feet on the carpet and waltzes along the hallway inside the livingroom while picking items to his bag.

INT. LIVINGROOM - DAY

In the livingroom, there are two swivel armchairs, a tv and a big bookshelf and a side table. Burglar searches for items to steal and finds a beautiful picture frame.

But then he stops and listens.

He turns around and sees one of the swivel armchairs turn slowly. The turn reveals an OLD MAN, sleeping in the armchair, wired headphones on his ears.

Lovely music plays in the headphones blocking any outside noise. Burglar stares at the resident. He slaps his hands together twice, waits, but the old man stays asleep. Burglar continues to examine the room.

As the old man sleeps, CAT, sleeping on the man's lap raises his head.

Cat opens his sleepy eyes and smacks contently. Then he sees Burglar. His eyes widen as he realizes Burglar holding a beautiful picture frame in his hands. But Cat doesn't care about the frame but the picture inside the frame: Cat and his owner in a loving warm hug.

Cat jumps and pushes Burglar to the ground. He takes the picture frame and places it back on the shelf where it belongs. He swipes dust from it.

2.

Burglar shakes his head astounded and gets up. He goes for the picture frame which Cat is guarding and they start a tug-of-war with it.

We see as the old man, sleeping happily, hears nothing of the war happening behind him. Objects fly and Cat and Burglar scream but all lost in the calm music in the owner's headphones.

Burglar stands up holding the frame and shaking it so Cat would let go off it. Cat loses his grip and flies off screen. Burglar lets a sigh of relief, not knowing where Cat went, puts the picture frame in his bag and throws it on his shoulder. But then he notices a tail coming out of the bag, twisting and moving. Burglar grabs the tail and pulls Cat out. Cat comes out holding the frame and slaps Burglar on the face with it.

Burglar and Cat start a new wrestle of the picture frame but midst their fight they lose their grip of the frame which slides across the floor next to the old man's armchair.

Burglar and Cat leap after the frame but accidentally bump into the armchair. The chair starts spinning uncontrollably around while the wire of the headphones twists around the chair and the old man. The spinning slows down, and Cat and Burglar stare as the plug of the headphones slowly gets more and more loose from the stereo. Burglar is horrified, shaking his head but Cat is smiling and nodding encouragingly.

Then, the plug detaches. As the tension loses the armchair starts spinning in reverse.

Armchair comes to a stop and the old man wakes up eyes wide. Cat jumps on his lap and tries hastily gesture on the direction of Burglar who is lying on the ground holding the picture frame.

Owner smiles at Cat. What a silly, precious creature. He takes Cat to a new, tight embrace and falls quickly back to sleep.

Burglar stands up and puts the picture frame in his bag in a very showy manner in front of Cat: he has won. Burglar walks towards the front door. Cat is desperately trying to get himself free from the embrace of its owner and watches as Burglar walks away.

Before Burglar leaves the living room, he gives a last victorious grin at Cat and turns his back at him.

Cat's eyes are bulging as he struggles - and then - he gets himself free and flies across the room ferociously towards Burglar who has no time to act.

3.

3. INT. LIVINGROOM - DAY

Old man wakes up from his sleep and realizes his headphones are no longer on his ears.

Old man turns around on his chair and sees Cat on the shelf dragging the picture frame and placing it on its place. Cat smiles at the owner with one black eye and tangled fur, barely standing on his feet. Cat gives the owner a shaky thumbs up: he had managed to save the epitome of their loving bond!

The old man smiles at Cat, who, with his last strength, now climbs to the old man's lap.

The other swivel armchair slowly turns around revealing Burglar tied and gagged to the chair with the wire of the headphones. Burglar, face full of scratches, tries to struggle free.

The owner gestures to Cat that his ears are missing the headphones. He starts to look around him. Quickly, Cat digs the side of the seat cushion and takes out a remote controller and shows it to the owner. Owner smiles, nods and Cat puts the tv on.

Burglar flaps his tied hands and tries to struggle free to no effect. Cat turns the tv volume higher. Burglar leers at Cat who stretches and yawns and, together with his owner, falls soundly asleep.

END

Appendix 2. Screenshots from the animatic

