Professional Development Grant (Awarded October 2017) – Final Report

Arkansas Tech University

"An Unfinished Love"

A Stop Motion Short Film

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Restatement of Creative Work

An Unfinished Love is a short film, written and directed by Rami el Harayri. The story follows a man as he falls in love, goes to war, and grows old as his small country town grows into an urban city. Mr. el Harayri is an award-winning filmmaker based in the Netherlands and has acted as a director on the project. He has produced, directed, and written a variety of short films and documentaries, including Behind the Smoke Screen (2013), and Never Too Late (2014). The goal was to complete a stop motion short film based on the script and submit it to international film festivals, with the potential for screenings and recognition across the globe.

As a stop-motion filmmaker, I have led the production efforts on the film and provided direction to a team of Graphic Design and Game and Interactive Media Design students. The project has provided an opportunity for the students to collaborate on a film with an international filmmaker. They've gained experience taking direction from a real-world client and working on a production team. The film equipment purchased with grant funds will stay at ATU and is available for students to use on a range of art, animation, and other projects.

Review of Creative Work

Pre-production of the short film began in October 2017. I provided the director with concept art for the main characters, and a student worker was tasked with producing storyboards based on the script's first two scenes. I took over storyboarding upon the student's graduation, and the film entered the production stage in early 2018.

A total of six puppets, five sets, and various props were constructed for the film. Three student workers were assigned projects to start building puppets and sets in Spring 2018. As part of their job, I instructed them on fabrication techniques for stop motion.

More than 50 shots were filmed for the project. Each individual shot is made up of a series of dozens of photographed frames, taken as the puppets are re-positioned in small increments to portray the illusion of movement. In total, the film is made up of over 2300 frames at 12 frames-per-second.

Digital effects and compositing were also used alongside traditional stop-frame photography. Snow and fire were both digitally added to the film in post-production. Several scenes also needed to be cleaned up digitally, including removing unintentional camera moves and correcting lighting variation between frames.

Having recently completed primary photography, the film is currently in a rough-cut stage. Pending any re-shoots advised by the director, it now awaits scoring and color grading from third party collaborators.

Summary of Outcomes

The project aimed to produce a stop motion short film. Production on the film took longer than the original estimated timeline outlined in the proposal. I worked on the animated visual portion of the film and the director arranged the music composition, editing, and color correction. Once completed, the film will be submitted to various festivals, with the hope of having it shown at a range of venues around the world. Submission dates take place throughout 2019 for the intended festivals. A director hosted pre-screening is being planned for January 20, 2019 in The Hague, The Netherlands (Poster 1).

The project was intended to help a team of student workers gain production experience. I was able to bring on four student workers to help with storyboarding, concept work, puppet building, and set fabrication for the film. The team consisted of students from both the Graphic Design and the Game and Interactive Media Design programs.

The film was also intended to expand the capabilities of the Game and Interactive Design Program and create an opportunity for me to develop additional skills in my field. 3D printing was used extensively during the project, and various designs were developed to accommodate the animation process. A system of 3D printed replacement faces was created to help convey a range of facial expressions. A base digital 3D version of each character's head was modeled and rigged. Each individual facial expression was then animated and divided into brow and mouth shapes. These 3D models were then printed out, painted, and swapped in and out during animation. Some example 3D prints were included in the Art Department 2018 Biennial Faculty Show in Norman Art Gallery (Poster 2). In addition to the faces, 3D printing was also used to produce molds for silicone puppet hands. This implementation of 3D printing has helped combine more traditional art skills with new technology that is relevant to production of interactive media.
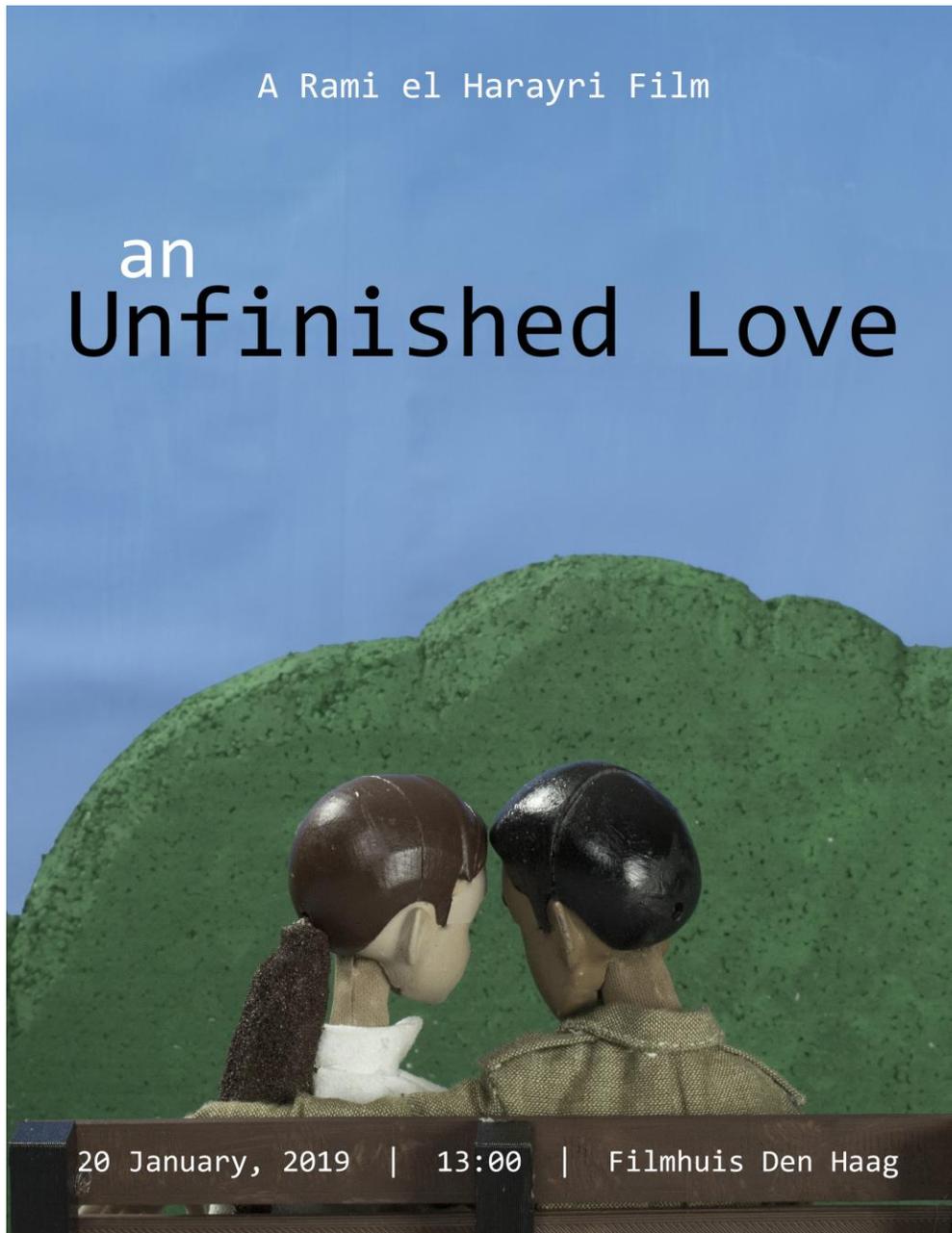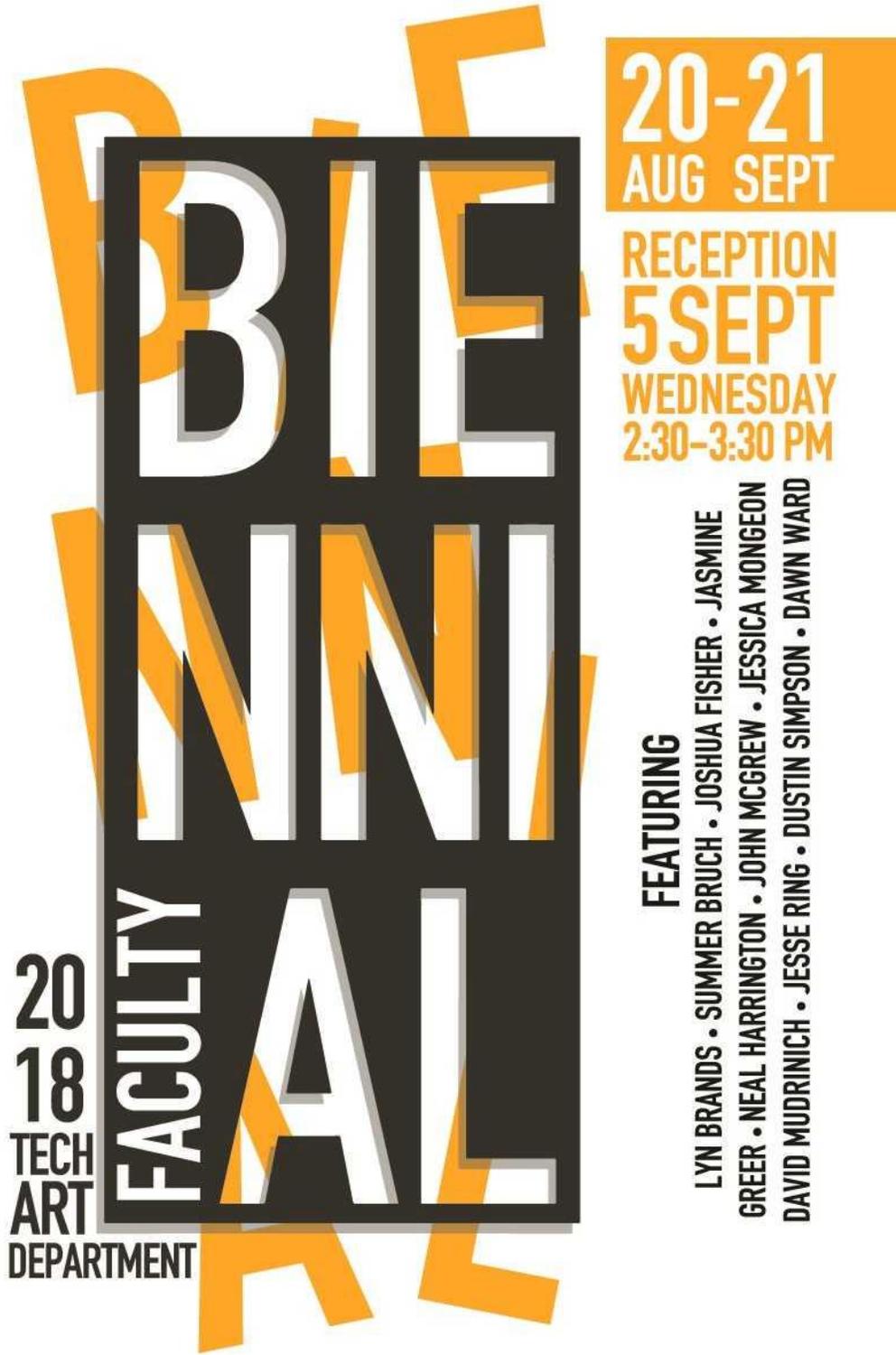
Conclusions and Recommendations

The project was a valuable undertaking in a variety of ways. It provided me with opportunities for professional development in the field of animation and 3D printing. The film gave rise to collaboration with both students and international colleagues. It also provided me with a better understanding of the grant-writing process. In addition, it helped open new potential avenues for the Game and Interactive Media Design program by exploring animation and storytelling with both traditional and emerging technologies.

As the film has not yet been finalized, news of submissions and potential screenings will not be available until 2019. In the future, I will plan out the production schedule to better reflect the scope of the project. I did not account for the extended time it would take to train students, or the reduced student work hours at the end of each semester due to final exams and projects. As a result, I had to complete much of the set and puppet building on my own over the summer break.

It is my recommendation that similar animated film projects be undertaken in the future. There are opportunities for collaboration within the Art Department, across campus, within the local community, and throughout the world. Animated projects can be used to disseminate information, promote content, and tell a wide range of stories. They can be both immersive and interactive, utilizing new and emerging technologies.

Poster 1