

CG Film: Poppy

A Soldier Finds Redemption in the Hell of the World War I

September 28, 2009 - 13:03

Poppy is a CGI drama set on France's western front in World War One. Two New Zealand soldiers are trapped behind enemy lines and are trying to find their way to safety. They find an orphaned baby under its dead parents in a ditch. One of the men wants to save it, the other does not.

Poppy is based on a true events - the writer's great-grandfather was one of the soldiers.

About the Film

Writer David Coyle was 18 years old when he wrote Poppy as a student at South Seas Film and Television School in Auckland, New Zealand. It won a pitching competition where Producer Paul Swadel was a judge. A week later Director James Cunningham discovered and presented the script to Paul. It seemed immediately clear to them both that POPPY should be produced as a short film.

Poppy took 15 months to make. A one day shoot occurred at Weta Digital in Wellington, NZ, (on Peter Jackson's new Motion Capture sound stage), with some of New Zealand's finest actors.

From there Director James Cunningham embarked on a labour of love and made the film with a tiny support crew keeping him company through nearly five thousand hours of post production. He camped out in the spare room at home for most of the year then took over a corner of an office at work, hand-crafting the film with loving detail but always focused on the story.

The driving ethos of the film was to create an emotive, affecting and dramatic CGI animation. The approach James took was to harness the gold that actors bring with their performance to take the CGI short genre into a new realm. Poppy is not cute, quirky or a film for children.

The Director's last CGI short film Infection competed in competition at Cannes, Sundance and 20 other international Film Festivals. Infection is one of the most successful short films ever made in association with the New Zealand Film Commission.

Directors Notes

Can you explain what attracted you to the story?

When I first read the script I had a strong emotional reaction. It is a small story about powerful events. I thought that it could be done well with animation. When I spoke to the writer and he told me that it was

based on actual events, well that was the icing on the cake. I would like to thank the writer, David Coyle, for letting me make his family's story into this film. It is a great story that drew everyone to the project like a rolling snowball.

A gritty drama set in a war zone nearly 100 years ago seems like a strange choice for a CGI short film. Why animation?

This was the first question I had to answer when I first met with the Writer. My answer was:

Poppy is a small and delicate story that is not like most war films. I saw that it needed simplicity and a delicate hand. Animation is all about distilling a subject down to its very essence. Great animation finds the heart of a subject and shows it clearly and simply for all to understand. By taking away all the complexity of a live-action WWI film I felt that the visual stylisations of animation could get to the heart of this small story, the heart of it's characters, and make for a stronger film.

There's another reason too, and it's that I think the medium of CGI has a lot more potential beyond just animations for kids and visual effects pyro-technics. When partnered with strong stories and great acting it opens up possibilities in telling stories that might otherwise be too difficult or not possible at all. I would like to push those boundaries.

How did you arrive at the visual style of the film?

The biggest problem to crack was finding the right look for the world of Poppy. So many decisions to make. What should the characters look like? How real? How much detail, how stylised...? Our initial concept sketches were quite gestural and rugged. This felt right for the tone of the story and what it was about. I started to look for the visual 3D equivalent of these sketches. Rodin was the answer, especially his later expressive bronzes. His amazing sculptures were like sketches but in solid form. That became the inspiration for the chiselled carved look of the characters. The key thing this does immediately is define the film as not trying to look real'. Through exaggeration I have enhanced the characters and story. The set design was also about finding the right balance between realism and stylisation. The close-up sets, the ground that characters touch and sit on, needed to be more realistic than I first expected. It needed that to give the characters more weight and presence. However, the distant background sets were able to be quite stylistic, like theatrical back-drops.

The idea of exaggeration was also used when designing the main two characters of Paddy and Jack. We sketched caricatures of the actors which we then used as templates for building our 3D head models. And the final characters look quite a bit like the actual actors. Authenticity comes through facially, and also in the transposing of the actors performances onto the digital heads. I am very excited by the final blend of realism and stylisation.

Most CGI films don't have a shoot at all. And this was your first experience working with actors?

Working with actors was a big challenge but great fun. My producer Paul was almost a co-director through a lot of this. We worked well together as a team through rehearsal, working ideas with the actors, testing the script, finding new nuggets to dig out and develop. I remember during rehearsals, watching these great actors using a golf club and an umbrella as rifles. Matthew Sunderland won Best Actor in New Zealand's Film Awards and here he was, pretending he was in a muddy ditch / down the back of a sofa / on the western front of WWI. The cast were completely convincing and I was blown away! And relieved. I

suddenly realised that I could hang the entire film on their performances. The shoot itself just went incredibly smoothly. The actor driven process was lots of fun, and for me, that was where the film was made quite different from just me all by myself in front of a bank of computers.

How did the more traditional actor-driven approach integrate with the digital process?

There are animators out there that say that motion-capture is cheating. I don't subscribe to that ideology. I believe in using the right tools for the job. And in this case actors were the way to go. All of the motion in the film comes from performance capture of the actors on a sound stage mixed with key frame animation of their faces and some props. As much as possible we used what the actors provided. The performance capture shoot went incredibly smoothly. We shot the whole film in one day. We had rehearsed enough to get into the zone very quickly and then we could hone and adjust that until we got the gold. The great thing about motion-capture is being able to work an entire scene all at once, not having to set up for different angles and lighting set ups. We had an additional four HD video cameras capturing reference footage for us to edit with. We then used that video as reference for the facial key frame animation we did later. Key frame animation comes down to selecting the key moments of the actor's performance and recreating those in our 3D head rig. That distillation process tends to amplify and exaggerate. Mixed with the full body motion-capture, and performance sound-recorded on the day, it has worked well for this story. We have completely created a world, and the characters in it but the intensity and subtlety of human performance drives every frame of Poppy.

Director Biography

James Cunningham has written, directed and animated three award winning theatrical shorts before Poppy.

Infection competed in competition at Cannes International Film Festival 2000, Sundance Film Festival 2001 and 20 other international Film Festivals. Infection is one of the most successful short films ever made in association with the New Zealand Film Commission.

Delf was selected for the Saatchi & Saatchi new directors Global showcase in 2000 and won numerous awards. Delf is an acronym for digitally engineered life forms.

Blinder was released theatrically in New Zealand. All of these films explored James' vision of what programs, as characters, might look like within computers and digital space.

James is Head of 3D at one of New Zealand's premiere Post Production houses, Digital Post where he leads a team working on Visual Effects for local and international TV Commercials. Prior to this he was a Technical Director on The Lord of the Rings at Weta Digital Ltd.

He has a Bachelor of Fine Arts in photography and a Master of Fine Arts in digital animation from Elam School of Fine Arts (Auckland, NZ).

Producer Biography

Paul Swadel is a New Zealand film Producer and Director. He has nurtured a filmmaking partnership with James Cunningham that spans 16 years and three globally successful short films.

He has directed and produced many successful short films which have screened in competition at Cannes, Venice, New York and Sundance film festivals to name but a few. As a TV Commercial director

he has done award-winning work for Sony, Nike and had his Playstation work picked up globally.

Paul is a Co-Executive Producer of Headstrong with Ant Timpson and Leanne Saunders. Their feature film *The Devil Dared Me To* has its world premiere at SXSW and screened at over 20 International Film Festivals. Their second feature film *A Song Of Good* began its festival run with a World Premiere at Rotterdam Film Festival. It garnered 5 nominations at the 2008 New Zealand Screen Awards, and won a Best Picture Award.

Paul has also directed a significant number of award-winning art documentaries around the world. He has a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Film from the University of Canterbury and a Master of Fine Arts in Intermedia, from Elam School of Fine Arts (Auckland, NZ).

Production Company

Supercollider Ltd is a filmmaking partnership between James Cunningham and Paul Swadel that spans 16 years and three globally successful short films.

Their Film *Infection* competed at Cannes International Film Festival 2000, Sundance Film Festival 2001 and 20 other international Film Festivals.

Paul and James are developing several feature film projects in which they intend to utilise and extend the performance capture process used in *Poppy*.

Projects include an indie CGI film titled *Marshal* with Executive Producer Mark Ordesky, (also Newline Executive Producer of *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy).

More Information at www.poppyfilm.com. Image and Video Courtesy of James Cunningham