



THE DAM KEEPER

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TEACHING THE FILM:

The Dam Keeper is an animated short film about a young pig with a big responsibility. He is mistreated by his classmates and he has a misunderstanding with his only friend, "Fox." A class screening of **The Dam Keeper** will encourage students to think about their own values, their impact on others, and who they would like to be. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film provides an introduction to the core concepts of media literacy, prompting students to analyze the creation and development of animated characters, and to examine the building blocks of good storytelling.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **The Dam Keeper**.

Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

ABOUT THE FILM

The Dam Keeper, an original animated short film by feature animation artists Robert Kondo and Dice Tsutsumi, tells the tale of a young pig encumbered with an important job, and the meeting of a new classmate who changes everything. A first-time collaboration between some of the most talented artists in animation, The Dam Keeper made its world premiere as an official selection at the 2014 Berlin International Film Festival and made it's US premiere at The New York International Children's Film Festival. The film was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Animated Short.

Set in an uncertain future, one small town's survival is solely due to a large windmill dam that acts as a fan to keep out poisonous clouds. Despite bullying from classmates and an indifferent public, the dam's operator, Pig, works tirelessly to keep the sails spinning in order to protect the town. When a new student, Fox, joins Pig's class, everything begins to change.

{ Robert Kondo and Dice Tsutsumi (USA, 2014)
18 minutes, English, Grades 1-6 }

Recommended Subject Areas:

Arts/Media
English/Language Arts
Elementary School
Middle School
Group Agreements
Restorative Practice

Key concepts / buzzwords:

Allegory
Animation
Bullying
Community
Drawing
Emotions
Empathy
Friendships
Kindness
Metaphor
Responsibility
School
Storytelling
Values

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING LESSON AND DISCUSSION:

- 1) What is animation?
 - What animated films have you seen before?
 - How is animation different than live action?
 - Who are the characters that you like best in animated films?
 - Make a list of your favorite animated characters and write their names on the board.

- 2) As a class or working individually, choose a character from the list and complete the CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT WORKSHEET, located in the Supplemental Resources section of this guide.

- 3) Making an animated film is a process of storytelling, character development and drawing. Watch [Making The Dam Keeper](#).

- 4) In addition to drawing characters and their world, an animator needs to take the characters through a story.
 - What makes a good story?
 - Use the STORY DIAGRAM WORKSHEET, in the Supplemental Resources section of this guide, to diagram the story of your favorite animated film.

HOW DO THE KIDS AT SCHOOL TREAT THE PIG?

POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION:

Reactions, Characters and Story

- 1) How did **The Dam Keeper** make you feel?
 - Did you like this film?

- 2) Who were your favorite characters in the film?
 - Could you relate to these characters?
 - What do you think life is like for the hippo and the rabbit after school?

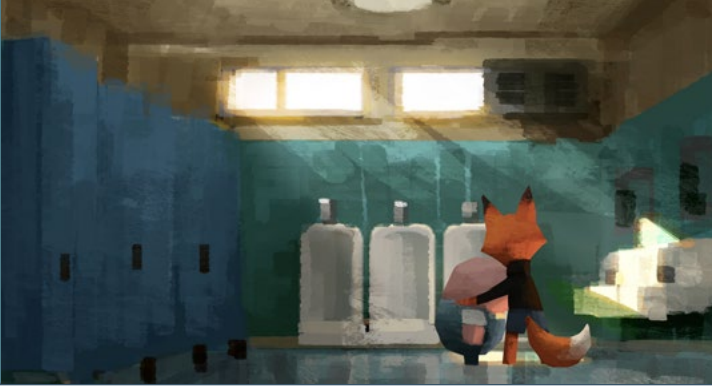
- 3) What is **The Dam Keeper** about?
 - What happens in **The Dam Keeper**?
 - Summarize the film for your classmates.

- 4) Describe the world of **The Dam Keeper**.
 - What is their school like?
 - How is it like or unlike your school?
 - What is their town like?
 - Is it a place where you would like to live?

- 5) How do the kids at school treat the pig?
 - Why do you think the hippo and the rabbit bully the pig?
 - What does the teacher do?
 - Do you empathize with the pig?
 - What is the difference between sympathy and empathy?

- 6) How is the fox different from the other kids at school?
 - How do the pig and the fox become friends?
 - Why is the pig so upset when he thinks that the fox is making fun of him?

- 7) The Pig has an important responsibility, which he neglects after a conflict with the fox. Do you think this is okay?
 - How does he feel when doesn't do his job?



Context and Meaning

- 1) What happens to the town when the dam overflows?
 - What do you think the pig means when he says: Dad told me that the job of the dam keeper is to keep the darkness away?
 - What do you think “the darkness” is?
 - Can you think of any other meanings for the darkness besides pollution?
 - Can you think of any symbolism or metaphor in the dam and the darkness?
- 2) **The Dam Keeper** is a fictional story set in an imaginary world.
 - Do you think that there are any connections or parallels between the world of **The Dam Keeper** and the real world?
 - In what ways are the animals like human characters?
 - How do the feelings and emotions that you see in **The Dam Keeper** compare to feelings and emotions that real people experience?
 - Why might a storyteller choose to talk about real feelings in an imaginary setting?
- 3) Was this a good film to watch as a class?
 - Would you recommend that other students watch this film? Why or why not?

Style and Message: Reading the Film for Media Literacy

- 1) What do you notice about the animation in **The Dam Keeper**?
 - Did you like the style of the drawings?
 - Have you seen other films that look like this one?
 - What was special and unique about the animation in **The Dam Keeper**?
- 3) What sounds did you hear in **The Dam Keeper**?
 - What did you think of the narration?
 - Why do you think there was no dialog in the film? Was it difficult to understand what was happening without dialog, or could you follow the story from the pictures?
- 4) Do you think that there is a message in **The Dam Keeper**?
 - Is there anything that we can learn from this story?
 - Why do you think that the writers and artists who made the film chose to focus on the character of the pig?
 - What lessons or feelings do you think the film’s creators want you to take from the story?
 - If you were to continue **The Dam Keeper** story, what would you change?

WHY MIGHT A STORYTELLER CHOOSE
TO TALK ABOUT REAL FEELINGS IN
AN IMAGINARY SETTING?



POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Character Development Lesson with Dice & Robert

Dice and Robert give a presentation about how they created the characters in **The Dam Keeper**.

Character Development Assignment

Create a fictional character that can change the world of **The Dam Keeper**:

- 1) Students tape paper to their backs using masking tape.
- 2) Using magic markers, they walk around the room and write something positive, defining and memorable about each of their classmates on that classmate's back.
- 3) Students return to their desks and read their classmates' comments.
- 4) Students copy some or all of these characteristics into the defining traits section of the character development worksheet.
- 5) Students complete the worksheet in class or for homework:
 - In the physical appearance section, write the name of the animal that will represent you.
 - In context, write about what role your character plays in The Dam Keeper community: where does he or she live? Is he or she in school? Who is his or her family?
 - In conflict, think of a challenge that you have faced in your own life. Write this down as a challenge for your character to overcome.
 - In change, write about how you want your character to learn and grow by the end of the story.
 - Don't forget to name your character!

Draw Your Own Character

- 1) Complete the questions on the top section of the DRAW A CHARACTER worksheet, in the Supplemental Resources section of this guide.
- 2) Use your answers as a guide to help you to draw your character on a separate page.
- 3) Upload your character to Instagram with **#MyDamKeeperCharacter**.

California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- Grade 4: Standard 1.10 Evaluate the role of media in focusing attention on events and in forming opinions on issues.
- Grade 5: Standard 1.8 Analyze media as sources for information, entertainment, persuasion, interpretation of events, and transmission of culture.

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm

Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- [Reading Literature Grades 1-5](#)



MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

MEDIUM	<p>All Media Is Constructed. How is the message delivered and in what format? What technologies are used to present the message? What visual and auditory elements are used? What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?</p>
AUTHOR	<p>All Media Is Constructed by Someone. Who is delivering the message? Who originally constructed the message? What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
CONTENT	<p>All Media Is A Language. What is the subject of the media message? What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content? What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response? To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
AUDIENCE	<p>All Media Messages Reach an Audience. Who receives the message? For whom is the message intended? What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message? What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message? How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
PURPOSE	<p>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason. Why was the message constructed? Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How? To what extent does the message achieve its purpose? What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>



ANIMATION OVERVIEW

Animation is a process used to create motion pictures through the combination of still images (e.g., digital graphics, photographs of drawings, photographs of objects, etc.) which, when played in sequence, create the illusion of movement. All television cartoons, for example, are animations, and are made up of thousands of still images (drawn by hand or on a computer) that are played sequentially, along with a soundtrack, to tell a story.

2D Animation Techniques

- Classic animation (e.g., Disney's *The Lion King*, most TV cartoons)
- Rotoscope (e.g., *Star Wars* lightsabers)
- Flip books

3D Animation Techniques

- 3D animation (e.g., Pixar's *Toy Story*, *Wall-E*, *Up*)
- Stereoscopic 3D (e.g., *Avatar*)
- Cut-out / Silhouette animation (e.g., *South Park*)

Stop Motion Techniques

- Claymation (e.g., Nick Park's *Wallace and Gromit*)
- Puppet animation (e.g., Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Coraline*)

The world's most famous animator, Walt Disney, began making short animated cartoons based on children's stories in 1923. In 1928 he introduced Mickey Mouse in the first animated sound cartoon, *Steamboat Willie*, which became an immediate sensation. Throughout the next decade, Disney would add such elements as carefully synchronized music (*The Skeleton Dance*, 1929), Technicolor (*Flowers and Trees*, 1932), and the illusion of depth with his multi-plane camera (*The Old Mill*, 1937), a device that allowed for animated cels to be photographed against a three-dimensional background. Although not the first animated feature, Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) was the first to use up-to-the-minute techniques and the first to receive widespread release. The film's success can be attributed in part to Disney's willingness to use animation to create a profound dramatic experience. He strove for photographic realism in films such as *Pinocchio* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941) and *Bambi* (1942).

The success of television cartoons led to the virtual disappearance of animated shorts produced for theatrical release. Animated feature-length films, however, flourished, especially after the release of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), regarded by many as the studio's best animated feature in decades. Other Disney blockbusters followed, including *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994) and *Lilo & Stitch* (2002).

The development of computer animation was another great advancement in the form and resulted in feature films of astounding visual sumptuousness. In 1995, *Toy Story* was the first film to use only computer-generated imagery (CGI). In 2001 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences added a new Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film. The first recipient of the award was *Shrek* (2001). Other major animated features were *Toy Story* (1995) and *Toy Story 2* (1999), *A Bug's Life* (1998), *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) and *Finding Nemo* (2003).

Retrieved from *Britannica Online for Kids*: <http://kids.britannica.com/ebi/article-198341>



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CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT WORKSHEET

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

What does your character look like?

NAME

Write your character's name here

DEFINING TRAITS

What is special about your character?
What does your character hope for?

CONTEXT & BACKSTORY

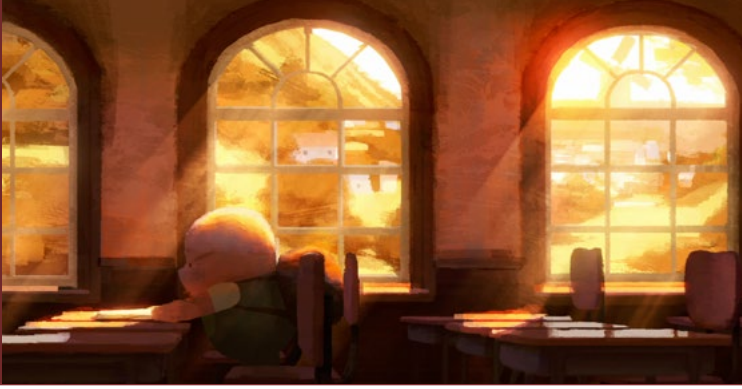
How is your character connected to the story and the other characters?

CONFLICT

What challenges does your character face during the course of the story?

CHANGE

How does your character grow and change?

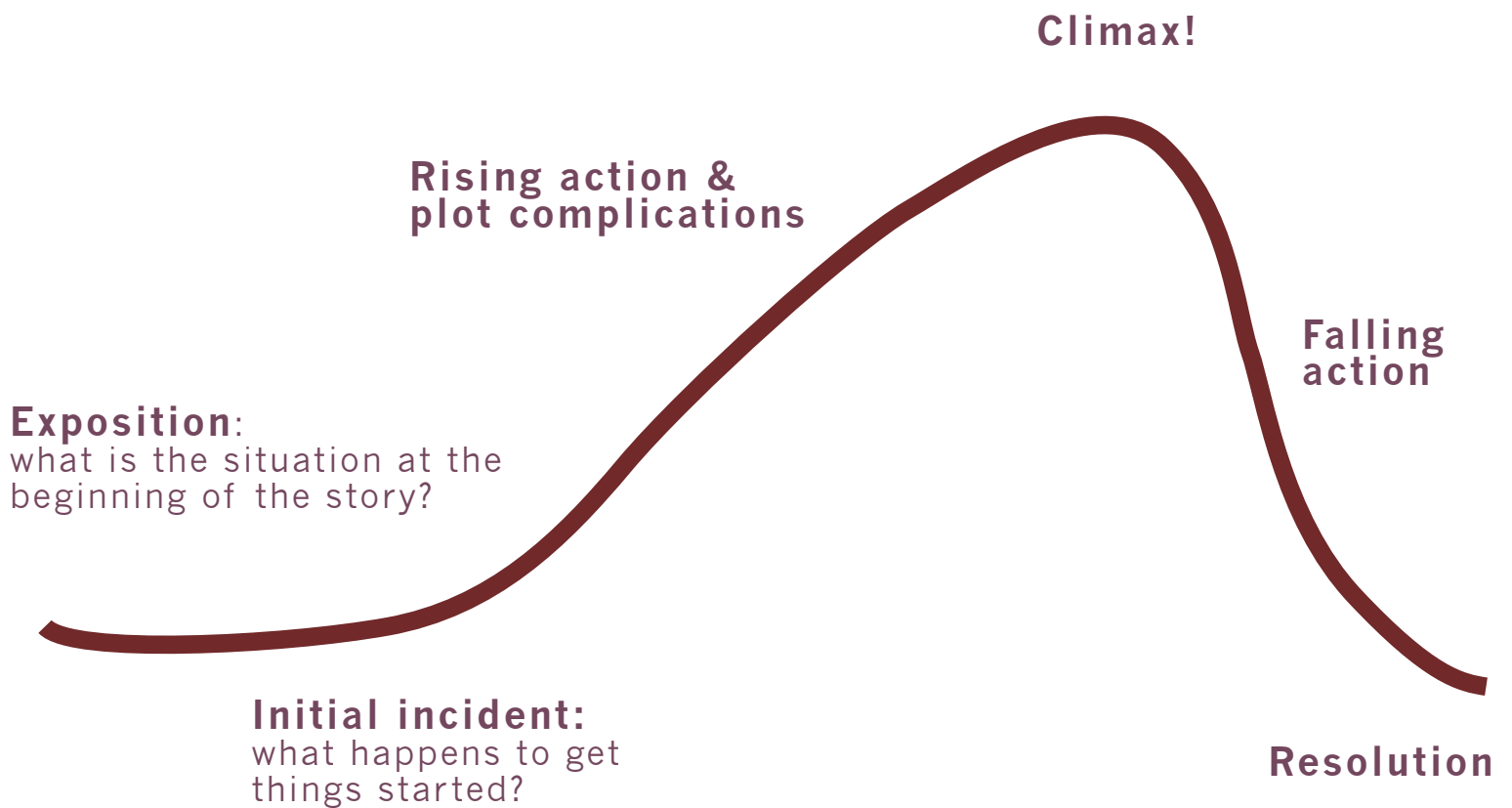


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STORY DIAGRAM WORKSHEET

Use the diagram below to outline the plot of a story





CHARACTER DRAWING WORKSHEET

- 1) What animal is your character?
- 2) Is your character tall or short?
- 3) Is your character big or little?
- 4) What color is your character?
- 5) What is your character wearing? Does your character have a hat?
- 6) Does your character have big eyes? A big nose?
- 7) Is your character smiling?
- 8) Draw your character on a separate piece of paper. Use your answers to these questions as a guideline.



ARTICLES REVIEWS

An interview with Robert Kondo and Dice Tsutsumi



By Dan Sarto | Thursday, December 11, 2014 at 7:12pm
 In 2D, Art, People, Short Films | ANIMATIONWorld

As far as visual development goes, both Robert Kondo and Daisuke “Dice” Tsutsumi have forged careers working on some of the biggest animated features of the last decade. From *Ice Age* to *Horton Hears a Who!*, *Ratatouille* to *Monsters University*, their artistic talents, including art direction, have touched numerous well-known and successful films.

But visual development is only one small part of the filmmaking process. For the two filmmakers, leaving the comfort of their Pixar “home” for the vast unknown of independent animation production has been both rewarding and terrifying. With their new studio, Tonko House, they’ve recently produced their first short film, the intensely beautiful and mesmerizing *The Dam Keeper*. I recently had a chance to speak to Robert and Dice about their

film. They spoke about the need to branch out and become complete filmmakers, to learn to the art of storytelling and in the process, become better artists and better people.

Dan Sarto: Tell me about your new film?

Robert Kondo: *The Dam Keeper* is an 18-minute animated film that Dice and I wrote and directed together. Our idea was to create a moving painting. Our film is about a pig who has the everyday responsibility of saving his town. But the town has no idea of his efforts. Because of his responsibilities, he lives a bit outside of society and is ostracized for it. One day, a fox comes into town and flips the pig’s life upside down, who is now put in a position to either open up to the world, or close down even more. This is our first time directing anything. But it’s been really fun.

DS: That’s certainly a new role for you guys.

RK: Tremendously different.

DS: What’s the genesis of the story?

Daisuke “Dice” Tsutsumi: Because we had never written or directed stories before, we struggled quite a bit. We went through five different stories. The story kept getting too big. We couldn’t tell it in a short format. We kept trying to figure out what to do. Then we found this folktale from the Netherlands, “The Little Dutch Boy,” which became our inspiration. We turned that story into a short film.

From the very beginning, we wanted a story that showed a character changing his perception of



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the world around him. Emotionally, he struggles internally before finding solutions throughout the film. In the end, it's not the world that changes, it's actually him that changes. We weren't thinking about plot or visual style for the film until much later.

DS: 18 minutes is a "long" first film. Was that always the plan, or were you looking to make a five minute film that suddenly became 18 minutes long?

RK: Our commitment was, because it was our first story, not to compromise on the film's quality. We'd do whatever we needed to do for whatever film we decided to make. We had two amazing producers [Megan Bartel and Duncan Ramsay] that supported us that way, letting the story expand where it needed to. In the future, our storytelling skills will get better, so we can be more concise, a little clearer, so we could do a film like this that fits into a smaller box. But, we needed 18 minutes to tell this character's story.

RK: We had been art directing for a long time within big studios, so we thought we knew about filmmaking. We thought we knew how to make a film. But we soon realized we didn't know enough about filmmaking at all. When we started directing this film, there were so many aspects that we had no idea about. We had never been exposed to those things. It's almost like we'd been protected from those aspects of production. It was quite a humbling experience. What we had been doing before was really just one small part of the process.

DS: It was an important part, but in reality, a small part.

RK: One thing we both agree on is we became better art directors after having directed a film. We understand better now what a good art director should do to support the film's director. When artists

are really helpful and when they're just doing their own thing.

DS: How has this made you a better art director?

RK: From the standpoint of understanding context a lot more. Knowing when to provide answers and when to ask questions. As an art director, you're always providing solutions. But as directors, we found some of the most useful times with our team were when they were asking the right questions. Not necessarily questions that needed answers, but questions that helped us solve the problems we were facing at that moment.

We had taken three months off from Pixar to work on the film. Then we went back during the middle of our production. It was a great thing, empathizing with the director. Empathy is a big part of working in these big studios. story, not to compromise on the film's quality. We'd do whatever we needed to do for whatever film we decided to make. We had two amazing producers [Megan Bartel and Duncan Ramsay] that supported us that way, letting the story expand where it needed to. In the future, our storytelling skills will get better, so we can be more concise, a little clearer, so we could do a film like this that fits into a smaller box. But, we needed 18 minutes to tell this character's story.

DS: You both have such storied careers in visual design and art direction. But, you've never really written or directed your own films. Not only that, but you've always worked within the comfort of a big studio system. What have been the main challenges striking out on your own?

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DS: So you've officially left Pixar to form a new company?

DT: We officially left Pixar in July. We were at the best phase of our careers at Pixar. Having a great time. They were giving us a lot of opportunities. But we wanted to make sure we didn't get too comfortable in that situation. Making *The Dam Keeper* was such a difficult project. We were doing something we didn't know how to do. But we grew so much as artists because we challenged ourselves to do something we didn't know how to do. That challenge was almost like going back to school. We both agreed we have to do this for real. Just because we've had successful careers, is this it? Maybe now is the time to expose ourselves to an unknown world.

I have a wife, a young son, a mortgage. Robert is engaged and also has a mortgage. But we had saved a bit of money and said, "Let's give this a try. Now is the time. If we don't do this now, we'll never do it." So we had to leave Pixar. They talked about giving us an extended leave, but we said, "No we have to leave. We have to be accountable for everything we do. We can't still be protected by the studio."

DS: There is certainly a different sense of urgency when you're financing a business on your own. Not everyone can make the transition from a big studio to a small one. They're used to operating with significantly more resources.

RK: One of the other big challenges for both of us was that this was the first time we'd tried writing. We had to learn how to write "and" learn how to work with each other. There was a lot of insecurity



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out there on the table. We both are coming from a world of comfort with regards to who we are and what we're capable of doing. It was hard suddenly to be operating outside our comfort zone.

It certainly tested our relationship. Up until that point we'd never really argued. During our collaborations at Pixar, we generally agreed about a lot of things. Having that first fight...

DS: ...All the good things about a new relationship...

RK: Yah, when you come out of it, it's all good stuff. But when you're in it, uuuuhhhh...

DS: But sometimes it's that negative energy that kicks you in the butt. So what are your plans for this new company? Are you doing production consulting? Are you just focusing on your own films?

RK: Our main goal is to make our own films. We're developing some film and TV series ideas. But we're not just set on film formats. We're inspired by Moonbot Studios. They're all storytellers. They don't just work on films. That's a model we really like.

DT: We also have to nurture our narrative skills. It's not like we're ready to just jump into all sorts of things. But we've got a number of things cooking.

RK: The big thing for us is, "OK, we made one film. We need to get to a second film." In making *The Dam Keeper*, we got addicted to this feeling of absolute terror where we were thinking, "I'm not sure if we should be doing this!"

DS: Tell me about the production.

DT: We had a big crew, maybe 70 people. No one was

full time. We only had a certain amount of time with certain individuals. Kudos to our producers, who managed all these different people who had different amounts of time to give. We knew if we managed that time well, we'd get a lot of great work done. The production was run quite professionally and efficiently.

DS: How long all told did the film take to make?

RK: Pre-production took about one year. Dice and I were working on *Monster's University* at the time. On weekends, we'd write. Our actual production was nine months. Three months of that time we took off from Pixar. The rest of the time...we rented a studio space right across the street from Pixar and were always running back and forth. Morning, noon and night we were there.

DS: I'm assuming a lot of people who worked on this film were colleagues at Pixar?

RK: Yes they were. But we also expanded our social networking and used Facebook to find young painters who had something to gain from working with us. Because it was a volunteer-based project, we wanted to make sure everyone was getting something out of it. We were very clear about that from the very beginning. "What do you want to get out of this? What are you not learning in your day to day that you want to try?" With our paint group, every week we'd get together and paint still lifes. We'd teach people how to paint. That was a big part of our production.

DS: So part of this project involved your mentoring artists working on the film.



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DT: That's how you get the best work out of people. If they're just doing you a favor, you don't always get their best work. We wanted to make sure everyone was gaining something from this project. That worked out well for everyone.

DS: So what are the big takeaways from your first film that you'll bring to your next project?

RK: You can't avoid disaster. That's what we learned. Disaster is always going to be in your path. The challenge is how you respond, how you deal with it. How the two of us communicate during times of disaster is critical. It's not just about work – it's about life. Tonko House [their company] has been about guiding our lives to be something more than who we are now. Disasters seem to get bigger and bigger now. We're on our own now. The Internet goes out. We have to deal with AT&T. That's a huge deal! You talk about the comfort of working at a big studio. Some of things they do are just phenomenal. They have top people in every crevice of what gets done. You easily forget that.

DS: I used to joke that at Pixar, every employee in every position used to be a CEO somewhere else.

RK: [Laughs] That's so true.

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Dan Sarto is Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of Animation World Network.