The Ideas behind *Gopher Broke*: An Interview with

**Jeff Fowler, Blur Studios**

Jeff Fowler is a writer, director, layout supervisor, and animator at Blur Studios. Jeff wrote and directed Blur’s short film, *Gopher Broke*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film. While at Blur Studios, Jeff has served as a Lead Character Animator and Layout Artist for Walt Disney’s *Mickey’s Twice Upon a Christmas*, Blur Studio’s *Rockfish*, and directed animation for the theatrical teaser trailer for Twentieth Century Fox’s *Simpsons Movie*. He is currently working on the Warner Bros.’ film adaptation of Maurice Sendak’s children’s book classic, *Where the Wild Things Are*. Jeff graduated with honors from the Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida, and has won several awards for his own independent animated short films.

**Q: What is the role of the short in industry?**

**Jeff:** Shorts are tremendously useful in animation studios to promote internal growth, both creatively and technically. A short film project offers a vehicle for research and development on a variety of tools and techniques necessary to fine-tune a studio’s production pipeline. More importantly, however, they offer artists a chance to stretch their creative wings. Rarely do production artists have as much input on contract work as they do on a short film; providing a much-relished opportunity to influence artistic direction. Every short film we’ve created at Blur Studio has benefited tremendously from the enthusiasm of its artists devoting long hours and tight schedules to prove their creative mettle. The shorts programs I’ve been involved with have always become a labor of love; an instrument of artistic determination. The greatest, most humbling experience of my professional life has been to witness a crew of friends and colleagues devote themselves fully to seeing an idea of mine through to completion. For helping to bear the burden of
that process, and for their trust and tireless efforts, I’ll always be indebted to my team on *Gopher Broke*. Outside of the shorts programs backed by animation studios, I think short films themselves offer a wonderful opportunity for creative expression to those brave enough to take them on. I’ve known many artists who’ve began short film projects in their personal time as a form of creative release. That being said, I don’t know many artists who’ve actually finished their projects, but they seemed to have enjoyed the experience nevertheless! And why not? Personal short films offer an amazing opportunity to drive your own ship and enjoy complete creative control over a project; notions rarely available in the industry nowadays. It’s hard to go off-schedule or over-budget when there are no schedules or budgets! (Although I’d recommend even personal short filmmakers make some attempt at producing their own efforts!)

**Q: What were your goals when creating *Gopher Broke***?

My goals were to create something simple, something funny, and something I could show to my mother. The simpler the idea was, the more likely I’d be able to keep it under control as a first-time director. In the economic/budgeting sense of the word, simple means as few characters with as few locations/environments necessary to tell the story. In order for the project to be feasible for the amount of artists available, its running time needed to be kept in the neighborhood of 5 minutes or less. As much as we’d all like to live in a world devoid of creative restrictions, it can be good real-world experience to endure external constraints from time to time. In retrospect, I don’t think “*Gopher Broke*” would have needed to be longer than 5 minutes, but left to my own devices, who knows what overly extravagant choices I’d have made? (Rodent chariot races? Three-way gopher/farmer/alien climatic battle?) Some day I’ll release a *Gopher Broke: Redux* edition which will include the scene featuring a gopher arriving in a fantastic time portal from the future in an effort to warn the present-day gopher about his impending failures. Look for it in 2010!! Of course,
as simple as a story like *Gopher Broke* seemed on the surface, there is *always* more complexity to a project than you originally think. (A gopher needs fur, a chicken needs feathers, and a horde of crows needs a LOT of feathers.) Beyond the technical, the process of story wrangling often continues through pre-production and sometimes rears its ugly head in the early phases of production as well. The moral being, your idea will almost always *grow* beyond its original scope, both technically and creatively. (For better or worse!) By starting simple, you allow yourself and your idea room to expand naturally, which is a MUCH more enviable place than committing to a large and convoluted idea which you may ultimately be forced to slice and dice for one reason or another. (*Money, time, resources.*) Better to start simple and build! As far as the remaining goals of “something funny” and “something I could show to my mother,” you don’t know my mother well enough, so you’ll just have to take my word that she enjoys small rodents performing broad physical comedy. That leaves the goal of “something funny,” which is actually an easy item to explain. Comedy is so subjective; you really can’t do much beyond trying to amuse yourself. Here’s the tricky part, though; the gags and comedy will be the first thing to dry up in your well of enthusiasm . . . how funny is a joke the 300th time you’ve heard it? My point being, as a filmmaker you’ll numb over quick—show it to friends to reinvigorate your confidence in the material! Since we’re on this whole business of goals, it’s definitely a great idea to set a few for yourself if you choose to undertake a personal short film. Combine short-term with long-term, (I want my main character designed by, I want the story reel finished and ready to be presented by). Even if you miss your deadlines, you’ll most likely have made better progress because of them!