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Q&A
Salman Khan

Putting clay into play

He has put clay animation on a pedestal after *Taare Zameen Par*. **Dhimant Vyas** explains the process he adopted for the film



Clay animation that was used effectively for *Taare Zameen Par* sequence

Project

I had shown Aamir Khan some of my work, which he had appreciated. Later when he decided to use animation for *Taare Zameen Par*, he approached me. Initially he wanted to use the classical animation style but I suggested we try the clay animation technique and showed him some samples. He liked it a lot and gave me the go-ahead. Aamir wanted a beautiful and polished effect that we tried our best to deliver. The elements are bright and colourful, just the way a child's world is, nevertheless it flows smoothly into the story. It is not animation just for the sake of animating something. There was a purpose and that was to carry the story forward. It is a subtle way of giving the audience a glimpse into the child's inner world and the animation captures that perfectly.

Concept for animated sequences

I visualised the entire sequence. I first presented a couple of concepts to Aamir that we discussed and finalised before beginning the actual animation. We had a very narrow deadline of a month and a half to complete the entire animation from concept to modelling to execution and compositing. I showed Aamir the storyboards. We removed some elements, added a few others. On the whole it was an enjoyable process. I had three model makers working with me including Arvind Chudasama. The cinematography and lighting was done by Satya Prakash Rath who has worked on stop motion projects before so he has the experience to handle this kind of work.

Title sequence

The title where the name of the film *Taare*

Zameen Par morphs from English to Hindi to Urdu, the movement of the octopus, fish and parrot was shot against a blue, red and then a green screen placed under the glass. The team at Tata Elxsi composited those shots.

Process

Vaibhav Kumaresh's Vaibhav studios handled the 2D animation while Tata Elxsi worked on the CG animation as well as the visual effects and compositing besides putting credits on

the sequence and adding some effects in my clay animation sequence. The three teams were working simultaneously but in isolation from each other. Aamir and his production team were the contact points.

Technique

I use my own technique, which I call embossed clay illustration. It is different from typical clay animation, as the clay figures don't stand upright but are laid out flat on a smooth surface. It is technically easier to animate in this manner as it requires less planning than when armatures are used. Light is used to give the 2D surface the look and feel of a three-dimensional one. The illusion of depth comes from the play of light and shadows. But the light has to be planned carefully or else it will throw unnecessary shadows. This steals the volume. So the challenge is in creating a model that looks three-dimensional under the camera. You have to cheat a lot. When you look at the model by itself, its shape looks odd but when looked at through the camera lens, it is perfect. The camera is set up to film the animation from the top. We used two cameras - a webcam to check the animation frame by frame and another Canon digital SLR for capturing the final hi-resolution stills.

Challenges faced during animation

A very important thing while animating is to be able to maintain correct timing. Each element has a different speed and a unique style of motion. Sometimes, one shot had 20 to 25 things moving. For example, there was a scene with two groups of fishes. One small mistake means everything needs to be redone. To add to that, there was a very tight deadline. But timing is something that you learn with experience. There were no cuts in the three minute sequence. Sometimes we used morphs, other times there were pans, but the flow was always continuous. It was physically stressful but creatively most satisfying. I thoroughly enjoyed animating it.

■ Ashish Mitra



Aamir overseeing filming of the animation with Dhimant Vyas