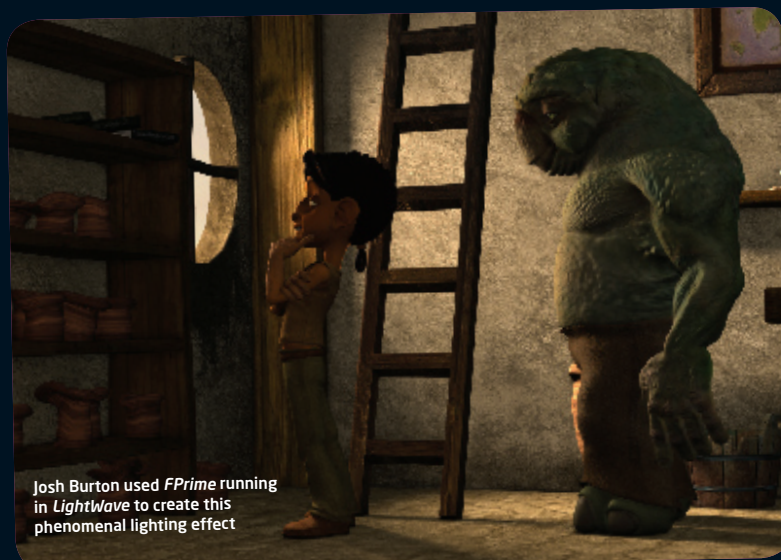




Specular and bump maps sell the illusion that the apprentice character is working with wet, messy clay



Josh Burton used FPrime running in LightWave to create this phenomenal lighting effect



## SHOWREEL



## THE PITCH

## SYNOPSIS

A young apprentice learns the mystical arts under the tutelage of an ancient potter

## LOOK OUT FOR

- 0:46 The apprentice mimes his willingness to learn
- 1:08 The apprentice wants to run before he can walk
- 1:27 Subtle exasperation
- 3:25 The potter breathes life into the clay ...
- 4:21 ... as does the apprentice
- 4:30 Clay has a mind of its own
- 6:03 Now the potter moulds the apprentice
- 6:33 Finally, the apprentice masters the clay

## SEE ALSO

- *The Dark Crystal* (1982) Jim Henson
- *Little Red Plane* (2002) Shadedbox
- *The Mantis Parable* (2005) Josh Staub

## THE POTTER BY JOSH BURTON

Modern student films need proper pipelines. This biblically inspired short required its own production forum, outsourced rendering, and even a dedicated effects TD!

**B**acked by strong design, storylines and execution, student films are improving in quality at a staggering rate. Produced in early 2005 by a group of students at Savannah College of Art and Design, Georgia, the animated short *The Potter* is an excellent example of the standard these films can attain - and of the kind of production pipelines they now demand.

"*The Potter* started as a simple concept from a verse in the *Book of Jeremiah*," says the film's director, Josh Burton. "He was talking about people being clay in the hands of God. My thought was that if the clay is alive, it may not necessarily be very cooperative with its maker." This notion grew to form the story underpinning *The Potter*. Over the course of the short, the clay proves to have a mind of its own, even as the apprentice himself comes to be moulded by eponymous potter. This charming metaphor gives continuity to the entire film without ever becoming heavy handed.

The designs of the two lead characters came early in the process, being the product of a larger story that Burton has had dancing around in the back of his head for a few years. As he explains, the apprentice and his master are different species for a specific reason: "I didn't want them to be mistaken for a father and son. The potter character was always turtle-like in my sketches. He was to be ancient, wise and infinitely patient - and for whatever reason, that always said 'turtle' to my pencil!"

One secret of the short's success is that it is told through mime. "Originally, I had a good bit of dialogue," says Burton, "but Jeremy Moorshead, the professor in my concept development class, kept pushing me to tell the story without words. I'm grateful that he did, because it makes for a stronger story." The mime lends the film a light touch, whereas dialogue could have turned it into something didactic and less interesting.

## FINDING RECRUITS

To bring this ambitious project to life took a ten-man team. Burton began assembling the key personnel after a brief meeting with Benjamin Willis, who subsequently became one of the project's animators. The rest of the team broke naturally into areas of specialisation. One member, for example, needed to devote their time solely to visual effects. It was an important post to fill, as there are a number of key scenes in the film that hinge upon the quality of the VFX work. Luckily, Burton had a budding technical director in mind.

"Jon Campbell took weeks of asking. I think it was because he had no idea whatsoever how he was going to do what I wanted. In the end, he agreed, and he did an outstanding job." So outstanding, in fact, that *Ice Age* creators Blue Sky Studios snapped Campbell up upon graduation. Yet one of the remarkable things about *The Potter* is that, while it features effects so prominently, it still manages to be about the characters - it isn't simply a showcase for digital techniques.



The apprentice gets his first glimpse of the potter's magic. Rim lighting helps pop the midground character off the background



Lighting set-ups also took into account the complex VFX that would be added



Burton now had his story, his characters and his team lined up, but he knew that, before he could proceed, he needed to figure out just how they could get the job done. "The project was a major growth experience for me. I've worked on group projects before as a team member, and have led small teams in freelance jobs. But organising *The Potter* was a completely new arena."

Accordingly, Burton spent time seeking advice from people he knew in the field, and reading anything he could find that discussed the production process. "In the beginning, I spent a huge amount of time on organisational matters: naming conventions, file referencing and production documents, with detailed notes for the different project members," he says. "I wanted to make this as professional a pipeline as we could manage with our limited experience, and I think doing that made a huge difference to the final result."

Managing the team became almost a full-time job in itself. Since the project's members were working at home and at school, Burton set up a private forum where they could discuss the project and give each other feedback as the short developed. This method worked successfully right up to

## "THE POTTER CHARACTER WAS TO BE ANCIENT, WISE AND INFINITELY PATIENT. THAT SAID 'TURTLE' TO MY PENCIL!"

JOSH BURTON, DIRECTOR

postproduction, when Burton switched to simpler means. "It was mainly [compositor] Will Atkin and I going back and forth on tweaks, and instant messaging was much more practical."

As well as a sophisticated production pipeline, another similarity with commercial projects was the need for a proper render farm. Towards the end of the schedule, there were renders going not only at Burton's home and in those of various team members, but at ResPower, a web-based rendering service to which Burton is extremely grateful. "They have my deepest thanks. They gave us the last push of rendering power that enabled us to finish in time for a Siggraph submission, which was the project deadline we were trying to meet."

Ultimately, for all of its artistic quality, Burton attributes the success of *The Potter* as much to the logistical skills he learned during its production process as to its storyline or characters. "When we got to the end of the project, we had more than 20,000 frames to organise and set up for compositing. Knowing where things were, and at what stage, was vital to finishing the project on time – or at all, for that matter!" ●

### WATCH THE MOVIE

You can view the entire short film at [www.the-potter.com](http://www.the-potter.com), which includes concept art, storyboards and Josh Burton's production blog. You can also see it on the *3D World* website.



### RESUME

#### NAME

Josh Burton

#### AGE

27

#### WEBSITE

[www.joshburton.com](http://www.joshburton.com)

#### BASED

Chicago

#### CAREER HISTORY

- 2000-2005  
Creative Director,  
New Eyes Media
- 2005  
BFA Degree in Animation,  
Savannah College of Art  
and Design, Georgia, USA
- 2005-present  
Animator, Midway Games



Burton decided on mime for *The Potter*, which worked better than dialogue

### SEND IN YOUR WORK

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