

## PenStevens: Making *Tied down*

I have been asked to give a personal account of the process of putting an animation together.

I'm pretty much at the apprentice level as regards this craft. I have actually only made one complete computer animation. It was a student piece, part of the work required for the [Bournemouth Computer Animation MA course](#). It was partly done while on the course and finished up afterwards. Prior to that? Well, bits and pieces. Sketches, half thought out doodlings in Flash, unfinished computer generated (CG) models made out of barely carved primitive shapes.... That kind of thing. I knew I wanted to do more, but I wasn't too focused about quite what I was trying to do and I was trying to fit it in to the edges around my life.

Quitting my job and committing myself to doing the MA animation course kind of legitimised the practice, took animation out of the margins and put it centre stage. What the course did was showed us how to focus our efforts and took us through the production process - devising the story, making storyboards and animatics, then modelling, texturing, lighting, animating, and post-production tweaking.

So that's the context out of which I made my first little movie. So given the time, access to equipment and to some guidance, what did I choose to make?

dance and leap about.

In the course of her dance she notices a dandelion seed puff (not sure what one calls these really but you see them floating about all over the place in the summer). She playfully tries to catch it but misses and watches it drift up into the sky. This draws her attention to the sun filled beauty of her surroundings. It is the complete opposite of her dreary existence inside the room, and drinking it in fills her with renewed vigour.

[Click here](#) to see the dandelion puff sequence (please note I have used a much reduced frame rate here to reduce file size for the web, so movement is much more jerky than in the finished piece).

In her dark prison, her ecstatic smile fades as she remembers her true circumstances. As she awakens from her reverie she turns wistfully towards the light streaming through the window, trying to capture her mood of only moments before. But a spider's web is stretched across the pane reinforcing the idea of constraint. Not only that, but a dandelion puff similar to the one that entranced her within her dream is caught fast in its strands. Even the symbols of hope from her dream have been trapped once outside of it. Her head flops down in despair.

I decided against giving any sort of back story to explain why she is in this predicament. I preferred to leave it open to interpretation. I think that the important idea to get across here is that she is constrained. The title of the piece *Tied down* suggests an additional possible reading that she is not simply physically constrained but perhaps psychologically. She is visibly younger in her dream which indicates that her dream is mingled with memory and a remembrance of a time when she felt more vital and less tied down. Her bonds could simply be a metaphor for the constraints placed upon one by the responsibilities and experiences of maturity. Either that or for the loss of physical flexibility that comes with age.

I guess I was aiming for a kind of wistfulness, the sweetness of nostalgia. This became more personal for me when, while working on the animation my Dad became ill and

I chose to not make her completely realistic. I gave her a quite large, round head. It is quite often the case that cartoon characters have larger heads than is normal in relation to the size of their bodies. It increases the cuteness factor, because it is nearer the dimensions of a child. I was not particularly concerned with making Tris cute, but I did want her to look vulnerable and a hint of childlikeness would certainly contribute to that. At the same time it was important that she plainly be a mature woman (particularly after all the comments I got on campus about bondage etc when I announced that she would spend the duration tied up) and so I had to play around quite a bit with the modelling, thickening her body until I felt her shape was right.

Her feet I left bare. Although this meant that I had to model them in more detail than I would have if I'd clad them in simple boots, I felt that naked feet would add to her air of vulnerability.

(Of course, another reason for not choosing to depict her in a hyper realistic style is that to do so convincingly is hard. To achieve something of the gorgeous solidity of Liam Kemp's [\*This Wonderful Life\*](#) would take no mean skill. One must really know the craft. And the more realistic one tries to be the less forgiving an audience will be of imperfections. A little abstraction provides some protection from expectations.)

facial expression

When designing Tris in my sketchbook, I found that it was when I determined the placement of her eyes on her face that she started to feel like she had a personality. I found that placing her eyes quite low down gave her a very melancholy, lugubrious air,

look like she's peering upwards from a head bent downwards. Another character I've

What I did was I tried out some poses in front of the mirror, taped myself doing it with a small video camera and made sketches. This I did, purely because I was the most readily available reference resource for myself. I'm no choreographer and when I had a friend point the camera at me I got quite self-conscious and became rather clumsy. I fared a little better when I employed a tripod but then I kept leaping out of shot. It was all a somewhat faltering process, but ultimately much of the action did get plotted out at this stage. This isn't immediately obvious when one views the animation as the camera angles vary so I thought I would illustrate the relationship by showing some stills here with their corresponding poses from the animatic.

[Click here](#) to see dance animatic

I tried to find poses that would make her look fearful and ill at ease for the first part of the dream. I did some research in front of the mirror but also by reading some books about body language. I had her make several gestures that apparently would've been a dead giveaway about her mood to someone well versed in this. She puts her fingers in her mouth and hides her face behind her hand, tucks one leg behind the other, and hunches her shoulders forward. She also holds herself tightly and rocks, a movement we apparently often make when we crave reassurance. Everything about her is tense.

Then I have her look at her hands and register the fact that she can now move them. Her hands are bent back to expose her naked wrists.

A close-up of her face shows her getting determined to move on and the tightening of her fist shows her stiffening her resolve.

It was hard to decide how her dance should go. I wanted there to be leaping and whirling and big wide expansive movements. She should look confident, her shoulders back, her face wearing cheeky winks and grins.

The feet swivelling move always raised a laugh when I showed people the animatic. I found it a difficult move to achieve convincingly though. It helped when I lent more weight over the toes and then over the heels as she swivelled but I remain not completely satisfied with it.

probably one of the most famous "...and it was all a dream" movies - only the dream is

