Plasticine Animation

After the huge success of the all famous "Wallace and Gromit", plasticine animation has been widely recognised, and is constantly appearing in films and TV commercials...

One of the key points about animation, is patience. If you haven't got any, don't even try to start animating, because you'll just end up pulling your hair out. Unlike normal filming where you film for an hour, and have covered a good 10 minutes of your film, animation is different. From personal experiences, it usually takes about an hour to film about 10 to 15 seconds! You can speed up the process by taking less shots (which makes the animation a lot more jerky) but even so, you still will spend ages filming for only a small snippet of your film. This is why Aardman animations (creators of Wallace and Gromit) take a good few years to produce their finished half hour film! One you understand the work involved, then the first thing you need to know is what sort of camera will do animation.

Before you start learning how to animate, you need to know if your camera is suitable, and if not which ones are.

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The Models

Obviously when you animate, you are going to need something to animate with! Animation models come in all shapes and sizes, and the material varies from each model. Firstly you need to do a few sketches of the character you want to make. When designing, remember that is going to have a fairly sturdy base, (with humans you can give them fairly big feet) because the model will keep falling over if you don't. Think about the kind of movement you need the model to perform. If you are making a character who is very expressive with his arms, then it would be silly to make him with flimsy arms or they will have to be replaced quite frequently.

Inside most of the well known models (i.e., Wallace and Gromit) there is usually a metal "armature". This is shown to the right, and is basically a structure that supports the model when its moving. Unfortunately, for us amateurs the best way is to make one yourself, because prices for proper armatures are in the hundreds.

When I made my first film, I used the well know children's kit "Meccano" for my armature. It actually worked fairly well, as it was stiff enough to hold the models arms and legs up. You may find that when using plasticine to animate, it gets dirty very quickly, so to avoid that use plastic gloves. Also, you will find that unsupported plasticine will not be very well balanced (due to its
heavy weight) so before starting your film experiment with other materials (wire based models covered with foam or cloth are good).

The Sets

When making sets, you rarely need to build them with more than three walls. Three walls is just enough to contain your miniature world of what your filming. Your set must have a firm base, which doesn’t move around. If your set isn’t secure, it will move between shots, making your animation look like a mini earthquake! When designing your set bear in mind the size of your camera. A set is no good if your camera won’t fit inside it! Also, remember to leave enough space to get your models in (whether it is from the top, side or whatever). For a simple room set build two side walls and a back wall from foam or thick card. The furniture and props don’t need to be too elaborate, add simple chairs and tables if they fit your story. (Check local toy shops for ready-made pieces, or make them yourselves from balsa wood).

How To Animate

Animating basically means taking a small shot (or frame), moving the model a bit, then repeating the process several times. When all the shots are finished, the model moves so small and so fast that it gives the illusion that it’s moving. Above is a good example. The finished version is below. As you can see, by taking several fast shots, it looks like the man is throwing the ball. The smoother and more realistic you want the smaller the difference between the two shots has to be. So if you want it to be smoother than this, you don’t move the model so far each time.

Pace is one of the keys to animating. You have to remember about the pace of what your animating, and animate is accordingly. For example, if your model was building a house of cards, chances are you’ll want a slow and smooth movement. If however your model is trying to put out a fire on his trousers, then he’ll be moving pretty quick! How you achieve this is as follows. If you want a model to move slowly and smoothly, take lots of shots, but move the model only a very small distance between each shot. If you want your shot
to be fast and jerky, then take less shots by moving the model fairly big gaps each time. Note how the model to the left accelerates by first taking small gaps (when he prepares to throw) and then slightly bigger gaps (when he speeds up by throwing the ball).