



The Ca' Foscari Experience

Robb Pratt

Director

I work in the Hollywood Animation industry. Throughout the course of a 30+ year career, highs and lows are to be expected - which is true of any career - but perhaps even more dramatically felt in the entertainment industry, where unpredictable trends shift with ebbs and flows as turbulent as the California shoreline. The business is uniquely mercurial - what is hailed as a breakthrough one year can be a failure the next, and what feels like the safe, 'sure thing' often collapses under the weight of audience fatigue or changing cultural tastes. Working in animation, you quickly learn that patience, resilience, and the ability to adapt are as important as technical skill or talent. Even the most gifted artists can find themselves caught in the crosswinds of shifting studio priorities, corporate acquisitions, or sudden shifts in what audiences are drawn to.

There have been exciting times, when the industry is super-creative - characters and stories are crafted that entertain generations. During these periods, the energy in the studios is vibrant. Work is so rewarding and satisfying that long hours don't feel like a burden - they feel like a privilege. Artists enjoy employment and career advancement opportunities, youth joins in the talent pool with fresh ideas and raw enthusiasm, lifelong friendships are made, and the work is done passionately - driven by sheer love for the art. FUN times! Memorable times! The times an artist lives for. Times that an artist can always look back on and be grateful to have been part of. In these eras, you feel like anything is possible - creativity seems contagious and limitless. Collaboration flourishes, risk-taking is encouraged, and studios foster an environment where experimenting with bold, new ideas is celebrated. You see artists inspiring each other, bouncing ideas off one another, and building on concepts in ways that lead to projects that feel bigger than any single contributor. It's the creative equivalent

of catching lightning in a bottle, and when it happens, it feels almost magical.

Then there are times when the industry goes into a 'play-it-safe' mode, afraid to steer away from the latest formula that's led to financial (not necessarily creative) success. During these dry spells, the energy in the studios can feel stifling. Studios focus on replicating the formula, and decisions are made based on what has proven profitable before, rather than what might be artistically daring or culturally relevant next. Unfortunately, even success can be the worst thing for innovation, as it often leads to 'creative atrophy'. Studios won't back creativity because they don't want to lose the grip they have on recent success - a success that becomes suddenly precious and fragile. What worked once becomes a formulaic crutch, and studios become conservative despite their past victories that were earned by being innovative. Fear of failure sinks in. Vision, imagination, and the chance to redefine boundaries are often tossed aside in favor of replicating the same elements that generated success - predictability in favor of creativity. Yet what seems safe for business can feel suffocating to the artists, who find themselves constrained by mandates rather than inspired by challenges. This repurposing of ideas doesn't work for audiences - if they've filled up on one tasty dinner, they tend not to want to eat the same thing right after, especially with their bellies still full. Audiences crave freshness, excitement, and originality, and if the industry fails to provide it, attention drifts elsewhere - even to completely different forms of storytelling.

In my experience, these cycles - of creative abundance followed by cautious retrenchment - shape not just the trajectory of the industry, but the emotional life of the artists themselves. One year you are riding high, celebrated for your contributions to groundbreaking projects, and the next year you may feel trapped, wondering whether innovation is even possible within

the walls of the studio. And yet, this ebb and flow is what makes animation a fascinating and challenging field. It teaches resilience, encourages exploration outside the boundaries of studio assignments, and reminds you that creativity cannot be fully controlled or commoditized. In fact, some of the most rewarding breakthroughs occur precisely because someone dared to push against a culture of safety, to explore a story that no one else thought would succeed, or to experiment with techniques that challenge conventional norms. Without the contrast between the highs and lows, it is difficult to fully appreciate the moments of true creative exhilaration, when risk-taking pays off and audiences respond with excitement, joy, and recognition.

In my career, I've seen this cycle repeat many times over. The patterns of creative highs followed by cautious retrenchment seem almost rhythmic at times, like the tide, coming in and going out with an uncanny predictability. I love to work in a creative industry - there are eras when the work is so fulfilling, the ideas so invigorating, and the collaborations so exhilarating that it feels like being part of something greater than oneself. The energy in those moments is almost contagious - you can feel it radiating through the studio, from animator to animator, from director to writer to designer. One would hope that successful innovation would naturally lead to more innovation, that a breakthrough in creativity would inspire others to push boundaries further, but sadly, this is not always the case. Oftentimes, instead of behaving like a muscle that grows stronger with exercise, innovation can perform more like a well that has dried up. Even when a studio experiences immense success, the very habits and routines that led to that success can harden into rules and limitations, and the freedom to explore the unknown diminishes.

Because of this, I've always been proactive in creating my own work, on the side of my professional career. I've learned that if you wait for the perfect opportunity

within the structure of a studio, it may never come - or when it does, it might be diluted by layers of corporate oversight. Working on personal projects allows an artist to exercise creativity fully and without compromise. A practical advantage of doing personal work is that it sharpens technical skills - I've developed new animation techniques, experimented with software, and tackled challenges that rarely come up in the daily grind of studio assignments. But beyond skill-building, there is a far more essential consequence - it keeps an artist's mind alive, curious, and truly creative. And that creativity is not just a career tool - it is what makes life worth living! It is the spark that drives an artist to wake up in the middle of the night with an idea they cannot ignore, the force that turns an ordinary scene into something magical, and the fuel that keeps the passion for storytelling burning through years of both success and struggle.

There are considerable setbacks when working on your own. The freedom to create comes at a cost: less collaboration, less support, and perhaps the greatest of all challenges for an artist - less visibility. What artist wants to work on something that no one sees? Especially in animation, where the work is painstakingly labor-intensive and time-consuming. To invest that level of effort without assurance that it will reach an audience requires a combination of stubbornness, passion, and faith in the work itself. It is a test of endurance and commitment, but also a test of belief in the value of one's own voice.

In addition to my professional career, for which I am very proud, I've been keeping the creative juices flowing through this personal work, animating fan films of established characters. These projects offer instant gratification in that they come with a built-in audience - people already love the characters, and there is immediate feedback and engagement. There is certainly creativity to be had in working within these constraints - figuring out new stories for known characters, pushing visual boundaries, or reinterpreting

them in fresh ways - but there is also a danger in relying too heavily on what has already been created. In a sense, it is a creative crutch. The originators of these characters went through a process of trial and error, learning to succeed and fail repeatedly, honing their craft and building their audiences from the ground up. By working on existing characters, I was stepping into a world where much of the groundwork had already been laid, where the initial struggles of finding an audience, defining a style, and testing boundaries had already been navigated by others. It was, in a way, a shortcut - a chance to exercise technical skill and storytelling within a framework that already had recognition. Yet I knew that for true artistic growth, I had to move beyond this safety net, to take on the difficult and risky work of creating something entirely new.

So I set out to emulate my artistic heroes - to create something new and unique, to struggle to find an audience, to learn how to fail and succeed as they did - I animated my very own project: *CARMAN: The Road Rage Anti-Hero*. It was exhilarating to step into entirely new territory, to craft a character that had no pre-existing fan base, no built-in recognition, no safety net. Every aspect of the work - from the character design to the animation style, from the story beats to the subtle emotional cues - was mine alone. I was suddenly the sole architect of every decision, responsible not only for the technical execution but also for the artistic integrity of the world I was building.

And then, what had seemed so easy with fan films, suddenly became almost impossibly difficult with original work. It was like rolling a boulder up a hill. The immediate gratification that came with fan films - the instant feedback, the hundreds of thousands of views, the likes, the shares, the comments - was nearly non-existent. With *CARMAN*, it felt like I was shouting into an empty auditorium. I meticulously crafted every frame, refined every scene, and yet the world outside my own personal

studio remained largely unaware. It was humbling, frustrating, and strangely liberating all at once. I pressed on, motivated in part by the words of a colleague who had reminded me, “You have to make stuff because you never know WHO is watching”.

Artistically, the experience was far richer than any fan project could have been. To ‘write a new song’ rather than ‘cover someone else’s’ forced me to push boundaries I hadn’t explored before. I experimented with narrative pacing, with visual humor, with subtle emotional cues that had no template to follow. Every challenge was a lesson. I found joy in moments where a scene worked perfectly, or a line of dialogue landed just right, or a movement captured exactly the feeling I had intended. The work demanded focus, patience, and an unflinching honesty with myself about what was and wasn’t working. There was a thrill in discovering creative solutions to problems that had no preexisting roadmap.

And yet, the struggle weighed heavily. One late night, as I toiled away under the dim glow of my studio lights - late nights are customary for artists - the discouragement began to creep in. I was disappointed at the lack of engagement, at the sense that my hard work was invisible. Despite the hours, the technical feats, the emotional investment, it seemed as though no one was watching. I wasn’t breaking through. I wasn’t ‘moving the needle’. I began to question why I was doing all this work if it wasn’t having an impact. The thought of giving up tempted me - the easier path of returning to a fan film, where instant validation awaited, whispered seductively in my ear. Cynicism, that insidious companion, tried its damndest to take root in my psyche. Confidence, once automatic, now required conscious effort to summon. Each frame I animated felt like a test of my resilience, my patience, and my belief in the work itself.

And yet, even in those moments of doubt, there was something quietly profound unfolding. I realized that the struggle itself - the painstaking creation, the wrestling

with ideas, the failure and small victories - was a vital part of the journey. It was teaching me more than any accolades or audience metrics ever could. I was learning not just about animation, but about perseverance, about faith in one’s own voice, about what it means to create without guarantees. Every late night, every frustrating moment, every seemingly invisible effort was shaping me as an artist in ways that would resonate far beyond the final product.

And then, like a visit from a Fairy Godmother, I got a midnight message from Roberta Novielli from Ca’ Foscari in Venice, Italy. My colleague was proven right - “You never know WHO is watching”. Roberta was watching at the behest of her lovely daughter, Cora. They had seen *CARMAN* and were inspired enough to ask me to visit Ca’ Foscari for their annual Film Festival, much to my delight. Of course, I eagerly accepted the gracious invitation. The sense of validation and excitement was almost overwhelming. It was one of those moments where all the late nights, the doubts, the seemingly invisible work suddenly felt like it had a purpose. Someone, somewhere, had noticed, had felt inspired, and had extended a hand of encouragement.

I was excited for months leading up to the trip - the planning, the traveling, the preparation. Venice, Italy! A true Mecca for creativity - an ideal place for an artist to find inspiration! The architecture so distinct that every turn would feel like stepping onto a movie set. As a huge *Indiana Jones* fan, I was especially thrilled at the prospect of seeing some locations for one of Indy’s adventures!

Upon arriving in town by water taxi - THAT was fun! - I felt an immediate rush of energy and awe. I could see that my expectations were about to be completely blown away. Roberta had arranged for Martina, a Ca’ Foscari student, to greet me and escort me to the University. From the first moment I stepped onto campus, I sensed something remarkable. There was a palpable sense of belonging among the students. They were clearly part

of something extraordinary, a community united by creativity and passion.

On campus, the atmosphere was infectious. The camaraderie between the students and faculty was wonderfully profound and heartwarming – a genuine joy that radiated so brightly. Artists were gathered, all together, feeding off each other’s energy, collaborating, sharing ideas, and inspiring one another. It reminded me of my early days in the industry, when the thrill of working alongside talented peers seemed limitless, when every conversation sparked ideas, and every glance at a colleague’s work was a lesson in possibility. The optimism was tangible, and it filled me with a sense of hope and renewed purpose.

I saw the students helping one another, critiquing work thoughtfully and constructively, encouraging risks, and celebrating originality. Here was a place where failure was seen not as a setback but as a necessary step in the learning process. The energy was uplifting in a way that words can scarcely capture. It reminded me why I had devoted my life to creating art in the first place – not for fame or recognition, but for the sheer joy of exploration, expression, and connection with others who shared the same passion.

Even the architecture of the campus contributed to the creative energy. Open courtyards invited collaboration, and sunlit spaces offered quiet nooks for reflection. Every corner seemed designed to spark curiosity, to invite students to linger, to experiment, to be inspired. It was a reminder that creativity flourishes not only through mentorship and talent but also through environment and community. Witnessing this firsthand, I felt deeply grateful, humbled, and inspired, as if Venice itself had reached out to welcome me into its centuries-old tradition of artistry.

Is there a better setting on this Earth than Venice for creativity? It’s impossible to take a photograph that isn’t charming – the whole city is Art Directed! Each

building is unique from the last, each corner is beautifully composed, no matter what angle you’re taking it in from. The colors, the textures, the way sunlight bounces off the canals, all seem deliberately curated by some unseen hand. Walking through the streets feels like stepping into a living painting, a moving storyboard that shifts with every turn. Even the sounds – the gentle lapping of water, the soft clatter of footsteps on cobblestones, the distant melodies drifting from open windows – seem composed to inspire. It’s a place that lives and breathes art. Every alleyway, every bridge, every weathered door tells a story, and as an artist, it’s impossible not to be affected by it.

There is inspiration in each and every nook. I envy the students that get to spend their school years here, living within this daily immersion in beauty and history. They are all so blessed to experience their formative years in such an inspiring place, surrounded by centuries of art, architecture, and culture that continually challenges them to think bigger, dream bolder, and create fearlessly. I sense that they all know and appreciate this, as evidenced from the smiles that always seem present on their faces and the lively energy they carry as they move through the city.

I was afforded the honor to speak to the class in their main theater – an honor that I will cherish forever. Walking into that space, I felt the weight of the moment, but also an electric energy. The students’ faces were bright and expectant, attentive and engaged. It was a joy to share the experiences of my animation career with them, recounting the highs and lows, the lessons learned, the mistakes made, and the moments of triumph. I spoke about the unpredictability of the industry, the importance of taking creative risks, and the value of persistence. I could see that my words resonated with them, prompting thoughtful nods all around. There is something profoundly rewarding about standing before an audience of young artists, knowing that your experiences – your successes, failures, and stubborn perseverance – might help light the path for someone else.

And in a wonderful exchange of artistic works, I was honored with watching the student films. These films were curated from all over the globe, and I was astonished by the polish - many of them looked very professionally executed, some rivaling studio work in technique and vision. The collection was incredibly diverse, spanning genres, styles, and cultures, each with its own voice and perspective. The artistry on display - from cinematography, acting, lighting, cutting, and post-production - was extremely inspiring. I found myself leaning forward, studying every frame, mentally dissecting the choices the filmmakers made, marveling at how they approached storytelling, and feeling a renewed sense of excitement for what animation could achieve. I wanted to know how the filmmakers worked, how their professors guided them, how the school supported their films. Each piece felt like a window into the mind of a young artist, unburdened by cynicism, fully invested in exploring what was possible.

What struck me most was the fearlessness. Unlike many professionals who may hesitate, constrained by budgets, client expectations, or the weight of prior

successes, these students were willing to experiment, fail, and try again. There was an exuberance in their work that reminded me why I fell in love with animation in the first place - a reminder of the joy in the act of creation itself, in the thrill of bringing imagined worlds to life. Experiencing it firsthand was invigorating - it reminded me that creativity is not just a skill or a career but a vital, living force, capable of connecting people across continents, cultures, and generations.

It is crystal clear to me that Ca' Foscari is a special place. The setting, the circumstance, and of course, most of all - the people. The ARTISTS! What amazing and inspired artists! It was the perfect remedy for my artistic stagnation. Their films reminded me of what creativity looks like before all the heartbreak and setbacks of life try to suffocate the soul. It's been a few years since my last visit, but I think about it often, as it represents a story of the reward of being creative, the reminder to be creative in difficult times, and the promise that creativity is being nurtured, encouraged and inspired for the future.

Thank you for these precious gifts, Ca' Foscari!

The awkward beat is interrupted as they both hear a noise coming from outside -

