

Interview with Thurop van Orman

Creator of the “The Marvelous Misadventure of Flapjack”

Gina Gress

I was lucky enough to get an interview with the amazing and talented Thurop van Orman, best known as the creator of “the Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack”, a show that I can safely say restored my faith in modern animation. Thurop graciously let me interview him in his home in Ventura, California on February 24, 2011. Here are some of his thoughts on Flapjack, modern animation, and what it takes to really get your show picked up.

GG: I read that you didn’t watch a lot of TV growing up. Do you think that helped you develop your own style because you were less influenced by what cartoon were on TV at the time?

TV: Maybe, yeah. I still don’t have TV ... Did I say I didn’t watch a lot of TV growing up? I probably watched a normal amount of TV growing up actually, and I think in some ways TV inspired me to have adventures. I was always inspired by the Smurfs, as stupid as that is. And He-Man also. I think I watched a lot of TV up until I was 13 and then I didn’t watch any TV at all. I remember seeing little snippets of Beevis and Butthead and Ren and Stimpy, which was inspiring to me, but I didn’t watch ‘em.

GG: Was working on the Powerpuff Girls your first job in animation?

TV: I worked at a video game company before that, before I went to CalArts. But it was my first job in storytelling. The company was called Zantera and we made games for EA and some other big company I don’t remember ... We just did little Gameboy games but it was super fun. You would get a game and get to do the whole thing yourself –the art, the animation and everything, which was neat. We did Tiger Woods golf and Looney Tunes Cart Racing. It was fun.

GG: So then you went to CalArts and went on to the Powerpuff Girls?

TO: Yep, I started as an intern on the Powerpuff Girls. I was there for a few weeks. It was right at the end of the Powerpuff Girls and Craig McCracken was like “We’ve already done it! We’ve already done every story!” They

would have story meetings and try to brainstorm ideas and he would say "We've already done that. We've already done an episode just like that. We're out of ideas and we can't make any more." So that night I went home and I was writing out ideas, because I love the Powerpuff Girls. I was a big fan.

GG: That was a great show.

TV: Yep. I thought this is my chance, so I wrote all these episodes, like 5 or 6, and I brought them in the next day and they bought all of 'em. Then pretty quick after that they gave me a storyboard job. I think they gave me a revisionist job. And then storyboarding.

GG: So, Cartoon Network lets anyone there pitch a show. That's when you pitched Flapjack?

TV: Actually, I pitched Flapjack when I was a student. My second year CalArts I made a 7 minute Flapjack short and after that started pitchin'. And that was when I ended school too. I was like "This is the show I'm gonna make." I pitched it around and then pitched it at Cartoon Network. And the lady I who was over viewing me was like, just looking out the window while I was talking, and watching TV, and someone would walk by and she'd be like "Oh hey! Matt! How's it goin!" And I realized that no one was going to take me seriously if I was a student. Since Flapjack, there have been a lot of new people coming in, like fresh new blood, but at that time there was no one new comin' in, so everyone noticed, like "Oh there's a new guy, he's good!" People would come and say "Oh, that storyboard pitch was so great, it was like the old days of Powerpuff" or whatever, then I would say "Hey, could you recommend me to development?" At that time, a new person had come into development, so I had a little scheme. Every time someone would say something nice, I would say "Hey, could you tell Heather Kinion about me?" That was the person to pitch to. So by the time I was ready to pitch Flapjack again, they already wanted to work with me. Which as it turns out, is the way to go. If you're pitchin' something, lesson learned. You gotta make them want it first. And it's the same with storytelling. You gotta make them want the information before you give it to them. You gotta create a buzz for yourself and then go in and pitch, or they don't give a shit. Their job is to look for reasons to say no so they don't look stupid, making something that's bananas or garbage or whatever, so you gotta set yourself up so they think "This is the guy. We gotta make something with this guy. He's fresh, he's new, he's got ideas." And then pitch. Otherwise you could pitch forever, and they'll just keep saying no.

GG: Because they don't know who you are?

TV: Yeah, for the most part. And because executives I think either don't have or don't trust their intuition. There are a few high up people like Jeffrey Katzenberg who are different but for the most part, executives don't know unless a lot of people are telling them if something is funny or something is great. They don't get it. They don't get any of the stuff they're making.

GG: They just want to make money?

TV: Well, they want to make money and they're just playin' by the numbers. They went to school for business or worked their way up from a PA. But for the most part, they just worked their way up because they're good at networking and stuff. And they're not good at recognizing a great idea.

GG: Especially if it's different or something that's never been done before, like Flapjack.

TV: They don't want something new and different, because it's way too risky. In TV I realized, when you write out outlines for them, they don't want all the funny details. They want to know how this story is like a story they have seen before. It's the complete opposite of artists, we want to see something we've never seen before, something new. They'll read something and be like "Oh, kids are gonna hate this. It's about love, and bla bla bla." But if you put it in terms that they recognize, like "No, it's the Rocky story," they're like "Oh! I see that! Rocky was successful!" And then they eat it up. They're like "Yeah, yeah, you're right. Just make sure there's a fight in there."

GG: So it's a little bit of manipulating ...

TV: It's a lot of manipulating! I mean, that's kind of a nasty way to put it, but ... I'm working on a movie right now and I have to have two separate pitches. I have the stuff that I put on the Internet for the young people and then I have stuff that I pitch to the executives, and they're totally opposite. It wouldn't even seem like the same movie. Executives want to hear "It's Rocky, but starring Pee Wee Herman instead of Sylvester Stallone, and his opponent is Jurassic Park!" They love that stuff. And they just want to know that it follows a formula that works.

GG: Right, well, it seems like a lot of people are getting recognized now because of their student films, and those are in turn getting turned into shows, like Adventure Time and Regular Show.

TV: Well, kind of. Cartoon network didn't recognize either of those guys out of school. Both of those guys worked on Flapjack. Adventure Time actually wasn't a short for school, it was for Federator, who were the first

people to recognize me, too. Fred had this deal where he would just make a shit ton of shorts and not make a lot of money, but he would give people a chance. No one would have picked it up, but then it got such a huge response on the Internet they thought, "There's something to this! Kids are watching this!" So they picked it up. But it was messy at first. Pen set up Adventure Time to totally go against the grain. Instead of making a show with story structure, he wanted something completely bananas with crazy stuff happening all of the time. When Cartoon Network picked it up they said, "We love this. Just make sure it follows this formula." And it was bananas, with Pen not wanting to work on it anymore and the executives almost cancelling it a few times.

GG: I think the show turned out pretty bananas anyway.

TV: It is bananas! And it's getting more bananas.

GG: I'm so surprised with all the stuff they get away with that seems to go under the radar.

TV: It does. Well, with Flapjack we had to go under the radar but with these new shows ... When Flapjack started, Cartoon Network's mandate was "We want mom-friendly shows." The new head guy in charge called a town meeting and told us his plan. His plan was to make mom-safe stuff. He said "What we want is television that you can just put your kids in front of and just forget about them. We don't want moms to be washing the dishes and then hear something crazy and say, 'What are you watching?'" And I'm thinking, "You just described Disney. You can't out-Disney Disney, ever." And he said "I'm gonna tell you a story: Rugrats. We used to let my kids watch Rugrats. Then one day my daughter was over at her friend's house, watching Rugrats, and she learned from Anjelica, one of the characters, the phrase 'I'm going to kill you.' And after that, my wife scratched that off of the list of things they could watch." And he said the same thing about the Simpsons. He said, "We're not allowed to watch the Simpsons. We're gonna make shows that are impossible to say no to." And I'm like "Um ... you just listed the two top TV shows in the last 15 years. For animated TV shows, I don't know if that logic is working out." And he said "But think of how much MORE successful they would be if people like my family were watching them." And I'm thinking, that is the worst strategy I've ever heard. And it doesn't work! Look at the numbers. These shows were successful because they were different and they pushed the envelope.

GG: Kids like offensive stuff, too.

TV: Well, you can have sweet stuff. That's kind of what we were going for.

Sweet stuff but still pushing the envelope. So during Flapjack, I would fight with the standards people all the time, and we would slip stuff in, and it became this show that pushed the envelope. It has a huge following with teenagers and college kids, and what I've been trying to tell them from the beginning is if you get the big brothers and sisters to watch it, the kids are gonna watch it with them! And I wanted Flapjack to be like a family show where adults would appreciate stuff that kids wouldn't get. And if kids don't get stuff that's bad or whatever, then good. If you put subliminal stuff in there and they get it, then they were already exposed to it.

GG: They're gonna find out anyway ...

TV: Right. So CN flip-flopped and now they're saying they're gonna make crazier things than what's ever been made and I think the rating is TV-14 instead of Y-7.

GG: Hopefully they'll keep pushing the envelope. So, what advantages are there to working in TV cartoons? Can you really get away with more? Like how in Flapjack, Captain K'nuckles' syrup flask was clearly a metaphor for alcohol?

TV: Yeah. Yes, you can get away with more. I mean, in some ways. They can't even put on TV a lot of the Bugs Bunnies for being super racist or super violent. I think they've found out these things, like violence makes kids violent, and stereotypes and racism make people stereotypical and racist. People complain that you can't do what you used to on TV, but I think it's a good thing. But I think being a little edgy isn't hurting anyone.

GG: So, did you want to be a voice actor, or did you just fall into it?

TV: I did. I wanted to be a voice actor and I fell into it. As Flapjack's voice, I wasn't going to do it because I wanted to direct. And when you're directing the voice actors and you're on the other side of the glass, it throws you off because you're not looking at them. You have to be able to concentrate on if their voice is working and talk it over with people. So I didn't want to be on the other side of the glass, even though I wanted to do his voice. Paul Ruebens, Pee Wee Herman, was supposed to do his voice, but he didn't show up that day, and his manager was being kind of weird, so I just said fuck it, I'll do it. So for the pilot I just hurried and read all of Flapjack's lines, and people liked it, so it worked out.

GG: It worked out. So, the character designs of Flapjack are very unique. Did you flesh out the character's personalities first and then work on the designs? I know with Flapjack, you had that design with you for a while.

TV: He did evolve though, he evolved quite a bit. K'nuckles and Flapjack were the hardest because I was trying to figure out their characters while I was drawing them. Craig Killman helped me out a little bit, he was the character designer for Dexter and Powerpuff. And the rest of the designs, like the gross dock people ... I wanted it to feel like Flapjack and K'nuckles were in their own little world. Especially Flapjack. And I wanted the world around them to be a stark contrast of that. The dock people are the harsh realities of life. And I realized the only way I'm gonna pull off these caricatures of real people is to do caricatures of real people on the train and stuff. So I'd be like "Oh, that guy has a gross wart on his neck." Peppermint Larry and Doctor Barber have these ..

GG: They're very gummy.

TV: Right, they have these huge gums. I would see people with tons of gums and say, "You never see that. I'm putting that in." I would pick one or two little weird quirks and make the caricatures. They were more grotesque than real life but I tried to keep it grounded.

GG: Cool. Is K'nuckles based off of any person you saw?

TV: No, he's more cartoony. His personality is based off of Brian Doyle Murray's character in "Get A Life". As a teenager, I watched that and the Simpsons. But he's not really based off of anyone, looks-wise. Actually, at the beginning of the show, I had never seen Spongebob, and K'nuckles had these pincers so everyone was telling me he was too much like Mr. Krabs, so I changed it. I wanted to veer away from that direction.

GG: Well, he definitely has his own personality. So, the look of the show implements a of mixed media, like how Poseidon is this live action guy and the waves are cut out collages. Were you going for a storybook look for the show?

TV: I guess so. Children's books were what I planned on doing instead of animation. I was just going for collage, for something you've never seen before. I wanted to do the whole thing in stop-motion but I wasn't allowed to.

GG: Because of time?

TV: Yeah, time and money. I think I could pull it off now because I know the process but at the time it was too foreign to the studio, and I don't think they were gonna let me do something like that. But I think it worked out. I like how it looked with the 2D and if you wanted something to pop, you could hit em with the 3D. I think if it was mostly 3D and you hit them with 2D, it wouldn't work as well.

GG: It would be a little more jarring. Well, specific, off-model facial expres-

sions are rarely seen in cartoons today, and I think they really set Flapjack apart. Did you use model sheets on the show, or did you give the animators more creative freedom with the character's poses and facial expressions?

TV: Um, that one. With Powerpuff Girls, where it was just so stiff, and you couldn't do anything, like everything had to be crazy on-model. I would see these storyboards as an intern that were just so incredible, there was acting and stuff, and I saw how much more funny it could have been if you could see the acting in it. Instead of just like, happy face, sad face.

GG: Right, these stock expressions.

TV: Yeah, it sucks! It just not even acting. I was surprised, with Cartoon Network I never got a note for being off-model. Because I thought I was gonna get in tons of trouble. I said, "Just trace the storyboard artist's work." And they all draw different. But that allowed it to have acting and have unique expressions.

GG: I think that's a lot of the reason why people like the show, because the expressions are just so out there. Another thing I like about Flapjack is its hand-drawn quality. Nothing seems computer generated. Was it harder producing a show with more attention to detail like that? Was the production schedule different than the other shows?

TV: It was the same as the other shows. And like I said, it's a trade-off. Sometimes you just got these really shitty drawings, and I would have to go back and change them all. That's why people say stick to the model sheets, because when you send them overseas, they expect them to change the drawings and make them look like the model sheets. I don't think it was more work because of that; it's a lot of work anyways. But it's more organic.

GG: Definitely. How much of the dialogue was improvised in the recording booth?

TV: Not a lot. I think Steve Little improvised the most, Doctor Barber's character. He also did Lollypoopdeck, and a lot of Lollypoopdeck's stuff was improvised. While we were trying to figure out what to say he would just be rambling on, and that's usually what we kept, all his bananas stuff.

GG: But you otherwise pretty much stuck to the script?

TV: Yeah.

GG: When did you first get into stop-motion?

TV: In high school I guess? I did stop motion stuff but I didn't have a camera so I just kept building stuff. And then I got to CalArts and Charac-

ter Animation people weren't allowed to take stop motion, it was experimental, and I couldn't take the classes. And everyone was telling me at the time that stop motion was dead. Then I don't know what happened. I think when I was working on the Flapjack pilot and was talking to Carl Greenblatt, we were talking about Sesame St. and how experimental and rad it was and we said, let's do that. They didn't give me any money for the title sequence of Flapjack so I built all of it.

GG: Are you influenced by any experimental animators now?

TV: Uh, I'm not sure. I don't know what you mean by experimental ... I see shorts that are inspiring. Like "The Story of North America". I mean, I don't know that it's actually influenced anything that I've done but I love it. But when you say experimental I think of non-narrative, which is the way it is at Cartoon Network. And I can't watch that, I just have too short of an attention span.

GG: I'm the same way. So, right now you're a producer on Adventure Time.

TV: I'm still getting credits for that but I'm not there anymore. I worked on the front-end of the episodes but I didn't work on the back end of em.

GG: Oh, ok. Are you optimistic about the success of the show?

TV: Yeah, I think it's doin' great.

GG: How do you feel about the state of animation today? Do you feel like it's too tame?

TV: I think it's pretty good. I don't feel like it's too tame. I don't think they should make it crazier. Already Adventure Time and Regular Show are kinda pushing it to the point where I don't know if I want my kids to watch it. But I have kids younger than the age range for those shows. So I don't know, I feel good about it.

GG: So what advice would you have for a young animator who wants to succeed in the industry while still working on projects they believe in?

TV: Do that? (laughs) Because you feel like it's one or the other?

GG: A little bit.

TV: I was nervous about that at the time, because all I wanted to work on was Powerpuff. I thought, what's gonna happen when this show is over and there's nothing else good to work on? So I made my own stuff. Then when Flapjack got rolling, I was recommending JG and Pen, saying, "They should have their own shows. I'd totally work for them." And pretty much all the shows out there now are people who I worked with and who I think are really funny and my friends. So I think the industry has gotten better, which is rad. I feel like if you have strong ideas and you're a good storyteller, you'll make stuff. You'll believe in it because it'll be you.

As far as advice goes, I think people fall into two categories. I think Pen is just a natural storyteller. And some of my favorite storytellers are just naturally great storytellers. They're not necessarily trying to follow the rules or whatever. But I think it can be a lot more hit or miss. So I think my advice would be to learn the rules of storytelling. Because if you have both, the natural ability to tell stories and the ability to talk to executives, you'll be able to get what you want so much better than if you know how to tell stories but you don't know how to talk about it or explain it. Not saying Pen is like this necessarily, but I think if he knew the rules of story structure better, he could have bullshitted the executives and gotten what he wanted. And not just to bullshit, I think it can help your stories when you know story structure better and can follow notes.

GG: Is it a lot to do with selling yourself?

TV: Yeah, well, it's knowing to talk about story. And if you can't you just have to follow orders because they outrank you. You can't make them laugh to convince them. But if you can talk story structure and explain why this works better than this, they'll do it. If you say "But this way is funnier!" that won't work. So, if you can talk the talk ...

GG: You can get what you want.

TV: Yep.

GG: Can you tell us anything about your current project, Black Forest, or is it strictly confidential?

TV: I don't want to say too much about that right now.

GG: That's fine. And that's all the questions I have! Thanks so much for your time, Thurop.

If you wanna see some of Thurop's amazing art, checkout <http://thurop.deviantart.com/> !