"For a character design position, I look at their drawing, painting, and design skills, and for a variety of styles," says Aaron.

Perfect portfolios

Killer tips Leading animators tell **Julia Sagar** how to catapult your career to the next level with a carefully crafted showcase of your artwork

An image from Aaron Blaise's new 2D animated short film, Snow Bear, which is due in the autumn.

It doesn't matter how talented an animator you are. If you don't have a killer portfolio to showcase your skills, that job you've dreamed of is unlikely to materialise. But crafting the perfect portfolio or reel is an art itself. So what's the secret to success? And with thousands of other passionate animators out there, how can you ensure you stand out for the right reasons?
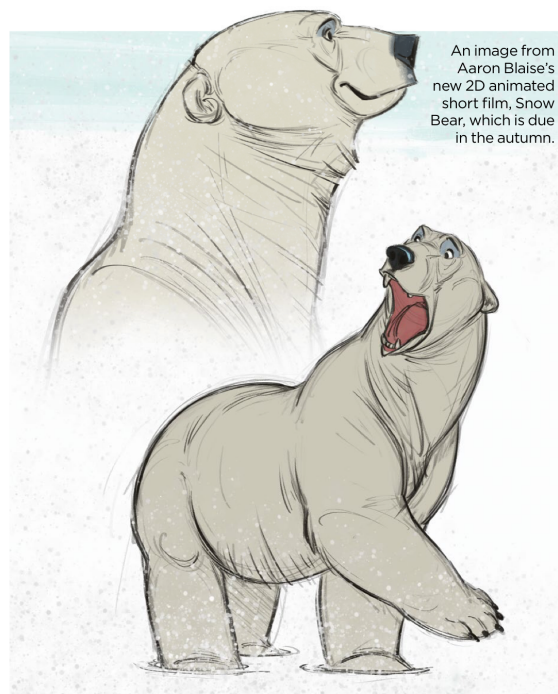
We asked leading animators to share their pro tips on portfolio strategy. Whether you want your digital portfolio to work harder or to make your showreel sing, there are some best-practice tips that can be applied, whatever field you're targeting.

Golden rule one: know your audience. Who is your portfolio or showreel aimed at, and what do prospective employers, viewers or visitors want to see?

"Whether you're applying to a games studio, effects studio or a character animation studio, you have to tailor your portfolio to the studio you're applying to and the type of work you aspire to do," says Andrew Gordon, a directing animator at Pixar, who's worked on everything from A Bug's Life, Monsters, Inc. and Toy Story 3 to Pixar's Academy Award-nominated short film Presto.
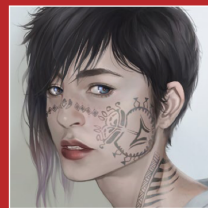
WIZARDRY AT WORK
We talk to the Framestore creature artists behind Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, and hear about an unusual development process.
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CLOGGED UP WITH ART
Find out why Dutch artist Iris Compiet is trying to cram a museum's worth of exhibits into her studio, where she creates her fantastical pieces.
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MORE THAN SKIN DEEP
Ever struggle to depict believable tattoos? Check out Tan Hui Tian's tips, among other indispensable advice from pro artists, in our Q&A section.
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Park City (Wasatch) is one of a number of images in Ty Carter's portfolio that shows his understanding of design and colour.

Oscar-nominated animator Aaron Blaise agrees: "Know who you're interviewing with," he advises. "If I were looking to get hired at Disney, I wouldn't show them a reel of Simpsons animation, and vice versa. And if you don't have the type of work you think a studio is looking for, then it would be in your best interest to do a shot or two in that studio's particular style."

HOOK YOUR VIEWER

"Keep in mind that we have seconds to evaluate your work," explains Disney in its exceptionally helpful portfolio and showreel application guidelines (**www.disneyanimation.com/faqs**). That means putting your best work first and closing strong, as Pixar's Andrew explains: "Realise that people will fast-forward through your work. If they don't see something really quickly, they'll turn off."

It also means being original. How? By injecting personality into your portfolio. "Good character animation is the art of bringing characters to life – not moving them around," points out Aaron.

He's currently working on an original 2D animated short film, Snow Bear, with business partner Nick Burch, and urges animators not to sacrifice personality by focusing solely on movement and

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"Game animation is competitive," says Jonathan Cooper, who worked on Uncharted 4. "Even veterans need to keep pushing the quality bar to get that ideal job."

mechanics. "Often a shot requires little to no movement to get an emotion across," he says. "It can be just a look, an eye movement, a blink. I also advise animators to include performances where there's a change of emotion or idea: angry to happy or fearful to brave. That's when it becomes real and the viewer is pulled in." ➤➤

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What skills do you want to see in an animation portfolio?
I want to see that someone understands the principles of animation: weight, physicality, overlap, squash and stretch. There also needs to be good acting sensibilities – an understanding of how to gesture or when not to.

Anything you don't want to see?
I don't care about rendering or lighting. I just care about storytelling, entertainment value, great posing character and great acting – the elements that make quality feature animation. If you're applying to be a technical director or a lighter, they want to see great staging and lighting. Modellers want to see details of models. Animators look for that spark.

What exactly is that spark?
When I see an original character that's well posed and has a funny little story, I know this person is thinking about entertainment. That's what grabs my attention. That's the spark.

Which portfolio traps do people most often fall into?
When you're tailoring a demo reel towards what you think a studio wants to see, don't copy old tests. Make it original. Add personality. If you're going to use a stock rig from a school, come up with an original design and test. Don't leave the default shading and geometry of stock in place. It lacks imagination.

What are your showreel tips?
Show storytelling. I really love the idea of seeing a lot of shots, and continuity. And keep your titles simple and classy. You don't need a beautiful logo that's been done in After Effects with exploding phone numbers!

Andrew teaches animation and storytelling masterclasses. Get more tricks, tips and info via @splinedoctor and his website.
www.splinedoctors.com

Grandpa's Farm. "Keep your showreel short and sweet," advises Ty.

Thumbnails from Snow Bear. "Only include the best, most impressive work in your portfolio," recommends Aaron.

Ty's best tip for standing out is to be yourself. "Find a way to reflect yourself in your work."

Night Hunt. "Lay out your portfolio to look as professional as an 'art of' book," advises Ty.

When it comes to specific skill sets, different disciplines require different portfolios. For Andrew, who specialises in character animation, this means showing an understanding of the principles of animation – squash, stretch and so on (see his advice on the previous page).

JUMPING IN

For Naughty Dog video games animator Jonathan Cooper, however, this means showing actions and a relevant style. Jonathan is the brains behind video animation website **www.gameanim.com**. He's currently working on Uncharted: The Lost Legacy, and says that for the games he makes, he wants to see navigation around a complex environment, including jumping, climbing and vaulting, one-on-one-combat, walk and run cycles, and so on. "Dialogue and acting scenes are a huge bonus as we're always blurring the lines between gameplay and cinematic storytelling, and game animators are typically expected to at least have a hand in both aspects on the

job," he says, adding that camera work also helps you stand out.

As Jonathan explains, it's essential to have an up-to-date demo reel to keep up with the fast-paced games industry. "A personal website is the easiest to share with the studio involved in hiring, but a link to your latest reel in your resume is enough," he says. "I prefer Vimeo to YouTube, because of the final render quality and overall cleanliness of the site," he continues. "And ArtStation is fast becoming the standard for pre-made portfolios. But I recommend adding your reel everywhere – even LinkedIn. As for a physical portfolio, I don't think I've seen one in years."

Lisa Allen, an animator at Blue Sky Studios and recent portfolio reviewer at November's CTN animation expo, echoes the sentiment: "Your showreel is really the only part of your portfolio that matters for getting a job as an animator. Ideally, the pieces in your showreel demonstrate your eye for acting, posing, design and composition. If you've done work in any other categories like life drawing, or

illustration, that's great – but keep them in a separate part of your portfolio website instead. Also, less is more. For me, the perfect reel is between three and five clips and around a minute long."

GOLDEN RULES

Another golden rule for a successful portfolio is to create a clear focus. If you're showcasing a number of core abilities, make sure the direction in which you want to take your career is clearly presented. "Successful portfolios are specific, organised and contain original ideas," says Blue Sky Studios visual development artist Ty Carter. His film credits include Ice Age 4: Continental

> ## 66 We are in the business of entertainment. I want your portfolio to entertain me 99

Drift, Epic, and The Peanuts Movie, and he shares all kinds of useful tutorials and teachings on his Patreon page (**www.patreon.com/tycarter**).

"It's good to see one major focus like character design, set design or colour. If you do each of these at a high level it doesn't hurt to show them all, but be careful not to include too much. What's most important is showing you're a creative problem solver. Ask yourself, what do you bring to the table that no one else can do? Is your own life experience reflected in your art? If not, how can you do that?"

Most importantly, it's about storytelling. "Don't fall into the trap of being a shot animator," warns Andrew. "People don't just want to see great animation: they want to see if you can tell a story. You have to put together the pieces so that you're showing you understand cutting, continuity and staging. You don't need complex rigs to get noticed. Just great ideas."

"At Disney we would talk about portfolios that stuck out," agrees Aaron, "and they stuck out because the work was consistently entertaining throughout. We are in the business of entertainment," he smiles. "I want your portfolio to entertain me."
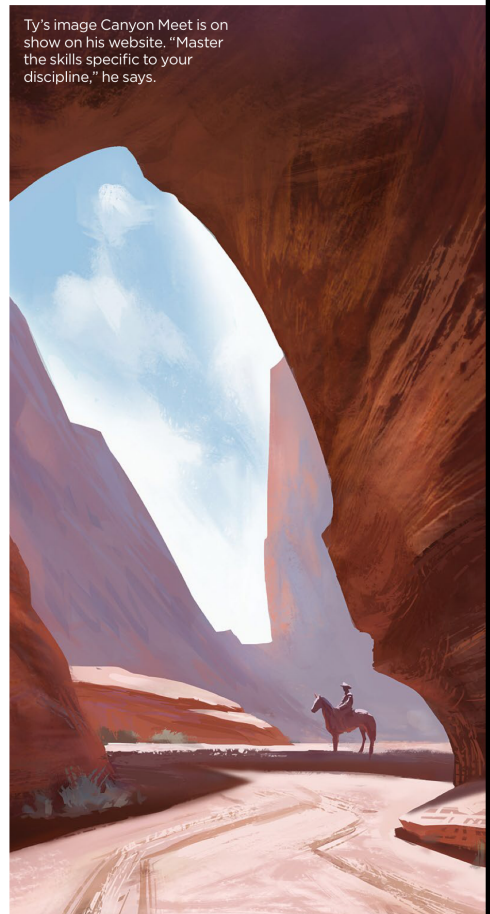
"At Blue Sky we look for animation with entertainment through character and personality," says Lisa Allen, who worked on The Peanuts Movie.

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