

MOONBOT STUDIOS: A LUNAR ADVENTURE IN LOUISIANA

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March 5, 2012 was a big day in Shreveport, Louisiana. Confetti flew and a brass band played as a parade made its way down Texas Street. Bill Joyce and Brandon Oldenburg, the creative partners in charge of Moonbot Studios, rode in convertibles and held their Oscar statues high. Managing Partner Lampton Enochs and Trish Farnsworth-Smith, the studio's head of production, rode behind them. The Byrd High School marching band played a special arrangement of "Pop Goes the Weasel," and Moonbot's artists, animators, programmers, and administrative staff tossed Moonpies to the crowd from their cars and floats.¹

In May, 2011, Moonbot Studios of Shreveport, Louisiana, released its first project, an animated short called *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* on Apple's iTunes Store. By July, partly in response to an article in *Fast Company*, sales of the film had skyrocketed to the top of iTunes's charts. By Wednesday, July 14, the *Morris Lessmore* film short was the top selling film on iTunes.

The New York Times declared the iPad App, created in collaboration with Twin Engine Labs, another Shreveport start-up² to be "The best...a visually stunning bit of work with entertaining interactive features."³ MSNBC.com's Gadgetbox declared the app, "a must-have interactive book."⁴

The beginning of 2012 brought even more excitement. At the end of January, the Moonbots discovered that *Morris Lessmore* had been nominated for an Academy Award for best animated short. At the studio, the Moonbot creative team was ecstatic. The studio had only been in existence for a little over a year, and the movie and app were its first major projects. The newly-formed team had believed in the project and had poured their hearts into telling their touching tale of the healing power of story, but, as with all artistic ventures, audience response is impossible to completely predict. Some artistically brilliant projects are commercial failures, while some artistic failures are commercially successful. *Morris Lessmore*, with its poignant story and its brilliant blending of old and new animation technologies, had managed to succeed in both areas. The stage was set, then, for new challenges, and the Moonbot team already had the walls of their conference room covered with concept art for illustrated novels, comics, animations, and interactive applications. They also had a slate of commercial projects including a promotional app for Ford Motor Company to accompany the release of the new Ford Fusion. *The Numberlys*, a second storybook app, was scheduled for release in early 2012.

Moonbot was the joint creation of Alissa Kantrow and Lampton Enochs of Louisiana Production Consultants and children's author, illustrator, and filmmaker William "Bill" Joyce. Kantrow and Enochs funded the venture through Louisiana Production Consultants from 2008 until 2010 when the company was officially formed. Joyce is a native of Shreveport, Louisiana, whose credits include the creation of the Emmy Award winning *Rolie Polie Olie* animated series, and *A Day With Wilbur Robinson*, the book that inspired the Disney film *Meet the Robinsons*. His artwork has graced the cover of *The New Yorker*. Joyce was also the producer, production

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designer, and co-creator for Blue Sky Studios' animated film, *Robots*. He designed the 1994 and 1995 Christmas window displays for Saks Fifth Avenue's original location. Even after forming Moonbot Studios, Bill still worked independently with other studios like Dream Works and Blue Sky.⁵ Joyce developed concept art for Pixar's *A Toy Story* and *A Bug's Life*. His versions of Buzz Lightyear and Rex the dinosaur appear in *The Making of Toy Story*.⁶

Though Bill Joyce was the most famous "Moonbot," he was quick to acknowledge his colleagues. Co-founders included creative partner Brandon Oldenburg and managing partner Lampton Enochs. Trish Farnsworth-Smith, the studio's head of production, had served as Joyce's managing director since before the studio's founding. Barbie Cannon served as the chief financial officer, and Sullivan Parker supervised production. Though it was less than two years old, the rapidly-evolving studio had already organized itself into five departments: art, animation, editorial, technical direction, and Moonbot interactive. Moonbot Interactive, one of the most recent, had emerged from technical direction and was dedicated expressly to the creation of games and apps.⁷ (See the appendix for Moonbot's organization chart.)

William "Bill" Joyce:

Bill Joyce grew up in Shreveport, Louisiana. One early inspiration for his career was Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. Bill's early stories delighted his friends and classmates, but weren't always appreciated by school officials. In fourth grade, he wrote his first book, *Billy's Booger*. It was about a boy named Billy who was terrible at math. He received help, however, from a magical character ("a little booger man," as Bill once expressed it) that would emerge from Billy's nose to tutor him in math. The principal called Bill's parents in for a meeting about his use of boogers in the story, but they were neither surprised nor particularly distressed.⁸ (During a visit to the studio, the author saw a beautifully-drawn illustration of Bill's nose-dwelling creation. The character was green and semi-transparent with a single long hair curling from the top of his head.)

Bill's principal might not have known what to make of Bill's early efforts at creative expression, but Art teacher Ann Jacobs and journalism teacher Maredia Bowdon remember him very fondly. "He was the perfect student," Bowden told a *Shreveport Times* interviewer. Jacobs remembered how talented he was, even in the fourth grade. She also remembered the optimistic, upbeat spirit of his work. "Right will [win] out with Bill," she said.⁹

When asked about the influences on his life, Joyce says he came from a family where art was appreciated and encouraged. He had cousins that were in opera, photography, and music, among other things. His own passion for art developed early, and he pursued it tenaciously. Anytime he hit a wall, he says, "I'd back off and redouble my efforts." That kind of stubborn persistence, he believes, is an important difference between just being talented and being successful.¹⁰

When Joyce enrolled at Southern Methodist University, a private, liberal arts school in Dallas, Texas, he naturally chose art as his major. He quickly found himself frustrated, however, by the school's emphasis on abstract and nonrepresentational art. Joyce was interested in art as a storytelling medium, but his instructors did not consider illustration to be real art.

“I looked at art history books and saw all of these illustrations of Bible stories and of Shakespeare,” he said. “I asked my teachers, ‘When did narrative become not art?’, but no one could give me an answer.”¹¹ Joyce spoke with Maredia Bowdon, his high school journalism teacher and school newspaper sponsor, about his frustration. She advised him to switch his major to film, and he followed her advice.¹²

After graduating from college, Joyce began a career as a children’s writer and illustrator. His wife, an attorney, provided much of the financial support during those early years. Bill took his work to publishers in New York, and illustrated the work of other authors before finally publishing his own projects. Bill traveled to New York often and spent time in California as well, working with major studios like Pixar and DreamWorks. Early in his career, he wondered if he would have to relocate to one of the entertainment hubs to be successful, but publishers advised him to stay in Louisiana.¹³

Keeping the Wheels on the Bus:

To manage his growing slate of projects, Bill formed howdy ink, LLC (Note: The name is deliberately written in lower case.) in 2002 and rented studio space on the campus of Centenary College. Trish Farnsworth-Smith, who had worked with Bill during her time with the Shreveport Arts Council, joined him there as his managing director.¹⁴ Trish is, as Moonbot co-founder Lampton Enochs described her, a “wheels on the bus” person who manages the practical side of Bill’s creative ventures. Her duties include project oversight and production facilitation. Enochs, whose company financed the Moonbot venture from 2008-2010, is a “wheels on the bus” leader in his own right. After starting his career in California, Enochs moved to New Orleans in 2002 to help facilitate the creation of Gwave Productions, a firm that produced made for television movies for ABC Family and the Disney Channel.¹⁵ A Mississippi native, Enochs attended the University of Virginia where he received a degree in finance and management information systems. He and Alissa Kantrow, his business partner, formed Louisiana Production Consultants, an organization whose purpose was to attract film and television projects to Louisiana. Enochs and Kantrow were producing movies and running a local studio complex, Mansfield Studios, when they teamed up with Joyce to form Moonbot.¹⁶ Enochs is in charge of the team that handles the business side of the enterprise: human relations, finance, contracts, business development, and production. Enochs has had a lifelong passion for film. (As a young person, he once brought some of the other neighborhood kids together to put on a production modeled after the popular “Dark Shadows” television series.) One of their first decisions was to recruit Brandon Oldenburg to join the venture.¹⁷ Kantrow was an original partner in the company, but ultimately withdrew for personal reasons including, foremost, a family move back to her hometown of New Orleans.¹⁸

Trish Farnsworth-Smith, like Lampton Enochs, is something of an art/business hybrid. She has both a deep love for the arts and a gift for organization. She has bachelor’s and master’s degrees in theater and has worked in regional theater on the West Coast. Trish met Bill Joyce while working for the Shreveport Regional Arts Council. They worked well together, and he hired her as the managing director of howdy, ink, the organization that manages his projects. When Moonbot formed, she went from managing two-and-a-half people to over thirty.

“My job,” Trish told an interviewer, “is to take care of the day-to-day business details in the organization so that my artist team can do what they do best, and to create an infrastructure and an environment where they produce good work. It is also sometimes my job to tell people, ‘You’re not doing what you need to be doing right away,’ or to bring the focus back to where it needs to be.”¹⁹

Brandon’s Burning Passion:

Brandon Oldenburg decided to become a filmmaker at age 7, after seeing *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with his father in Fort Worth. His father took him to a camera store where he purchased a used Super 8 camera. Shortly after that, he began making films with his friends. Though filmmaking was usually a positive experience, Brandon and his friends once started a fire that burned up an acre of farmland. In pursuit of his dream, he attended the Ringling College of Art and Design, graduated, and co-founded Reel FX Creative Design Studios, a Dallas-based firm that developed special effects for feature films. He served as senior creative director there for fifteen years, as the studio grew to over 200 employees. During his time there, Brandon worked with many major studios including Disney, DreamWorks, Pixar, and Blue Sky Studios. He collaborated with sculptor Brad Oldham to design and create “The Traveling Man,” a \$1.4 million three-site sculpture. Oldenburg met Bill Joyce in 1998 when the studio decided to make a short film. They worked well together from the outset, and stayed in touch.²⁰

The Founding of a Studio:

The formation of Moonbot was the result of a convergence of events or, as Farnsworth and Enochs would describe it, “an alignment of stars.”²¹) In 2005, before Moonbot was even on the radar, Bill Joyce formed a joint venture with Reel FX Creative Studios, the Dallas company Brandon Oldenburg had helped to found. This venture, called Aimesworth Amusements, was supposed to produce books, video games, and feature films. (Joyce also collaborated with Reel FX in creating parade floats for Disney and Halloween decor for Martha Stewart.) Though the joint venture lasted for nine years, many of the projects Joyce had envisioned for the venture never completely materialized. During the process, however, Joyce continued to work with Brandon Oldenburg. The two found that they shared similar artistic visions and worked well together.²²

Joe Bluhm, who later became the lead artist for the studio, was the first artist the studio’s founders hired. Bluhm came from New York where he had been freelancing for animation and film companies. Though Shreveport, Louisiana, had not been a part of his original career plans, Bluhm enjoyed working with Bill and Brandon so much that he found that he did not want to leave. As artists themselves, they respected artists and storytellers in a way that larger, more profit-driven firms did not. Bluhm storyboarded much of *Morris Lessmore* before the studio as such even existed.²³

Adam Volker met Bill through Oldenburg when he came to Shreveport for a painting project. “I think we’re going to start a company with Brandon,” Bill told him. Volker, like Oldenburg, was a graduate of the Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida.²⁴ Founded by Dr. Ludd Spivey on the former estate of Ringling Brothers Circus co-founder John Ringling and his

wife, Mable, Ringling prepares artists with a broad skill set that has proven to be an excellent match for Moonbot.²⁵ Bohdon “Bo” Sayre and Jamil Lahham, both Ringling graduates, would soon join the growing studio as well.²⁶ In the months that followed, another wave of Ringling artists including Christina Ellis, Mike Klim, Gordon Pinkerton, Beavan Blocker, Megan Deane, and Dominic Pallota would join the studio.²⁷

Jamil Lahham, the studio’s lead animator, came to Moonbot after working for larger studios in Los Angeles. Some of his friends were concerned that moving to Shreveport, Louisiana, might be a hard adjustment for him. “But I was like, ‘Don’t worry about it. Sign me up,’” he says. As an animator, Lahham’s job was to transform drawings into computer generated puppets that would represent the characters in three dimensions. As lead animator, his job was keeping a team of animators on task. Lahham’s team consisted of six in-house animators and four freelancers who worked off campus and stayed in touch through the Internet.²⁸ Producing computer animated movies is much slower than filming live action. The animation team produced, on average, 5-7 seconds of usable animation a week and one second or less, depending on the complexity of the scene, in a day. Rendering, the process by which the computer transforms digital data into vividly colored and lighted high-resolution scenes, is a slow process that requires a great deal of computing power.²⁹ The animation part of the process took between eight and nine months to complete.³⁰

Launching a studio is not cheap. Though the specific details of Moonbot’s financial history have not been made available to the author, it is a matter of public record that one of the company’s most faithful financial supporters has been a Shreveport businessman named Bill Anderson. Joyce said Anderson, “quietly stuck with us when others may have had doubts, and provided a secure place for us to pursue our dream—come what may.” Joyce also said, in an interview, that he was grateful to the entire Anderson family for their faithfulness.³¹

Another of the “stars” that converged to make Moonbot a reality was a push on the part of the Louisiana state government to grow the entertainment industry in Louisiana by setting up robust incentive programs that included tax credits for companies producing movies, interactive media, and live performance. The state, according to Moonbot co-founder Lampton Enochs, asked, “What can we do to get this going?” Louisiana’s Department of Economic Development offered funding for workforce training which enabled Moonbot’s first hires. Film editor Calvin O’Neal, a native of Detroit, would later join the Moonbot team after meeting Enochs at a workshop on film editing sponsored by Louisiana Production Consultants.³²

Morris Lessmore: The Idea

As a project, *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*, actually predated the studio. The story began as a gift to a friend. Bill Morris had worked at HarperCollins Publishers for over fifty years, and was a friend and mentor to studio founder William Joyce. In a business that is sometimes cutthroat and impersonal, Morris had been a friend to authors that encouraged them and worked with them to shape their talent. When Bill Joyce heard that Morris was dying in a hospital, he went to visit him. During the trip, he wrote a parable about a man who had given his life to books and to those who write them.³³

Other inspirations added to the mix. Joyce remembered visiting New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and seeing the streets filled with books that had been washed from libraries and from the homes of New Orleans residents. While making a documentary, Joyce went to shelters and interviewed displaced residents. Their faces, he said, were blank until they began to talk about their lives. It was in that process, he said, that they began to recover their stories and their identities. In one of the scenes of the animated short, people are seen wandering like lonely ghosts through the ruins of their city, and the ground is littered with books. As Brandon expresses it, “They’re looking for their stories.”³⁴

Another inspiration for the story was Coleen Salley, a professor of children’s literature who taught at the University of New Orleans. Ms. Salley was a colorful storyteller and an enthusiastic advocate of illustrated children’s literature who was known throughout the publishing world. Moonbot’s artists honored her with a brief cameo appearance in the *Morris Lessmore* film and App.³⁵

The library and the books are characters in the film as well. Bill Joyce remembered the feeling he had as a child visiting the library. It was, for him, a magical place where he heard “a thousand whispered invitations to adventure from all the books on the shelves.”³⁶

As the project progressed, imagery from classic films like *The Wizard of Oz*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, *The Red Shoes*,³⁷ and the silent comedies of Buster Keaton³⁸ all melded with the spirits of Bill Morris and Coleen Salley, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina,³⁹ and the healing comfort and the strong and silent call to adventure that comes from the shelves of a library. In the months that followed, the inspired imaginations of still artists, 3D animators, model builders, and composers would blend into the mix as well.

Building a Studio: Moonbots in Biospace

With the *Morris Lessmore* animated short serving as a lightning rod for creative talent, the studio began to take shape. The nascent studio was, in its earliest days, divided between Bill Joyce’s office on the campus of Centenary College and the second floor of the Biospace building in Shreveport. Designed as an incubator for medical technology businesses, the Biospace suite had Bunsen burners and chemical showers. Biospace was, perhaps, the perfect place for a group of mad scientists. A suite of rooms on the ground floor was being modified to the specifications of the Moonbot team, but would not be ready until well into the production phase of the studio’s first project.⁴⁰ Lead animator Jamil Lahham recalled the chaotic energy of those early days. The studio didn’t have enough computers for everyone, so some of the employees brought their own. There were no lightboxes for tracing animation work, so some of them placed the paper against the window and used daylight.⁴¹

One creative choice Moonbot made was to blend computer-generated imagery with handmade miniatures of some of the scenes, most notably the New Orleans French Quarter and the library. The studio rented a soundstage in Shreveport, and the team began work on the sets. Jim Hayes, a Hollywood artisan who had relocated to Louisiana, led the design and construction of miniatures. The New Orleans street scene and the exterior of the library were built on 1/12 scale while the library’s interior was built on a 1/6 scale. The New Orleans French Quarter, because of its age,

has a European colonial texture that is not found in newer American cities. To give his artists a sense of New Orleans' unique personality and "lived in" flavor, Joyce took them on a tour of the city itself.⁴²

Filling the library set with miniature books was challenging. In a blend of cutting edge and traditional technology, studio artists designed 3D models of the books on a computer and fabricated them on a 3D printer, a device that converts computer-generated images into plastic models. After making silicon molds of the original books, the team molded hundreds of books and painted them to look like leather and paper.⁴³ When the miniature shoot was complete, Moonbot entered into its next and, possibly, its most challenging stage of production. To produce a 3D, computer generated movie, even a fifteen minute short, would require months of work and a whole staff of animators. It was at that point in the process that the second wave of artists and animators, many of them Ringling College graduates, joined the Moonbot team.⁴⁴

Joe Bluhm, who had storyboarded the entire project, was given the responsibility for designing the look of the Morris Lessmore character. He based his first sketches on Bill Joyce's book illustrations, but Joyce wanted a different look for the movie character, something that would translate well into animation. Since *Morris Lessmore* would be a silent film, Joyce told Bluhm to study the work of silent film legend Buster Keaton. Bluhm studied Keaton's unusual way of moving, his expressions, and his clothing style and created a character that was mostly an animated caricature of Keaton. With Joyce's agreement, the studio finally had its main character in place.⁴⁵

The co-star, Morris's guide, was a walking Humpty Dumpty picture book who changed expressions and gestures by turning pages in flipbook fashion. Since Morris was a character who was broken and trying to rebuild his life, Humpty Dumpty had seemed, to Bill Joyce a natural choice for a guide.⁴⁶

Lead animator Jamil Laham explained the process of moving from still art to animation. Once the artists had established the look of a character on paper, he said, the animation team would step in and work with the rest of the team to determine how the character's psychology was to be expressed onscreen. They would decide how the character would laugh, smile, and walk. "This smile is too devious," the director might say. "He should look more innocent." They might discuss what the character would do with his or her hands during a conversation. Does he squeak when he laughs? How high should her eyebrow go up? These decisions are made during the pre-production process. Finally, once the look and feel of the characters had been established, the actual animation process would begin.⁴⁷

Because *Morris Lessmore* was to be a silent film, music would be an integral part of the story. Rather than bringing in a composer after the animation was complete, the team involved John Hunter (the composer) throughout the process. Using the musical nursery rhyme "Pop Goes the Weasel" as a starting place, Hunter varied the orchestration to create a sweeping tapestry of styles and moods. In the aftermath of the storm, the song was slow, tender, and sad as people searched through the rubble for pieces of their lives. At another point, the score exploded with orchestral intensity to match a library filled with dancing, flying books. The design of the App followed a similar pattern as still artists, animators, and the composer worked with the

information technology crew to build interactivity into the story. Though some studios follow an ordered, sequential process with one completed part of the project passed, whole and complete, to the next crew, Moonbot used a more collaborative, reciprocal approach that allowed tweaking of the various elements throughout the project.⁴⁸

Managing Workflow: Shotguns and Sticky Notes

Managing the traffic flow in a project like *Morris Lessmore* requires a delicately managed balance between the sometimes joyful, sometimes furious chaos of creativity and deliberate planning. Sullivan “Sully” Parker was brought in to serve as an interface between the studio’s founders and the animation, art, TV, and interactive departments. Originally an English literature major, Parker developed his expertise as a project manager while working for Leapfrog, a manufacturer of interactive educational toys. One device he developed to manage workflow was a marker board with a grid covered with sticky notes that sat in the middle of the graphic design area. The board had the names of the company’s thirty artists along the top and categorizes their projects into four areas: backlog, in progress, needing feedback/blocked, and done. Colored sticky notes gave specific details of the work being done by each individual. In addition to the board, Parker also used Shotgun, a project management software package similar in function to Microsoft’s Project Manager but designed specifically for the needs of media production firms.⁴⁹

Moonbot used what industry experts refer to as the agile production method. Developed by the software industry, agile production is a method of speeding up the design process by pulling just enough of a project element together to test it with the other elements. Rather than having software engineers work for months on the various parts of a project and getting them as perfect as possible before bringing them together for testing, agile production is built around the idea of quick iterations that allow the elements of the project to be repeatedly pulled together, tweaked, and tested on the fly.⁵⁰

In order to keep all members of the Moonbot team involved and up to speed, Moonbot established daily meetings called “dailies” in which all employees gathered into the company’s small theater to receive updates on the company’s various projects. This method was also used by Pixar and early Disney.⁵¹ During the author’s visit to Moonbot, one of the animators showed rough clips from *The Numberlys*, the company’s newest project. Members of the team discussed eye blinks, head movements, and other aspects of the clips as the animator worked to refine them. “I’ve tried it like this,” he would say as he showed one clip, “but I’m not sure about that.” Then he would show another clip. “The movement here is more fluid, but it’s kind of crazy.” The other members of the team would ask questions and offer comments and suggestions. Designing funny characters was serious business for them.⁵²

Moonbot’s Products and Culture: Story is Paramount

Because Moonbot, in 2011, was a small studio, they could only keep two or three projects in production at one time, but, at any given time, they kept a variety of ideas in the development “pipeline.” On the walls of the studio’s meeting room were storyboards and concept sketches for animated features, storybooks, graphic novels, and apps. The studio combined work they did for paying clients like Ford Motor Company with self-initiated projects. In choosing projects, co-

founder Lampton Enochs said, “Story is paramount. It should be a creatively interesting project.”⁵³

While some studios choose to focus on a specific medium, be it comic books, animated features, or novels, Moonbot went a different direction. “We’re really agnostic about platform,” Lampton Enoch explained. “Whatever is the best medium for telling the story.”⁵⁴

In an age that concentrates so much on electronic media, Moonbot’s founders still cherished books. Co-founder Brandon Oldenburg said he considered the production of a book to be an end in itself, not just an afterthought or merchandising for a movie.⁵⁵

Lead artist Joe Bluhm found Moonbot to be a perfect fit for his goals as an artist. He compared his approach to life and art to playing football and playing in the band when he was in high school. “The band director was okay with it,” he said. “He thought it was cool that I did both, and worked around my practice schedule. The football coach kept saying I needed to do one or the other. I ended up getting out of football, and staying in the band. I didn’t want anyone telling me I could only do one thing. I wanted to do it all, and they let me do that here. If you show an interest in something, they’ll say, ‘I think you could do that.’ I told them I wanted to make a maquette [a small statue of a character], and they told me to make one.” Joe started out as a storyboard artist, moved into character design, and is now the lead artist for the company. It was he who developed the overall creative concept for the *Morris Lessmore* App.⁵⁶

One feature of the new company’s culture was its refreshing willingness to experiment with the latest in storytelling technology while maintaining a reverence for traditional technologies like silent film and printed storybooks. Concept artist Christina Ellis spoke of her love for comics,⁵⁷ and lead artist Joe Bluhm talked about the studio’s willingness to mix words and pictures in new ways.⁵⁸ The storybooks in development on the meeting room’s walls showed careful attention to the appearance of the paper and the lettering as well as the pictures. Every detail was crafted to lend itself to a story’s mood or texture.

Bohdon Sayre and Adam Volker, who started the company’s interactive media area, spoke of their passion for exploring the largely untapped potential of digital media as a storytelling vehicle. Bo said he wanted to prove interactive gaming as an art form and a story medium. He said he had spoken to larger companies and had found the characters in their games to be lacking in depth and emotion. A well designed game, for Bo, was ultimately about the story, and the unique strength of gaming, for him, was the way it allows the user to experience the story in a personal, interactive way that would not be possible with other with non-interactive media.⁵⁹

When asked about the company’s culture, Moonbot artists described it as a swim-or-sink experience. Some employees, they said, had come to the studio wanting more of a mentoring experience, and did not stay. Moonbot, they said, fosters learning by doing.

“The culture is very driven,” Bo explained. “It takes initiative to work here. Everyone is a leader in some way, and there’s a lot of responsibility. It’s a trust situation, and you don’t want to let the rest of the group down. Not everybody is comfortable with that.”

“That’s one thing about working with mostly young talent,” Adam Volker said. “None of us had ever made a movie before. We said, ‘I think you usually start movies with a storyboard.’”

According to Bo, the process often began with a question that started out, “Has anybody here ever made a...?” Whether the question was about a movie or an interactive videogame, the answer was usually “no,” and was followed by questions like, “So how should we do it? What should we do first?” In the process, they would develop a new way, their own way, of producing something. Later they would talk to people at other studios who had done similar projects and find, in some cases, that they had actually invented a more efficient way of going about it.⁶⁰

Early Successes: Accolades and Oscar Statues

The Moonbot team ended 2011 on a note of triumph as recognition for *Morris Lessmore* continued to pour in. *Apps* magazine selected Morris Lessmore App of the Year. *Ipad Insight* also awarded it App of the year. *The New York Times* listed the App as one of the Top Ten iPad Apps of 2011. *The Spectator Book Blog* and *School Library Journal* also included the app on their “Top 10” lists. *The Telegraph* and *Kirkus Reviews* also named *Morris Lessmore* as one of the best iOS Apps of 2011.⁶¹

As 2012 began, Moonbot launched its second interactive storybook app, a project called *The Numberlys*. Inspired by Fritz Lang’s 1926 silent science fiction classic, *Metropolis*, and described by Moonbot’s artists as “Fritz Lang for kids,” *The Numberlys* shows a stark, gray, orderly world of numbers that is suddenly disrupted by the arrival of letters. What are these strange, disorderly creatures that represent abstract ideas and don’t stand for quantities?⁶² *The Numberlys*, because it uses numbers and letters, lends itself more readily to teaching applications than *Morris Lessmore* did. The iconic popularity of *Schoolhouse Rock*’s “Conjunction Junction” and “I’m Just a Bill” animated shorts with Generation X children shows that having educational value does not always keep an animated project from being enjoyed and fondly embraced by viewers. Only time will tell whether *The Numberlys* will enjoy the same level of success as *Morris Lessmore* or *Schoolhouse Rock*.

The studio’s most exciting victory came at the end of January, 2012, when they found out that the *Morris Lessmore* animated short had been nominated for an Oscar. Studio founders Bill Joyce and Brandon Oldenburg, along with other members of the team, would spend the first few weeks of February showing and discussing their film at leading studios and film schools, and basically campaigning for the coveted Academy Award Oscar statue.⁶³

The company went up against some stiff competition, including Pixar, and won. The experience, for the team, was surreal. Bill Joyce and Brandon Oldenburg had prepared an acceptance speech, but when they took the stage, looked out into the audience, and saw Steven Spielberg, Meryl Streep, and Martin Scorsese sitting there, their minds went blank. Bill made a remark about “these two swamp rats from Louisiana,” and the audience applauded.⁶⁴ After receiving their statues, they went backstage and saw actor Michael Douglas standing there. “Hey, fellows,” he said. “How does it feel?” Meryl Streep, Tom Cruise, Christopher Plummer, and the actresses from “Bridesmaids” all congratulated them. On the way home, Joyce hid his Oscar statue in a

pillow case. When it passed through the X-ray machine, one of the scanner technicians said, “Oh, boy. I thought we would see some of these today.”⁶⁵

The parade in Shreveport was a delightful and triumphant homecoming for the team, especially Joyce. The marching band from Byrd High School where he had illustrated the school newspaper and met dear friends like his teacher, Ms. Maredia Bowdon, played “Pop Goes the Weasel” as Bill and Brandon led the parade down Texas Street. Shreveport’s mayor declared March 5, 2012 “William Joyce and Brandon Oldenburg Day” and presented them with plaques. “Everything worked out perfect,” Joyce said. “The streets were filled with people and confetti, all because we wanted to make a cartoon.”⁶⁶

The Future

Though most new companies dream of the kind of success Moonbot’s early endeavors have enjoyed, the company faces challenges as well. Some companies get themselves into trouble after an initial success because they start to assume that they know all of the secrets to being successful and that all they have to do is to do the same things again. That does not always work.

“There’s a classic thing in business,” Steve Jobs once said, “which is the second product syndrome. Often companies that have a really successful first product don’t quite understand why that product was so successful. And so with the second product, their ambitions grow and they get much more grandiose, and their second product fails.” Apple, he said, experienced this. The Apple II was highly successful, but the Apple III failed. After the success of Pixar’s *Toy Story*, Jobs knew the company would have to be careful. In Pixar’s case, however, the success of *A Bug’s Life* proved that his fears were unfounded.⁶⁷ May that be so of Moonbot, as well.

Success raises other concerns. If Moonbot continues to roll out successful projects, the studio will face questions about its identity: How large should the studio grow? Should they try to grow to the size of Disney Animation (over 600 employees)⁶⁸ or should they remain small and nimble and partner with larger studios when they need access to big studio equipment and budgets? One of the aspects of Big Idea that the studio’s young artists said they prized the most was the flexibility of the company’s structure. Is this strictly a characteristic of small companies that has to be sacrificed as those companies “grow up,” or is it a core value of the company that Moonbot should strive to preserve no matter what?

In a 2012 interview, Bill Joyce recalled working with Pixar, Blue Sky, and Reel FX when they were new, small companies. He remembered the cycle of optimism, terror, and finding a way that is part of the process of making an animated film. He remembers something else, too: “When they were smaller, there was a *semper nova* of creativity and freedom that’s hard to maintain. The weight of burden surreptitiously takes away what is golden. If you spend too much money, people get cautious and nervous.” Joyce said he wanted to know the people by name, and that he’d rather do smaller films with 75 or 100 people than to try to grow to the size of major studios like Pixar or DreamWorks.⁶⁹

“It’s hard,” he says, “if you have to coordinate between 40 different departments. People want to justify being studio employees by expressing their opinions.” During the production of *Meet the*

Robinsons, Joyce says, Disney Animation fired him sixteen times only to rehire him later. The company went through seven regime changes during the time they were working on that single film. “The first people you meet see your vision,” Joyce said. “Then they all get fired, and you’ve got to deal with their replacements.” Disney mainly left him alone when he was working on the “Rolie Polie Olie” series, he says, and the show garnered three Emmy Awards. Most of the time, though, he felt that the movie in his head was not the movie that made it to the screen. He did have more positive feelings, he said, about the work he was doing with DreamWorks on *Rise of the Guardians* and with Fox on *Epic*.⁷⁰ Perhaps, when a writer/artist/director has earned three Emmys and an Oscar, studio executives finally begin to trust him.

Co-founder Brandon Oldenburg has his own ideas about the future of the studio. “Of course we want to grow,” he says. “I imagine us growing through a split-cell process in which one small studio grows into a cluster of creative boutiques. But then you have to have corporate to oversee the boutiques, and that adds another set of management problems.” Oldenburg, who helped co-found a company that grew to over 200 employees, knows about the ups and downs of growth from personal experience, some of it painful.⁷¹

The company’s Shreveport location also constrains the studio’s growth in some ways because of its distance from Hollywood’s infrastructure and pool of talent, but the choice to locate in Louisiana was no coincidence. The company does not have a mission statement as such, but when asked about Moonbot’s mission, lead animator Jamil Lahham, speaking of founder William Joyce said, “He loves movies. He loves Shreveport. He wants to make movies in Shreveport.”⁷²

Unlike some of the studio’s younger animators who joined Moonbot right out of school, Lahham worked for major studios in Los Angeles before joining the Moonbot team. He says he has no desire to see Moonbot become the kind of studio he worked for in L.A. “They were large and impersonal”, he said. Lahham, who came to the U.S. from Syria, much prefers Moonbot and Shreveport, Louisiana.⁷³

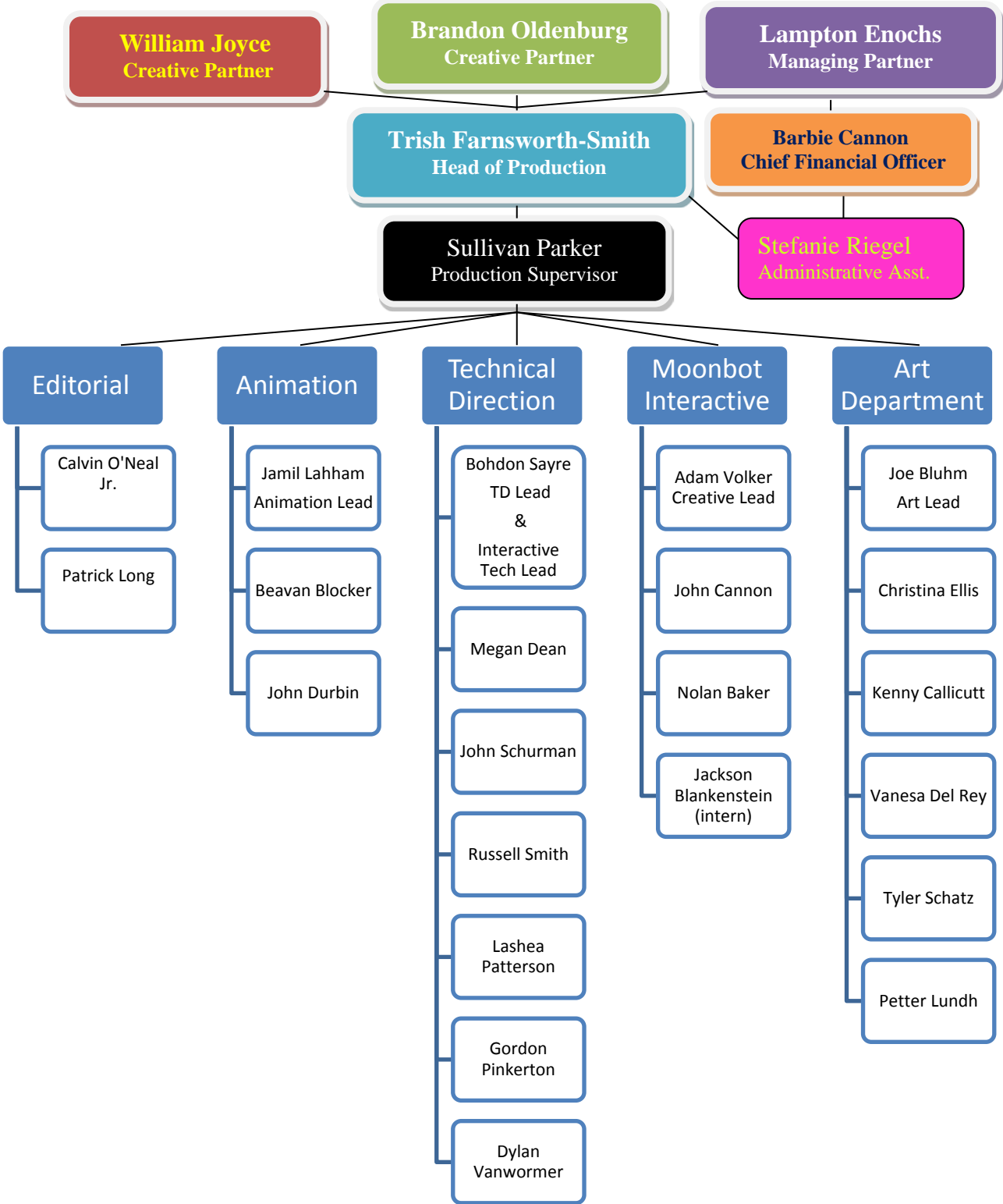
Lahham, like Steve Jobs, talked about the risks of having a wildly successful first product. When the team was working on *Morris Lessmore*, he said, they were not thinking of winning an Oscar. They were just working as hard as they could to finish. Trying to follow up a successful product creates a new kind of pressure. The studio’s second project, *The Numberlys*, was released before the Oscar nomination so they were able to complete their sophomore project without the kind of pressure that often follows a successful first project. “Trying to please everyone is a recipe for failure,” Lahham said. He remained hopeful, however, that the studio would maintain its proper focus.⁷⁴

What, then, is the next stage? When asked about the combination of deliberate planning and emergent strategy (i.e. carefully planning ahead vs. planning on the fly) he uses in his endeavors, Bill Joyce laughingly replied, “Everything I’ve deliberately planned has failed utterly. You have plans when you go into battle, but the battle is fought in the moment.”⁷⁵ Alissa Kantrow, interestingly enough, remembers “clear as day,” sitting down with Bill Joyce and Lampton Enochs when they were first thinking of starting a studio. “We’ll start the company,” he said. “We’ll make an animated short, it’ll get nominated for an Oscar, and it’ll be the calling card for

our company.”⁷⁶ “Failed utterly” certainly doesn’t do justice to the facts, in that case, but Joyce most likely interpreted “planned deliberately” as “tried to control every detail,” as opposed to hiring talented people and trusting them enough to let them do what they do best. Moonbot certainly seems to have done that.

What about the financial side? Since Moonbot is a privately-held company, most of the company’s financial information is unavailable to outsiders, one can only speculate. The company was two years old in 2012, and facility, equipment, and staffing costs for the start-up were certain to have been significant. The company’s ability to attract high-paying clients like Ford Motor Company, even before earning an Oscar, gave it an edge few new start-ups enjoy, however. One can only imagine the selection of clients available to Moonbot after the Oscar, but providing services to clients was only a means to an end. How close was this small, innovative studio to being able to support itself entirely with its great stories? That is a story for another day.

Appendix: Moonbot’s Organization Chart



Prepared by: Trish Farnsworth-Smith and Stephanie Riegel, November, 2011.

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