

FUTURE VISIONS

STAR WARS' MOST AUDACIOUS ANIMATED SERIES **VISIONS** RETURNS - AND THIS TIME, AARDMAN, CARTOON SALOON AND MORE ARE INVOLVED

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STAR WARS: VISIONS STARTED as an experiment: a series of nine animated anthology short stories set in a galaxy far, far away, but with no relation to the main Skywalker Saga. When they were released on Disney+, the reception was rapturous; thunderous applause followed. And that's when executive producer James Waugh – who also oversees the “Franchise Story” team at Lucasfilm – started asking: how far can *Visions* push *Star Wars* storytelling?

“We always saw *Visions* as a framework and a platform to tell unique *Star Wars* stories with really interesting creators,” Waugh tells *SFX*. The first season, he explains, was mainly anime because the team at Lucasfilm loved the artform. Therefore, the emphasis was on animation studios from Japan telling uniquely Japanese stories informed by their culture. “That unlocked for us the reality that different cultural perspectives on *Star Wars* could really influence what these stories could potentially be,” he adds.

GLOBAL VISIONS

Visions now returns with nine more short stories, but this time the outlook is global. Studios from Spain (El Guiri), Chile (Punkrobot), South Korea (Studio Mir), South Africa (Triggerfish), France (Studio La Cachette), India (88 Pictures) and once again Japan (D'Art Shtajio) have produced episodes. Closer to *SFX*'s home, Ireland's Cartoon Saloon has made a short titled “Screecher's Reach”, as has the UK's most famous animators, Aardman, with a short titled “I Am Your Mother”.

For Waugh, having these different perspectives from different cultures makes the new season increasingly diverse. “You look at Cartoon Saloon – the short is steeped in Irish culture, and you wouldn't get that otherwise,” he says. “Each culture brought their own unique take on *Star Wars*... you're seeing the culture reflected through *Star Wars*.”

He points to “The Bandits Of Golak”, from 88 Pictures, as an example of deeply fusing a cultural perspective into a story. “I remember when they first pitched us the idea, they showed us this amazing, dazzling art and photos of dhabas, which are truck stops throughout India.

“They decorate them in bright, vibrant colours to attract travellers, and so that was the reference point. Then it became, how do we build this within *Star Wars*? How do we take this thing that is innate to a culture and put it within the *Star Wars* setting?”

Another effect of opening up *Visions* to storytellers from around the world was the variety of changing animation styles. “There are animation styles that you normally don't associate with what we've done,” Waugh

Punkrobot's short “In The Stars”.



“The metaphor of the galaxy is powerful and needed, but it is really a human story”

explains. “Punkrobot has this amazing fusion of 3D meets stop-motion that allows for rich texture. Triggerfish's short, the design of those characters are completely unique. The characters have this doll-like texture.”

Many animation studios had seen what the first season had accomplished – filmmakers telling stories about roaming Jedi knights, rogue Sith on the Outer Rim, relatives of Jabba the Hutt starting a rock band – and wanted to play around in that *Star Wars* sandbox. However, while Lucasfilm received phone calls from various suitors hoping to get involved, the process of recruiting studios did not change from the first season.

“The first volume did have a resonance in the animation community,” Waugh says. “We certainly had studios that were really inspired and wanted to reach out. But it was more about which studios we were really impressed by. The truth is, we're just huge animation fans. Seeing Cartoon Saloon's work, Triggerfish, Punkrobot – all of these studios are amazing, and so we reached out to them.

“We really wanted to make sure that we had an interesting mix of globally different perspectives and different lenses. We did some

cold calling. Some people were just shocked that *Star Wars* was calling them, but it came from passion and love.”

Lucasfilm soon started getting pitches and Waugh started feeling out the types of stories the studios wanted to tell within the *Star Wars* framework. “We're always looking for, where's the heart and where's the soul of the storytelling?” he says.

“We were surprised by how each of the studios had that anchor. We didn't get the types of pitches that we often can get at *Star Wars*, dealing with the mega mythos of the galaxy and all the world-building elements. They understood that we were looking for emotional, true stories.”

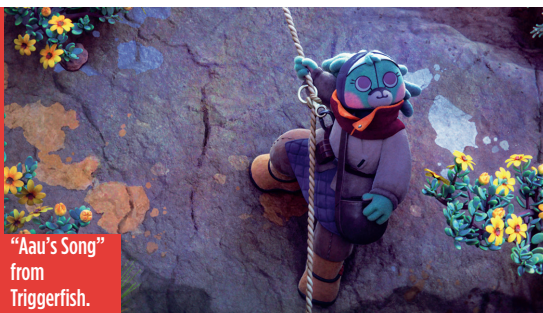
He offers an example in Aardman, the stop-motion studio behind Wallace and Gromit, Shaun the Sheep and *Chicken Run*. “Aardman is such a storied studio and we were expecting more comedy pitches, but what we really respected and admired about them is that they had something to say, and so their pitch is so relatable and universal, even from a studio that we traditionally think of as more bombastic and comedy-oriented. It's funnier because it had that truth to it.”

“The Bandits Of Golak” by 88 Pictures.





Studio Mir, "Journey To The Dark Head."



"Aau's Song" from Triggerfish.

STAR WARS: VISIONS



"I Am Your Mother" from Aardman.



With such diversity on display, a fundamental question that Lucasfilm has long contended with arose: what makes a *Star Wars* story? Sure, Jedi and Sith and Midi-chlorians are all uniquely *Star Wars*, but they do not necessarily make a bona fide *Star Wars* story – and *Star Wars* stories don't have to include them. Since the shorts within *Visions* can be about almost anything, there needed to be a guiding light that brought them all together.

"What was interesting this time around was delicately balancing; staying true to the heart of good *Star Wars* storytelling, the values and the type of themes we usually resonate with, while also opening the door to what *Star Wars* stories could be, and finding ways to use *Visions* as a place to push the boundaries of what we're comfortable with," Waugh says.

"Animation gives us a little bit of a natural leeway for that. It's a way of looking at *Star Wars* like we never had before. Seeing Aardman's very, very British humour, it really played well. But all of the studios had that awkward moment of, does this fit in *Star Wars*? And then also, is it doing something unexpected?"

For Waugh, the value and theme that's core to all the stories is simply being relatable on a human level. "You look at *Episode VII* and Rey and that's really a story about a lonely girl who discovers a dog, BB-8. You could look at it in those terms. She suddenly has a friend.

"The metaphor of the galaxy is ultimately powerful and needed, but it is really a human story, and so our goal is to keep that guiding light with the studios."

Of course, filmmakers also have a desire to use all the *Star Wars* tools at their disposal, and the first season of *Visions* featured a fair number of lightsabers. The second season is no different, with storytellers gravitating towards using the Force.

"The Force really fits with this idea of following your own inner voice," Waugh says. "It plays with themes that are so inherent about embracing your destiny, and that's one of the elements that really defines *Star Wars* storytelling. Naturally, a lot of the studios gravitated towards wanting to have some sort of Force element within their storytelling.

"And it expresses itself in different ways. Like with Triggerfish, the Force is expressed with a song, which is really beautiful and unique and something we haven't seen before. But it's that same metaphor of finding your inner calling, just with a Force ability that manifests through song.

"There are also characters that are Force-sensitive on the run, and a character looking for a better life and being tempted by something that's ultimately Dark Side-related," he continues. "And there are a couple of clear Jedi stories. Because, you know, lightsabers and Jedi make everybody happy."

While Waugh wants to stress that *Visions* does not fit within canon, one short from the first season featured Boba Fett, with Temuera Morrison reprising the role. "Some of the stories could easily fit within a canonical perspective," he says, "and if you think that story takes place within your head canon, great! Even then, we weren't looking for

expanded tales about known characters. What's interesting about *Visions* is the opportunity to use the texture and richness of the galaxy to create new stories and new characters that are very clearly influenced by the elements of a galaxy."

However, he tantalisingly adds without going into specifics that we can expect a familiar face in season two: "I will say Aardman has a very special guest star, a known character from *Star Wars*, and there are tons of Easter eggs throughout that are instantly recognisable, and characters we've known throughout the trilogies and the shows."

EXPANDED UNIVERSE

With the first season unanimously praised, you have to wonder whether this novel approach to *Star Wars* storytelling has had a wider impact on Lucasfilm – and Waugh is well placed to speak about the franchise's future.

"I don't know if *Visions* in particular has influenced the decision-making across Lucasfilm," he says. "But what's beautiful about *Star Wars* is that it's a galaxy, it's a place, it's a history and a timeline. There's so much potential and only so many stories that the camera has been placed on.

"We all feel that there's a real expandable reality to *Star Wars* storytelling. There's never been this sort of a phenomenon, where the elements, the sounds, it means so much. I am of the mindset that there is room for all layers of *Star Wars* storytelling." ●

Star Wars: Visions is on Disney+ from 4 May.

