

The Simple Carnival's Sophisticated 3-D Videos

by Rosalie Chandler

On February 15, 2017, The New York Stereoscopic Association hosted award-winning 3-D filmmaker Jeff Boller at its monthly meeting. Boller is a Pittsburgh, PA, based artist who combines his musical talent, tech-savviness, storytelling skills and love of 3-D to make unique music videos. You can check them out in anaglyph at smitten3d.com/video.html.

For the past seven years, Boller has been working on his album *Smitten*, which was released on Valentine's Day. Since 2011, he has been releasing accompanying 3-D music videos for the songs on the album. So far he has completed five out of 10 and they've been screening at festivals around the world including the Mill Valley Film Festival, the LA 3-D Movie Festival, the New Media Film Festival, the 3D Korea International Film Festival, and the European 3D Film & Music Fest. His films have also played at a number of the National Stereoscopic Association's 3D-Cons since 2012. "The Problem with Friends" won Best Video at 3D-Con 2016 in Tulsa, OK.

The video that has received the most recognition is "A Geek Like Me," which was awarded the Paul Wing Best in Show Award at 3D-Con 2014 and won the Perron Award for Short Animated 3-D film at the 2014 Stereo MEDIA Summit. Boller also received the inaugural Ray Zone

Award for Excellence in "3-DIY" at 10th Annual LA 3-D Movie Festival for "A Geek Like Me."

There are plenty of reviews and descriptions of the songs and musical influences available on The Simple Carnival's website but we're here to talk about 3-D!

RC: What was your first encounter with 3-D? If it was a still image, what was your first encounter with a 3-D film?

JB: Probably my first encounter with 3-D was a giant King Kong poster from the children's magazine *Dynamite*. But the thing that made the biggest impression was when the 3D Video Corporation syndicated various anaglyph 3-D movies on cable TV back in the 1980s. My dad bought me anaglyph glasses from a local convenience store. We didn't have cable, so I would go to a relative's house to watch films like *Revenge of the Creature*, *Gorilla at Large*, *Dynasty* (the kung fu film, not the '80s soap opera) and *The Mask* (the Canadian horror film, not the Jim Carrey comedy). Those movies were the most amazing thing I had ever seen on a TV. I didn't have the capability to create my own 3-D films or photos back then—I could only draw anaglyph images with magic markers or colored pencils. But the wonder I felt from seeing those movies stuck with me.

RC: What 3-D and non-3-D filmmakers or pieces inspire you?

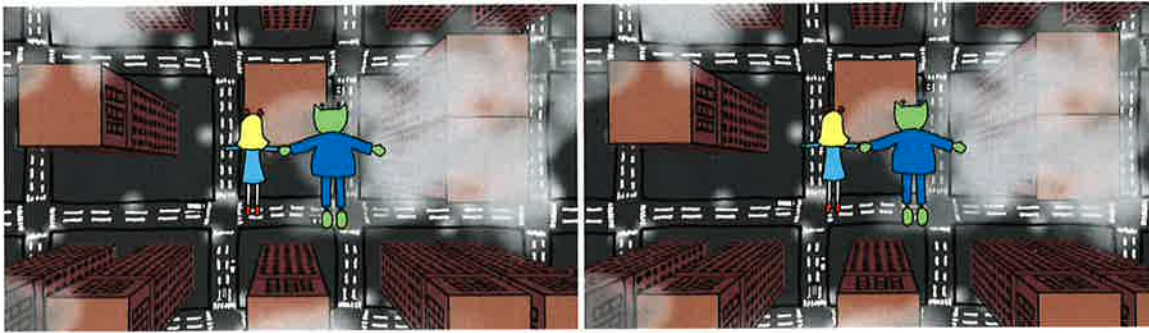
JB: I feel fortunate to be living in an era when there are some truly spectacular Oscar-nominated films that have been released in 3-D. I'm sure some of those movies will be considered classics in the future, if they aren't already considered classics now. That said, most of my inspiration comes from the past, usually from non-3-D sources.

I'm a big Hitchcock and Spielberg fan. I love the way that Hitchcock sometimes tells a story with just visuals, and I love Spielberg's sophisticated sense of staging. Both of them, when they're at their best, mercilessly manipulate the audience in the most entertaining sort of way. Plus, their films usually have two of my favorite composers doing the score—Bernard Herrmann and John Williams.

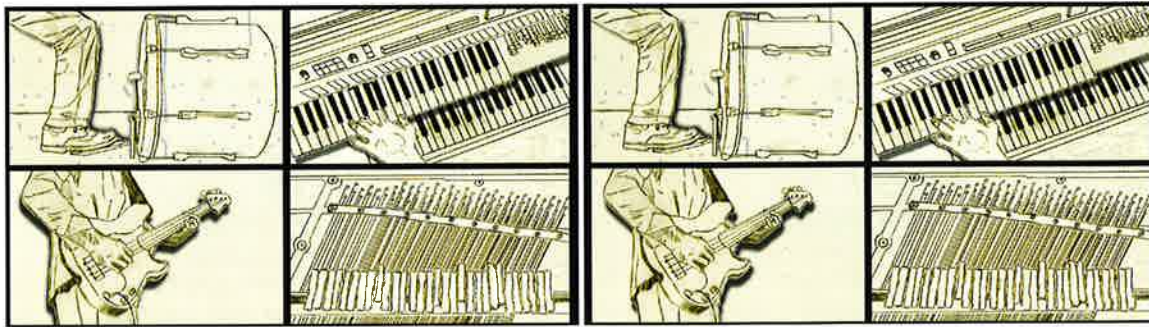
F.M. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927) is one of my all-time favorites. The special effects work for that time period is stunning, and the story packs an emotional wallop. The sound design is decades ahead of its time. The overall effect between the sound and visuals is like a vividly-remembered daydream. I also love Disney's *Pinocchio*—particularly the whale chase at the end. You can see and hear this amazing group of artists working

Jeff Boller joins the New York Stereoscopic Association via Skype. (Stereo by Jim Harp)





Still from *Smitten*
(Courtesy of Jeff Boller).



Still from *A Geek Like Me*
(Courtesy of Jeff Boller).

together to create this exciting and emotional thing that's firing on all cylinders. That's what really inspires me—when I see or hear art that's firing on all cylinders.

RC: The big question: *Why 3-D?* What inspired you to make videos to accompany your album in 3-D? Why not 2-D?

JB: At first, it was a side effect of picking Anime Studio Pro as my first animation program to learn. Anime Studio Pro has some basic stereoscopic features built in, and I had always loved 3-D as a kid, so I thought it would be fun to indulge that interest while creating these music videos. What I found as I got more into the project though, is that 3-D works extremely well for certain kinds of material. When you have 3-D imagery—especially surreal imagery—in combination with music or animation, 3-D gives it the potential to feel like a waking dream. It can be a bit like experiencing a direct connection to someone's imagination. Norman McClaren's short *Around is Around* is a great example of that. I'm really drawn to imaginative things that pull me in through a combination of sound and visuals.

In a 2014 issue of Stereoscopy (# 98, Issue 2.2014), Boller wrote a piece detailing his process for creating "A Geek Like Me."

RC: Have your techniques and/or software changed or varied since "A Geek Like Me?"

JB: The techniques and software are always changing, unfortunately. I say 'unfortunately' because, if I would stick with doing the same thing, subsequent films would be a lot quicker to create. It's like, just as I start to get really comfortable with a particular technique, the film is done and it's time to move onto the next thing, which involves an entirely different main technique—though the new film usually builds upon the techniques that I previously used.

That's always been the goal with *Smitten 3D*, though. There were very specific filmmaking and CG techniques I wanted to learn with each music video, and I chose to attack the videos in a certain order so that each one is more technically challenging, or builds on something that I learned in the previous video. It's kind of like a Montessori curriculum for filmmaking.

The video to "The Problem with Friends"—which I did after "A Geek Like Me"—was my first serious attempt at using Blender (a free, open source CG modeling/animation application), and I made it do a lot of things it wasn't designed to do. For example, Blender is not really meant to handle a mixed media sort of approach where you have bits of

video flying around every which way. I had to write custom software to make that happen. Also, when I started "The Problem with Friends," there was no stereoscopic camera feature in Blender. I ended up modifying an existing stereoscopic camera add-on, and then writing a bunch of additional software to go along with it. (As I started to work on the final shot nearly a year and a half later, Blender finally got a built-in stereoscopic camera feature.)

RC: How did you create the Victorian imagery used in "The Problem with Friends?"

JB: When I started work on the video, I toyed with the idea of incorporating images from actual Victorian stereo cards, but abandoned it when I couldn't easily determine what was public domain and what was not. The Victorian imagery I ended up using was based off of a public domain DVD clip art collection I had purchased some time back. I modified the clip art pretty heavily, where I would do things like take the head off of one person and paste it onto the body of another person. All of the clip art was in black and white, so I filled in the proper colors in a paint program. Unfortunately, the Victorian clip art was very low resolution. If you zoomed in too close to the artwork, the black outlines looked like they were from a 1980s home computer—they were very obvi-

ously blocky. So I printed out all of the colored Victorian images on a color laser printer, which made the black outlines fuzzier and hid the fact that they were so low resolution. The imperfections of the laser printer also made all of the solid colors look like newsprint - like Roy Lichtenstein's pop art - which added a wonderful visual texture to all of the flat elements in the video.

I basically used an updated version of the technique that Jim Blashfield used on his music videos in the '80s and '90s. He would use a color copier to make copies of photos and clip art, cut them out with (I assume) a penknife, and then animate them under a camera lens. Conceptually, I did pretty much the same thing, except I did it with a computer, a laser printer, and a cheap scanner. The goal of "The Problem with Friends" was always to make something like Michael Jackson's "Leave Me Alone" video (which Blashfield directed) but with a Victorian steampunk style, and in 3-D.

RC: Are you self-taught?

JB: As a filmmaker, yes. I started making films with a Super 8 camera back in second grade. I made hand drawn animation, stop motion animation, and silly, short, live action films. I continued to make silly live action films and videos as a teenager. I also dabbled with computer animation at that time, using an application for the Atari 800 home computer called Movie Maker—it was kind of like a primitive version of Flash animation. In my 20s, I landed a job at a video production company as a videographer and editor, where I started taking the craft more seriously.

Many years later, when I got into making the music videos for *Smitten 3D*, someone suggested

that I enter the music videos in some film festivals. That idea seemed really intimidating, as I thought you had to have gone to film school to get into a film festival. After being sort of accidentally invited to my first film festival, I thought I ought to buckle down and learn as much as I could about the field via reading, watching, analyzing, and, of course, making more of my own films. And that's where I'm still at—trying to be a sponge and absorb as much knowledge as I can about all aspects of the field. I kind of hope I'll always be in that state, as it's exciting to learn and feel like you're growing in some way.

RC: You produce your music largely on your own. Is it the same with your films? Do you prefer to work alone?

JB: The films are pretty much a solo endeavor. It's not so much that I prefer to work alone as it is that I have to do it out of necessity. I didn't raise funds via Kickstarter or have a producer giving me a budget to work with. I can afford the equipment and software needed for CG film production—which doesn't cost that much in the big scheme of things. However, I don't have the resources to pay a team of good animators or technical folks. The upside of not having the money to run things like a full-fledged production team is that I get to learn how to do all the roles myself. It's obviously not the fastest way to work, but it's been a terrific way to learn. If I ever find myself in the position of having to delegate things in a larger production, I'll have a really strong understanding of everybody's role and know exactly which things I need the most help with.

In addition to these questions which Boller answered via email, the members

of The New York Stereoscopic Association had a few for him at the meeting as well.

Jim Harp asked Boller if he had considered making a virtual reality experience for one of his songs. It turns out Boller has created VR environments as part of his day job as a software developer, where he's designed things like a virtual casino to facilitate psychological research.

As far as his creative work though, Boller says, "I've messed around with Google Cardboard and I considered doing something with that, but I like film. I think VR's a different thing. There's a lot of possibilities with it and I'm excited for the possibilities, but I'm more focused on making 3-D films. It's just an area that I like exploring."

When asked about upcoming projects, Boller replied, "On the album there's a song called 'Go Away I Like You Too Much' and that's going to be the next video. I'm doing a lot of character animation with it." He is incorporating the Microsoft Kinect, a device that translates a person's gestures into video games, into his next piece. "What I'm doing right now is writing a computer program that connects the Kinect directly to Blender. I'll be able to translate my real life physical movements directly to a character in Blender. So it'll look different than any of the animations I've done so far." He hopes to have this film completed by the fall.

NYSA president John Zelenka wrapped up the Skype session by saying, "It was a pleasure speaking to a geek like you."

Boller will continue to release 3-D music videos for *Smitten* in the coming years and, when they're all complete, he plans to release them as a 3-D Blu-ray. Beyond that, Boller plans to create 3-D narrative CG animated shorts with orchestral soundtracks. Please visit [The Simple](http://TheSimple)

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Still from *The Problem With Friends*
(Courtesy of Jeff Boller).

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Simple Carnival

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Carnival's website at simplecarnival.com and follow Boller on Facebook ([facebook.com/TheSimpleCarnival](https://www.facebook.com/TheSimpleCarnival)). He plans to attend the 2018 3D-Con in Ohio, so look for him and some of his latest work there! 📷

Wanted

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