

Autodesk Vision Series 2024

# Art Without Borders: Mastering Technical Tools for 'Iwájú'

Cinesite | Session Transcript



## **Art Without Borders: Mastering Technical Tools for 'Iwájú'**

Walt Disney Animation Studios partnered with Kugali Media to tell the story of 'Iwájú' and tapped Cinesite to help create the six-episode series. Working remotely facilitated a global and egalitarian partnership, where the challenges of creating a futuristic, yet recognizable Lagos and populating it with compelling and authentic characters drove the entire team to create their best work. Hear from Adel Abada, Associate VFX Supervisor at Cinesite to explore the technical and artistic challenges and how they were overcome.

[Watch the recording](#)



**Adel Abada, Feature  
Animation VFX Supervisor at  
Cinesite**

Adel is passionate about all types of storytelling art forms and has been in the animation and VFX industry for over 20 years. He currently serves as an Associate VFX Supervisor at Cinesite, where he's been for the last 9 years.

Throughout his career, he has worked at major studios around the globe, including Pixar, Weta FX and Sony Pictures Imageworks. Adel's expertise lies in collaborating with passionate artists and utilizing technical tools to craft compelling visual narratives that captivate audiences worldwide.

## Session Transcript

**Adel Abada (00:14):**

Hello and welcome to this presentation Iwájú: Art Without Borders. I'm very excited to be here and to walk you through the process of how we created this six-episode series currently available on Disney+. My name is Adel Abada. I'm an associate VFX supervisor. I've been in the industry for over 20 years. I worked on many studios around the planet and I've been with Cinesite for the last nine years. I had the privilege to supervise the entire show of Iwájú alongside with Marlon West, who's the VFX supervisor Disney Animation Studios. Ellen Poon, our VFX supervisor in LA and our very talented animation director, Jason Ryan. This presentation gives you a quick overview. We're going to be talking about how everything started, the research process, pre-production that was handled by Disney Animation Studios and Kugali, production process, all done by Cinesite, the collaboration between all three studios and how that evolved over time.

**Adel Abada (01:31):**

So how did it all start? Well, it's an idea that started between the Kugali team and Disney Animation Studios. Kugali is a small studio in Lagos, Nigeria. They create stories in the form of comic books. They had stories to tell and they created an alliance with Disney Animation Studios to create a movie which ended up being this six episode limited series. And Cinesite was tapped to take care of all the CG work. And from the beginning the expectations were very clear. We want this to be feature film quality at all levels, asset build, animation, lighting and effects. It was structured as six episodes but built in the form of a three act story. If you strung episode one all the way to six, you really get a full movie with three acts. It was set in futuristic Lagos, Nigeria, yet grounded in the current economic and cultural realities. Timeline was about 22 to 24 months. Each episode was roughly between 18 minutes to 20 minutes, which amounted to a toll of more than 1800 shots for the whole six episodes. We knew from the beginning this is going to be a large scale environment with a lot of and a lot of CFX for the crowds as well.

**Adel Abada (03:04):**

Now for some of you who might not have seen the movie on Disney+, let me just play a trailer.

**VIDEO: Disney's 'Iwájú' trailer**

**Adel Abada (05:55):**

So when you start a movie, it is common that you're going to have to do the research. Here I'm going to just speak about the Cinesite side while waiting for the story and the storyboards to come our way, we wanted to kind of dive a little bit and understand a little bit of that culture. Our approach was to study a little bit of the artwork. I personally start

to listen to some of the music from the region. As you get sort of attuned to the reality of Lagos, Nigeria and Nigeria as a whole, I think you're starting to build this sort of emotional database as you start to approach the project. You're basically getting into the right headspace. We looked at some of the work of their photographers, very interesting perspective on how they see the land. It's always interesting to take a look at raw images from the reality, but also try to understand it from the perspective of their own artists and how they see their own town. And also just taking a look at what's available on YouTube with some of the people who kind of traveled to Lagos and just be live in the street of Lagos virtually, but still get a sense of it. And I think that starts to get you into that sort of headspace.

**Adel Abada (07:29):**

Now you do your own research and one great thing that our HR team did was a masterclass to understand a little bit about the history of the land and their colonial era, their independence, their military ruling, and then the civilian ruling that came along afterwards, that transition and also the discovery of oil that changed completely the dynamic of the economic structure within the land. And later on there's this sort of recurrent theme that the production designer and the director will constantly talk about, which is the main land versus the island, which is very specific to Lagos, which is still the economic capital. It used to be the capital of Nigeria before it kind of moved up to Abuja if I'm not mistaken. But that concept wasn't strange to us when the production designer and the directors start talking about it, and you can see it, and I'll play here a sequence about this idea of the mainland versus the island.

**Adel Abada (08:38):**

The mainland is chaotic, it's messy, but yet very alive. The island which you see here is very well organized and spacious and lush and it's that constant theme of rich versus poor and we try to be as accurate as possible in building this. People who are familiar with Lagos will know that the island is connected to the mainland by three bridges and the actual geography is quite accurate. And this is some of the images of the mainland. The color palette is very earthy and warm in the mainland, but very cold and kind of a cool color palette when we are in the island.

**Adel Abada (09:33):**

The other aspect was Nigeria has over 500 languages and we knew that our focus is going to be mainly on the Yoruba language and also Pidgin, which is English with some very specific accents to the region. There's absolutely no way for me to describe the Pidgin than to actually show you. Let's take a listen at this sequence. This is from episode two. The guy you see there is Bode. He's the bad guy. He's about to meet with his lackeys, he who just came back from some shady work and they're meeting on this secret location on the rooftop. Take a listen at the guy who actually exits the car. That guy speaks Pidgin.

### **VIDEO: Clip from 'Iwájú'**

**Adel Abada (11:37):**

So I think it was great to bring that sort of level of authenticity but also be very respectful about the people and the story we're telling, which is all about Nigeria.

**Adel Abada (11:53):**

Now, no matter how much research you do and how much history you're going to read, there are things you're not going to catch. And this is where the importance of the cultural advisor is going to be key. Unless you've been living there for six years, you're going to miss a lot of subtleties. And Tolu who was our cultural advisor from the Kugali team and Ziki, who also lived in Nigeria. And they kind of guide us a little bit through this process of understanding the subtleties of the culture and had to do with the salute like a younger person, the way it salutes an older person, a water bowl in a restaurant because people eat with their hands. They always have this bowl sitting on the side where they wash their hand. The Agege bread, which is a traditional very known bread from the region. Tola and Godspower's relationship, Godspower's is actually the driver, the father and daughter relationship and all this aspect. I think it was extremely important to understand that as we're telling these stories. We're being authentic to the culture and to the region. And in this scene here, this relationship between Godspower, who's the driver of Tola, our main character, she looks at him as almost like her uncle, but he understands this is still the daughter of his boss. And they are really limited to that. Take a listen.

### **VIDEO: Clip from 'Iwájú'**

**Adel Abada (13:43):**

Wonderful work from the animation team with all the subtleties there. Again, great work from CFX as well on the dress in this scene. This is the Agege bread, great work from the FX team.

### **VIDEO: Clip from 'Iwájú'**

**Adel Abada (14:18):**

So in this scene it's all about the dynamic of the father and daughter, which is very different from the west where it's almost like a hierarchy of how she perceives her father. And in this scene, he forgo about her birthday and just offering her this lizard as a gift to kind of forgive himself for forgetting the whole day about her birthday. Look at her reaction.

### **VIDEO: Clip from 'Iwájú'**

**Adel Abada (15:27):**

Now pre-production was all done by Disney Animation Studios and Kugali. And in that process, I mean we're working with Disney, which are the best in the world when it comes to making stories. They came into multiple, every episode were delivered one after the other. We got episode 1, 2, 3, and so forth. And for us story is extremely important because this is the place where we start to analyze the level of complexity of what we're going to be dealing with. And later on when we look at the storyboard, it's either we confirm or not and we had different stages of analysis of what we're going to do. And often we would discuss at the storyboard level where things can be improved or adjusted, but it's important to identify your level of complexity early on so you approach it with the whole team with the best tools.

**Adel Abada (16:33):**

Now the design part is pretty standard in any feature film, but again, we're working with Disney, fantastic artwork that was submitted, the usual front, side and back and texture call out and groom details and character facial expressions and environment and so forth. Absolutely a delight working with Disney. Very, very, very accurate. And we started early on with the main characters, then the sets and secondary and tertiary characters. And by the time we get to the secondary and tertiary, the team has adapted so fast to the taste of their production designer and all the design team that we could start with sometimes a rough sketch and kind of push it through and get the approval that is expected from the director.

**Adel Abada (17:37):**

Great. And then next step was the cinematography intent. I think this is the part that sometimes is missing when you're working on some feature animation and it was great to have it here. You often get a color script and you often get a color key. But to me cinematography intent is the missing link because that's really going to drive the color key and it's a constant interaction between cinematographers and the art director and driving the intent of the story through colors and contrast and whatever theme they establish. And for this one, and that was created by Adolf Lusinsky and Rob Driesell, their intent was about creating two themes, the compassion versus indifference. No matter what the scene is, if we identify the scene as compassion, then it has to be a shallower depth of field with less contrast. If it was indifference, just like in the scene on screen right now, it has to be deep depth to field with a lot of contrast.

**Adel Abada (18:51):**

And you might think like, hey, a camera at nighttime, my F-stop is low. It should get a shallow depth to field. Well that was a choice and this is part of understand the rule before you break them. And in this scene that you see right here on screen, that was a moment of compassion because our character had made a mistake but wanted to correct it and kind of had regrets about what he has done. It was a compassionate moment. We have this sort

of bokeh and shallow depth to field in here and it's been very consistent. There are some exceptions throughout the film, but having that in the background, so decisions are driven by the theme that supports the story is to me a key element that should drive any feature in film you're making. Okay, now let's get to production. The part that Cinesite took care of.

**Adel Abada (19:53):**

So now you get your design, you got your storyboard to your concept, you got to take it from paper to screen. I've talked originally about some of the dev initiative that we initiated. We knew that early on that it was at the story level. We knew that we had to have a city building tool that would allow us to replicate the mainland, that crowd system needs to be improved knowing that our crowd system is going to have to handle CFX on top with a lot of traditional clothing, a character variation tool, which I will talk shortly about, but I want to play that sequence we're talking about. This is a lot of scenes from the mainland. In this reel, you'll see a different locations of the mainland and different times of day. And it was important that each location feels different. We built a city building tool that was, we didn't completely start it from scratch because our VFX team had worked on a project that required city building, but it was not at this level.

**Adel Abada (21:01):**

So we kind of started the conversation with them and then pushed it as far as we could to basically handle the different location of the mainland. And the rule was that the mainland needs to feel very organic and messy and with a lot of variation. Optimizing the scene also was key. And it seemed like there's geometry at the base, but there's a lot of DNP support because we're not very close with the camera. Contrary to these shots that you see right here, where all of this is geometry, character props, it has to create this sort of feel of chaos. An organized chaos as would say Hamid, the production designer. Now our character tool was great, but we pushed it a little further and our character tools has allowed us to create a lot of variation in the characters. With only four body types, some groom and different clothing, we could create thousands of variation.

**Adel Abada (22:11):**

So we never see the same character twice in any given scene. And that kind of helped reinforce the variety that we really wanted to push. One thing we really liked about some of these scenes is that especially when we were in the market is that the composer who came later on when we were about to finish the movie, started composing the score for this film and he was originally from Nigeria, but made his career in LA. He was like, oh that reminds me of my childhood when I'm looking at those sequences in the mainland. And we're like, okay. I think when you have this sort of genuine response from somebody who hasn't been involved in the project, I think we're very feeling grateful that we did hit a target and we were still respectful to the whole culture.

**Adel Abada (23:05):**

And again, this is another variation of different areas of the mainland just toward episode five when they're chasing the bad guys. Alright, and that was the asset building in the mainland. I want to talk now about the look of picture. Look of picture is not only about the look, it's about identifying. This usually happens at the beginning of a project and this sequence has nothing to do with the movie. Early on, one of the decisions was, okay, what is this movie about? What does it look like? And we knew that the mainland is going to represent more than 70% of the film. This was important to kind of create the feel of it with a large amount of props. And this allowed our asset team to start figuring out how to build this world at a smaller scale because from this, it's going to go 10 times bigger.

**Adel Abada (24:13):**

It was key for animation to start getting those subtleties and find what the director wants. It was great for CFX, obviously lighting. We did the daytime, nighttime, we worked closely with cinematographers, our lighting team did a fantastic job on this. And all of this you do to really get into the head of your director and production designer and cinematographer. You're starting to understand the subtleties of what's important to them. So by the time you start your first sequence in production, you hit the ground running. From first sequence, now you got to look of picture, you establish a shot, you're in the pace of delivering, now you got to keep it going. And I think one of the challenges was the schedule. I mean, this movie was made across six to seven time zones. I mean we had LA, Vancouver, Montreal, London, Lagos, Nigeria, Uganda.

**Adel Abada (25:23):**

So it requires a lot of coordination and a lot of effort and a big, big thanks to everybody who contributed and our line producer in making sure this kind of happened consistently over 24 months. It was important also to keep the team motivated across the scene. That wasn't too hard because the story was great, everybody was loving as they read every episode, we would get excited about some of the events and even the changes, sometimes you get a hold on that sequence, we're going to make some changes in story. Even at that point we were curious about what the changes are going to be and often seeing the first version and the second version and see how that got improved is absolutely amazing. It's really watching Disney in the process, which are, they're at top of their game and was really, really delightful to go through that.

**Adel Abada (26:24):**

Now obviously we're making a movie, it's all about teamwork. However, you have to establish some protocols. You kind of build trust. You're going to build it by the delivery of your quality of work, your commitment to constantly improve the quality, the trust is going to be there. But it's important to establish protocol, especially for Ziki who was first time director and we explained that we're dealing with a large scale of assets and shots. One of the main meetings we used to have was Braintrust where we look at



storyboard and we'll say here's a level of complexity where we're at, we can improve this. This is going to be a little bit hard to do, but we know how to approach this. And then the sort of constant back and forth and conversation and how to do the best work with the time we have and the resources we have.

**Adel Abada (27:28):**

And it was a great interaction. We approach it a lot from also after the Braintrust, we have this process of Digi Scout, which is important for both the asset team and the cinematographer. And Rob Dressel really loved this process because he could identify how he's going to shoot his camera. The asset team will know where the camera is. They optimize their workflow to all be on screen. Animation is the standard blocking spline and finesse. Foundation lighting is something we do early on. Everybody knows what the color palette is going to be. Animators are aware of where the shadows and light are going to be. Is this a nighttime, is this a daytime? I think it's always helpful to have that in the back of your mind and also help lighting start early on and not just wait for textures to be done before they can start. All departments are focusing toward the final image and that brings efficiency to the process and it helps the director clearly see where his movie's going because there are so many steps before he get to the final image.

**Adel Abada (28:42):**

Now we do this for a very good reason. We do it so we can provide the highest quality possible obviously on time, but sometimes there's going to be difficulty down the road and there're going to be certain level of complexity that you didn't plan for. And that's where the level of collaboration is extremely important. Then I get very excited about that. I mean I love making movies because of that, because of the challenges and us getting into a room and finding a creative solution for that. And in this case, we had Otin that looked like this and we knew by episode six he would transform on camera to something like this. And we got with designers and cinematographers and our animation team and FX team and we figure out a way of doing it even though it wasn't specified very clearly from the beginning. And that's the level of collaboration you want when you're partnering with different people across different cities.

**Adel Abada (29:51):**

Now sometimes in this process of collaboration, sometimes perfection can be the enemy of greatness. And what I mean by that is that don't lose track of what you're trying to do. You're trying to do 1800 shots, not three shots, not ten shots. Constantly have this sort of holistic approach and making sure that we're raising the bar equally throughout the show. You don't want to end up with 20% of your movie looking amazing and rushing 80% just to kind of get it on time and on budget. You have to balance these things out. And I think Disney was amazing with this because they understood this, that we're making a movie that is driven by a story and this is always this balance between story and aesthetic.

If a note is driven by the story, nine out of 10, you're going to go back and do it and hopefully you do it through the process.

**Adel Abada (30:54):**

And even if you miss it through the process and you do it a little late down the line, you still go back and do it. If it's aesthetic and you had a chance to see it many times, but for whatever reason you missed that and now we're in 2K, final render and a new idea comes up. I think this should always be evaluated at what is the impact in terms of resources. If this image at that stage, again we're talking about we've gone through the whole process and this note is coming a little late, if that note is a 2% increase in quality versus a 5% resource demand, then you just, yes, you go and do it. But if it's 2% and it's requiring 20% of resources, maybe you should reevaluate or consider what we call CBB stands for "could be better".

**Adel Abada (31:49):**

And I think I know that some people think of CBBs as a list that everybody's going to forget at the end of the movie, but we don't. We took it very seriously. And if I'm not mistaken, we have had about close to 50 shots in CBB with about 30 in priority one and 25 shots in priority two. And we did all of the priority one because we knew it was important and the part that was in priority two, some of 'em were just dismissed just because when we sat down with the production designer and the VFX supervisor Marlon West from Disney and we're looking at it in continuity with sound, we're like, I don't think we're missing this. Because remember when we're reviewing shots, often we're looping one shot forever for a good five minutes. You're going to catch things at a very high detail, which is part of the process, but now you're looking at it in the edit, suddenly forgot about the note. Probably that note wasn't that important and these notes were sitting in CBB level two. Again, it's a matter of balance and priorities, but definitely keep a holistic approach and make sure that the story is your driving force.

**Adel Abada (33:13):**

And I'll give you a very quick example that happens on the show. I'll play it here. This is a good example where story really mattered. In this scene, long story short, the shot that you're going to see here was fully blurred. It wasn't just a little circle around the character, it was the whole set. And then I think somebody, one of the editors at Disney looked at it and he's like, if he's eating his food and then his glasses are fully blurred, how is he interacting with the rest of the world? And it sort of made sense because we don't want that logic to interact with the audience, we kind of distract them from the story. To us that was the story point. Whatever note was we were like, okay, let's go back and fix it. Even if it meant going back to animation and redoing some of the CFX work and crowd work.

**Adel Abada (34:10):**

Because think about it, this whole image was blurred originally, we didn't really pay attention to the CFX, but now it's kind of down to just his face and all the interaction of the secondary character becomes important. It came late in the game, but it was important. We did it. However, as another example to show you the aesthetic versus story in this sequence, all these shots look amazing. Everybody was really happy with it. And then in this shot, the last one here, this idea of screen paper on the ground, the production design wanted a little bit more than what was approved originally. And again, this note is not happening during the process. It's happening at a point where we already rendered 2K, everything is close to final and we're just expecting compositing notes. And for this case, we regarded this as not a necessary note to do right away. And eventually when we looked at it in context, it didn't really matter.

**Adel Abada (35:17):**

As long as you keep the story your driving force, I think you'll be safe. Now Ziki as first time director, I mean I can only say good things about him, absolutely amazing. He's doing this for the first time. He was a writer as well. He always had the story at heart and any note that he would point out would completely make sense and would be driven by the story. Of course, the aesthetic was there. The production designer made all the effort and cinematographer and the whole team at Cinesite was committed to deliver the highest quality but true pleasure working with Ziki, who really understood the process and embraced the process of both Disney Animation Studios and Cinesite. Now over time, you start working because we're talking about 24 months of personal involvement and commitment to this film and you start to understand exactly what your collaborators want.

**Adel Abada (36:26):**

So, everything continued to be important, but you started to kind of understand the key focus area of your main leaders. In the case of the director and for Ziki, it was important for him to get all these subtle details and animation that would remind him of some of the behavior he would see in Lagos. It was also important for him, the look of the food. If the food didn't look right, he'd be like, oh, this doesn't look like a soup I would drink. Then we will make whatever necessary adjustment in both lighting and compositing to make it look like that. Obviously, a lot of work can look deaf to make it look right from the beginning and then adjust depending on the lighting conditions. Photographer was all about dynamic of the camera in the relationship between characters. This idea of the camera below the eye line or above the eye line was very important to Rob Dressel and the eye, the eye spec and the eye whites for Adolf Lusinsky very important.

**Adel Abada (37:28):**

And of course, your audience is connecting to your characters through their eyes, made complete sense. Production designers key focus area were the patterns and the paper on

the ground, but also the key, the skin variation, the tone that would vary between different skin tones. That was super important. He wanted to make sure that whatever he approved in a neutral lighting was still relevant as we start having these characters under different lighting scenarios. Alright, in conclusion, what does it take to make a movie? It takes a lot of effort. It takes commitment from many people. You going to need artistic skill, technical skill, great partnerships like the one we have with Autodesk. But what binds everything together is the human factor. It's this sort of positive kindness attitude that is there. You're working with people for many, many, many months and you want to make sure that this environment is helpful and positive.

**Adel Abada (38:49):**

Definitely set a clear direction, set high expectation in demanding environment, but always in a very encouraging, positive way. And this is actually a key element that made this collaboration work wonderfully because both Disney and Cinesite believe in this human factor approach of positivity. And then finally, the impact of telling a story. Ultimately, it's very obvious, it broadens our horizon. It makes us understand different cultures and make them more approachable. I hope that we'll get more of this high quality work that will be shared around the world with different cultures associating with different studios around the world to tell their stories and I think will make this world a little closer and make our understanding of others more open. And that's it. If you've been kind enough to follow me all the way to the end of this presentation, I thank you. Yeah, this was Iwájú, which by the way, Iwájú means the future in the Yoruba language. Thank you again everyone and take care.

