

## Brad Minnich Explores New Animation Territory with 'The Good Lord Bird' and '2150'

The veteran VFX editor and supervisor talks about his two latest projects, Ethan Hawke's Civil War-era period Showtime series, and a fully animated feature inspired by 'Love, Death & Robots.'

By [Victoria Davis](#) | Tuesday, November 10, 2020 at 2:58pm

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Cataclysmic climate changes, super-powered emerald energies, and electrifying Pokémon powers have been visual effects editor Brad Minnich's specialty for over a decade. Since 2008, Minnich has worked on box-office hits such as *The Day After Tomorrow*, the *Twilight Saga*, *Captain America*, *Green Lantern*, *Justice League* and *Detective Pikachu*. But this year, Minnich is expanding his VFX and animation horizons with two new projects: his first historical period production, *The Good Lord Bird*, and his first fully animated feature, *2150*.

Co-created, executive produced, written by and starring Ethan Hawke, Showtime's *The Good Lord Bird*, set in 1859 pre-Civil War America, is based on a novel of the same name, and is produced by *Sharp Objects'* Blumhouse Television. The show follows the shocking, mortifying, and humorous journey of abolitionist John Brown (Hawke) and a young former slave who Brown forcibly frees and names "Onion." Brown is determined to free all slaves, no matter the cost, and Onion--who is mistaken for a girl--finds himself accidentally along for the chaotic ride.

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Minnich, who also worked with *Alpha* VFX supervisor Jeffrey A. Okun for *The Good Lord Bird's* first episode, serves as the show's primary VFX supervisor, bringing animated life to gun fights, canon blasts, town fires, and recreating the 1859 raid at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. While the show's pilot is more rooted in dialogue and backstory, Minnich's VFX work really kicks off in the second episode, where John Brown makes a declaration of war in a flammable town, his speech accompanied by ready-to-fire pistols in each hand.



But Minnich's taste for both the gritty and the futuristic is captured in his own personal animated film, *2150*, which follows the story of two innocent men who are criminally convicted and sent to a lunar prison to work and, inevitably, die. The two men become friends in order to overcome their harsh reality and escape back to earth. Minnich describes his animation as "*Shawshank Redemption* meets *The Matrix*," but the numerous animation styles included in the feature were inspired by *Love, Death & Robots*, a show Minnich says left him in awe of the potential for animation. Minnich has also recruited a reputable group of over a dozen animators and creators for his team, including *Walk the Line's* Mike McCusker as editor and *Star Wars* character designer Ian McCaig.

We recently had the opportunity to talk with Minnich about his two new projects, diving into the creative process for *The Good Lord Bird's* most challenging gunfight scenes and exploring Minnich's vision for how he plans to incorporate 16 different animation styles in *2150*.



**Victoria Davis:** *What first got you interested in visual effects and animation?*

**Brad Minnich:** When I first came out to Los Angeles, I still wasn't sure what kind of filmmaker I wanted to be. I got involved with DreamWorks, I briefly worked as Steven Spielberg's PA, and

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then I went into the editorial world on a Roland Emmerich movie called *The Day After Tomorrow*. I've always liked big ideas, and big scope things, and here I was, sitting with Roland looking at freezing Earth.

We can take people anywhere and tell any story with visual effects and it was cool to get on the front end of that wave. And now, the lines of animation and visual effects are so blurred. They're one in the same. That's where the world's going. I love it.

**VD:** *You've spent a large part of your career working on fantastical films like Captain America, The Twilight Saga, Justice League, and Detective Pikachu. Meanwhile, The Good Lord Bird is a big contrast in how grounded it is in the real world and historical events. I'm curious what attracted you to that project with it being so different from your usual niche?*

**BM:** You make a great point. I was really working away on these big, out-of-this-world, sci-fi animation effects and to be honest, I was a little burned out. And that happened year after year, project after project. But when I got a call from the producer for *The Good Lord Bird*, I was like, "You know what, that's perfect for where I am right now." I just needed to take a step back from blowing up a planet and let's get more grounded into this period piece, with a lot of fun 1857 *John Wick*-type gunplay. It was really cool to kind of get into that more grounded world with a smaller crew and more intimate filmmaking, instead of these big, massive behemoth films that have 500,000 people in the end crawl.



**VD:** *Was it an adjustment at all having to transition from, like you said, blowing up planets in the most exciting, dazzling way possible, to gunfights and fires that needed to look as real and as authentic as they could?*



Brad Minnich.

**BM:** You still have to go through the process of making an amazing shot. Whether it's big or small, the question still has to be answered, "Does this help tell the story better?" That's true whether it's a really small cosmetic fix or whether it's a really big explosion. You still have to approach it the same way and you still feel through the creative process and the delivery process of the shot the same way. It's just a different subject matter.

It's also my belief that it's always better to capture as much of the performance and action in camera and to only use VFX to enhance the scene and storytelling. So, during production, the goal is to collaborate with the director and other department heads in relation to VFX work needed on set to complete the shots in post-production. Since this is a

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Such spectacular work! Thank you, Patrick and team.

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Not disagreeing with any of this, except that Charlie is bi. Not gay. Husker is pan. And Alistor is Asexual.

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No offense, but I take what I see on Tumblr with a grain of salt. Only because Tumblr is a hornet's nest, 9/10 of the time, filled with SJWs that will shit on anything that they don't agree with...

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If anyone has faced persecution it is all the people Christians have killed in the name of Jesus Christ and the bullshit written in the bible. So easy to get into heaven, yeah you can murder people...

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To say there is no reason other than they are gay just displays they haven't been paying attention to the show or it's development. Vivienne herself has literally said, in some cases, what the sins...

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**GW Garland** I just hope that produce a film that children can go see without parents having to hold their hands over the kids ears and eyes. It really irritates me that film makers produce films, like the...

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period piece, VFX were used to create period accurate environments, period accurate gun fights, and most importantly to create Harpers Ferry in West Virginia. I was able to use various techniques involving animation, compositing, matte paintings, and CG.

But during post-production, the duties change. I then collaborate with the directors, editors, and vendors to solve complex visual problems including shot design, shot production, and shot delivery to final presentation.

**VD:** *Are there any particular episodes—in terms of both storyline and visual effects—you're especially excited about? Something viewers should be looking forward to.*

**BM:** In Episode 2, we burned down a whole town, which was super fun for me as an effects artist. There was more big gunplay, and we put some humor into the gunplay, which was a tricky thing to do, figuring out how to make a big gunfight humorous. But that's very much the tone of the show. Onion and John Brown are in the middle of everything blowing up around them and somehow, they're still not getting hit. It was a scene I enjoyed working on, finding the balance between a gunfight, burning down the town, still having a funny atmosphere.

**VD:** *Were there any big challenges for you on this show?*

**BM:** The challenge of it was continuity, especially in a gunfight, because anytime you shoot a gun, and the bullet hits, for example, a wall, now you have to track that bullet hit in every single shot thereafter, even if you've got 1,000 bullet hits. You have to track 1,000 bullets, or 1,000 fires or whatever it is. So, Episode 2 was challenging for that reason as well.



Brad Minnich's '2150.' Images courtesy of Brad Minnich.

**VD:** *You also have another project in the works that's a new type of endeavor for you—a fully animated piece called 2150 with an incredible team of creators, including Alita Battle Angel's Cat Thelia, Ghost In the Shell's Nivanh Chanthara and the Star Wars saga's Ian McCaig, just to name a few. How did this idea get started?*

**BM:** Like I said before, animation and visual effects are rolling together now. They're almost indistinguishable at some points. And I had written this project because I love the prison escape sub-genre: *Shawshank Redemption*, *Escape from Alcatraz*, *The Great Escape*. But when I saw *Love, Death & Robots* on Netflix, with all the different animation styles in there, my mind was blown. It absolutely expanded my understanding of what could be done with storytelling and animation. So, I changed my original script and took the storytelling in a different direction of telling a linear narrative story.

I took the script and broke it down into 16 different beats. And then went out to all these amazing Academy Award-winning filmmakers and designers and concept artists and asked them what they thought of this idea. Every single one was like, "We love it. We're in."

**VD:** *And you are working with Love, Death & Robots' character designer and concept artist Marcin Rubinkowski on 2150. Why do you think this story got such immediate affirmation from these big-time animators and artists?*

**BM:** This is an R-rated, adult animated feature with all these different styles. What I discovered is there are a lot of animators and creative people who don't get a chance to work on this type of R-rated subject matter. And everybody that's come on our team is like, "I want to show that violent world, or that prison life."

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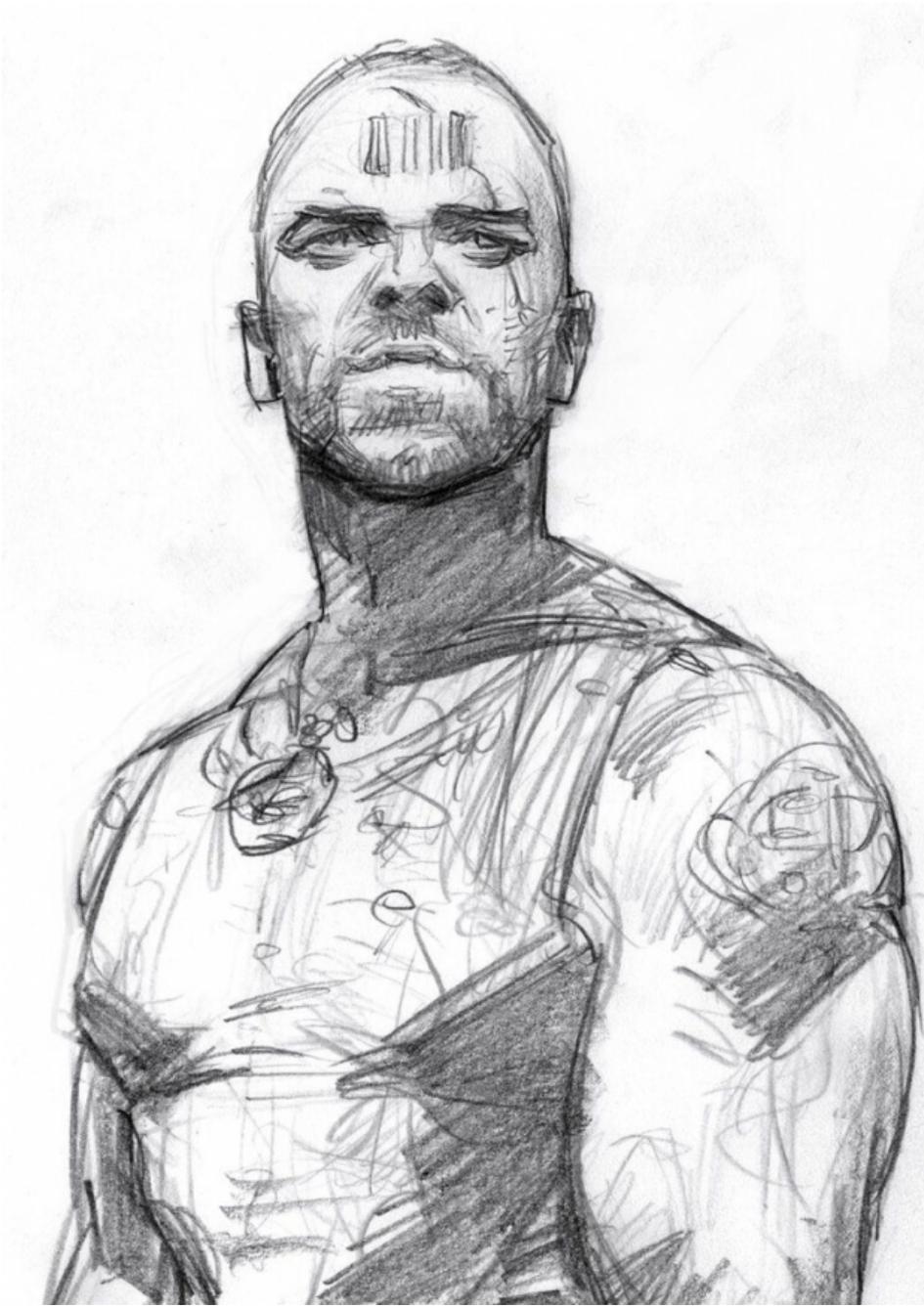
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**VD:** *Getting the chance to bring these animators together, I'm sure, is a big part of it, but what do you think animation does for a story like this? What's the merit of bringing these characters to life in this medium?*

**BM:** It actually did start out as live-action, but seeing *Love, Death & Robots* made me realize it could be better. I don't want to explore just one style of filmmaking or just one style of animation. And that's what makes this project neat. There are going to be 16 styles of an animation, all connected with this linear narrative. No one has ever really done this kind of project before. One scene will be in, say, 2D animation style, and the next scene will be in photo real 3D/CG.

And the biggest question here is, "Well, you can't bump animation styles, can you?" And my thing is, "Of course you can." As long as the story holds.

**VD:** *It's similar to that continuity you were talking about with *The Good Lord Bird*, correct?*

**BM:** It's exactly like that. Even in certain filmmaking, like when Quentin Tarantino did *Kill Bill*, in the middle of the live-action set, he has full-blown 3D cell animation. Everything can be connected, as long as your characters stay the same. My lead character, Deakins, will have a very telling scar on his face and a very specific wardrobe. And all my characters will have a visual cue to their character in their wardrobe. So regardless of whether you change animation styles from one to the other, you're still seeing the same visual cues, hearing the same audio cues, the same wardrobe cues. Once you set up that language, you will be able to follow the story.

Another cool thing we try to do is marry our scene locations with the correct animation style. Beat number nine, for example, is the lunar buggy chase. Our lead antagonist and lead protagonist have to jump into these hovercrafts and they're racing across the lunar surface in a car chase. And what we decided on for the animation was Unreal Engine, used for video games, and they have a particle system called Niagara. So, we modeled the cars and animated the chase, then we put it into Niagara and the idea is that its super effects will help tell that story in a very visceral way.





**VD:** *The Good Lord Bird* and *2150* have both been relatively new experiences for you in the business of animation and VFX. What has been most rewarding about these two projects?

**BM:** A big part of it is the collaboration process with the other filmmakers. You cannot make animation films without other people. It takes a tremendous amount of bodies and minds to get your ideas off the ground. And the most fun part about it is sitting in a room and brainstorming with these other creative minds, amazingly talented people across the spectrum, making an idea into the best story it can be.

If you're interested in working on this type of project, please reach out to me, because I'd love to hear from you. I will hear from animators around the world. This is a global thing. So please reach out.

*2150* has no set release date yet, but animators interested in working on project can reach out to Minnich through the [2150 website](http://enter2150.com): [enter2150.com](http://enter2150.com). *The Good Lord Bird* is currently available on Showtime.



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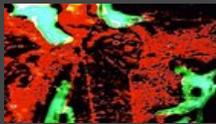
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