SYDNEY student Costa Avgoustinos is riding high after taking out third prize in this year's Tropfest, the world's biggest short film festival. Proving that independent film-making is thriving, the event attracted 656 entrants aged from 12 to 67 years.

Avgoustinos cooked up his six-minute animation, titled Yin, using Macromedia's Flash web animation program running on a Pentium III PC. It took two years working from home, irregularly, to complete the tale of Yin — one half of the Yin-Yang symbol — who is abandoned by its companions on a journey to the stars.

"I began by scribbling down ideas during some of the more boring lectures," Avgoustinos, a law-multimedia student at the University of Technology, Sydney, says. "Then I moved on to the really difficult part of making the storyboards and some flipbooks to test the animation."

Pre-planning each segment ensured the most cost-effective use of animated sequences. Some running and walking routines could be used multiple times without seeming repetitive.

His main tools were pen, paper, Flash and a flatbed scanner for digitising the hand-drawn backgrounds. A friend provided the musical score, leaning over the keyboards and playing his guitar pressed close-up to the PC's inbuilt microphone pick-up.

Avgoustinos has long dreamt of bringing his own characters to life, but was daunted by the cost and technical difficulties associated with hand-drawn cel animation.

"It used to seem like the idea of making your own cartoon was unattainable. Flash has changed all that," he says.
"A friend taught me the basics of Flash in just two hours. It definitely saves a lot of time.

"The multi-layering system is brilliant and the program cheats for enlarging and reducing images really helped."

He also appreciates Flash’s ability to play back animations quickly and easily. Working alone presented challenges: "When making something like a film you need to deconstruct the idea, break it down into manageable parts," Avgoustinos says.

"This can be a mechanical, soulless process, and hard with no-one to bounce ideas off. You can go insane labouring over every minute detail. Sometimes you just have to take a step back and remind yourself why you started out in the first place and how you felt when the idea was fresh."

Avgoustinos's advice for other would-be animators is to aim for a realistic goal.

"If you are going to spend two years of your life making something, it has to be good enough to sustain you. Completely believe in what you are doing," he says.