



Re-Imagining the Skeletal Helmsman

One element that had been missing from my pirate-themed yard haunt was a skeletal helmsman, as seen in the Pirates of the Caribbean attraction. I had extra bluckies (blow-molded skeletons) lying around, but I didn't have a nautical wheel, a motor, or the expertise on how to animate this prop.

After scouring HalloweenForum.com, I came across several home-fashioned helmsman props and ideas on how to incorporate a windshield wiper motor to animate this prop.

I started by looking for a quality nautical wheel, which is easily the most expensive part of the project. Luckily, I found a non-functional decorative wheel on eBay that turned out to be solid oak. The antique-colored blucky is courtesy of OrientalTrading.com and the motor came from MonsterGuts.com.

The first part of the prop to build was the wheel house. Good solid 2"x6" planks were fashioned to hold the wheel on a 7" bolt. The planks were secured to a base, and a cap was created and added to the head of the bolt.





SAILOR'S GRAVE HAUNT

The Final Resting Place of Pirate Souls



The most time consuming part of this prop was the positioning of the blucky. Despite my best efforts to encourage him to cooperate and stand on his own, he refused to do so. And so holes were drilled into several parts of his body (against his wishes) and 1/2" schedule 40 PVC pipes were used to prop him up. (Now he can quaff as much rum as he likes and he'll still be able to drive the ship!) You will notice that he is not straight up and down. That would not look very realistic, so I combined several 45 and 90 degree joints to get a more realistic "leaning-into-the-wheel" effect.



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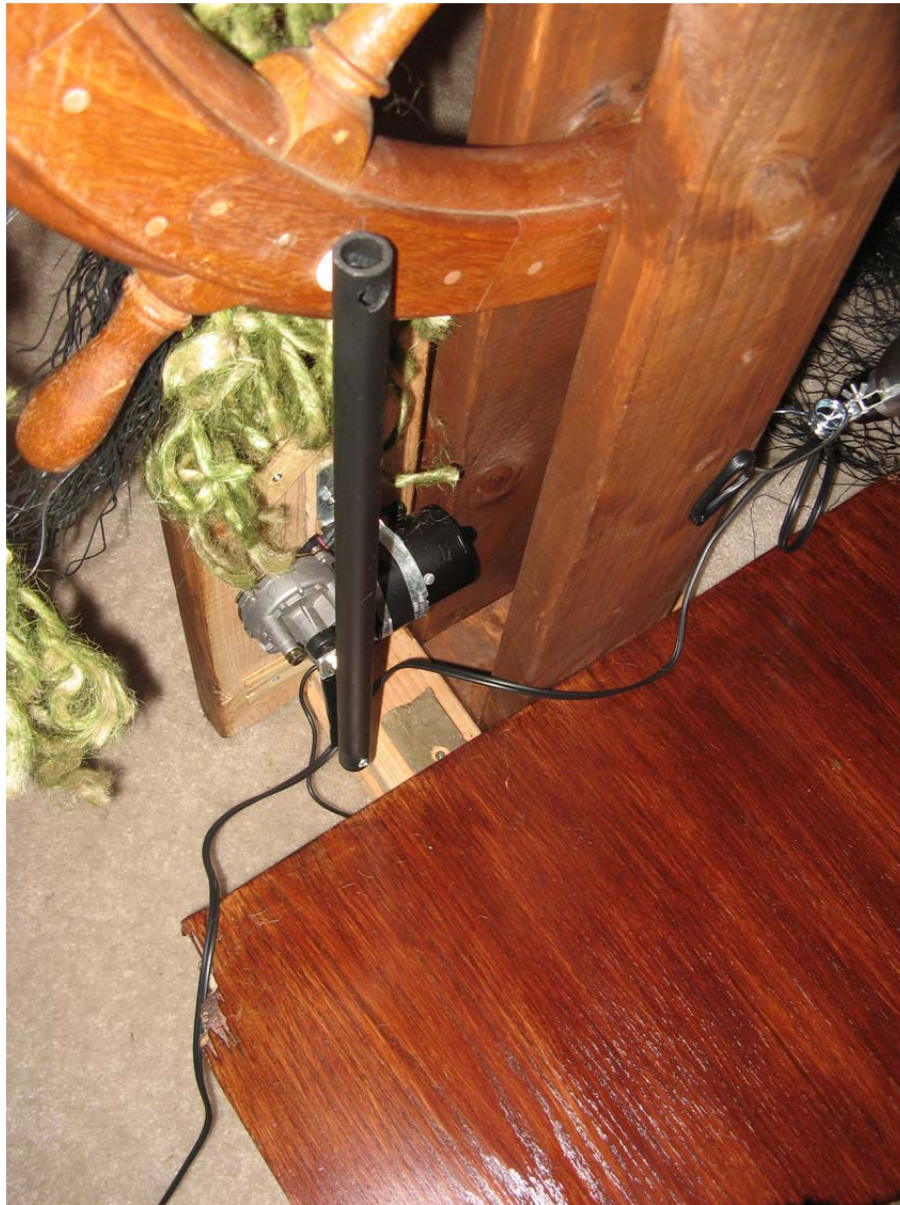


To give his hands and arms more realistic motion while the wheel is turning, I placed his hands on the wheel handles and wrapped them with thick bone-colored rubber bands so the hands can turn a bit. I also wrapped a much larger rubber band around his upper torso and secured his arms to this rubber band so there is some give, but the arms will not come off.

This was my first venture into wiper motor-based animation, and it was quite simple to complete. The wiper motor was mounted to a sturdy board with a 2-3/8" pipe grip tie and positioned directly below and to the side of the wheel. The linkage comprises 4" aluminum stock (on the motor side) and a



PVC pipe (on the wheel side). The aluminum stock had to be bent slightly to prevent any contact of the nuts and bolts. I went with a 5VDC power supply and not a 12VDC power supply so it looks like the blucky is gradually rotating the wheel. Also, the motor is apt to kick a bit as it moves the PVC pipe, so I secured the board to the base of the wheel house.



I then decorated my helmsman with a shredded \$2 kids Halloween costume and some creepy cloth and added pieces of seaweed garland and jute netting to the wheel to hide the motor linkage.



-UPDATE-

I swapped the unrealistic looking blucky with a barney skeleton posed with fencing wire for a more realistic look, but it is still lightweight.

