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Chloe Renee Hayes
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R·I·T

note to self

By

Chloe Renee Hayes

AN ANIMATED THESIS PRODUCTION SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IMAGING ARTS/COMPUTER ANIMATION
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION
COLLAGE OF ART & DESIGN

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
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Committee Approval:

Brian Larson,

Date

Professor/Animation Program Chair
School of Film and Animation
Thesis Advisor

Peter Murphy,

Date

Professor/Lecturer
School of Film and Animation
Committee Member

Thomas Gasek,

Date

Professor/MFA Director
School of Film and Animation
Committee Member

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Acknowledgements

Throughout this film's creation, I received help from many people in several different areas. Those people who supported me, challenged me, inspired me, and lent their own hands in help have my utmost gratitude, and recognition goes to them for this film's successes. On difficult days, and in dire times, my friends, classmates, and collaborators made this film possible.

Firstly, my thesis advisor, Brian Larson, whose abounding patience and encouragement were matched only by his expertise and insight, gave constant meaningful feedback and advice during my time as his student. As his student, Professor Larson always pushed us to improve and tested our skills – this was precisely the reason I asked him to be my advisor on my thesis. He certainly delivered: the most meaningful council came in the form of difficult questions meant to challenge my thoughts on my film, story, and characters. This was a vital step to improving my own understanding of my film, and thus creating a better, more thoughtful piece.

In addition to Professor Larson, I received a great deal of advice and feedback from other professors and classmates that did not go to waste. I was always grateful for the information and helpful opinions. There were many thoughts and observations that didn't occur to me, and hearing from outside perspectives that usually did not have much prior knowledge of the film's content was extremely enlightening.

It is important to note my main collaborators on this project: my voice actress Christa Elliot and my sound designer Zazu Pitts of Sour Note Productions. Ms. Elliot was incredibly diligent in her work and easy to work with. Likewise, Mr. Pitts is a talented and highly professional sound designer, and his skill truly shows in his work in the film. He made many accommodations and worked extremely hard on this very complicated piece. I am very grateful for their hard work, as they treated this piece like it was their own. This is as much their work of art as it is mine.

Lastly, I was truly touched and amazed by the many people who lent their help to complete my film in the final days. Among those friends and classmates credited in my film were people who quite literally banded together to help me clean up line work, color shots, finish backgrounds, create special effects, composite shots, and help with post-production and credits. I am in awe at their skills, hard work, and care with my film, and I am endlessly grateful to them for saving my ass.

Abstract

“note to self” is a 2D animated film completed as the thesis project for my MFA degree. This film uses experimental imagery and often abstract visual metaphor to tell a narrative story that discusses suicide, self-harm, depression, trauma, mental health, and the complicated issues surrounding these subjects.

“note to self” tells the story of a teenage girl fighting through her struggles and uncertainties in the metaphysical space of her own mind. Sienna, the protagonist, has resolved to kill herself and is working through her conflicted feelings to rationally explain why. Posed as a conversation with a part of her own psyche, a sort of “demon” which exists in the form of a spirited, floating mouth, Sienna explores her reasons for leaving life. On this journey she encounters many creatures and traverses many places that represent her experiences, traumas, psychological issues, and discontentment with life and the world. Due to this, she has decided that death is her best option. This isn’t so easy, however, as she is soon confronted about her decision by the specter of her future self. The future-self, a character that has been pursuing her in the background for the duration of the film, reveals to Sienna that she’s worth waiting for, and that, in truth, Sienna does have hope. In the end, Sienna decides to have mercy on herself: her future self, whoever she is, has the right to exist. She deserves a chance and, as this future self is a new and distinct person from Sienna, it is not Sienna’s life to take. Sienna fights her way back to life.

The imagery throughout the film is metamorphic and expressive to represent the feelings and energy throughout the film as Sienna, and the audience, experiences them. This film was created using primarily 2D, hand-drawn, digital animation, relying on varying line, color, and texturing styles for each part of the film. While there was a prepared script and narrative created for the film, the art style and production were created through a more atypical, experimental process that relied strongly on the emotional context of the scene and the expressive nature of art. The final result was a sequence of scripted scenes that were animated and filled with art in an expressive and partially spontaneous process to create a more raw and genuine communication of the protagonist’s story and ideas. This process, while unusual and difficult to manage (in large part due to its novelty to me), made for authentic representations of highly personal, even controversial issues and enhanced the emotional value of the film.

In regard to its subject matter, it is necessary to acknowledge the content of the film and the motivations that lead to its creation. By proceeding with this film, it was a task in itself to consider the various statements and discussions surrounding the sensitive topics of suicide, depression, psychological disorders, and mental health in general. Not only was it imperative to develop a background of intensive research into the subject, but also (perhaps more critically) to get in touch with my own feelings, experiences, and history on the subjects presented. It would be dishonest to deny that the sentiments expressed by the character are, in large and small ways, deeply felt emotions and sincere perspectives that I have encountered both personally and through others close to me. Naturally, this served as the creative palette for my work. It was both a crucial resource for me to draw from and inform my art creation process, and the basis upon which I pursued this film even despite some doubts in the onset. Drawing from inherently, severely, personal battles and difficulties with the topic at hand, this film did at times take its toll in nearly every space of my life. It was an increasingly challenging film to make in many ways, and yet it brilliantly also became one of the most cathartic and artistically honest experiences of my life.

Introduction

Mental health is a taboo subject. While strides have been made especially in the past few decades, the stigma associated with the discussion of mental and psychological disorder and well-being has persisted. This even holds us back from addressing issues that are in need of attention, both personally, and more widely as a society. There is still indeed a stubborn lack of understanding about mental health issues, as well as a general denial about the effects and consequences of these issues, and negative connotations applied to affected persons. Any person admitted to suffering from afflictions of the mind tends to pay a social and sometimes professional price in the form of judgement, scrutiny, and even intolerance from others. In many ways, this is not fair, nor a healthy attitude with which to approach an issue that for many, like the protagonist of my film, is a life or death struggle. It is taken as a matter of course that ‘most of us have yearly check-ups for our physical health, yet our mental health is not given the same care by any means’ (National Alliance on Mental Health). The most sinister, heartbreaking way in which this stigma affects us is when those like Sienna are pressured and shamed into denying and burying these concerns to their health, and forced into positions where harm and illness is left unaddressed until they are led to desperate, terrible, extreme choices.

Sienna fought her way out and survived her experience, and sadly too few accomplish what she has by the end of the film’s story. At the conclusion, Sienna has not solved all her problems; no woes or hurt have been erased. She is, in fact, returned to the same place where she started on the edge of the precipice. What she has gained is perspective – and hope. Opposing the void is a steep, treacherous mountain, with a river rushing down and over the cliff where she stands. That is her life, and while she is willing to climb it, there is work to be done. It won’t be an easy journey but her resolve in the end is, at the very least, to try. There are no magical cures. For Sienna’s (perhaps life-long) path to recovery, it will be necessary for her to confront her issues, not bury them. While not explicitly stated in the film, I personally envision Sienna’s final scene as representation of her decision to reach out and seek help for her issues. This is her “first step”. It can be the hardest step to take – but also the most necessary. Rather than a true resolution, we are instead presented with Sienna’s turning point at the conclusion of the film. It is still possible she may fail. The ambiguity of her future is uncertain even in my opinion (which is perhaps a self-reflective aspect of my own life path). Yet, she will indeed try.

Preproduction

Motives and Research

At its conception, this film was merely a desire to communicate feeling and thought. Before writing my proposal in the spring of 2018, I was encouraged by my advisor to run through a myriad of possible film options, the goal being to discuss and find an interesting subject to express through animation. There were many potential films I was eager to explore, and many of them were far more straightforward and perhaps would have their own unique benefits. Yet, I found myself continually circling back to this film. It was merely a concept, for which the only clear idea I had was the protagonist's conflict against life and the confrontation with her future self. I envisioned the various things I wished to describe through the film, and wondered whether it would be a worthwhile journey despite its complications – this was perhaps the first time the film served as a metaphor for itself.

Wary as I was about the content of the film with regards to my presentation and its reception, and my ability to undertake a project that, conceptually and artistically, had become very complicated and heavy, I wanted to pursue the film. Early on, I accepted the challenges I might face and the potential failures I may commit, but it was important to me that I at least tried. I had no real ambitions that this film would become a life-changing, didactic paragon of hope that would save the lives of anyone struggling with the protagonist's same adversities. I merely wanted to share my own thoughts as effectively as I could; to communicate a perspective, along with my own ambivalence and uncertainty, and the entangled feelings of my experience. I wanted to show, and learn for myself, that those who are broken and hurting are not alone.

I never explicitly, publicly discussed the subjects in my film in any verbal sense to anyone. There has never been a time in my life when I didn't think about it, but saying these things out loud was difficult. It's not exactly that we hide these parts of ourselves; we cover hardships and present our best to the world. Once again, stigma plays a role in this social strategy, but more than this, many of us lack the bravery and trust to make ourselves vulnerable in this way. Moreover, words themselves, while great tools for communication, often leave wanting the full, genuine meaning of ineffable things I want to articulate: too often I feel poorly understood and,

even worse, I rarely say what I really mean. Both limited accuracy in the use of words as well as candor missed in our lives restrain our conversation on the most difficult and yet important issues. Thus, in lieu of words, the film served as a substitute. As art serves no greater purpose, I didn't have to say what I wanted to say on the deeply considered and important matters I grappled with – I could show it instead.

The research I explored was informative on two prongs: I formed a stronger basis of purpose in my motivations for creating the film, and secondly it helped me later in defining the some of the artistic expression in my film. The most straightforward way to tackle sensitive issues around mental health is by gathering the most objective, measurable information that one can. I began by gathering statistics so that I would be able to begin defining the issues and their impacts more clearly. From this, both the need for my film was more strongly informed, as was my personal perspectives and artistic lens.

In my research, focusing on trends of violence and psychological issues that are arising currently, I found the cynical viewpoints pervading news outlets and social media are, in some sense, partly right but mostly wrong. In many crucial ways the world has been improving in leaps in the past century and even in the past few decades. In his book *Enlightenment Now*, Steven Pinker presents a comprehensive report of research in various fields to show that we are now living in the most peaceful and prosperous time in history. Among the studies he presents throughout his book, he that things like worldwide education, world literacy, health outreach, charitable aid, and other measures of prosperity are all the highest they've ever been and rising. Meanwhile, violent crime, child hunger, teen pregnancy, child/infant mortality, poverty and other problems are the lowest they've ever been and ameliorating. The world is progressing in critical ways. Yet questions remain on how one is to square the constant barrage of catastrophe, hate, pessimism, and downward trends that persist in broadcasting.

Pinker has an explanation for this in his fourth chapter "Progressophobia". Essentially, the perspective that the world has become progressively *worse* is mainly due to psychological biases, such as the availability heuristic, confirmation bias, and negativity bias. Availability heuristic is the fault in psychology defined as the (inaccurate) estimation of the probability of occurrences based on the ease with which instances come to mind. That is, the visibility of a problem tends to

exert undue influence over our perception of its actual pervasiveness (for example, we can consider the concept of vegans as pretentious and strident). Confirmation Bias occurs when we start with a preconceived notion and then give inordinate attention to the evidences for our bias (while often not meriting weight to information that stands in opposition to it). Lastly, Pinker describes the negativity bias: “News is about things that happen, not things that don’t happen”, he states (41). Specifically, we tend to remember negative events more strongly and clearly than positive events (Pinker notes an exception to this: *autobiographical* memory tends to color our experiences more positively, while our past hurt fades increasingly with time in favor of fond memories). With all this in mind, whenever we encounter one of the ‘good-old-days’ types that pontificate about the deterioration of society and ‘making things great again’, we can be sure that they are merely suffering from errors in cognition, poor awareness, and logical fallacies.

Yet, it would be disingenuous to claim that the world has improved in every area all the time. As described in the introduction, while we have made leaps and bounds on many important aspects, I found research showing that there are many areas where we lack significant progress, and have, in some cases, worsened, specifically regarding mental health. Around 18% of adult Americans suffer from an anxiety/depressive disorder (nearly 40 million people over the age of 18). Despite this, a mere third of these people (36.9% of sufferers) receive professional treatment (NIMH). According to the same 2015 study by the National Institute of Mental Health, suicide was the 2nd leading cause of death for persons 15-34. In a broader view, statistics from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention show that suicide has sadly been on the rise in the past decade in every age group. Illustrating this surge, this research reports that in 2005 there were roughly 32,700 suicide deaths as recorded by the Center for Disease Control (Crosby et al.), while in 2017, suicide claimed nearly 44,200 victims (Hedegaard et al.). Likewise, in 2015, suicide rates among teenage girls also spiked, reaching a 40-year high. From 2007-2015 alone, suicide rates doubled among teenage girls, while teenage boys had a 30% increase in suicide deaths (CDC).

Aside from the science, it has recently become an extremely socially relevant topic. There have been several suicides in recent years of notable figures, celebrities, and role models, including comedian and actor Robin Williams, singer and rock star Chester Bennington, fashion designer Kate Spade, celebrity chef and author Anthony Bourdain, and popular Korean Pop stars Kim Jonghyun and Sulli (Choi Jin-ri). While tragic, these losses have been the impetus for several

initiatives for change in mental healthcare. Several independent foundations for suicide and self-harm prevention have fortunately found promotion in many new ways, including the song by Logic titled “1-800-273-8255” (the phone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline). Additionally, while a more controversial and divisive issue, the rise of public shootings has played a role in the mental health dialogue as well. Mass shootings have been steadily increasing in both frequency and deadliness for the past few decades (Reynolds), and while some of the conversation is, perhaps, partisan rhetoric put forward as a scapegoat for negotiations on gun control, discussions of mental health are relevant to these events. While not much substantial change has yet come from the administrative bodies, the conversation has at least begun in face of these dire, building trends.

Things are indeed still dire in many facets and areas of the world, but progress is real. We are almost out of the woods on some serious issues. Yet, it can be difficult to see the forest for the trees. Much like those that see the world as a worsening place, the protagonist of my film falls upon several logical fallacies as she tries to justify her path toward suicide with reason, but in reality, like many, she is suffering from irrational thinking in her mental health state. Yet by no means should we dismiss Sienna’s feelings: there is a thin line between not enabling self-destructive behavior, and invalidating a person’s experience. Studying these trends had practical use in informing my, and Sienna’s, motivations and gave color and specificity to experiences that touch us. Most of all, the research affirms the film’s purpose: the need for hope.

Art Inspiration and Experimentation

Along with the scientific research conducted for this film, my process included much artistic study as well. While a narrative element was maintained in the film and script writing, the core of the film was its expressive, metamorphic, and occasionally experimental use of imagery. As a result, the crux this film’s creation was centered around the experimentation of stylistic methods and production of art and imagery for the film. This process took two main courses of parallel study: the examination and research of inspirational art and animation, and my own pre-production process of art experimentation and creation.



Figure 1: Images and still frames from Buck’s film, *Good Books – Metamorphosis*

Within a year, I encountered many artworks and artists that served as inspiration; although I had always observed my favorite artists with admiration and desire for emulation, this project prompted me to consider more seriously the various works presented to me. With my best objective lens, I analyzed the short films and art I found most relevant to my own work, noting the elements that I found most effective, and doing my best to deduce the methods by which such imagery could be achieved. While it’s too difficult to catalogue every artwork that has ever made impressions upon my own style and thinking, there were a few particular films and art experiences that had special influence on my film.

First and foremost, I was influenced by specific films that, in my opinion, made excellent use of transformation and metamorphosis. At the top of this stands the Good Books animated short created by Buck Studios titled, of course, “Metamorphosis” (Fig. 1). Not only is this short stylistically striking, but the use of metamorphosis in storytelling along with the voice over is extremely impressive. This short piece was especially informative as I began my own work, with the goal of a similar format in mind. Specifically, aside from the beautiful imagery itself, the way the story is communicated through a combination of script writing and visual metaphor was valuable to my work.



Figure 2 (Left): Still from Isao Takahata's film, *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*
Figure 3 (Right): Still from Masaaki Yuasa's animated series, *Ping Pong*

In addition to Buck Studios, there were many animations that influenced my work heading into my thesis. To categorize, a diverse group of Japanese animated productions had inspired me in various ways, such as *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* by Isao Takahata, *Ping Pong* by Masaaki Yuasa, *Paprika* and *Millennium Actress* by Satoshi Kon, and *5 Centimeters per Second* by Makoto Shinkai. *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* and *Ping Pong* are both excellent studies on the use of line and style as a communicative tool for the emotion in a scene or character (Figure 2-3). In a way that is both similar and opposite, films like *5 Centimeters per Second* are inspiring for their quality: the scenery and art in this film, leaning more into realism, is stunning, and there are many examples of animations like this that drive me (perhaps neurotically) to pursue this quality in my own work. More than the visual aspect, *5 Centimeters per Second* (figure 5) bore a special influence on my art research for my thesis because of the sentimental, coming-of-age themes explored in its stories. Lastly, like the others, the visual quality of Satoshi Kon's films are remarkable, but the notable aspect of these visuals is Kon's use of metamorphosis and transition. Kon's films in particular served as structural influence when I began considering how to present my art and visual metaphors. While there are more than listed here, these films offered inspiration and instruction on many levels.



Figure 4 (Left): Still from Satoshi Kon's film, *Paprika*

Figure 5 (Right): Still from Makoto Shinkai's animated anthology, *5 Centimeters per Second*

The artworks that inspired me were not only in the field of animation, but artists from many different disciplines. There is an array of traditional art that I found evocative in the use of style, colors, and textures: in general, I observed definable attributes of a few specific art periods. Impressionistic painting, while difficult to translate into an animated form, was something that interested me in particular for its use of color, and the ability to convey the essence of a scene without too much refined detail. Expressionism is akin to impressionism taken to a psychological and emotional extreme; this period of art I found intriguing because it did not seek to capture imagery, but rather the feeling and sensation of a scene. Taking a step further, Surrealistic art works with concern for the expression of the subconscious, allowing the illogic and rawness of our minds to break through. Lastly, while it may seem categorically out of place, performance art played a role in my conceiving process as well. While a fine art, it does not at a glance appear to relate to animation. However, the use of the human form as both an artistic tool and canvas is something I found particularly powerful, and this type of art was especially enlightening in its use of visual metaphor to convey very abstract ideas. These movements in traditional art were all objects of significant reflection during my research into art. In my own film, as in these movements, I was searching for new modes of expression. While many of these styles would not be particularly practical for animation styles, their prompt was important to the development of my own ideas and how I would interpret my thoughts into art.



Figure 6 (Top Left): Still from Marta Pajek's short film, *III*

Figure 7 (Top Right): Still from Valentin Reidi and Frédéric Schuld's short film, *Carlotta's Face*

Figure 8 (Bottom Left): Still from Martina Scarpelli's short film, *Egg*

Figure 9 (Bottom Right): Still from Rosto's short film, *Reruns*

Similarly to this, in the fall of 2018, I was fortunate to win the RIT raffle for a ticket to the Ottawa International Animation Festival, where I saw a plethora of films that made excellent use of animation as an expressive medium. Of the many short films that I enjoyed, there were a distinct few that caught my attention and drew my thoughts when I was making my own film. Firstly, a film titled simply *III* by Polish animator Marta Pajek (fig. 6) presented an intriguing use of animated line as a means for metamorphosis and transition in a mind-bending depiction of intimacy. Here, using the freeform existence of animation to blur the reality of the space on the screen, Pajek simultaneously presents the viewer with hyper-magnified sensation bordering on disturbing: a metamorphic, omniscient perspective where we are slipped in and out of the skins of the characters. Secondly, films like *Carlotta's Face* by Valentin Reidi and Frédéric Schuld from Germany (fig. 7), and *Egg* by French-Danish animator Martina Scarpelli (fig. 8) both present creative, heavily symbolic films examining very personal issues in which narration was matched with expressive, striking imagery. In *Carlotta's Face*, unique designs and textures were applied to describe a neurological disorder, prosopagnosia, along with a candid autobiographical

speaker. Similarly, *Egg* tells a dramatic inner narrative about anorexia where a graphic use of black and white imagery shows imaginative depictions of the struggle that are raw and sincere. Lastly, the short film *Reruns* (fig. 9) is a 3D and live-action composited film that travels through a surreal world of memory created by Dutch filmmaker Rosto only a year before his death due to cancer. *Reruns* is impressive both for its imagery and design, and also its handling of the bizarre, otherworldly, and mutable form of memory and the mind. The themes, styles, unique storytelling methods, and use of the plasticity of animation to convey complex ideas made these films relevant, edifying, and inspirational pieces as I began my own course of work.

Of course, a valuable resource for useful and inspirational art and animation was my thesis advisor, Brian Larson. During our weekly meetings he introduced me to many new artists and their work. Explorations like these formed the inception of my stylistic goals: I began to clearly envision a style that morphed to fit the content of the film. In our discussions we explored animation done with various media. In one example, animation with charcoal illustrations formed frames by repeatedly drawing and erasing on the same paper, where the ghost of previous erased images clouded behind moving objects. The contrast and the graininess of the line, in combination with the ghostlike after-images, gave a somber and somewhat eerie atmosphere to the images. We also discussed more painterly, detailed styles, such as in the animation in the 1953 short film, “The Tell Tale Heart”, based on the 1843 short story of the same name by Edgar Allen Poe. The animation in this short is immensely creative, not for its detailed, hand-painted imagery, but for its technique in expressing motion. Rather than full animation throughout, much of the film consists of mis-en-scene, intricate pans and camera movements over a painting, changes in lighting, and cross-dissolve transitions to imply actions taking place. This method is effective and fills the screen with enough information to be a worthy supplement to the narration. While considering different styles, and perhaps media that would be detailed but difficult to animate, analysis of the methods used in this film was extremely educational.

With a wealth of inspiration and reference pooled into an artistic resource, I began the important process of art experimentation. The artistic goal for my thesis film was to rely heavily on the expressive quality of art and animation, and use abstract imagery and visual metaphor to describe complex ideas, feelings, and sensations. Additionally, a specific point of inspiration that I wished to pursue was the use of various, flexible styles, colors, and line qualities throughout my film; I

wished for the style to be guided by the emotional content of the script and scene. For that reason, my experimentation process was largely an exploration of various media as a means of examining the emotional impact of different styles and line. More importantly, this was the preliminary step to the creation of art for the animation: with the ideas and story solidifying, the themes and emotions surrounding the film were the basis for various, genuine attempts at expression. Without trying to overthink the concepts, I did my best to focus on senses and spontaneity to guide my process. The results of this are seen in figures below.



Figure 10 (Left): Art experimentation – painterly style test

Figure 11 (Middle): Art experimentation – line warp test

Figure 12 (Right): Art experimentation – lineless style test

In my initial tests, I stuck to a familiar and obvious medium in the form of digital art – specifically, using TVPaint (figures 10-12) to explore some stylistic possibilities that were on my mind. This was useful primarily in the sense that I had very strong intentions to use TVPaint as my primary animation tool in production, and while I was familiar with the program, it was imperative to gain a more intense understanding of the styles that were possible, and moreover, practical for animation. For reference, I tested the possibility of engaging in a more stylized line, and using a warp/transformation tool to animate in TVPaint (Figure 11), I experimented with a lineless style (Figure 12), and attempted animation with a more painterly style (Figure 10). From this, I began studying what functions these styles could serve and began building a repertoire for different looks I wanted to apply for certain parts of my film. More importantly, I was learning the different limitations to each of these styles.



Figure 13 (Top Row): Art Experimentation – Pen concepts

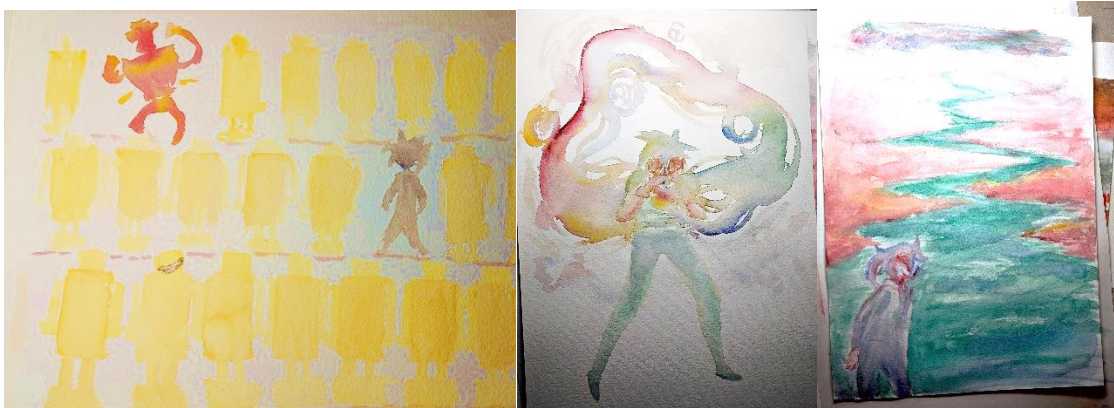


Figure 14 (Bottom Row): Art Experimentation – Watercolor

Stepping outside of the digital medium, and in hope of discovering unusual, creative answers in media I less frequently use, I experimented with traditional art. In this part of my experimentation process, I was less concerned with finding a useable style with which to animate, and instead was delving into the exploration of themes and imagery that served as concepts for my film. Starting in the shallow end of the pool, my first attempts were sketching with pencil and pen in an effort to lay down some basic ideas I was developing around vague emotions and themes relevant to the film at the time. Very early on, I was attracted to a specific image showing the character hanging from a line as metaphor for her struggle (figure 13), and my early concepts explored this idea a bit further. I next employed the use of paint, specifically watercolors, to explore some rough concepts, thinking about the character and environments. This time, I was focusing on some more defined themes that I wanted expressed in my film, for example struggles in belongingness, mood disorders, and a concept for the ending, a visualization of the road to recovery (figure 14). While I do paint occasionally with acrylics, I

was not as experienced in watercolor paint, so there were certain constraints to making art in this medium. This, however, was somewhat of an intended benefit: my hope was that the lack of control would force me to expand my ideas, break out of my familiar style, encounter unexpected details to the imagery, and overall elevate creativity.



Figure 15: Art Experimentation – Chalk

This method of creative experimentation through the exploration of different styles and medium peaked in my next round of efforts. For my next experiment, I chose a medium that I was not only unfamiliar with, but hadn't really engaged in for a few decades: during a visit to my family's house I made use of my little sister's sidewalk chalk on our driveway. For these unique concepts, I focused on the character and explored her experiences and psychology more deeply. Specifically, perhaps a natural effect due to working with a child's toy, I felt drawn to explore the character's experiences in her childhood, and how they might be visualized for my film (figure 15). Since the chalk had a limited color palette, the pieces were so large and round, and the surface of the pavement was so rough, the limitations were matched only by my in-expertise at handling the chalk. However, once again, this forced me to bend my style and intended visuals into even more inventive representations, blending where I didn't intend to blend, and creating even more abstract and symbolic imagery rather than literal drawings. Lastly, while not exactly a part of the art creation process, the use of chalk had an interesting presence even as it was being washed away; watching the art slowly dissolve, while not directly informative to my concept art, was an unexpected visual phenomenon that directed my perspective into further transformation.

This forced me to begin conceptualizing my thoughts on the character in a more raw and direct way, which had a great impact on how I would begin communicating my ideas artistically. These exploratory concepts were crucial in helping me to solidify my vision for my film and the character, and while not all (in fact, not most) of the imagery was used in the final product, it was an incredibly meaningful and enlightening experience to approach my film on this creative avenue.

Script Writing and Animatic Process

Thus began what was undoubtedly the most challenging and mentally exhausting process for my film. The planning of the film went through many phases, and ultimately, the preproduction process of story planning was conducted along two parallel lines: script writing and storyboard creation. There were many reasons for this preproduction method, if it may be called that. My thesis advisor, Professor Larson, suggested early on that I choose one process and commit to a final version before proceeding to the next step. Specifically, it would be much more intuitive to approach these items, first script and then storyboard, in serial order, and in hindsight there are obvious advantages to this type of plan. In some sense, I find this approach more advisable than what occurred during my process. With some indecisiveness, I found it especially challenging primarily because I was committed to certain important points in both the script and the visuals, and so I quickly found myself working both in synchrony, constantly braiding and fitting the developing aspects of one back into the other.

The sort of fluid, changeable state of my story process meant that adhering to my proposed schedule and story plan was a challenge in general. In fact, while my final proposal made specific room for experimental elements, the treatment presented was significantly much more narratively based, the earliest draft versions being strictly narrative, than the story concept that formed at the start of my actual preproduction process. This was at least in part due to my history both as an artist and as a filmmaker. That is, in my time in animation and filmmaking, my story presentations have followed a narrative basis (possibly the result of influences in the form of my favorite films and tv shows that drew me to animation in the first place). Yet in my undergraduate career, my history in traditional art and multimedia installation featured artistic presentations that were much more expressive toward a conceptual, experimental base. Thus, as

the experimental aspects of story and concept began to swiftly evolve in my preproduction stage, there was a robust artistic root for me to return to as I proceeded.

However the effects this emergent development had on my film were cascading: the suggestion to focus on script first and boards later was the most sensible method with which to approach this film, however the inception of my idea in the proposal already posed a conflict to this in my view. Beginning with the narrative aspect, there were plot points that I securely maintained as the core of my film, yet the amoebic nature of my script writing led the meat of the film into a state of mutability that was not entirely planned. This is not inherently a bad thing, however the system of my filmmaking had become something fundamentally different and new.

In addition, there was innately very little structure to be had in my approach because, as I saw it, the nature of my film demanded honest, creative expression, and in some sense spontaneity. At the same time, the serious and personal subject matter imposed a qualitative criterion upon my art creation process that was somewhat constrictive. High expectations for my work combined with a heavy reliance on emotional context, and perhaps even whim, for the creation of artwork does not make for efficiency in production. One could fairly accuse this process as impractical in acknowledgement that I experienced periods when I simply felt creatively, artistically blocked; during these times, I would force artwork in an effort for progress. The result of such phases was work that was mostly unsatisfactory and quickly discarded – or creating no artwork at all in favor of transitioning to another aspect of preproduction.

These blocks were not a problem solely of finding the right impetus with which to charge the creation of art for my film, but also of the struggle between the script and visual storytelling. As mentioned previously, there were aspects to the story that had been pinned to the plot as the conceptual skeleton of my idea; yet writing a dialogue script into this mold was a puzzle. The dialogue in the script is required to be natural and generally should inform upon elements that are not fully addressed visually – a task contending the fact that the imagery was still amorphous. This was compounded with complications regarding time restrictions, the voice actress' final deliver, and the subject matter of the film which demanded certain things be addressed with care. For this reason, forming the artistic aspects to a film that was still in structural formation felt quite like trying to make a cake while it was baking.

As a feature of my process, in the absence of boarding and art creation, I would switch back to working on the script; in some ways, this was the most advantageous use of the process I employed. Where I felt at a loss for the scriptwriting, I would experiment with some updated storyboard visuals, and vice versa. In this, I helped myself to use my time productively, rather than idling on a single aspect of preproduction. I do feel that this was the main reason the intuitive, serial method of story creation was not something I chose to commit to: there were truthfully several moments where, after stagnating for some time, I felt I should close that chapter of preproduction as the final version and move on, keeping with my schedule. In some sense, I did do this once or twice, but this decision too often felt like I was settling on work that was simply not my best, and lo, not after long I would find solutions to issues in my film that would have been permanent.

Most of all, one significant reason the script could not be finalized before the storyboard and animatic was due to the fact that, to its credit, these two aspects formed a creative conversation that allowed for the creation of a film which would have simply been impossible to create by a different method. One obvious challenge that I faced early on was the use of the script itself. The art in this film was the main focus of my thesis, whereas the script and voice over, insofar as they served as a guide for what was being shown, were an accompaniment in some sense. So, naturally, there was an immediate conflict over what ideas and events would be better shown rather than described. In fact, this conflict remained for me up until the final picture-locked version of the film. Feedback from others offered extremely ambivalent opinions on where, and which, words belonged. In fact, even after recording the script with my voice actress, there were several pieces of lines that I ultimately cut from the film.

On the opposing side, there were times when the story writing took a more natural flow, in that writing pieces of the script helped to structure the imagery and timing of the animatic. Most of all, the script was the first area in which I had a degree of an outline for the film, especially in the emotional arcs that would be taken. Not after long, the script could be divided into “chapters” defined by specific issues that were being discussed and events in the film. While the words changed, and certain parts were condensed or combined, these chapters remained somewhat consistent in their order. Their sequence in the film took summary ideas in these general sections: an introduction, psychological and emotional pain, depression, identity and self-

loathing, trauma and worldview, reflection on the consequences, the confrontation by the future, the reversal, and finally the film's resolution. If nothing else, I was committed to this structure of the story arc, and this was especially useful in helping me to control the time length of the film, which was immediately too long in its early forms. From this, it made the decisions about what imagery to include in the final animatic much less complicated, but no less easy in some areas.

As the film came to fruition, an example of a persistent conflict in this process came in an early section where the protagonist describes a multi-faceted, psychological struggle (the discussion on psychological and emotional pain). In its earliest form, in the treatments of my proposal, this was a full discussion represented by several stages containing some of the basic concept imagery of my film. For instance, the scene of the dark room where the protagonist is bitten on the arm by a small, child-like, demon creature is a core visual metaphor peripherally referenced throughout the film. In its original concept, this "room" was thoroughly explored through dialogue, but in the final version of the film, this event is covered with little more than a line or two in the script. The reason for this reduction was partially due to time constraints, but more so, as she describes valent and confusing emotions, it was necessary to match the protagonist's discussion with the same energy in a series of transformative, fast-paced, dynamic visuals. That is, while the core imagery was still used, simply relying on this single scene was not sufficient.

Much of the art, concepts, and boards created during this experimental process never made it into the final film, and this is particularly true for this section. The series of visuals for this section was filled in by selected imagery from my art creation process; the task of generating the right expressive visuals for these scenes by itself was a challenge, especially as the script was condensing causing ideas to synthesize. Conversely these visually saturated scenes were intentionally a bit of an onslaught on the viewer, and thus distracting lines of dialogue were removed to make the experience more digestible. Additionally, once the sequence of imagery became more advanced, it was increasingly clear the explanation by the protagonist needed to be less and less verbose. This was capitalized by the final edit of the film: the final voice over and animated imagery was such that a more muted verbal delivery in this and certain other places was preferable for the delivery of the ideas in the film. The end of this process saw a total of 21 distinct drafts for the script and 19 storyboards that encompass numerous shots worth of imagery that never even made it to animation.

Lastly, on a separate level, there is some consideration to be made regarding films that are deeply personal and emotionally dense. Much of my creative block came out of frustration that I wasn't visually articulating certain subject matter with the accuracy and effectiveness I wanted. Not just frustrating, but at times this was disheartening. Even more extreme was the problem of exposing certain thoughts and feelings; to be frank, I often felt held back by my own sense of vulnerability. Attached to the fact that I took a serious look into some complex issues, sharing raw opinions is a struggle with which every artist must contend. It could not be ignored that, on my behalf, my character was speaking from a perspective on issues that I would scarcely like to mention with my own family. So, in recognizing I had chosen to broadcast this discussion to an audience, I had my own insecurities and hang-ups to work through. This held me back in my process more than I'd like to admit, but of all the learning experiences involved in this film, honesty and bravery within one's work was an unexpected and perhaps essential lesson.

While messy and occasionally chaotic, the fluidity of this somewhat unintended approach allowed for a lot of opportunity in the creative process. Furthermore, the nature by which the animatic and the scriptwriting informed each other in their development was a unique characteristic of my preproduction process that opened the door for more creative revelations and, in my opinion, a more powerful, honest, and effective film.

Certainly, had I stuck to a more straightforward process, my schedule would have been much easier to manage, and this is a significant consequence, especially since it is an area where I struggled ahead of the film. Yet, undoubtedly, it would be a wholly different film, as I am not convinced much of what I achieved artistically was possible with any path other than the one I took. This process was an endeavor of discovery and the art that resulted from this creative journey was the climax of artistic experimentation. The case for more straightforward storytelling is valid, but in the case of my film, the goal for the art was expression. Exploring the medium of animation and its ability to convey feeling, not only through visual styles of color, texture, and line found in static art, but also through the style of motion, was ultimately a pursuit that led my process.

Concepts and Design



Figure 16: Concept Design – Original imagery

The concepts for this film were largely directed by the art creation and story writing process. In a typical narrative it might make sense to determine the basic character design and environment concepts in the early stages of preproduction. However, in this film, these things could not be determined until the scenes and various styles were established, which in turn were guided by the story and the emotional arcs. Also, as many of the scenes were metamorphic in abstract spaces, there were very few conventional backgrounds throughout the film. Additionally, while the character designs were mainly functional for the protagonist. The only other human-bodied character is Sienna’s future self, which is in effect a variation of the protagonist design. The rest of the “characters” are figures or creatures with specialized designs and art, as their appearance was typically born from the art creation process. In early stages, however, I did formulate rough concepts of thematic imagery or characters I wanted to use in my film. Also, as a character-focused story, developing the protagonist design to fit the film’s various needs was vital.

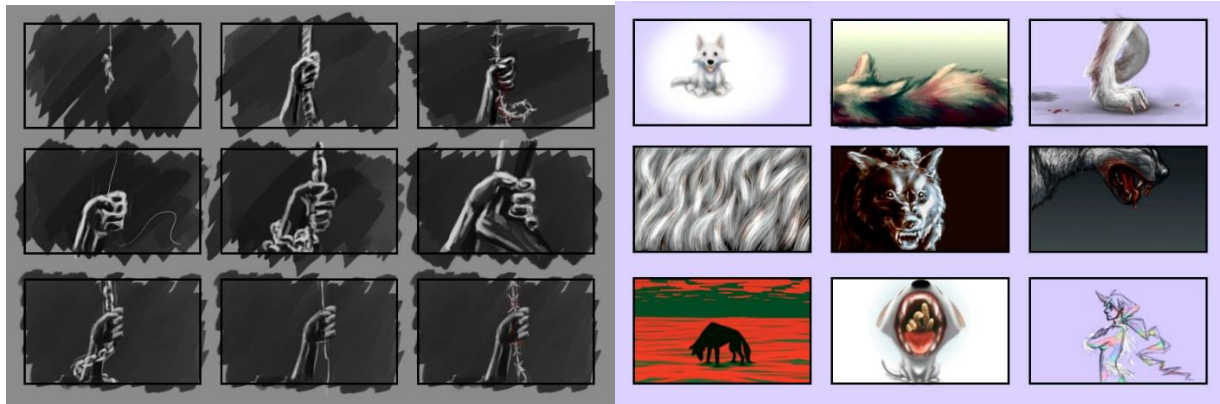


Figure 17(Left): Concept Design – Thematic imagery: Rope

Figure 18(Right): Concept Design – Thematic imagery: Wolf

While the majority of the imagery in my film was derived from the art experimentation and creation process that made up the meat of my thesis year, there were several thematic images and visual metaphors from the film's inception in the proposal stage. Such concepts were presented as part of my proposal, as in figure 16, and were developed from the very first versions of this story that took on a more narrative, prescribed plotline. Once preproduction began, I continued to develop these concepts, especially some thematic imagery that, while they did not yet have specific placement in my animatic when they were created, would recur as motifs in the film, for example the rope and the wolf in figures 17 and 18. The purpose for this was not only to give relief to the audience that would experience a myriad of imagery, but the recurring images would help to establish a language to convey certain feelings. For example, in figure 17, the hand grasping a rope in once scene reappears, this time grasping barbed wire; the implications to this effectively convey the basic idea that holding on is a source of pain for the protagonist. Not all of these concepts made it into the final piece, but all of the imagery in this vein was developed as metaphors with very specific purposes in mind.

While designing the character, it was imperative to keep several things in mind. Firstly, this would be a character that would have to translate across several styles, and line qualities, so it was important to have a design that could stay consistent despite this. Secondly, more than translation, this character would transform, bend, melt, explode, and engage in lots of complicated movements that required her to be both exaggerated enough to believably achieve all of this, and simple enough to be animatable in these many situations. Lastly, the content of the film held great sway in her appearance as well. While she should maintain a visual sense of

unreality and exaggeration for the sake of her metamorphic presence, and the metaphysical landscape that she lives in, it was important to avoid making her appear cartoony. She is the voice for a lot of deeply serious, emotionally dense issues, and if her design did not reflect this, it would disrupt the tone of the film.

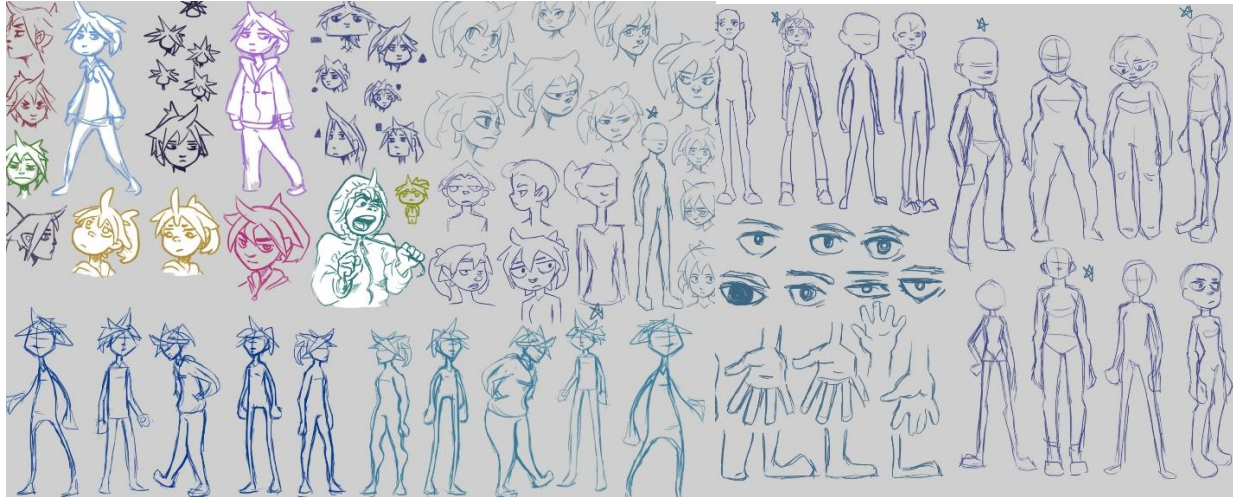


Figure 18: Character Design – Initial designs and secondary designs for the protagonist

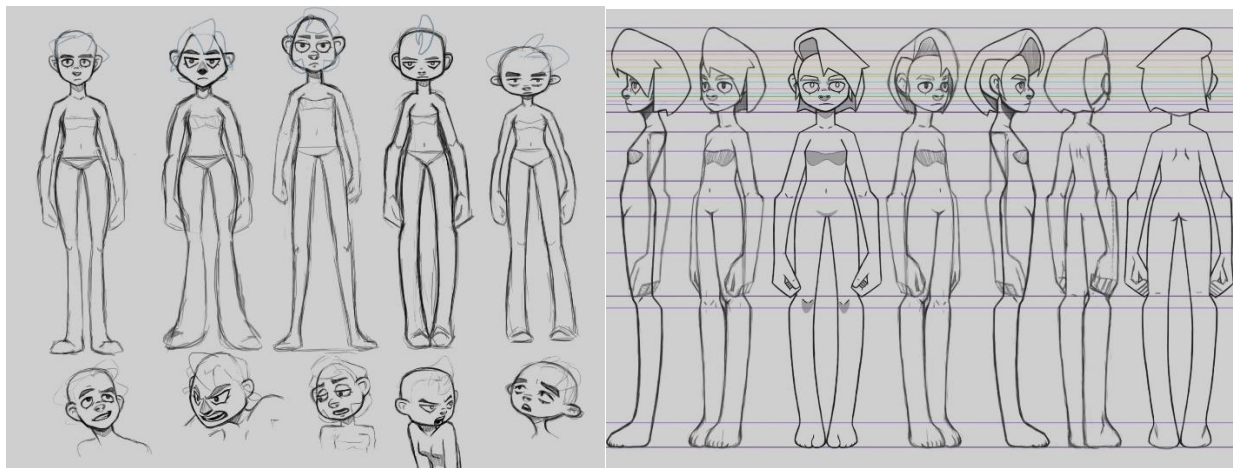


Figure 19(Left): Character Design – Refined designs for the protagonist

Figure 20(Right): Character Design – Character turnaround for the protagonist

In early designs (figure 18) I spent time exploring various shapes and styles that were expressive and attractive in different ways. While not complete, I had a well-developed sense of her attitude, personality, and general character, which I had laid out early on. From this, I was leaning toward more exaggerated character types, which in the end were somewhat too caricatured to carry the intense narrative. In the refined designs (figure 19) while focusing on her form and figure, a

change occurred that seemed to naturally follow from the role of the character in the film. That is, in early designs, she was wearing clothing that was as non-descript, for the reason that I didn't want to imply any social categories on her character that would skew the discussion she presents. However, after working on her new design, it became clear that not only would it be easier to animate and give her a stronger silhouette to leave her unclothed, but this would hold logically with the abstract mind-space she inhabits in the film. In the same fashion as her ideas, she is quite literally laid bare, and exists as her natural self.

In the final refined design (figure 20), I tried to keep the overall shape as simple as possible, with straight, smooth edges that streamlined her design for animation. As a character, she is a victim of her mental condition, but she is far from helpless – something her angular edges, long limbs, and large hands help to convey. She is a pensive character, and she has a large head to show it, with her forehead comprising half of her face. Her face occupies the lower half of her head, as though nearly sliding off, to reflect her brooding, melancholy disposition. Her bangs cover half her face making her seem shielded and introverted, but contrariwise her hair is also shaved on one side making her unconventional and exposed. Lastly her face and expression were compelling details to her design; specifically, her round eyes and thick, angled brows. This look accomplished a balance that allowed her face to emote clearly and yet maintains a sort of default mood that is subdued, serious, and perhaps a little troubled.



Figure 21: Character Design – protagonist drawings, poses, and expressions

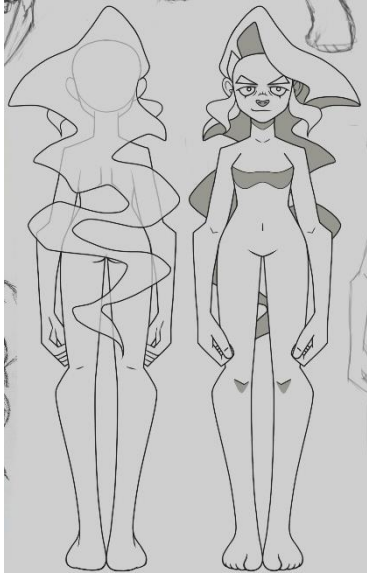


Figure 22(Above):
Character Design –
“Future-Self” design

I used this design as a base for the “future self” design, which is essentially an adult version of the protagonist (figure 22). This character is similar in her appearance, with some differences (mainly in the height, breasts, hips and hair). Aside from being more physically mature, the “future self” has hair that is much longer and, in fact, symbolic. There is an end to the long stream of hair in the design for practical reasons, but in the actual film, the end of her hair is never shown within the frame. Also, her hair is always in motion, flowing and weaving in an ethereal manner. While a very subtle analogy, this is meant to be an allusion to the fluid, ever-changing nature of the future, the ends of which are hidden and indeterminate.

Production

Script Recording

The first step in production was accomplished over the holidays; in only a few sessions with my hired voice actress Christa Elliot, my final script was recorded. This was a process that had its own myriad of complications, mostly due the logistical and technical challenges of collaboration. However, since the dialogue was a driving force for my film, this process required extensive attention.

After discussing a work agreement, I provided a general service contract that I wrote to suit our exchange. In response to concerns about the revision prices, a solution offered by Ms. Elliot was the use of over-the-phone recording sessions, so that I could give direction as she was recording. The phone sessions Ms. Elliot and I used were a suitable substitute to in-person recordings, although it had its limitations due the quality of the phone call. It was clear from our first session that live directing during the recording was not only beneficial, but somewhat necessary. Our first session lasted roughly two hours of running through the lines. I was extremely grateful for my actress's hard work and patience; capturing the vision of a character through someone else is more than difficult. I gave her extensive direction on nearly every line, doing my best to convey not only the intended inflections of words, but the energy and attitude with which things were meant to be said.

As per our agreement, I preferred to have the whole of the recording sessions sent to me, so that I could listen carefully without the impediment of a long distance mobile call, and dissect and choose the line readings I liked best using my own audio editing software. This process was a large task by itself; combing through roughly four hours of line readings, and comparing lines over and over, while editing and re-arranging audio, took a vast amount of time and effort. If that were all, it would have been simple, however there were additional complications involved in this process.

One initial problem to be dealt with was the animatic, which was not yet picture locked, and applying the final voice in place of my own rough-read of the lines proved to be more problematic than I anticipated. Firstly, the read from Ms. Elliot was quite different than my own,

and therefore the timing for nearly everything needed to be adjusted. Also, the interaction of the final acted words with the animatic imagery was much different than the written script. As it had been in the script writing process, once again I was adjusting the lines and the imagery itself, and even discarding a few sections at times. This was done in part to condense the length of the film, which was a primary struggle for the animatic process, but also the final recording helped elucidate where some lines were needed, and others were simply not. Adjusting the audio to the animatic and vice versa took some inventiveness and some mercilessness as well.

Nevertheless, there were mounting problems even in the line selection phase. After selecting the lines I found some small errors in the audio. One problem with a quick solution was the discovery that the entire session for my protagonist's lines was missing one of its stereo channels, and thus panic ensued until Ms. Elliot sent me a new file that fortunately was intact in both channels. I was also lucky not to lose time editing the session all over again because I was able to simply replace the file source with the new file. However, there were additional issues found that unfortunately did not have such easy solutions. Specifically, for some of the recordings of growls and yelling, the volume was too intense and caused some distortion in the audio. This was a frustrating problem and in the end, it we discovered that the possible cause for the distortion could be an overdriven mic. As a result, my options were to go ahead with the distorted audio or reach out to a different actress for replacement lines. I opted for the latter choice with voice actress Stephanie Garrido. To my luck, Ms. Garrido was quick to jump in, and since the distorted lines were growls and yells, the difference in the two voices could not be detected.

While these issues caused some delay, I was able to work through them efficiently. However, because the process of choosing lines and working with my animatic in this process took such an inordinate amount of time, I was already struggling with a tight schedule. The process of trial and error that seemed inherent in the scripting and recording process was a challenge that, as my first attempt, would have benefited greatly from some stricter planning. In general, while many things did not go to plan, and I was perhaps a little overly particular with the voice direction and how I imagined things should sound, I was immensely pleased with the result, working with Ms. Elliot was a pleasure.

Animation

The rough animation of this film was undoubtedly an area that was, for me, the easiest and most enjoyable experience of this film. With no hard questions to answer or decisions to make, I had nothing but straightforward production ahead – or so I thought. While the majority of my process was lots of simple, straightforward animation production in TVPaint, there were a few tangles to smooth over, and a few important decisions that had to be made as my time was running out. Specifically, there were plans for my animation that were no longer functional or possible as I was reaching the deadline; my early plans to literally use different media for my animation had to be reconsidered almost right away, and later on my goals for the animation could not be maintained in the short time I had left. Finally, while a dire choice, in favor of having a complete, colored film rather than presenting unfinished gaps, I chose to perform triage by cutting a scene from my film toward the end of production.

This film was conceived as a digital 2D film that I planned to complete mostly in TVPaint. However, during my art research in my preproduction process, and in several conversations with my advisor and others, I became increasingly inspired to pursue a more complex production. While the decision was not one I fully committed to, I was so inspired by the various films and art I was studying that I felt it would be an effective tool to use not just many styles, but many different mediums for animation. If I had indefinite time for production, I would have happily pursued this task; the use of physically painted, drawn, and textured frames of animation would have a powerful impact on this type of film. According to my personal fantasies for completing such a process, I would have continued with rough animation in TVPaint, and then determined the style and media to be applied to certain sequences, which would be traced and painted or drawn, frame by frame, in their intended medium, and then finally photographed and composited into the film. Not only would this be impactful and visually engaging if pulled off correctly, I imagine this type of production would be incredibly fun. However, even if I had any amount of experience in any production remotely similar to this, it would have still been a monumental task. Since I had only ever done digital animation, I could not even assume how much time, or the materials, it would take, as such a process would undoubtedly entail lots of trial and error and invention on my part. Thus, while a wonderful idea, I re-committed myself to my original plans for a digital 2D film, making use of varying styles through TVPaint.

Another plan for production that was reconsidered with varying results was my preference to complete my animation totally on my own. If I were to get a second chance at this, I certainly would have asked for a great deal more help from my classmates, and done so much sooner. My initial hesitation to reach out came mostly from an almost neurotic desire to be in control of the details of my film. On one hand, I felt it was such a deeply personal discussion, and my expression on many things was so vital, that there wasn't much room for outside help to begin with. Moreover, the creation of art in the film, coming from an entirely emotionally centered process, was extremely intimate in its development. With such private reference, it seemed that involving others into the production process would in a way pollute the communication of a film based in personal expression.

Secondarily, a fear that held me back, and did in fact come to pass, was that asking for help would cause more harm than good. The area where I needed help most was in cleaning the line of my animation: a very straightforward, but time-consuming task. While I was grateful for all the help I received from classmates and friends who worked hard and efficiently, there were a few cases where the line was off model, not smooth or straight, or simply not to my standard. Cases like this were a bit frustrating, since my help had come on a purely voluntary basis and I quite literally could only ask for so much. Yet, choosing the best files to outsource, writing directions, preparing the files, labeling and exporting the files, and sending them out was a process that by itself took quite a bit of time which, if files were returned that I could not use, was a total waste. Usually this time was compensated by the amazing and quick work done by those helping me. However, if not, I only had a few options: ask for a revision, send the file to someone else, re-do the linework myself, or simply use it in the film. Unfortunately, there were times when I put time and effort into creating and exporting files that I ultimately had to clean myself anyway, as I did not feel comfortable putting them in the film as is. Overall, the help of my classmates and friends was enormously valuable, and it would not be a stretch to say that my film was saved by the efforts of the many people who volunteered to help. Yet, while there are no guarantees to any process, hindsight offers some suggestions to avoid these problems. Had I considered asking for help sooner, and had the opportunity to be more discerning about the different roles and files I was distributing to people, I would have been better equipped to handle these errors, and been able to save a lot of lost time.

Lastly, a cause for hesitation that was somewhat more irrational than I had thought was the expectation that had I asked for help, I would not have gotten lots of responses, and simply would have irritated others and wasted my time. To my preference, before the production of this film, I had not asked for assistance in any sense that did not require a contract or work agreement. I did not like the idea of asking for others to do work on my behalf because I was working to slowly to do it myself; in some sense it felt like asking others to make up for my incompetence. As a society we are generally socialized to want to not burden others, which is a good thing in most cases, however this is not always a practical mindset, and retrospect, it seems a little foolish to have been so repelled by the idea of asking for help. Not only had I spent years working alongside my classmates and friends, who I had helped many times myself, but the SOFA community had proven itself early on to facilitate collaboration and assistance on films. Despite my hesitancy, I was given an amazing amount of help, especially toward the end, where talented classmates put hours of work into various parts of my film, from backgrounds, to clean-up, to special effects, to compositing. As foolish as I had been, I should not have been so surprised to have been able to rely on my friends and fellow artists, who were there to help up until the end. As shame inducing as it seemed to ask for help and burden others early on, the irony of the reverse is striking. I wouldn't necessarily call my mistake on this issue a regret, but it was certainly a lesson learned.

Obsession comes in many forms and has its functions and drawbacks. Entangled with the prospect of reaching out for help was not merely the idea that I should complete production alone, but that it was preferable for the sake of the quality of my art. This perspective is not entirely untenable, since I committed to at least completing my rough animation on my own. It would have been possible, and perhaps advisable, to accelerate this step in production, either by simply giving myself stricter time limits or by outsourcing some work. However, this presented itself as a challenge that I couldn't simply move past. Most artists have a propensity for perfectionism, and where it would have been wise to move on and let lie some versions of my roughs, I felt compelled to put a great deal of effort and attention to the quality of my animation. It was a difficult negotiation to make with myself, and while stricter time management has obvious benefits, the quality of my animation was immensely important to me.

Using the medium of animation and performance properly was vital to the artistic expression; for me, the quality of animation is akin to the difference between a novel and a bulleted list of events. On the one hand, there was a metamorphic and loose element to the animation and visuals, however, where I could I conveyed realism in the animation of dimension and physics. The purpose of realism in the film, of course, is the ease with which we relate to it. In particular, the way the protagonist moves is usually in a realistic, human manner. In response to this, we are more inclined to empathize with her experiences: when she is struck, or bleeds, or falls, we can be certain of the hurt it causes.

Alternatively, the nebulous, metaphysical world that surrounds her relies on it's unreality to convey the abstract concepts that go beyond character performance. The world itself is constantly transitioning between colors, forms, textures, and line. The protagonist herself morphs and transforms several times, especially as an expression of her more intense emotions. Likewise, the quality of transitions and metamorphosis tended to reflect the emotional content; for example, more subdued moods were accompanied by subtler transitions or transforming of the world, like in the scenes about family that reveal different tender memories through faux-pans, and heightened moods were accompanied by more intense or definable metamorphosis.

In taking advantage of the unique qualities of animation, these transitions were incredibly adventurous and enjoyable to explore; after all, without the dimension of time present in animation, you cannot show metamorphosis in a technical sense. This quality was most exciting in the use of different styles or line and the transition between them. For instance, in the scene of where we are shown a disturbing, un-bodied creature that lunges at the protagonist, the line is likewise sketchy, and somewhat imprecise with dark and desaturated colors, and when the protagonist slams the door on this monster, the line and color is increasingly smoother, clearer, and brighter. Similarly to the stylistic metamorphosis, bending the reality of a frame was a quality offered by animation that visualizes the world of the mind unlike any other artistic medium can. Just as the mind is surreal, unstable, and unlimited by physical nature, scenes like the ocean waves that suddenly appear to turn into a desert, or the transitions in the scene of fond memories, made use of animation's opportunity for not only emotional expression, but representation of totally psychological experiences.

While the film I presented has lots of satisfactory, high quality animation that I worked very hard and of which I am proud, this came at a price. As I was about mid-way through my animation, a confrontation with my schedule and dwindling time was inevitable, and I made the difficult decision to perform triage so that my most important scenes were completed, leaving behind a select few disposable shots to be completed when, or if, I had time. In the end, the designated shots (a piece of the conversation between the protagonist and her future self) were not able to be completed in time and I felt it better to cut them entirely from the final product of the film. While not unimportant, this section of shots were the most tentative even during picture-lock, and removing this segment of the conversation would not damage the logic or continuity of the film. Furthermore, it was a practical sacrifice, since the entirety of this section is composed of highly emotional and dramatic character acting that would have required a lot of work and attention. If I included it as poorly done or unfinished, the scene and lines would fall flat and possibly damage the overall delivery of my film. This was by no means an easy call to make, and it must be acknowledged that better planning earlier in production, and earlier in the year, would have rectified the issues that led to this choice. However, looking back, it was indeed a necessary decision with regard to my deadline.

Audio and Sound Effects

One of the successes of this film was undoubtedly in the wonderful, creative sound work that was done on the part of Zazu Pitts, my sound designer, from Sour Note Productions. Not only does his skill and creativity shine through in the film, but his work ethic, attentive engagement, and patience with countless peculiar requests and hyper-specific directions was greatly appreciated. One such request was my desire to edit the voice myself, and send it to him to be mixed in so that he could export the final sound as single file. The reason for this was that there were details and edits to be made to the voice that would simply be easier to do myself than instruct for someone else. This method was ultimately beneficial for both of us, since I was able to edit the voice exactly to my tastes, and because the sound design alone for the film, as Mr. Pitts described it to me, was more intense work and required more tracks than most of the feature films he had worked on, and needed his full attention.

While I do not have extensive experience in audio mixing, the skills I gained from Professor Dave Sluberski's instruction in his introduction and advanced sound courses were adequate to conduct the mix for the voice over. For the most part, this process involved simple editing and nudging to convey a conversation that flowed naturally and well-paced. There were some more detailed edits involved in this, where two versions of the same line were bisected and combined mid-sentence for their favorable parts (or to avoid an audible glitch in the sound, such as a lip smack), or using a time editing tool to speed up or slow down certain lines as I pleased.

The next step to this process involved more nuanced adjustments to the gain and panning of the voice to give it more 3-dimensional presence. Following this, I added effects to the voices of the monster character, and the future-self character. For the monster, I made a custom filter in an echo and reverb tool in Adobe Audition, and applied it to the whole track in an effort to make the voice more distinct; the voice actress used her skill to provide an excellent sinister, impish voice for the monster character, but it was still the same voice and needed some further discrepancy. Similarly, while Ms. Elliot did an excellent job acting for the age discrepancy, I added a slight pitch shift to the protagonist voice, to help her seem younger and separate her voice from the future-self character. Also added a more subtle echo to the future-self's voice, which was again an effort to differentiate not only her voice, but the status of her existence; this character was meant to be slightly ethereal, even ghostly, especially as she disappears. All of these edits were a large production task that took time; perhaps in another project matters like this are best handled by the sound designer, but it was an effort well spent as I was satisfied with the results.

My sound designer, meanwhile, was hard at work designing the soundscape for my film. There were some important scheduling matters to consider on both of our parts. Mr. Pitts had generously agreed to collaborate with me for no pay, and thus, when his company received paying projects during this time, he had to align his priorities accordingly. In light of his professional workload, and knowing that my film was long and would require extensive sound gathering and mixing, I began by making a detailed chart list of the scenes, time codes, and a general description of the sounds I was imagining. This was helpful starting out, although it was difficult to put somethings I was imagining into words, and thus further meetings and discussions were required to work out some details.

One artistic disagreement that we had early on was the use of music in the film; not only were our sensibilities different when it came to music in general, but it became more and more clear to me that there were few places that music felt appropriate at all. It took some convincing, and a some more strict direction, but ultimately Mr. Pitts accommodated my personal vision for the film. Within a few sessions, and after I sent the final voice audio, Mr. Pitts completed the sound for the film, even going to lengths such as meeting with me late at night to do so. His efforts were not in vain, as the work speaks for itself. Furthermore, thanks to the professionalism and experience of my sound designer and his company, my audio was well mixed and met the standard requirement for the screening theatre.

Post-production

The post-production for the film was fairly minimal as most of the important work was done and exported in TVPaint. The post-production entailed two main functions, comprising the editing and lining up of my shots with the sound, and also adding titles and credits. I was fortunate to have the help of my classmate and friend, Palwasha Azimi, in the creation of my credits and final export of my film. She not only helped me to organize my film's information on a credits template she provided, but she chose an appropriate font and credits style for my film, and checked the details and names of everything for errors. The result was more than satisfactory, and I was immensely grateful for her assistance and expertise.

Unfortunately, when it came to the editing and aligning the animation with sound, there was a crucial error made that affected the ending scenes in the film. While things were being aligned in Adobe Premiere Pro for the final export, we would check the synch of the sound using the viewfinder display in the program. This was a mistake, however, since I did not consider the possibility of playback errors in the program. We chose to proof-check the film in the viewfinder because the exports took nearly half an hour, and we were closing in on minutes from the deadline. It would have been preferable to export and check the final video product, something that I would typically do for all my films and even my assignments, but I was not confident that we would have time. As a result, I missed a synching error that caused the audio of the final few scenes to play a few frames ahead of the action. This was primarily noticeable at the screening with the lip-synch to the voices, which is particularly annoying to watch, and sadly does a

disservice to my voice actress and sound designer who both put lots of hard work into their contributions. Despite the rush for time, one cannot discount the necessity of double, and triple checking work on various formats. If I had done this, and noticed the synching error, I would have had the opportunity to re-export. Even if there was not time for another 40 minute export process after correcting the error, I would have still had the chance to at least consider exporting a compressed version, which may have lacked some visual detail, but would export quickly and would likely be less distracting than the synching issue.

Film Screenings

Screening of the Film

The screening of the film took place on a Monday, a special screening day created for students that were given extra time to submit (and some films that did not fit on the original screening schedule). Film screenings took place in the Wegmans theater, whereas all of my previous films had screened in the Carlson theater. This was a cause for concern because there were numerous emails sent out regarding this change, notifying everyone that there were new guidelines and requirement for file specifications. My sound designer and I did our best with following these guidelines, but during the first few days of screenings, there was a lot of evidence showing the reason these specifications must be so strictly regulated. The Wegmans theater sound system was much more sensitive to these changes, and so if the audio of a film was too loud, or had any stray background sound, it was very noticeable and even painful to watch. It was for this reason that I decided to take an extra precaution: I double checked with my sound designer that the final sound file followed regulations, and in case I made any errors on the final export, I took the final video file and reviewed it in ProTools Audio software. Luckily the sound was fine and adhered the Wegman's theater guidelines, but if there had been an issue my plan was to alert the sound booth on the day of my film screening, so they could make the necessary adjustments before it played. Fortunately, it wasn't necessary, and the sound was excellent.

However, it was during this final check that I noticed some of the flaws in the final export of the film, including some cropping flaws and the lip-synch issue in the last few scenes. There was nothing I could do about these issues except prepare to address them in the film responses. Having spent my last few days before the screening focusing on these issues, my own viewing of my final film in Wegman's theater was a bit mixed. Watching the film, I couldn't help but notice the various flaws, inadequacies, and missing elements, and more than anything I was nervous about the delivery of the film and whether the message would be well received. On the other hand, it was remarkable to see all the hard work put together; the animation looked well done and complete thanks to my cleaning assistants, the audio was excellent on speaker, and experiencing the whole piece in theater was intense to say the least.

Reception and Feedback

When it came time to present my abstract and discuss the film, the response from the audience was overwhelmingly positive, and I received much more feedback than I expected. Among the general thoughts and reactions I heard, there was a great deal of relatability and connection to the struggles of the protagonist, which was the response I was most pleased to hear. Small comments that showed much of the audience felt and understood the ideas in the film were proof that the film had been effective in what it was trying to convey. In this regard, the film was a success.

Similarly, I received some praise for the imagery and display of animation I utilized in the film, which was merely a comfort, assuring me that the great efforts put in my work were not in vain. People reacted to the energy of the film, and the expansive nature of the ideas, as well as lauded for my approach of these ideas, which were all wonderful responses to hear. However, I was also appreciative of the constructive feedback I received. Of course, the issues with the lip-synch was briefly addressed as my mistake. I also received some thoughts about the delivery of the film, specifically that the presentation of ideas in the middle of the film went on a bit too long and perhaps muddied the pace a little and made the film too long. This was interesting to me since I had been regretting the removal of the certain few shots from the version of the film. In light of this feedback, I considered my decision differently; undoubtedly it would have exacerbated the issue for this viewer to include even more shots in the film.

Overall, while the circumstances for its delivery were not ideal, and I became somewhat vexed by its flaws, I believe this film had a very successful screening. The feedback I received was not only very positive, but the reflections and impact it had on the viewers were essentially exactly what I had wished from the beginning. Of all my screenings, this one was the most nerve racking and ambivalent, and yet also the most meaningful for myself and I hope also for the audience.

Conclusion

Looking back on this thesis project evokes some very ambivalent feelings. It was a tumultuous time for various reasons, and yet there were things about the process I not only did well but enjoyed very much. Most of all I tackled some very unusual challenges that were new to me, and for many reasons, the creation of this film was one of my most intense learning experiences at RIT. Lastly, while there were abundant flaws, I feel very satisfied and fulfilled by the film I pursued, and incredibly thankful and proud of the hard work that I and my friends, classmates, and collaborators put into its completion.

This film also had some interesting reference to its own process. Many times through out the year, this film became something like a discussion between myself and it and it's characters; it was very much an interaction between film and creator. This dialogue produced interesting developments not only on the film but on myself and my life. I had been warned early on about the mental side effects of creating a film on difficult issues; focusing on heavy subject matter every day can certainly affect one's mood. However, my concerns were more to do with my frustration with my ineptitude at expressing things correctly. On top this, various things seemed to go poorly at just the wrong time; perhaps the content did have a subconscious effect, but there were many times where I wanted to give up on the film entirely. Especially toward the end, when things were becoming their most difficult, the thought crossed my mind, although it never reached quite the level of an actual consideration until the final hours before submission. It struck me that the timeline for my film's creation mimicked the arc for my character's journey to some degree: just like my protagonist, it was nearly too late to turn things around and succeed, and it was a struggle until the very last moment. The main disparity here was that my "rope" was the help I received from others – and for their sake too, I'm simply glad I didn't give up until the end. Ruminations aside, this thesis project had a very profound impact on me at every stage, more than in the learning process and experience gained, but in a deep consideration of the themes I was investigating and exploring in the film.

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Appendix A – Original Thesis Proposal

WHY

(Working Title)

2D Animation

Chloe R. Hayes

Thesis Proposal

For MFA in Film and Animation

School of Film and Animation

Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York

March, 2018

Approved for Submission by:

Brian J. Larson, Thesis Chair

Logline:

A cynical, suicidal girl stuck on a metaphysical plane must make her way out of a convoluted maze with many challenges and strange beings in order to accomplish her goal of leaving life behind, but she is confronted by the manifestation of her future self.

Treatment/story:

WHY is an affect-based experimental/developmental animation using various styles of 2D animation. There will be a main character, a teenage girl named Sienna, and a general plot progression driven by a narration/conversation. Several characters and scenes will be presented throughout the film serving purely as visual metaphors to illustrate the narration.

The narration will be a conversation between Sienna and a monster about her life. The monster appears in several scenes as a disembodied mouth that is either simply attached to anything, or floating in space. As the film begins, she has already committed an act of self harm in an attempted suicide. As her soul leaves her body, she discusses her choice with the monster, and throughout this conversation, in the visuals of the film, she is tested by many metaphorical creatures/characters that represent feelings, events, ideologies, and concepts from her life. Through all these *tests*, she chooses the path toward death, concluding that each test is an example of a reason why she should die. Finally, in the last level, the conversation is interrupted, and she is confronted by her future self, a character who has raced through the various realities to catch up with Sienna and give her a reason why she should live.

The film will present a few distinct visual metaphors, dispersed throughout the film, each with a progression of some kind (either a progressive action, or a rough plot line). All of these visuals will be guided by the content of the narration. The narration will be written in this general progression: Sienna is introduced, and then the monster begins a conversation and we immediately learn of her act, then the two discuss her motivations, and while the monster challenges her, she reconfirms her decision each time. Finally, the conversation comes to a climax in the discussion of her family, and those affected by her decision, and then the conversation ends: it is here that her future self interrupts.

In line with the narration, the visual metaphors will progress. The first metaphor to be presented is Sienna hanging by her hand from a rope in a dark void. The rope will change to a thread, a barbed wire, a chain, and a human ankle; this progressive metaphor will be presented in interstitial segments throughout the film. As the ‘main visual element’ there will be 4 spaces, or levels, Sienna will move through that represent the “tests” in which she can choose to fight back, and live, or give up and proceed toward death. In each space, a drum-beat sound will follow her, occasionally accompanied by a rope in her hand that she can choose to climb. Additionally, the narration may often be accompanied by stand-alone visuals to help explain aspects of Sienna’s life, using literal or metaphorical images. For example, a short shot of her in the back of a classroom, and also a scene of her mother yelling and cursing at her, a literal memory, but in this image, Sienna slowly fades and disappears.

The first level will be represented as a room, half in light, half in dark. In the dark half is a motionless, shadowy figure surrounded by swirling black waves. In this room there are small child-like demons that bite Sienna. The drumbeat sound will come from the light side, and as Sienna confirms her decision, she will carry the child-demons toward the black figure. The next

level will be a large bright, overexposed space. Here, Sienna will fracture into multiple frames (each frame will contain a clone of Sienna, each with a different emotion). As the fracturing continues, sienna becomes very small and the mob of clone “Siennas” that devolve into chaos. Again, the drumbeat sounds off, driving the chaos, until the narration leads Sienna to a decision to proceed toward death. With this, she is taken to the next space: a colorful, amorphous space, filled with large, cartoony, elastic beings. She doesn't like to be touched by these beings, and she attempts to fight back at first, causing the drum beating to sound off and become more intense. Led by the narration, she eventually seeks a way out toward death, allowing them to swallow her up. Depending on the content of the conversation, Sienna may pass between these different levels, illustrating the sentiments of the narration at will.

In the final level, Sienna arrives in a room of memory. She sees her life flashing around her, sometimes in abstract forms. In this level, she meets her childhood self. In her conversation with the monster, she is instructed to tell the little girl there is no hope and she has to die, because Sienna cannot complete this level unless she takes the little girl with her to death. Sienna hesitates, and before she can act, her future-self, a grown woman, arrives to stop her. She explains that she has been racing to catch up with Sienna since she began her journey: she was the drumbeat that was chasing her. The woman says that she comes from a place of peace: a place that was destroyed since Sienna began her path. The woman makes a plea to Sienna, telling her that she doesn't want to die, and that if she can't have hope for her present self, then she can believe in her future self. The visual metaphor of Sienna hanging in the void changes, and the rope she hangs from changes back to a chain, a barbed wire, a thread, and finally a hand that seems to be pulling her up.

Sienna is taken aback and overwhelmed, not only at the prospect of dooming the innocent little girl, but at the idea of taking the life of the woman, who is clearly a changed, different person from Sienna. Upon learning this new information, Sienna chooses to go back; as the woman puts it ‘if she can't have mercy on herself, then she will at least have mercy on her future and past self, and give them a chance.’

The rope appears in Sienna's hand and she begins to cry heavily. This point of emotion is Sienna's will to live. Sienna puts both hands on the rope in a clear action to climb it. At this moment, the visual metaphor of Sienna in the void changes. The void changes to a purple sky, and holding on tightly to the rope, she is pulled up; the rope is attached to a kite and she flies. The monster speaks again, appearing as a mouth on her wrist telling her that she has not escaped, that she may have to keep taking tests and fighting forever if she chooses the path to life. Sienna makes no comment, but grips the kite more tightly and continues to fly.

Rationale:

The film is an exploration of the choice we make to live. For some people this decision can be a difficult one, and this may not always be a sure answer for some. The goal is to explore a narrative that may challenge one's view on whether suicide could be the right answer depending on the situation, and if that's the case, where is the “line”? The main character is not suffering from a debilitating, or terminal, physical illness. It is also unclear whether her choices

are derived from chronic depression (or psychological illness) or if she is simply extremely cynical, and views the world and her experiences logically. Naturally, with a world filled with so many awful events and experiences, perhaps it is not mental illness, but a logical rational that could justify a desire to die. The question this film will pose, is this: can we understand those who want an end, and can we accept it or not? Where is the line? Despite everything that is awful in the world, is the path forward, life, still a better choice?

My answer to these questions, posed at the conclusion of the film will be this: yes we can understand, and for some, maybe it is acceptable, as we can never truly understand what it's like to walk in another person's shoes. Maybe they are in too much pain, physically or mentally, to go on. Maybe it's even logical at times.

However, despite all of this, it is my belief that life is always worth the pain; one should always strive to live despite these feelings. We can judge these people; condemn these people for causing further pain to their friends and family, but maybe that is not the only answer. Of course inflicting pain on others in this way is the true tragedy, in my opinion, but the answer in this film is a message of self-love. Finding the will to live through understanding that the future is uncertain and while it could even get worse, it is worth the chance of a happy ending. Even the smallest moments of happiness will prove the chaos and suffering to be worthwhile. Perhaps even, our future will reveal the suffering to have meaning, and lead to something better.

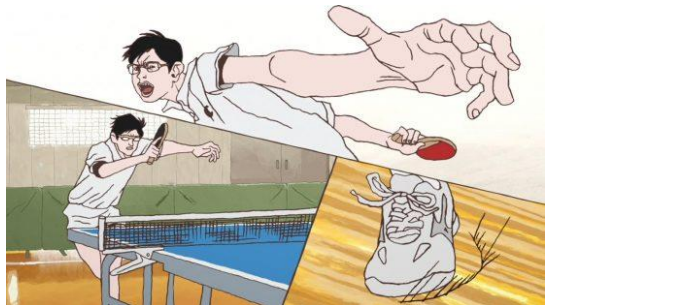
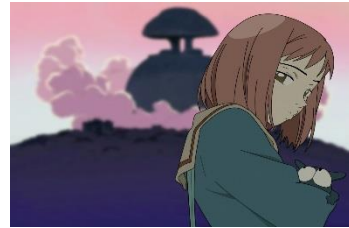
This film is of course based on personal beliefs, and struggles, that I have encountered. The various scenes will be interpretations of my own experiences and feelings (of course, being the writer and filmmaker of the piece). I'm not interested in discussing my exact experiences directly in the film, however they are relevant to mention because they are an ongoing influence on my ideas for the piece. More importantly, as a general social issue, events of suicide, especially among younger generations, has been on the rise. Something in particular is the rise of cyber-bullying, in which I have heard accounts from my younger sister, and teenagers I used to baby-sit, and others, of harassment and bullying on social media: most notably, very cruel messages telling them to kill themselves. For some of these young people, unfortunately, that is the only push they need. I don't necessarily mean to reach out directly to these people, but rather to make a statement that, if they see it, would hopefully influence them in a positive way.

Lastly, as mentioned above, this film is very personally relevant to my own life. I would likely be pleased to work on a film with happier content, but I feel this film is incredibly meaningful and could be very beautiful, at least to myself. As dark as the content is, I hope for the net emotional gain to be uplifting, and positive, which is a representation of my own thoughts on the subject matter. I am no expert, but I do have something I truly wish to say.

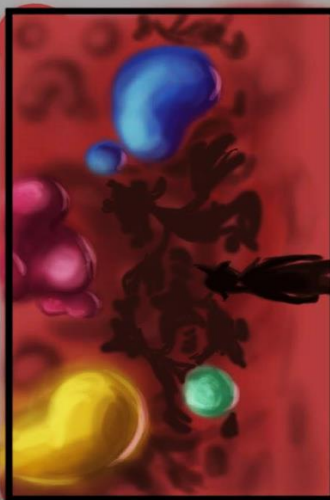
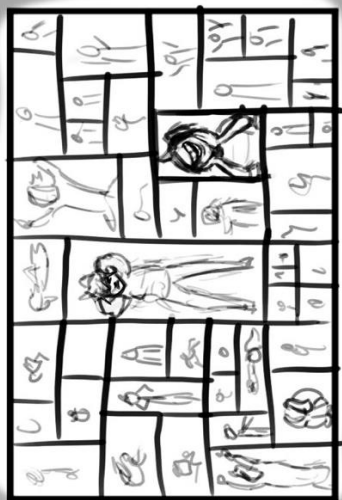
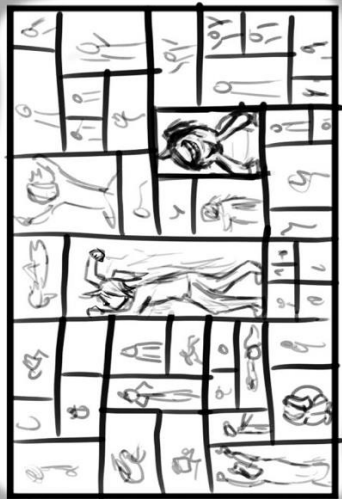
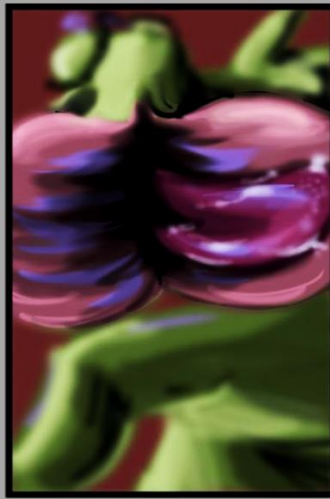
Vision:

The style will be 2D (digital) because I'm going to rely on the amorphous ability and freedom of the medium in order to present many of my characters and scenes. There will be transformation, elastic/cartoonish characters, amorphous scenes with unstable/changing backgrounds, and also unusual aspects such as the mouth that can appear anywhere in a scene. Additionally, the colors themselves will vary from scene to scene, featuring scenes that are mostly or wholly: greys/muted color, black and white with some saturated yellow and red, bleached colors in a white space, pastels and softly lit color etc. The line-work and style is also subject to change, transforming from thick line/shadow, to lineless color, to possible incomplete

line, etc. and including the possibility of adding/changing texture at certain scenes. I will take full advantage of everything the medium has to offer, and present a colorful, varied, unique interpretation of the story through the freedom and looseness of 2d.







Budget:

Required Items	Cost
External Hard-drive	\$100
Adobe Cloud subscription	\$19/mo for 12 mo. = \$228
Toonboom Harmony Premium (Student) and Storyboard Pro	$(\$17 + \$9)/\text{mo. for 12 mo.} = \312
16 GB added ram for Laptop	\$100
Drawing tablet	\$200
Composer	\$300
Voice Talent	\$300
Promotional prints (posters, postcards)	\$200
Promotional website	\$100
Festival fees	\$250
TOTAL SUM:	\$2,090

Appendix B – Thesis Proposal Treatment Revision

Chloe Hayes

Proposal – Conditional Approval

Section of Treatment (previous/narrative version):

[Sienna in the first “level” of the middle plane between life and death. The monster appears as a disembodied mouth floating in space]

Sienna furrows her brow and opens her mouth to speak but she is interrupted by a pounding sound. Sienna turns around, as the sound seems to be coming from behind her. It sounds off again, and her body shakes. She clutches her chest reflexively, hunched over; she can feel her heartbeat, and it gets louder and faster as the deep pounding sounds off again. “W-what’s happening?” she is still hunched, her eyes wide, looking back behind her, trying to find a source. “Well, you want to go?” The mouth replies. “You better go fast...because time’s running out.” The mouth speaks as the pounding sounds again, and the edge of the dusty horizon begins to get lighter, as if a sunrise approaches. “GO WHERE?” Sienna, backs away toward the dust, away from the light. “Well you can’t just walk there. You have to go there.” The mouth says, still floating in space. “Ok mouth guy... killin’ it... thanks a lot.” Sienna remarks sarcastically, then takes off running. Sienna runs, but only feels the pounding, and her heart, getting stronger “Dammit.” She looks over her shoulder again at the light. “I just don’t want to be here anymore” she squeezes her eyes shut. She slows to look behind her again, as the pounding seems to have paused, she turns back toward the darkness.

As she turns, the scene changes around her and she arrives in a new space. It’s a bedroom, halfway shrouded in blackness, half in light. She approaches the darkness, and as she nears, a dark figure becomes visible, standing in the shadows, surrounded by swirling, black waves. Sienna stops and stares at the figure a moment, as a few small, dark, childlike figures dart around the edges of the room. “Well done.” The mouth appears, stretched across the wall to her side. “Is this it? I thought you said there was nothing after.” Sienna complains. “Well I have no idea about

that.” the mouth replies, “But this isn’t the end yet. Find a way out, move on... one by one until you reach the end.” Sienna turns abruptly “What kind of bull-- How many of these places are there?” she says with an exhausted tone. “HMMMM, not sure.” the mouth smiles. Sienna sighs exaggeratedly, and puts her hand on her face. She looks around but there are no doors in this room. Suddenly she winces and looks down to find a small shadowy creature in the shape of a child has sunk its sharp teeth into her wrist. She grunts but does not struggle, and more approach. At that moment, the unidentifiable, atmospheric beating noise slowly begins to sound again from the light side of the room. Again, she can feel the pulse in her arm and in her chest getting stronger and faster, in sync with the ominous sound. The mouth opens up, now attached to the forehead of the shadow-child that is biting Sienna’s arm. “Do you give up? You can go back-- back there.” The pounding gets stronger. She sighs again, staring down. The shadow creature bites harder; blood drips down and her arm flinches slightly.

Back in the void, Sienna hangs by her hand from a rope with a large, dark, empty space below her, and she slips a few inches further down the rope again. Details of the ‘rope’ become visible: the rope has changed to barbed wire, and her hand is bleeding.

In the dark side of the room, Sienna stares up at the face of the dark figure, then shuts her eyes. Other shadow creatures start to bite at her, crying and whimpering like babies as the pounding from the light continues to grow. The one biting her arm closes its eyes and cries. She picks it up, still biting her arm, and cradles it. “Back where?” She replies “There’s nothing left...” She trails off. “I’m done...” She carries the small creature toward the dark figure. Once again, the scene around her changes as she walks, and she arrives alone in a vast, bright, overexposed space.

Sienna can hardly see anything around her for the brightness, and she instantly rubs her eyes. She looks around with one eye, but there is nothing. She sighs and takes a few steps around, slowly and without intent. The space fractures into 3 panels as she begins to search, not to Sienna's notice. The mouth speaks, seemingly from nowhere, unseen “Hey...what’s wrong?” Sienna groans as though exhausted, “Fucking fuck nothing’s wrong, you’re no help so just fuck off!” Sienna continues looking around for something to move towards, squinting and rubbing her eyes, as the brightness is becoming painful. Subtly, the different panels begin to behave differently.

“Well that’s rude” the mouth speaks, still invisible. “Just leave me alone!” she shouts as she rubs her eyes again with both hands, covering her face. As she shouts, the panels suddenly split again (still outside of her awareness), and once again as she yells and groans out in frustration. Each “Sienna” behaves in a unique way (shouting, cussing, whimpering, etc).

In the void, her hand tightens around the “rope” which has changed to a thin thread, nearly looking like a fishing line or a hair, and she slips down in the dark empty space a great deal (several feet).

The mouth chuckles “Alone?” Finally, Sienna looks around, as though suddenly aware of the noise, and presses her hands against her ears. In the chaos, the different panels are all making a racket. The pounding begins to sound again as one “Sienna clone” in a box to the bottom left begins to become very emotional and loud, clutching her head and raving madly; this panel begins to fade to white. Sienna’s heart starts pounding loudly again, and she tries to run, but she only runs edge of the panel. The mouth appears on the head of a “Sienna” in one panel to the right, completely replacing the face. “You better go soon, you’re running out of t--” “TIME? I know thanks a lot motherfucking mouthass jerkface.” She mumbles as attempts to force the wall down by slamming it with her shoulder. The pounding gets louder and and she begins breathing heavily, her heart beating faster and faster. She closes her eyes. Flashes of light, and blurred visions appear. Memories of her life: a bedroom with a pillow and blanket on the floor, flowering weeds lining the edge of a playground where kids are running by, Sienna's mother walking past a doorway shouting, and water running in a sink. She starts breathing faster. “STOP!” she screams “stop.” she whispers “It’s fine now. It’s over. I’m done. Please just stop...I’m done.” She mumbles. The “Sienna clones” quiet down slightly. “There’s no point” she states. “None of it matters...” The chaos becomes more quiet. The other Sienna clones darken one by one, fading to black. The atmospheric pounding, along with her heart, gets quieter and quieter. She begins breathing slowly and she closes her eyes, sliding down the wall limply. Sienna sits down as the others turn completely black. As she sits, the scene changes around her once again, and she arrives in a new place sitting on an odd squishy cushion.

Appendix C – Thesis Film Stills

