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The Lost Taste

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School of Film and Animation

College of Art and Design

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Abstract

The Lost Taste is a film about a young chef named Ueda who is running a noodle bar that was passed down from his deceased father. Ueda is an excellent cook who always satisfies his customers with his secret family recipe. However, in recent years he has been having a hard time running his business, since fast-food chain restaurants are booming and one across the street is stealing his customers. Recently, only a few old loyal customers have come to visit.

Worst of all, he has completely forgotten that this very day is the deadline to pay off his debt to a group of fearsome loan sharks. As soon as the mobsters learn that he is unable to pay off his debt, they immediately subdue Ueda and plan to brand him (literally) as a slave to pay his debt. Things are about to get ugly when the boss of the group suddenly feels hungry. Realizing he cannot work without lunch, the mob boss decides to command Ueda to cook for him since he has a distaste for those overselling chain restaurants that don't put any effort into quality of service.

Unfortunately, the immense pressure weighs too heavily on Ueda, and he is too nervous to perform even the simplest ingredient preparation. On the verge of utter failure, his eyes just so happen to glance upon the photo of his father on the cooking table. At that moment, he feels like his soul goes back to the time of his childhood, when his father was still in charge. In the memory, Ueda looks on as his father prepares the family's soup recipe with incredible grace. When Ueda snaps back to reality, the famous chef's special Udon soup has already been made by his hand.

Though not outwardly very impressive to look at, the boss is still enticed to

sample the bowl, and is shocked by its heavenly taste. The noodles are so good that it feels as though his soul ascends into outer space, filled with joy. Gratified by such an excellent dining experience—like he had never had before—the boss decides to spare Ueda from being enslaved. Unfortunately, the matter of repaying his debt is more complicated.

No matter how unwilling he is, Ueda has no choice but to give up the real estate of the restaurant to the mob boss as payment. Afterward, Ueda gets a job as an entry-level employee in one of the fast-food chain restaurants. Ueda is free from all his past problems, but what had remained of his chef spirit slowly dies inside him as he's forced into assembly-line food preparation.

Introduction

The motivation to create this thesis film was not only for school credits but also to make a brand new start and self-improvement toward my ideal of storytelling and animation production. To be more specific, I want to be mature and be able to stand proud through my work.

Animated comedy has always been my principle of making animation. Most of my previous works were usually comedies focusing on absurd images, crazy actions, and simple plots that were easy to understand. However, deep down in my mind, I am not satisfied with these immature works, longing to grow up and produce a story that contains seriousness and maybe some tragic elements. For me, the most important part of making this thesis is to develop my own style of storytelling and steer it toward more maturity and perfection. Of course, that doesn't mean I would just suddenly throw away my humor. I still want my film to have its fun, I just also want it to have seriousness, realistic problems, and inevitable loss and helplessness in life through my vision, while still keeping intact my sense of humor.

The Lost Taste is a 2D short film that can be classified as a Japanese-animated sitcom and gourmet drama about the decline of the traditional restaurant in the era of fast-food culture. However, while the world setting was based on a real restaurant in a town environment, I do not wish it to be too realistic and limit the performance. Animation is a form of art where people can free their minds, making their fantasies come true and seeing mental movements become visualized. Even though my film would contain some harsh situations that can snap the audience back to reality, that doesn't mean I should pass up the opportunity to reveal my own whimsy and the

colorful, abstract world and expression of art that represents the characters' thoughts and emotions I had in mind. Therefore, I would say this is an animated sitcom that was narrated with my eccentric imagination.

Since the film would take place in an old restaurant within a '90s modern town, I started my research and found lots of pictures of old restaurants, town buildings and structures, and common, ordinary meals from the '90s to the modern age in detail. Despite this film not having any fantasy element involved or having too many actions, I want my animation to be lively and emotional and to emphasize character performance with surreal and abstract images. To do so, I studied lots of animated sitcoms, films, and YouTube videos from Japan for their art design and montage editing. They provided a great deal of references and knowledge of how to show character mood and mental activity through background design, scene layout, lighting effects, and character poses to make the plot lively and show off the attitudes of my film.

To create a film that allows the audience to experience and receive the emotions I stored in it even a little is a huge step toward my inner growth and proof of being able to create an animation with an emotional story that can move people's hearts.

Review of Research

The Inspiration

    The moment I got my inspiration for my upcoming thesis project was when the first thing that came to mind was an image of an old chef calmly cooking a ball of noodles. It might seem like a random thought, but it was actually a scheme that had been secretly hatched inside my head for a long time. To be more specific, that was an image of a summary about my observation and interest in the urban environment where I lived my whole life.

    I'm a city boy who loves walking on the street and enjoying sightseeing. The flow of the crowd, the design of the stores and restaurants, the impact of the old and new era brought by the urban scene where traditional buildings and modern skyscrapers are side by side; their dynamic and atmosphere always bring me lots of stimulation, which leads me go wild and creative and serve as imaginative fuel for my previous animations. And among them all, I found that the restaurant is the most interesting topic for my story.

    In Taiwan, the food industry is pretty popular; I can find more than five restaurants next to each other on every block and hidden alley, and anyone who has cooking skills and a license can set up a food stand in literally any place to earn a living. From my perspective, the restaurants weren't just a place to keep people well fed, they were all unique museums on their own and were eager to tell me their history through their scent of spices, kitchenware on display, and the chefs with enthusiastic and generous personality (I mean, some of them do have more than 50 years of history). However, the number of restaurants was so large that they usually

come along with competitions and declination. I had seen lots of flashy looking restaurants' grand openings only to end up shut down within a few months and an unremarkable one run for a decade without running out of customers. Yet the ones that interested me the most were those that had been open for a long time and were loved by their customers but decided to close. What causes them to make such a decision and give up something they had built up for so long? Perhaps they are just tired? Maybe their income falls short of expenditure or they get involved with unpleasant conflicts? Such observations and questions about the possibility of their tragic element had been hidden in my head for years, and when I got determination to create a tragicomedy, they resurfaced in my mind as a main topic about how the plot and image of the film would become.

Finding References for World Setting and Design

It wouldn't be enough to complete my project with just my vision, so I started searching for some concepts that could bring the correct direction to my project's art style and performance. The first reference that eventually influenced me to use a Japanese restaurant as my main stage is my favorite TV series *Midnight Diner* (2009), directed by Joji Matsuoka, based on a manga with the same name by Yarō Abe. The plots of the series followed the life story of heartwarming interactions and hardship in the city from different people, and each episode had its corresponding dish provided by the protagonist to emphasize the theme. They all happened inside the old canteen. The architecture and interior design in the show was a traditional Japanese-style canteen with lots of beautiful elements for the audience's eyes to feast on: the warm color of lighting, a large number of utensils and kitchen utensils lined up in a dense and organized manner, a nostalgic but clean wooden dining table and tile wall, and the main chef dressed in a traditional plain kimono. With all these elements put together,

they became a dynamic photo that seems to be trapped in the Showa age full of comfort and friendliness, a safe haven where the audience can basically smell the tasty air and feel warm inside through the TV screen. Moreover, the narrow distance of indoor space provided an excellent stage for focusing their interactions and facial expressions between the chef and customers. The atmosphere and aesthetic of warm Japanese nostalgia is definitely something I want in my film, since they are more recognizable and beautiful than Taiwanese-style restaurants (which were usually just some old modernized architecture without any remarkable design but with dull cement walls and glass doors), and they can provide the comparison between an old-fashioned noodle bar and the modern fast-food industry.

Scene Still: Midnight Diner (2009) Joji Matsuoka

Influenced by the series, I searched for more references to gain a greater sense of Japanese nostalgic style for my layout design. In searching, I found lots of real

restaurant photos from the internet and an interesting YouTube channel called "Kana Urbanowicz." This channel provided a few looped 2D short anime about each different character enjoying their meal inside their unique theme restaurant, which had great details in them. Most of them share the similar texture of rustiness, nostalgia, and color palette that provide a clean, safe, and home-welcoming feel. Most of them have a recognizable L-shaped counter as their stage of performance. Eventually, I decided to do more research on the real restaurant photo I found online and the looped animation over the TV series for interior design. Because in the TV show, its interior layout placed the protagonist in the middle of the canteen so he can become the center of the scene and story, an important narrator who drives the plot and without any struggle. In my story, however, using the L-shaped counter in my interior layout would be perfect to show my protagonist as a powerless victim who is being cornered to the wall and feeling helpless from the invisible pressure hiding among the emptiness in his restaurant. As for the exterior design of Ueda's restaurant, I wanted it to look like an old Japanese traditional building from the 1960s/1970s with sliding doors and iron fence windows on it. Originally, I planned to make a whole wooden house like the design from a TV show. I realized that putting a wooden house in the middle of an urban environment was not suitable. After all, this type of house is more common in hidden alleys or in the countryside, and Ueda's restaurant was supposed to be built along with the rest of the city when it was just developing, which makes it likely to be a cement building. Therefore, I mimicked the gray-color wall, a wooden window, shop-sign, and dark tiled roof with rusty texture on them from the photo references to create an old restaurant that has a long history during city development.

At the same time, since it was a setting in a modern Japan city in the '90s, I needed to make the environment outside of the restaurant look clean and orderly and

to have block-shaped buildings everywhere. To do so, I found other photos of urban structures and buildings like a family restaurant, convenience store, and some business districts in Japan to create a fictional modern city environment and Ueda's rival restaurant to surround our poor protagonist, highlighting the fact that he and his restaurant are on the edge of being eliminated by the modern-age needs.

Although the layout designs from the photos references and from *Midnight Diner* were really inspiring, I did not want to replicate them completely, because their interior design and textures had too many details and their atmosphere was too solemn. It would have taken too much work time and limited my freedom in art design. Any metamorphosis that happened in the film would seem unnatural without the proper balance between realism and surrealism if the scene tended to be too realistic. The film does have some tragic features that can link to real life, but I want to make most of the scenes lively and surreal for the audience's visual experience and let them also be able to understand what happened in each scene without too much distraction. Luckily, an animated comedy film named *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (1999), directed by Isao Takahata, granted me great inspiration and support through its art style.

Unlike any exquisitely animated film from Ghibli Studio, every character and building in *My Neighbors The Yamadas* was minimized and covered with watercolor texture. The art style of its backgrounds was simple, with only a few line drawings and covered with watercolor texture, yet it provided a pleasant, eye-catching feeling that immediately made me decide to apply this as my reference for color palette and textures for my backgrounds' art style in my film. The simplified structures with corresponding pastel watercolors not only granted me less work on background but also created an excellent blur effect to present as a nonaggressive and fuzzy

dream-like environment fitting to my daily life theme, adding a unique sense of Japanese aesthetics into the film and helping the audience to more easily identify the main characters and important buildings in the scene. They also made my film look like the style of a child's picture book or a family friendly anime, which can create a strong impact and contrast when the tragic elements and hardship of the storyline collide in this colorful and peaceful world.

The other feature that inspired me from *The Yamadas* was the technique to symbolize the life experience of each family member into a series of montages. The way it turns the intangible concepts such as the meaning of the marriage, family harmony, and distress into a literal montages of representative images like cooperative boating, living on a giant snail, or a superhero daydream in visual screenshots granted me freedom of inspiration to develop my own imagination in my clips for spatial transformation and backgrounds with symbolic meanings.

Film Still: My Neighbors the Yamadas (1999) Isao Takahata

My thesis advisor Jonathan Seligson suggested another Japanese film that made

it into my list of research materials named *Night is Short, Walk On Girl* (2017), directed by Masaaki Yuasa. This film was notable for its exaggerated performances and backgrounds exploding with emotional expression. Unlike the other references, this animated film is not at all peaceful, but can be described rather as a love poem dressed up as a carnival full of colorful pop art and pure madness. The story is pretty simple; it is about a young man secretly in love and trying to date a girl who cares about nothing but living in her own world and enjoying life. What makes this film different from other romantic comedies is that every challenge and event that happened to the boy was so surreal and out of control that he had to break his body limits and laws of physics to date the girl. At the same time, the audience can enjoy the beauty of life through the girl's (and some other key characters') view full of imagination that contains intense color backgrounds and symbolic montages. Like I said before, I wanted my film to be lively, colorful, and showing attitude. In *Night is Short*, there are lots of examples that showed me how to use the correct colors to emphasize the character's emotions; the film also goes crazy with performances through body deformation and breaking the continuity of space.

Film Still: Night is Short, Walk On Girl (2017) Masaaki Yuasa

Overall, I decided to use the watercolor art style from *My Neighbors the Yamadas* as the main inspiration for my thesis project, because its warm and soft colors and textures were really fitting for a daily-life theme sitcom and provide a relaxing visual feeling to viewers. I also made the layouts of the wide-shot background more simplified than both restaurants and their interior designs so that the audience could more easily focus on the main stage and characters. Though it also get a general idea of where those characters were. As for the surreal montages and emotional scenes, I applied the scene designs from both *The Yamadas* and *Walk On Girl* in half of my film, so I could construct some important moments like the conflict between the chef and the loan sharks, the horrible side of the fast-food restaurant, the memory of Ueda's father, and the reaction after the boss ate the noodles to become the series of symbolic montages and exaggerated performances. To do so, I manipulated the emotions of the scenes through mild to intense colors and sudden space change and body-transforming montages to highlight the absurdity in life and human reactions. Therefore, most of the backgrounds are covered with full colors without layout to emphasize a current character's psychological state and also to emphasize that they won't be restricted by laws of physics and space for the tension of the scenes.

The Character Designs

The pattern of my film's character designs was pretty much similar to that of the Yamadas family: three-headed tall figures who appear as big head and shorter body. This child body design not only can make clearer expressions and adorable actions but also can represent the personalities—such as good, honest, and innocent—of the main characters like the chef, his father, and loyal customer. On the other hand, the loan sharks in the story are represented as the opposite: horrific, violent, and serious.

Therefore, the shapes of their body designs were deformed and irregular instead of the regular tall, three-headed figure.

I wanted my positive characters, Ueda and his father, to be seen as honest and skillful experts from the old age who obey the traditional way of cookery, so I made both of their bodies with well-balanced three-headed body figures with cute, decent geometric heads. Both of them wear the same white chef outfit, which is based on the real one from the old Japanese restaurant. The white outfit is meant to represent their innocence and sincere attitude toward cookery. The difference between them was that the father's expression is full of determination, while Ueda's is young, inexperienced, and without confidence. I wanted my negative characters, the boss and his bodyguards, to appear as a typical villain trio: a short and unremarkable person who has power and cruelty hidden behind his poker face while being backed up by two of his loyal and malicious goons, a giant brute and a skinny hitman. Although the boss's face is ironically like the Buddha and the goons' heads are bald like monks, the black sunglasses they are wearing have already revealed their bad intentions. The total black business and hat of the boss is followed by the dress code from the real old-fashioned Yakuza crime boss, and the goons dressed with no uniform color and clothing are based on the local gangsters in Asia area like Japan or Taiwan.

Making the character designs was pretty fun and enjoyable, but it didn't go as smoothly as I planned. One of the character designs that bothered me the most was probably the mascot for the fast-food restaurant, Octo-chan. He would only show up in a few scenes for a few commercial shots, but he was an important element that would determine the appearance of the fast-food restaurant. Therefore, I had to do additional research about what advertising mascots in Japan looked like. Before

making the decision, I thought about what I wanted my fast-food restaurant to look like. I realized that I wanted to combine both fast-food culture and Japanese elements, so I decided to use traditional Japan summer festival elements as my modern restaurant's theme. For that, the reference from *The Yamadas* and the idea of having typical festival foods as the modern restaurant selling point helped me come up with the festival stall chef figure with a cute takoyaki (octopus balls) as his head. Another one was the subordinate thugs designed for the loan sharks' group. My advisor was worried about my plan of making both as a buffed body twin wearing a black coat similar to that of their boss. He told me that it felt like only one of them as the boss's bodyguard would be enough, but then it could seem as if there were a lack of manpower, reducing dramatic tension. So I kept the number of thugs as two, but I decided to make their designs and their outfits more similar to those of gang members in real life on the street, which lead me to research gangster outfits in Asia and some character designs from "Yakuza" (Mafia in Japan), a game series of group drama that portrayed life of Yakuza with extreme details.

Moreover, I tweaked the shape of them so they could present different kinds of ruthless features: the tall and skinny one is a skilled and cold-hearted person, while the huge and strong one with an inverted triangle body shape is the simple mind and violent muscles of the group. The father role I created in this film also underwent a brief change. In the original design, the father's head was hexagonal in shape, which was supposed to show his strict but gentle character. However, it turned out to be pretty awkward because his head was just too big and ugly. It seemed that six obvious angles were too much for an elder face and it was out of proportion to his body, so I fixed it into a smooth-angled rectangle, which matched his body size and provided the same personality I wanted. The last one is about the face design for my protagonist Ueda. Finding a balance between an ordinary look and a memorable impression for

the protagonist's face design was challenge, but I still managed to use a long, plump head and curved hairline with big, clear eyes and a pointy nose to create an ordinary young face with vitality and a decent appearance. I did this after going through four scripts in which the face shape was based on a hypotenuse quadrangle with round angles. After showing it to my advisor, Jonathan suggested that I change his tiny pointy nose into an oval shape because he felt the pointy nose made my protagonist too handsome and resourceful, and we both agreed that he should be a character whose face can reflect an incapacity and immaturity to run or protect his business, despite being a skillful chef with an honest heart.

The Plot Development

The main plot of my film was pretty much unchanged after it came out of my head. The only difference I made in my final script was adding some new screenshots and refining lots of details during the process. I was sure that my story wouldn't need any changes and I could just start my production right away since it was approved by my thesis advisor, Jonathan Seligson, and other committee members without any problem. Apparently, I was wrong. After I presented my first animatic with my original plot at the Animatic Day meeting, I was basically getting roasted by Brian Larson and felt embarrassed to even show up at the meeting. However, as an animator, I adjusted my mood immediately and accepted the flaws in my plot because the critics have got a point. My current plot doesn't have any issues, but it was lacking many important screenshots to support my story's continuity and logic.

During the thesis advisor meeting, I discussed with Jonathan the issues I had and told him about my proposed changes. As a result, I realized the problem that caused my plot to feel too rushed and like I skipped over too much was because I didn't

create the scenes to show how good the chef skill was at the beginning and that there was no explanation of why he still closed his restaurant even though got a good result from his debt collectors at the end.

Moreover, some of my screenshots were pretty dull and boring and were lots of opportunities for me to improve. To refine the details, I had to create some new characters for additional screenshots, add more background designs for surreal scenes, change some small details of my prop, and add a new ending cutscenes. This extra work did concern me during that time, for this would make me add more length of time to my film since the duration of my first animatic was already 5 minutes long, and keeping the duration within minimized length was always my weakness in my previous productions. Therefore, to be able to catch up on time for the upcoming committees meeting in the end of October and actually finalize my storyline and art style for my future production, I started creating and renewing the current storyline and screenshots, while I also discussed with Jonathan the scenes I should keep and those that should be replaced with more convincing scenarios, all while trying to keep the duration as short as I could.

Scene 1-20 The Sad Beginning

In the opening scene, I used the scene of Ueda paying homage to his dead father's shrine to show his identity as an inheritor of the family business. After that, I planned to show the protagonist's bad business situation at an early stage after he opened his shop. Originally, the scenes meant to represent that business was slow were just him staring at his rival restaurant with an unpleasant look while opening his store, then just sitting inside of his empty store counter with a bored look on his face while looking at the success of his neighbor, which my advisor pointed out was pretty boring and not fully illustrative of what was supposed to be happening. For that, I

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changed this opening into a longer version that contained everything I needed to describe my protagonist's situations. The scenes of the rival restaurant became longer. And instead of immediately showing the rival, I let the fast-food mascot show up at the beginning and made him cook food in a cartoonish way with a flashy background, which turned out to be a TV commercial hanging on the restaurant door and luring lots of customers in front of Ueda, making the chef's unpleasant look toward his rival make more sense because he thought the character's tactics were somehow ridiculous and it was mocking to his face.

To show that Ueda was a good cook, I also created a brand new character based on my lovely father image and his kind and naïve personality, an old customer, to act as a supporter to our poor chef by enjoying noodle soup in Ueda's restaurant. To be frank, this new character's rectangular face didn't actually have any resemblance to my real father but represented only his positive nature. The design of his outfits and body, however, were indeed borrowed from my father's clothing because whenever I saw my father wearing them, it always gave me a warm and fuzzy impression, which inspired the image of this customer character in the first place.

Before the customer left, there were some clips showing that the customer had heart issues, when he was about to leave the restaurant satisfied. I want to depict this because I was told to give the reason why the business was slow, even though Ueda had his own loyal customer base. At that time, I believed if I found a feature that could show the audience that Ueda's customers were too old and would not be around long in the future, I would solve the problem of how to show his business was gradually going downhill. Unfortunately, I had to take these clips down after the committee's meeting. Both of my committee advisors, Tom Gasek and Mari Jaye

Blanchard, thought that it did foretell why business was slow, but they didn't think it was because the customer was already had a health condition; instead, they both thought the customer's sickness was caused by the chef putting too much spicy flavor or even poison in the meal, which was the opposite effect of proving that the chef was indeed an excellent cook. I had no choice but to throw those screenshots away, and then added a few cuts where he stared at the cash he had just earned and moved on to looking at the popular rival restaurant with worried looks after the customer left, then sitting himself on the floor in the kitchen counter with a depressed look, trying to hide from pressure and seek comfort in a familiar environment where he was surrounded by his trustworthy kitchenware and secret ingredients.

Scene 25-30 Searching for Cash in Other Dimension

Originally, the method I used to show that Ueda had an income shortage was straightforward, making him search any corner he could find (such as cashier, wallet, even his pockets) for quick cash, so I could keep the film's duration short. But Jonathan thought these scenes had potential and suggested that I find a way to make these money-searching scenes funnier. The first thing I changed was to delete the cashier scene and replace it with the one where Ueda handed over all the cash he just earned to the mobsters. Unlike the previous scene, the new one was more convincing to prove that Ueda was indeed under a real threat, making the atmosphere more sad and desperate to build up the mood. The second change, however, was the major one that totally changed the entire tragic trend into something fantastic and brought out my wildest imagination in the process. Instead of just showing Ueda pulling out his empty pockets, I decided to make something surreal about it by making him crawl inside of a mystery empty space where he finds only a leaf on the ground. Then, in the next scene, it is revealed that the empty space is actually a subspace inside his pocket,

where the chef had to shrink his upper body to get in and come back empty-handed. By exaggerating the size of the pocket dimension, it brought out an element of surprise and humor to the audience that the chef was willing to break spatial continuity just so he could find something valuable, while also emphasizing his tragic situation.

To make the entire pocket dimension look like an unworldly space separated from reality, I made its background design and the chef's outlook heavily influenced by Picasso's famous painting, "Guernica" (1937), which provided an excellent sense of irregularity and distortion through its layout and block-like textures. Although my scene didn't fill with people and creatures like the original did, the structure was pretty similar. The only difference was that I replaced the important characters of the painting — the candle-holding woman and the dead soldier — with my flashlight-holding Ueda and a blowing leaf from their position. In this case, Ueda played a similar role as the candle holder, an observer, finding nothing but emptiness and a single leaf that represents as his penniless state, so fragile that it can easily be blown away. For the background design, I chose to fill the empty space with patch fabric pattern as a symbolic background to imply the chef's poverty. After several attempts with drawing drafts, I finally created a dark world full of patch cloth layers stacked together, indirectly showing that he was so poor that his clothing was in terrible condition. As for Ueda, since I needed him to blend into this new environment so his existence won't conflict with the new art style, I altered his facial features and face shape into Picasso's character type to make him look more suitable in this place.

Painting: Guernica (1937) Pablo Picasso

Scene 32-34 The Torture

The scenes where the boss is about to brand Ueda with hot iron contain many strong negative emotions which require intense performances. Since I do not wish to turn my thesis into an R-rated film, I exaggerated their facial expressions with humor and made Ueda's face squeezing like a rubble ball to reduce viewers' tension, while I filled the background with extreme dark color images like red and black to transmit the emotions of fear and violence, saving me from having to spill blood in this dangerous scene. There was originally a scene where the mobsters beat the chef up before he was held and getting branded, but eventually I removed it since the colors and the poses from the hot iron scene had already shown enough hostility from the loan sharks, which also saved me some length of time.

Scene 38-40 The Terrible Fast Food Restaurant

To make the mob boss feel repulsive toward the fast-food restaurant and create an opportunity for him to try Ueda's skillfully prepared noodles, I decided to make a series of scenes with personification building and crazy gobbling performance to highlight the disgusting and terrible side of the fast-food restaurant and its customers.

For the scene outside of the restaurant, I wanted to make the image of this restaurant as a greedy beast that cares nothing about decency and hygiene and only about squeezing more money out of its customers. To do so, I planned to personify this restaurant and make it look like it was constantly chewing a mouth full of people. In the early design, the restaurant outlook was basically like a usual American rental square building with only two square windows and a main entrance representing its face features, but I didn't like it since it looked too normal and did not have any impressive features. Therefore, after I finalized the design of the restaurant's mascot, Octo-chan, I immediately renewed the restaurant design with more corner details and put a giant shop sign with an oversized Octo-chan's face on top of the building. With the face of Octo-chan, I could finally make the chewing performance with more vivid facial details by making its expression more vicious and ferocious while acting.

Inside of the restaurant, I wanted to create an extremely disgusting environment where food is spilling everywhere to strengthen the gang boss's contempt for this atmosphere. Therefore, I designed a background where I placed nasty goo on every corner and tables full of stacked dirty plates and bowls in the entire area. As for the performance of this scene, I chose to make everyone gobbling food with a rude attitude to correspond to the background. I referenced the body movements of beer drinking and hot pot eating scenes from the film *Night is Short* in my feast clip, making the characters' bodies be able to squeeze themselves like a water balloon while swallowing their food just like the reference film did to bodies in it. To make my work from drawing details and emphasizing their balloon-like bodies easier, I made the design of all customers uniformly bold and chubby with simple clothes. For more details of the performance, I originally made every customer suck on pipes extending from the ceiling, believing that this disgusting way of eating would provide

an interesting dystopian atmosphere to represent the modernization of the fast-food industry, while also showing the restaurant services to their customers with a perfunctory attitude. Once again, I had to throw this idea away after I shared the rough keyframes video with my committees because both my committees thought that this feature did not fit into my world setting. I also felt that the performance was too monotonous and mechanized, which I didn't really like. Eventually, I threw the old keyframes away and made a new scene. This time, I decided to make it in a traditional style, making the customers gobbling down the food through drinking and chewing normally but at a fast pace.

For the final summary for these scenes, I had planned to make a scene where the restaurant was pooping the customers out through its back door to show its heartless attitude toward customers after chewing up their cash, which also points out the difference between Ueda's business policy of taking care of his customers with love and kindness and the modern catering industry, which is deeply influenced by capitalism and only cares for the contents of peoples' wallets. The scene was funny, at first, but during the development I started to feel this one was too immature and disgusting. So in the end, I replaced it with a close-up shot of a man heavily burping after finishing his meal, which was meant to show that the customers in the fast-food restaurant have terrible table manners, which makes people resist going to this restaurant without too many disturbing elements to discomfort my audience.

Scene 47-60 Memory of the Father

The scenes of Ueda's memory about his father cooking in the kitchen represented a very important milestone of story progress for Ueda the chef in this film. Because those scenes are not only about Ueda cherishing the memory of his father and his

experienced cooking skills but also because they represent Ueda in current times, as if he became his deceased father at that very moment, perfectly presenting his father's craftsmanship to the loan sharks with his own hand.

To show the whole scenes that took place in the memory of the past, I made the backgrounds color with single gray, which was meant to represent a vague impression to the past. On the other hand, I kept the objects' texture such as food ingredients, specific kitchenware, and the father himself with their normal colors to not only represent their importance in Ueda's mind but also hint that those tools were currently used by him in the present day. Also, in order to show that Ueda transforms himself into his father when entering the memory scene, I first made Ueda's eyes glance at a photo on the table that preserves the happy moment with his father, which acts as a trigger for him to recall and enter the memory. Then, I made two close-up scenes where Ueda closes his eyes, then before he opens them, has his facial features and skin color transformed into those of his father's. I used a similar technique at the end of these scenes, in which the bowl of noodles' colors stays the same while the grayish memory world slowly fades out into a colorful room of a noodle bar with modern décor in the present day. This scene represented how Ueda inherited his father's spirit and cooking skills, proving that he is indeed a real chef who holds up his family name.

The cooking clips were a challenge and took me some time to observe how they worked since I had no idea how to draw the scenes that involved liquid and boiling movement. At first, I made only a few overlooked shots in my animatic, which only involved preparing ingredients like chopping vegetables or rolling dough, making them interact with water as little as possible. However, during the development I

immediately realized that this wouldn't work at all, since noodle cooking was destined to involve boiling water. Therefore, I made a few scenes involving water like tossing ingredients into broth, stirring the soup, filtering the noodle with a strainer spoon, and pouring soup into a noodle bowl to enhance the moments of noodle cooking. To learn how the water dripping from shaking the strainer spoon and the bubbles created by tossing objects into water looked, I actually cooked noodles myself for observation (which it didn't bother me at all since I basically cook at home all the time now with the pandemic) and incorporated what I saw into my animation.

Before I moved on to the scene that revealed Ueda's significant dish, I struggled to select which signature food in Japan I should present. In this film, Ueda's dish represented an extremely delicious food with a humble appearance that can easily be found in any common restaurant. Eventually, I decided to choose Udon noodles as the key dish in this film. The reason I chose this specific food other than iconic Japanese ramen or curry with rice was simple. Historically, it is said that this type of noodles once saved the residents who suffered from famine in Sanuki, Japan. As for the food itself, the Udon noodles are thicker than other types, which can easily to fill people's stomachs and are pretty common. In other words, the Udon soup was an excellent choice to represent as pure and holy in my opinion. I chose this specialty as one that could truly capture the mob boss's appetite in this film.

As for the noodles revealing and serving scene in the end of these clips, I knew I needed to draw my Udon soup image with convincing details that would arouse the appetite of the audience or otherwise it would lose all the meaning of being a gourmet animation. For that, I searched for some noodle soup pictures with heavy details from the internet and also viewed the rice noodle scenes from an anime called *Flavors of*

Youth (2018) to get an idea about how to show the elasticity of noodles and the clarity of the soup through drawings. With the help of these references, I managed to use watercolor brushes in PhotoShop to paint a realistic Udon soup.

Scene 64-67 The Taste from Heaven

Making surreal scenes about the boss's reaction was both a fun and distressing experience, since I had to modify them several times. These scenes were inspired from an inexplicably funny short 2D animation Café (カフェ in Japanese, 2018), made by a YouTube channel called Karameru (からめる in Japanese), which talks about an ordinary story of a strange white cat making an omurice for guests, except it always ends up sending the food and itself to the moon and outer space for no reason every time they are about to finish. Such an extreme performance was so random and hilarious that I decided to use it as my boss character's reaction toward Ueda's Udon soup, yet I also need to find a way to keep his reaction original without it being regarded as plagiarism.

My plan for the reaction performance was to make the boss look like he has just got a taste from heaven, indeed that it is so extreme that it affects even his body shape. So in my early animatic, I made the boss crash through the ceiling and fly toward the moon until both he and the moon exploded. Then I wanted to show that it was all just the boss's imagination that was reflected from his sunglasses in the end. For the flying performance, instead of making the boss's entire body fly out of the building, I made him stretch his neck to an incredible length, representing that the noodles were so good that they turned his head and neck into a noodle. However, the problem here was that the impression of the reference video was too strong for me and that it too heavily influenced my performance. Jonathan told me that he thinks these scenes were still

too similar to the reference and advised me to change it. Therefore, the alternative option came up to my mind: instead of flying to the moon, I would make the boss ascend from his own body straight to literal paradise, where there were angels that looked like Ueda and his father flying around while a goddess from Japanese mythology blessed the newcomer with open arms, ending it with a close-up where the boss exhibits unrestrained laughing.

Jonathan and the committees all accepted these new scenes. During the production, however, I was starting to feel dissatisfied with these modified scenes, feeling that they were lacking the inexplicable humor I wanted to borrow from the reference. After all, the scene where the boss's head flies toward the moon was too perfect for the film's humor. Eventually, I decided to bring the flying noodle head idea back into the film. Only this time, instead of blowing up the moon, I let the noodle head strike into the moon, only to then let the moon turn around and show that it had the face of the boss, and then it started eating the boss's head like noodles and smile with satisfaction, representing as the boss's reply to Ueda's wonderful dish in reality.

Scene 72-76 The Tragic Reality

The final ending scenes have the most important mission of all: to bring up the tragic yet logical ending as the final conclusion to conflict with the previous comedy tune without contradiction, showing the important theme of the film—inevitable helplessness in life—to the audience. In the early script, the ending showed that Ueda eventually had to close his store and begin his job hunting for financial difficulties even though the boss had forgiven his debt for having a wonderful meal experience from the chef. The problem with the ending was that there is a gap between the forgiven debt scene and the closing shop scene, which made the ending feel rushed

and didn't explain what caused Ueda to give up his career suddenly after he had just solved his debt problem. Jonathan and I did talk about the issues, bringing up a couple of solutions like adding some scenes to show he still had lots of debt from others or simply showing him the truth that no one will come even with the debt problem is solved. None of them worked for me, but I did find the real problem during the discussion: I made the boss treat the debt problem too kindly. Even though the noodles did really move the boss's heart, the problem involving money couldn't be offset that casually. Instead of forgiving his debt, pardoning Ueda from getting beat up and being sold has already shown him the greatest mercy. With this new setting, I got a brand-new lead to advance the plot: the mob boss was moved by Ueda's dish, so he decides to lower his debt and allow him sell the restaurant to them to pay off the debt. After losing his shop, Ueda has no choice but to work for the rival restaurant recommended by the mob boss.

To enhance the feeling of helplessness, I wanted these final scenes to focus on realistic tragic moments like losing the restaurant and Ueda's depressed state in an unfamiliar working environment. The color palette and scene layouts were still to provide the sad atmosphere I needed. For the restaurant selling scenes, I arranged some construction facilities in front of the restaurant and made the time setting around the twilight hour, which covered the entire scene with an orange color palette and dark shadows, representing how Ueda's family business has come to an end. As for the final scenes where Ueda is working for his rival, I wanted to emphasize that this working environment focuses only on the rapid mass production of meals like a soulless factory, so I researched some central kitchen pictures to learn about industrialized kitchen equipment designs and to imitate their details in my scene props. Despite the whole place being modernized, it needed to be shown as a nasty place that

was not an ideal working environment for a real chef like Ueda, causing him to fall into depression and slowly become one of the soulless workers without any passion and autonomy like he used to have. For that, I not only made the final scene filled with rust on the kitchen table and dirty water everywhere but also made the texture of the food ingredients on the table colored in brown and tan to show the terrible quality of food this restaurant provided, illustrating that this fast-food restaurant was really the worst place for Ueda.

The Additional Suggestion from Professors Afterward

Although I pretty much changed and added most of the important clips I needed to my film, I still got some advice to improve from Tom and Mari. Mostly, they were worried that I had too many details that felt unnecessary and extended the animation longer than the original, like the leaf in the pocket or the star expression on the face of the subdued chef. I understood their worries because I felt the same way they did about the length of my film. However, nothing in my additional details was unnecessary or came up without thorough deliberation; they all served a purpose like bringing up the mood or keeping the humor intact, and I was comfortable with them extending the duration of the film. Moreover, with those extra details, they actually helped me enrich the performance and visual experience of my thesis animation. Sometimes, rather than compromising, I needed to stick to my own opinions to preserve the ideal and humor of my film and my own art style of animation production. I did listen, however, to some advice from my advisor and committees for improvement. For example: I had to delete the scenes about the old customer's heart attack since the idea was imperfect. Also, I added a wide shot containing both Ueda's noodle bar and the fast-food restaurant where the chef looks out his door to see his rival across the way. That way, the audience wouldn't confuse the location between

Ueda and the fast-food restaurant. Finally, Jonathan wanted me to put some effort into my commercial clips. Originally, the commercial clips' screen size shared the same 1920×1080 pixel size as the rest of the scenes, which looked not different from other clips and lacked special effects that are only available on a TV screen. For that, Jonathan suggested that I modify them into TV screenshots at the last moment. Therefore, I put it back to Premiere and added some special effects like color emboss, channel mixer, and lens distortion into the fast-food commercial, turning it into a retro-style commercial so the audience could feel like they were watching it on an old television.

The Soundtracks

My film doesn't contain any dialogue, but it still required soundtracks and sound effects. However, I have neither the knowledge of audio software nor am I skilled enough to play an instrument. Therefore, I joined Artist Call Meeting at RIT to search for a suitable partner who could capture emotions through music. Eventually, I had the honor of working with a composer from the same school, Emily Pace, who is capable of composing delicate soundtracks that can provide gentle and touching moods. My new partner was full of passion and confidence, which not only made things easy for us to set our meeting schedule and deadline, but she also was willing to listen to what I had in mind for the soundtrack and shared her own ideas as well.

I wanted my soundtrack to be simple. The soundtrack would rely heavily on traditional musical instruments like the flute, drums, and gong. For the beginning and end of the film, I wanted the mix to evoke a sense of tragedy and depression. I wanted the commercial song to be catchy, with a childish tune. For the loan shark's debut, I wanted a theme with a compact, heavy rhythm that emphasized that they were not to

be trifled with. For the reveal of the disgusting truth behind the rival restaurant, I wanted a mix that evoked a sense of horror. For the memory scenes, I wanted a soft, psychedelic mix that would later become an EDM track. While I had originally wanted an energetic J-pop style music mix for the boss's reaction, due to a lack of time, it was replaced by a cartoonish projectile and yelling sound effect.

Of course, allowing my partner to take total control of the soundtrack doesn't mean I myself don't need to be responsible in this field. To assist my partner in composing, I also had researched some references that could help Emily understand more about the concept and style of my soundtracks. Since my film is all about the Japanese nostalgic style, I chose music from one of my favorite films full of enthusiasm for Japanese elements, *Isle of Dogs* (2018) directed by Wes Anderson, a Nissin commercial song named *Nissin Epic Commercial* (2018). Other than that, I picked some music that could drive the emotions for the surreal and emotional scenes, such as: a classic horror theme song from *Jaws* (1975) by Steven Spielberg and the famous gentle music *Moonlight Sonata* (1801) composed by Ludwig van Beethoven for memory scenes.

Process

I chose to make a 2D hand-drawn, animated short tragicomedy as my final thesis project, which is completely related to my major of study at RIT. However, it wasn't easy, as I needed to follow through with a series of standard processes. I needed to write a paper for setting my theme and purpose, get approval from a faculty thesis advisor and the committees in one semester before the final year began, and then spend the remaining two semesters in pre-production and formal production of my film. During the production, I also needed to meet with my advisor one-on-one every week and my partner composer every two weeks to report on my progress, check on each other's progress, and receive advice on how to make improvements from them.

In my first stage, I needed to make a thesis proposal that could whittle down my core idea of my story, the resources I needed to make the film, and the schedule that could help me track my progress. The proposal included a log line, a treatment, a rationale, a vision, a list of budget, and a schedule.

After the script had been written along with my proposal, it was time to make the storyboard to decide what the postures of performance and camera angles needed to look like. For the tools to draw a storyboard, using PhotoShop was enough. The contents in my storyboard were pretty simple; they only included the sketches of character postures, important buildings, and props where the backgrounds were left in blank. The reason why I did this was to save more time for further pre-production, because I believe the purpose of storyboarding is to determine the presentation of the performance rather than the artistic style, and everything on the papers isn't final. After all, designing the actual characters and background require more time than

drawing storyboard. Because of that, I was able to present the scenes of actions, movements, and camera angles in their entirety with clean and clear drawings.

With the basic images from the storyboard, making the animatic was the next thing I needed to do since I would need to examine the timing and length of the timeline. To do so, I used PhotoShop to cut out the images from the storyboard and made them gliding, moving around, and doing loop actions through repeat posing images in Premiere, editing them into a series of clips one by one. After that, I brought the animatic to showcase at the Animatic Day meeting at SOFA and a private animatic review meeting hosted by my fellow classmates. Due to the fact we were in the COVID-19 pandemic, we used Zoom to hold an online meeting instead of meeting face-to-face during quarantine, so I had to upload my video to the host a few days ahead and adapt to this brand new meeting method. Thanks to this meeting, I was able to learn from both professors and classmates what plot holes in my story needed filling, which timing should be cut or lengthened, and most importantly, which performances were dull and boring that needed to add more actions or background to make the scenes more convincing.

To make my character design fit into the Japanese children's book art style, I ensured that all of their outlines were drawn by pencil brush, showing the rough and uneven lines on them, so that they would look like the characters came from out of a book. Later, I used the same brush to draw the building outlines and background layouts to increase the sense of a children's book world setting.

For color, since my film was heavily influenced by Japanese culture and design, I chose Nippon colors (or at least similar to them) as my main type of colors for my

background and character coloring. This traditional color type that was used in kimono and Japanese traditional crafts provided a more soothing visual experience than normal colors and was able to hint at the atmosphere of Japanese aesthetics. Also, in order to make the scenes' textures look like a book page from a children's book, I used a watercolor brush, which provides a texture of irregular particles that could only be spotted on paper.

Moreover, the color itself played an important role for specific scenes' design: the scene for mood. Unlike the usual background with props and buildings, I used the colors to fill up the entire scene without layout as atmosphere to highlight characters' emotions, because using individual colors to match character emotional poses and expressions can make the mood of the current scene stronger. In order to distinguish the different emotions between colors, I usually use lively, bright, and soft colors to show a character's relaxing mood or ease the tension, and use dark, intense, and monochrome colors to show negative emotions or an oppressive environment. The memory scenes are a bit special; I used a completely gray color for the background to show them as the colors from the past that have faded with the torrent of time, yet at the same time I kept normal colors on some specific items and the father's character to show that they were important memories to our protagonist. Also, in order to give audience the idea that the filled-up colors are atmosphere of moods that permeate the entire space instead of a simple colorful flat wall, I put a white faded bubble behind every characters in emotional scenes to separate between characters and color backgrounds, making the color in the scene appears as if it were a colorful gas filling the room.

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After finishing up the preproduction, it was time to move on to animating. For

animating, I used TVPaint, PhotoShop, Premiere, and After Effects to draw, edit, and complete my thesis film. I used TVPaint as the main software to do the most important work: animating and coloring characters. For each clip, I made sure each of them were separate from others, turning a single one of them into an independent TVPaint file so I could adjust their drawings and poses one by one with organized classification. For the designs of backgrounds and props in the film, I used PhotoShop to design and color every detail on them. I also used it for lighting, animating nonliving objects, irregular movements, and the exaggerated reaction of the mob boss toward food. After putting background PNG files into the clip files where they belonged and finishing coloring the characters, I outputted those clips from TVPaint, assembled them in Premiere, and began editing them, making sure which timing needed to be shorter or a little longer. I only used the After Effects once, but not for creating any specific effects. I used it so I could make a scene where the boss's head was stretched toward the sky while spinning itself, because it was difficult to make such a movement in other software.

I was pretty nervous about using TVPaint to draw animations at first. Originally, I was a 3D animator when I first joined RIT, so although I already possessed the knowledge about principles of animation and video editing software skills, my lack of knowledge about the functions of the 2D animation software TVPaint was enough for me to shy away from using it during that time. However, such fear toward unknown software didn't stop my production progress. After all, I can always use YouTube to search for online instructional videos and learn more about TVPaint. Thanks to that, I not only learned that it allows PNG images to be input (a technique I used to add backgrounds in my scenes) and that it can automatically fill the color in a specific range of layout with a single stroke, but it also granted me confidence to address

TVPaint as one of my skill sets.

While animating, I found myself in a situation where I needed to combine PhotoShop and TVPaint for animating non-character objects because of their details and curved textures. Despite TVPaint being my primary software for animating, I'm still not comfortable and confident enough to add details on non-character objects frame by frame with it without spending overtime. On the other hand, PhotoShop doesn't have the best playback bars like TVPaint has, but its drawing tools and unique functions were able to help me concentrate on adding and copying repeated details on animated objects; for example, in the close-up money scene, the dollar will change its curved outline along with the chef's movement, but since I made the money pretty close to the camera, I needed to make lots of drawing details on it in every frame, and using TVPaint would take up too much time since the copy-and-paste and rotation feature in this software was hard to use. I had no choice but to output the money layout frames from it and put them into PhotoShop, where I could copy and paste their details in every frame without trouble. The building animations went the same way. I wanted them to squash and stretch themselves when the fast-food restaurant chewing the customers and the boss's head broke through the roof of Ueda's shop, but the fast-food restaurant had lots of color patterns and Ueda's shop's roof-top had some curved lines resembling as roof tiles, so I did the same thing as the money scene: output those frames and put them in PhotoShop, then spending some time coloring details and copy and pasting those patterns into every frame. For shadows, I could just draw them on TVPaint, but since I wanted to have watercolor texture on them, I used the same method—only this time it was simpler because I just needed to crop the shadow out of black watercolor matters according to the planned outline.

For background designs, I was having a hard time with the pocket dimension scene; initially, since I wanted the background covered with a patch fabric pattern, I planned to make them irregular to present a chaotic environment. However, I had no clue about how the irregular patch fabrics looked, and I was unable to find any reference to it, so the first design looked like an ugly doodle with giant geometric figures and large patch lines scattered around. Eventually, I gave up the irregular pattern and researched the painting *Guernica* for more ideas. Eventually, I found out that the pattern of this painting looks just like stacked blocks, which provided a regular but complex composition. Moreover, I found another reference, a cloth full of patch fabrics in square and rectangle shapes, stacking together. Therefore, I redesigned the scene with this new found pattern, and it became a world mixed with excellent abstract art and poverty.

For the composing part, there was basically no major issue with sound during the cooperation. However, my partner Emily Pace and I became nervous and frustrated near the end of the production because a technical problem with the sound started to come up. After I had finished the film, I sent my video to my composer because she had promised to help me place the soundtrack and sound effects in my film. However, for some reason, every time she sent me the audio files, they always had the problem of sound shifting with their sound effects, which didn't sync up with their action. I kept telling her the problem with her audio files, yet the issue kept getting worse every time she sent the files back. Eventually, the composer started to lose her patience too and started a small argument with me. I was mad and scared at that moment, never thinking I would see the day where I would stand on the edge of losing a partnership that had worked so well before. Luckily, after sending some emails to reason with her, she agreed to check again and found out that it was caused

by an incorrect setting (she didn't say much, but I guess it was about a forgotten Toggle Track Lock) in her audio software. The issue was fixed after the new discovery, but during that time, cooling down the conflict between partners and waiting for a workable audio file while the upload deadline slowly approached did stress me out a lot.

The problem of the audio file didn't stop there. When I tried to submit my finished film with an audio file from home, I got rejected from SOFATube's video upload system. Turns out they detected that the volume of the audio broke the peak, causing them to be unable to approve my film submission. Unfortunately, my Audition software was an old CS6 version that doesn't have a proper Match Loudness function to correct my loudness and true peak level. To fix the volume, the only option I had was to go to the RIT animator lab and use their newest CC version of Adobe program. I was wary about going outside during a pandemic, but I had no other choice.

Another technical issue that had to be fixed in school was adding captions in my film; on final screening day, so some audience who were deaf or hearing challenged would follow, it was necessary to add captions in our films to explain the soundtracks, music types, and sound effects. Once again, Premiere, part of my Adobe suite, was the old version that lacks the newest caption function. I went to seek Jonathan's advice, and he told me I had three options to solve this problem: (1) use Premiere on one of the school's computers, (2) create captions using the Titles or Text options in Premiere CS6, or (3) create captions in a different program or with an online caption website. At first, I tried option 2, but after making a few subtitles, I started to feel this would take too long because I needed to adjust the text size and locate their positions

manually, and the deadline was near. Once again, I went to the RIT campus and used their computers. Before I went there, I also made a list of soundtrack and sound effects names chronologically so I could start writing captions right away without missing any details and wouldn't need to stay at school for too long.

In the end, the outcome of the audio was excellent. And after I made my final examination to make sure there was nothing missing in my film and the soundtracks and sound effects stayed where they should be, I decided it was time to mark it as finished.

Evaluation

I am a person who follows time planning seriously. Therefore, I made sure that I learned enough knowledge of my equipment and software ahead of time so that I wouldn't have any mistakes appear in the script writing and animating processes and that I would prevent any technical problems from happening in my software that could hinder my progress. Because of that, I was able to follow my schedule without hindrance and didn't have major issues with animating or the plot except getting some helpful advice about improving small details from my thesis advisor, Jonathan Seligson.

However, I tend to focus on my work too much, which caused me to forget about the existence of my composer sometime. Because of that, I almost forgot to give her a time-lock video in early production that could help her measure the length of the timeline her music needs, and I missed some of her progress reports for a few days, which caused me to postpone her deadline further and almost lose the opportunity to correct her sound effect errors. In the future, I might need to pay more attention to my cooperation.

Moreover, I also found out that all of my Adobe software was outdated. After the production, I will likely need to update all of my software.

On the final screening day, we were all meeting together on Zoom. Although I gave my presentation in my personal place, I'm still nervous about my artist statement and the reviews of my film. I'm not really good at speaking in English, so I wrote a script of my artist statement, and kept exercising my speaking skills three hours early

before it was my turn.

After my film was screened, it was time for me to state my idea of my thesis project. To make sure I knew what to say, I put my script on the side of my screen as a reminder. During the statement, I shared my own ideology about making animation, comedy, and storytelling, telling everyone that this thesis project was more than just a way to earn credits, but a milestone for my self-growth as a mature animator. Of course, I was too nervous, which caused me to stutter during the speech, and for a moment I forgot what my next sentence was. I don't really know about the reaction from the audience since we were on Zoom, but I do know about one thing; even though I might have performed badly, it was my responsibility to give my film a final summary and let others know about my journey as an animator.

When it came to the question-and-answer portion, all of the feedback I got was positive. One of my committee members, Mari Jaye Blanchard, enjoyed my film and was glad I nailed the extra shots I added into the film and that she got to see the boss's insane reaction. Another animation professor, Peter Murphey, complimented me that I was able to create a complete story that was clear and well told while having my own unique humor intact. However, he also had a little complaint about some of my shots running a little long, and wanted me to cut those shots to shorten their time. In the comments section, lots of people said they liked my film and that they all wanted a bowl of noodles after watching it. One of the professors, Vanessa Sweet, even felt shock and sadness by the tragic ending in this comedy. To me, their feedback were all good signs, because that meant not only that I succeeded in manipulating emotions in my film and improving my storytelling ability but also that I managed to capture the essence of gourmet animation.

Conclusion

This project gave me a very fulfilling year and meant a lot to me. In the past as an animator, I always felt there was something lacking in my works, something that was more than just making funny postures and adding lots of humor in the story, and those things were sincerity and maturity. Without them, no matter how much humor I create in my films and how many people I make laugh, my works never felt complete, since they lacked refinement and meaningful purpose. Thanks to this thesis project, I was given an opportunity and enough time to not only practice all the skills I learned in RIT but also ignite my inner desire of expressing my true passion and the observation of life into my film. For the first time, I put lots of effort and love that I ever had before on film's design details and story to make this my best film. Because of that, my final was livelier and more emotional than my early animatic which was lifeless and boring before, and the background designs were richer, more detailed, and more stylish than my previous works. And most of all, I was able to move audience hearts with sincere emotion through my emotional plotline just like I always wanted in my original plan.

It's a shame that my fellow classmates and I couldn't present our films on the big screen in Wegmans Theater, but due to the pandemic lockdown everything was online instead. However, that didn't stop me from receiving lots of positive feedback from the comments section on Zoom. I was glad and honored that even the professors were actually moved by the emotional moment I made. Despite there being some details of background and timing that can be improved, the final result was enough for me to truly be proud and satisfied with my work for the first time. At that moment, I knew that I had grown up and that my skills and mentality as an animator had improved

more than before, which has given me enough confidence to develop my own art style

and perfect my storytelling in the future.

The Lost Taste

消失的味道

Wei-En Chen
2D Animation

Thesis Proposal
MFA in Film and Animation
Rochester Institute of Technology
April 27, 2020

Approved for Submission by

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Jonathan Seligson, Thesis Chair

Log line

A noodle chef tries to save himself from debt collectors with his family's noodles soup during an era of change.

Treatment

One morning before dawn when the incense sticks remain smoking in front of a spirit tablet with a picture of a serious looking old chef a young chef remains silent in front of the tablet, then sighs. After that, he stands up and goes to the restaurant gate, where he turns over the closing sign to "open" on the door. Beside the door, there is a board with the words "Last day of business, half price today" written on it. The scene focuses on the entire restaurant building, then the title of the animation show up and covers the entire building.

Some time passes, and the clock on the wall shows 12:30, but there are still no guests in the restaurant. The chef leans against the dining window with boredom in his eyes. The only thing he can do now is read the restaurant's sales ads that he hasn't sent out. Then, he turns his eyes to the new restaurant across the street. The moment the restaurant opens its door, it immediately attracts a crowd of people with cash to rush in. The scene is very unpleasant for the chef to witness, but after glancing at the empty cash register, the only thing he could do is to sigh. Suddenly, the restaurant door pushes open. Just as the chef readies himself to greet new customers with a smile on his face, the new patrons are revealed to be three debt collectors dressed in black.

The boss stands between his two flunkies and holds up the debt slip and points to the chef while smoking his cigar; asking him to bring them the money with just a look. However, all the chef can do is pull out his empty cash register and turn his empty

pockets inside-out. The chef tries to excuse it all by raising his hands and pulling a cute face. Unfortunately, the men immediately pin the chef down on the table, while the boss cracks his knuckles, ready to pulverize the chef. Just as the boss is about to bring down his fists, his stomach growls loudly. Realizing that he cannot work without having a meal first, the boss looks towards the new restaurant that seemed more attractive. However, after seeing the restaurant's entrance was already filling up with lots of people with the guests in the store all eating in extremely rude ways it turns the boss's stomach. Without any restaurant nearby, the boss nods towards his men to release the chef. He immediately sits down and orders the chef to prepare a meal for him.

Under the supervision of two men, the chef looks at the boss sitting in the dining area carefully. He is so nervous that his hands are shaking as he cuts the vegetables into a mess. The chef closes his eyes and worriedly thinks about which dish he should prepare. He sees his father's picture on the dining area window. At that moment, he closes his eyes again and calms himself. When he opens his eyes again, he sees the figure of his father. The chef's father gently pats his young son's head. The chef then begins to make his specialty. He kneads the dough, boils a hot spring egg, removes the cooked noodles from the pot, places the soup and eggs on the noodles, and finally sprinkles with some green onions as the end.

Although the appearance is not attractive, the hot Tsukimi Udon (Udon noodles soup with egg) still manages entice the boss. Then, after the boss tastes the noodles, something unexpected happens. The boss's neck suddenly stretches up, shooting his head up through the ceiling like a missile. It shoots all the way up to the surface of the moon, blowing it up! This vision slowly fades from the boss's sunglasses, and he is

expressionless and silent. When the boss slowly stands up, he takes out the debt slip

again, only this time he tears it up in front of the chef. After that, the boss opens his

coat, a lot of money shoots out from the coat like a machine gun, burying the chef.

After the debt collectors leave, the chef pops his head out from the pile of money. He

is happy at first, but then the emptiness of the restaurant makes him lose his smile

again.

Sometime later, the chef's restaurant sign is taken down from the building. The

fate of closing the restaurant was inevitable. The chef, wearing a suit, looks at the

interior of the restaurant for a final moment. Then, he picks up his luggage, walks

toward the city, passing by the bustling new restaurant and vanishings into the night.

Rationale

The story of this animation is about the decline of the traditional restaurant in the era of sophisticated fast food culture. The content of this animation will still contain exaggerated hilarious performances, but I hope that the final work will present a story with maturity and pathos.

In addition to the impact of the transformation of food culture, this story is also to commemorate an old restaurant I loved in the past. In my memory, the restaurant was a very friendly place, and the relationship between the restaurant owner and the customer was as close as that of old acquaintances. Not only in the recommending of delicious secret dishes not on the regular menu; the restaurant also provided entertainment such as comics and televisions to relax customers and reduce stress. However, with the rise of fast food culture and food photography activities, those old-fashioned restaurants are disappearing, and are being replaced by modern restaurants that focus on immaculate decorations and aim to sell vast quantities of food with quick turnover. The food in this type of restaurant may be delicious, but the environment and the staff seem to lack a sense of personal touch: the flow of customers in and out is very fast, which makes me feel pressured and rushed. It makes me just want to finish the meal and leave immediately without really getting to enjoy my food.

The dining experience in the modern restaurant makes me miss the past, and I hope to share this strong feeling with others with my film. In addition, I also want to use this animation to depict the transition period of changing food culture, highlight the sense of helplessness from the traditional restaurants, and hope that people will think about whether their eating habits are affected by it.

Vision

This animation will be a 2D animation for audiences of all ages. It will use software such as Photoshop, After Effects, and TV Paint, and will add multi-media elements if necessary. I want for my film to depict warm colors and simple character design; as well as traditional Japanese architecture, cooking process, and Japanese situation comedy stylings for the whole animation. Therefore, I will refer to some cooking works and Japanese TV dramas (Such as the Japanese comic "Midnight Diner" and the Japanese animation "ATASHIn'CHI"). In the clips of cooking, they will be slightly simpler, but I will also pay attention to details and let the audience feel satisfied while they watching the final film. Overall, I hope that the plot and the visuals can show a sense of maturity that is different from my past films, to show that I have continued to grow as an artist.

Budget

Items	Estimated Cost
Production	
Computer	In kind
Graphics tablet	In kind
TV Paint software	$600
Adobe CS6	In kind
Post Production	
Music	$400
Composer	$1,500
Sound Mix	$400
Festival Fee	$40
Total	$2,940

Date

Date	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Thumbnails & Storyboarding	orange	orange							
Character Design	green	green	green						
Environment Design	orange	orange	orange						
Studio Set Up			green	green					
Working with composer					orange	orange	orange	orange	
Shooting					green	green	green	green	
Editing and sounding								orange	orange
Credits									green

Storyboards
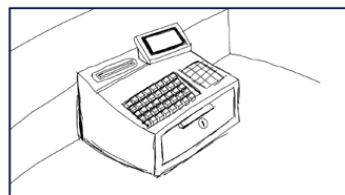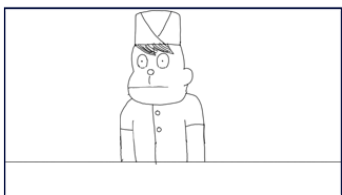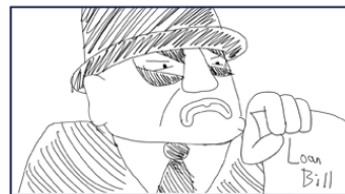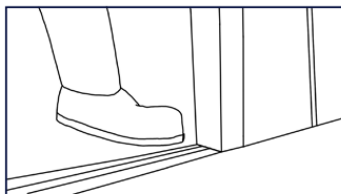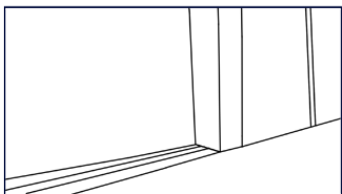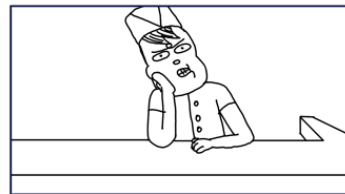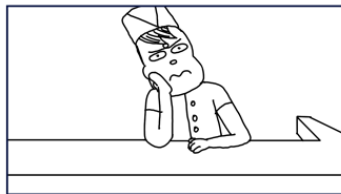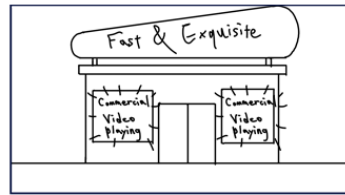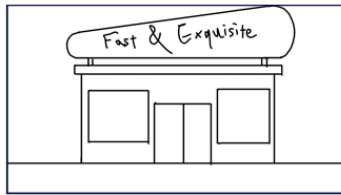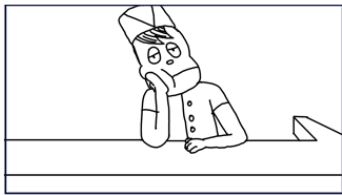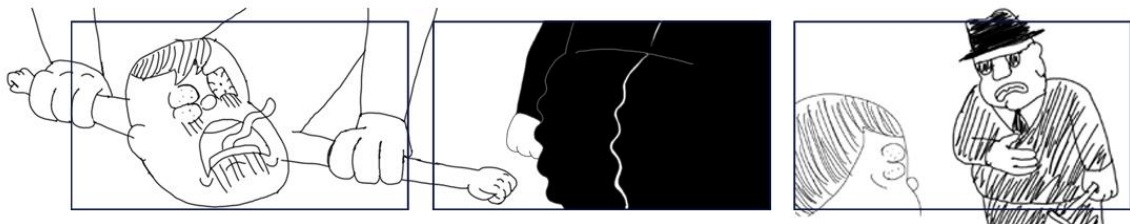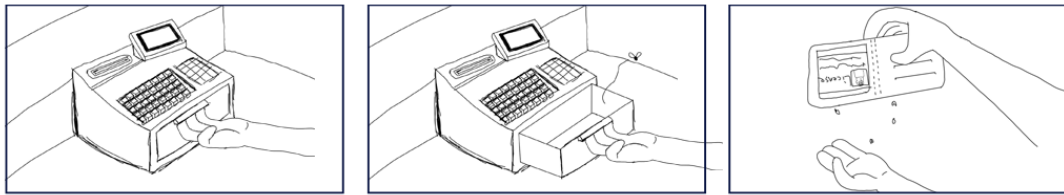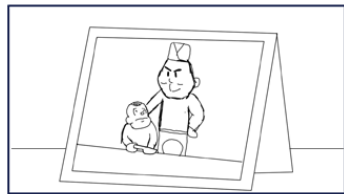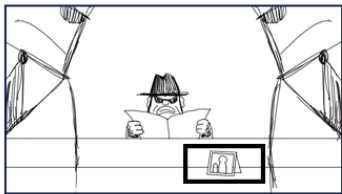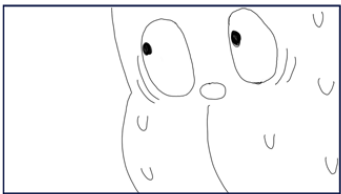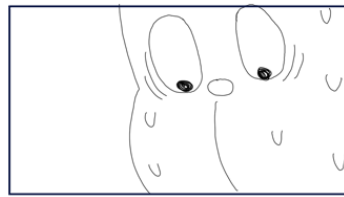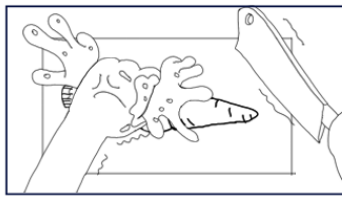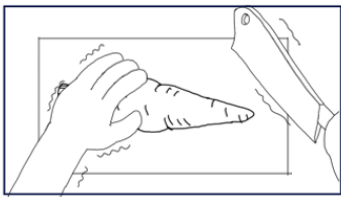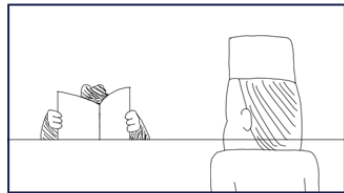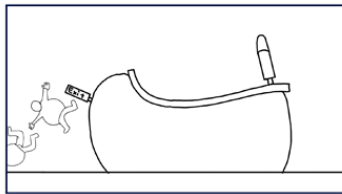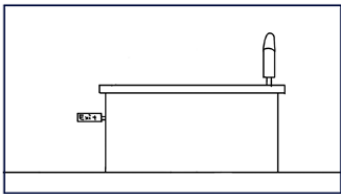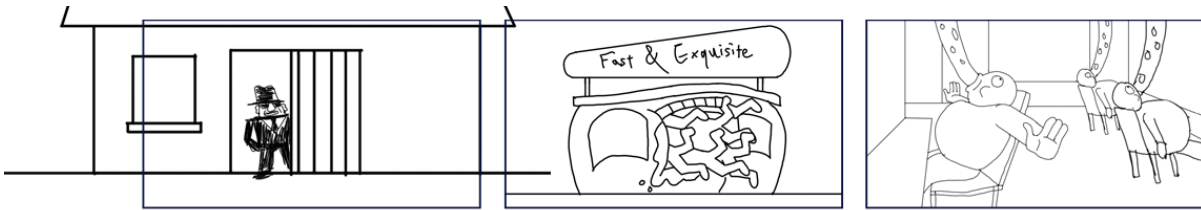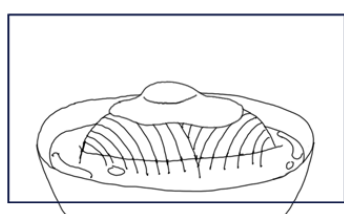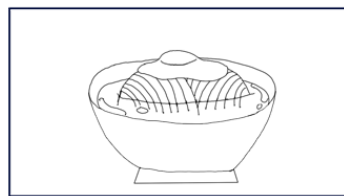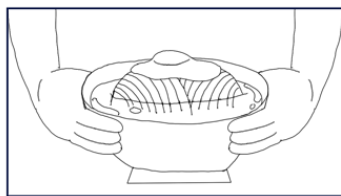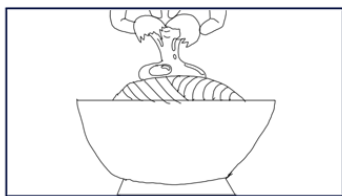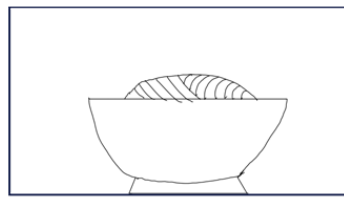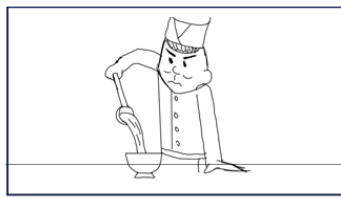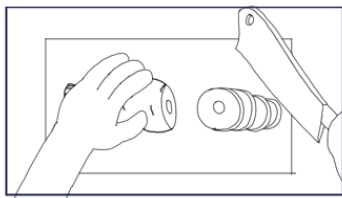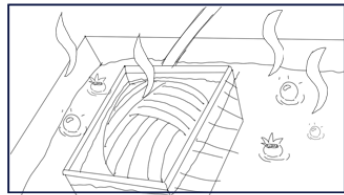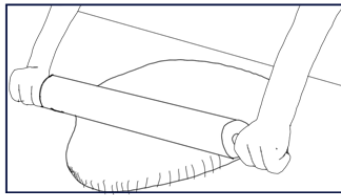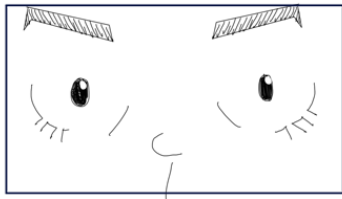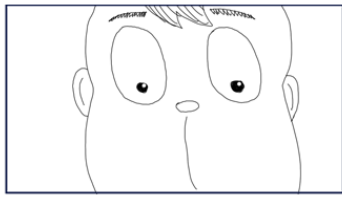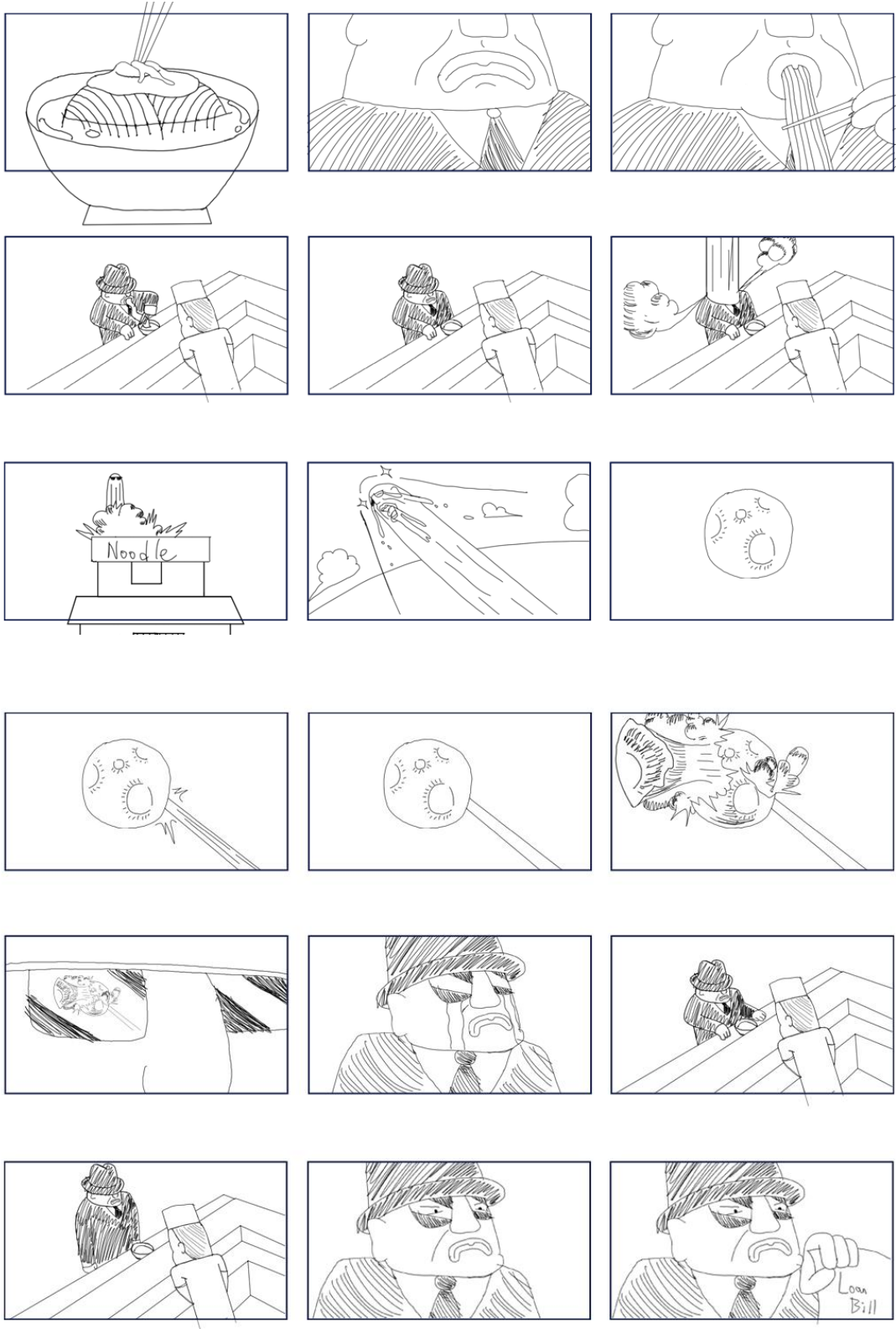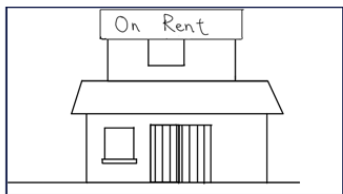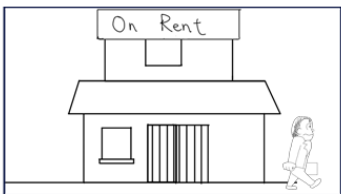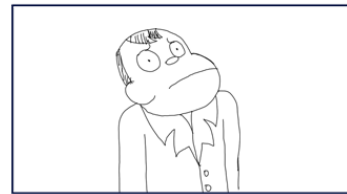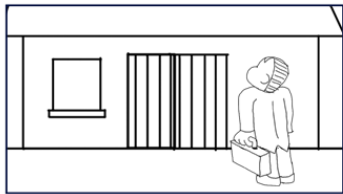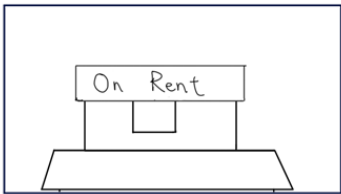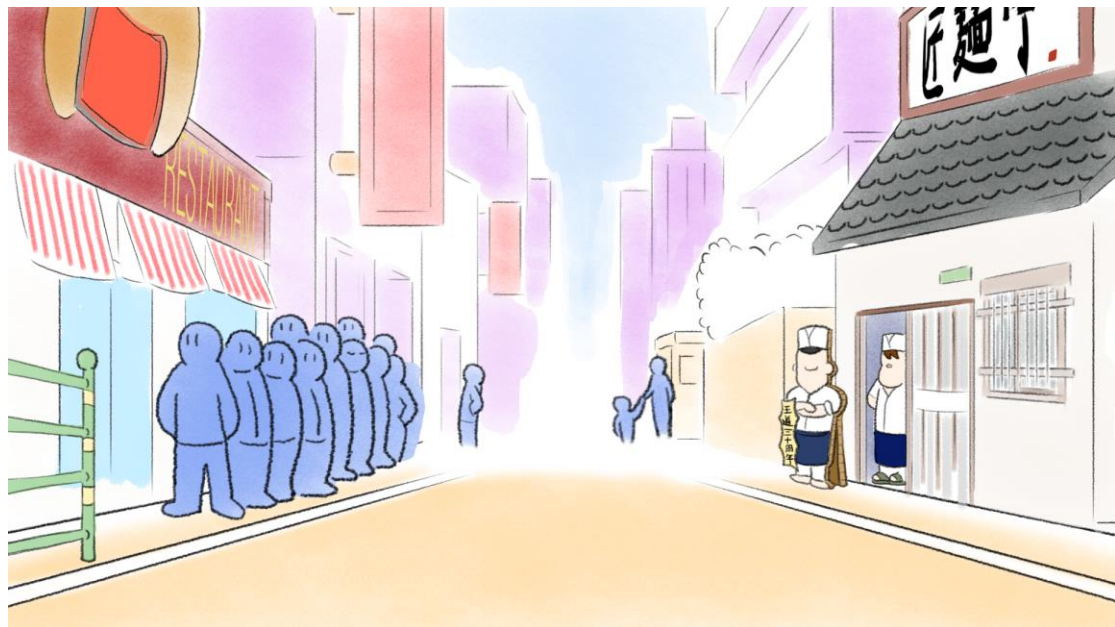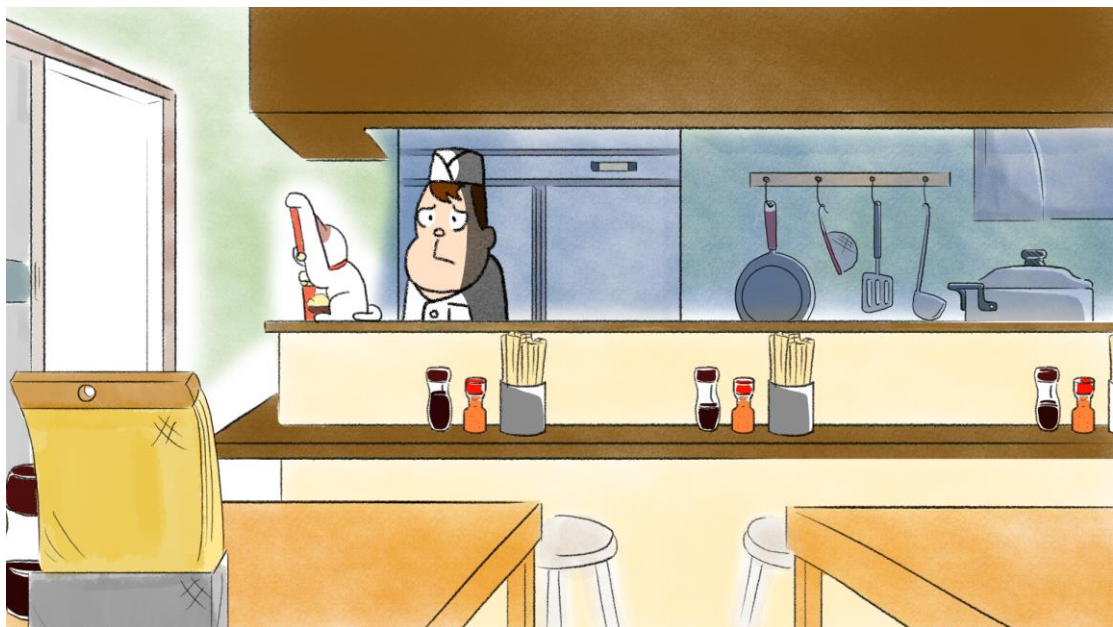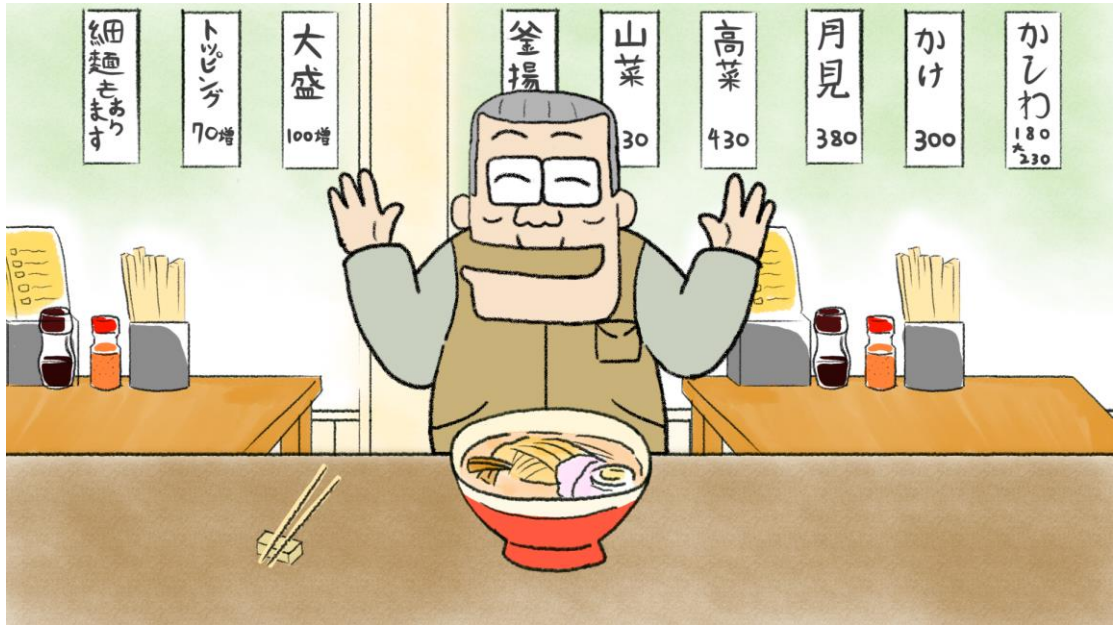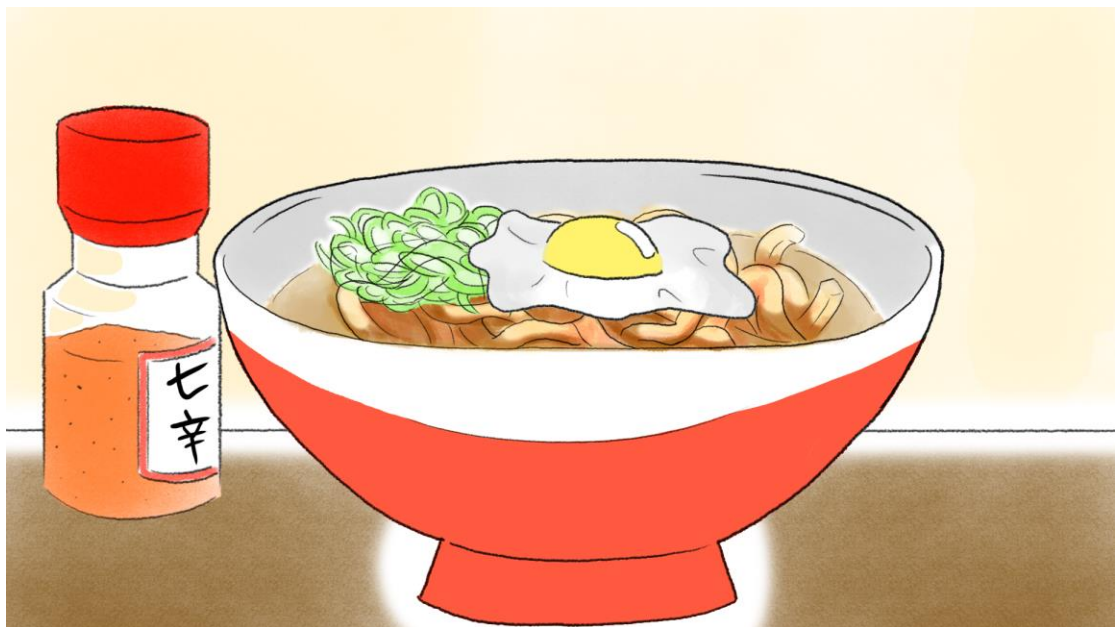
A Film By

Wei-En Chen

Character Designs

Character Design (Rough)

Protagonist: Ueda

消えるの味
The Lost Taste

Wei-En Chen

Ueda's Father

消える の 味
The Lost Taste

Wei-En Chen
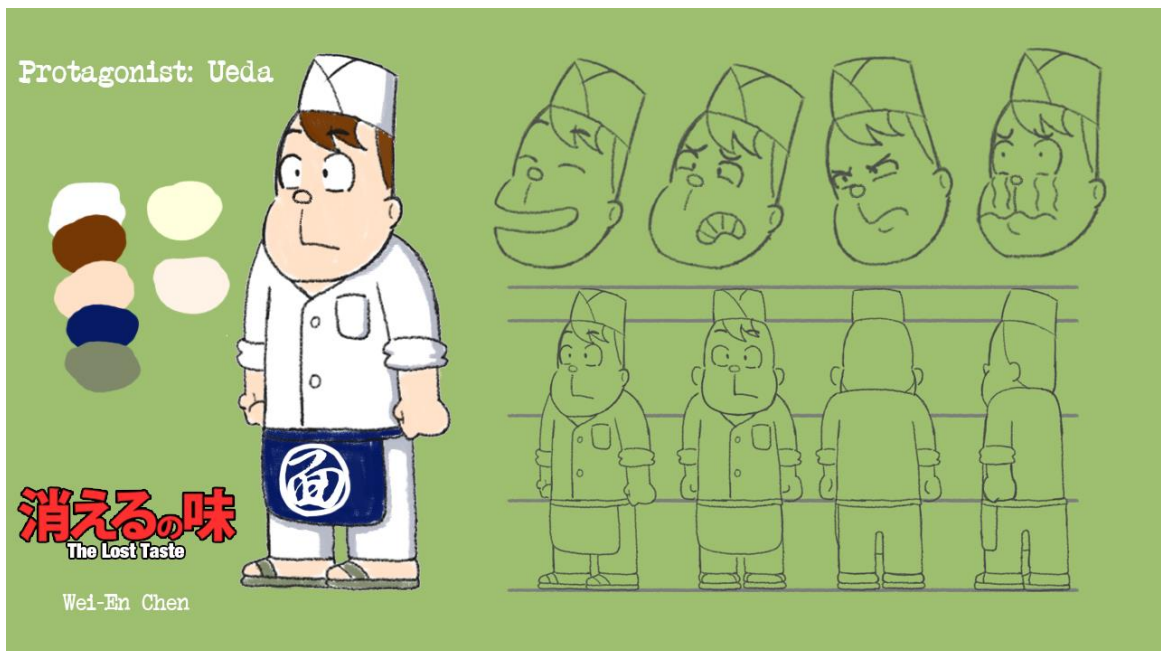
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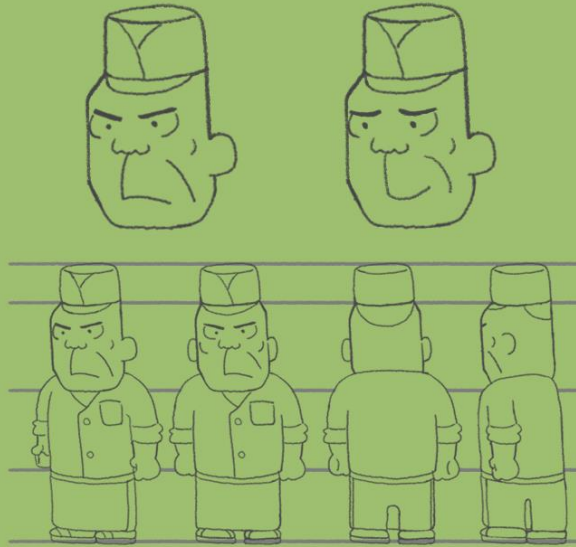
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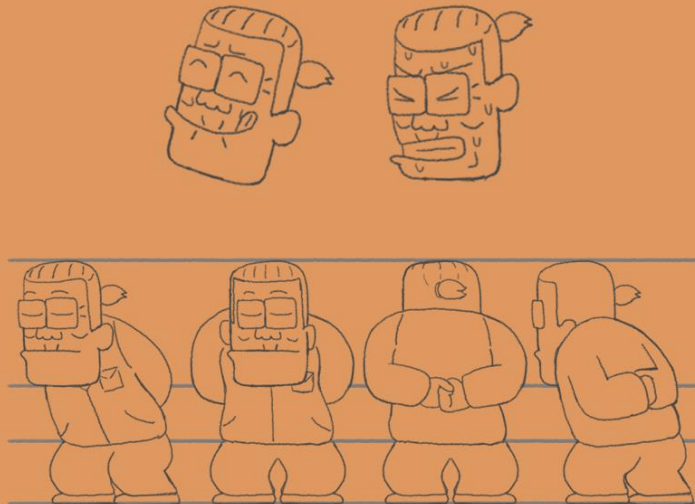
Wei-En Chen

Loan Shark group - Boss

The Lost Taste

Wei-En Chen

Loan Shark group - Mob 1

The Lost Taste

Wei-En Chen

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