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### Le Couple

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# Le Couple

by Jieting Chen

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE MFA  
IN THE SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION  
COLLEGE OF IMAGE ARTS & SCIENCES  
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

May 2014

## Committee Approval

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## Abstract

Le couple is my animated thesis film. It is 6 minutes 50seconds long. I created this work with Junran Mo.

Our short film is a humorous look at a dysfunctional marriage from two conflicting points of view. One point of view is the couple's external objective reality and the other is the husband's fantasies. On the surface of the film the placid husband is dominated by his pleasure seeking wife. While he submissively watches his wife's gluttonizing, he plots revenge at every turn. Theirs is a classic cartoon relationship based on such warring duos such as Roadrunner and Wiley e Coyote, Tweety and Sylvester and Bugs bunny and the hunter Elmer Fud. However our twist on that convention is that Le Couple ends up in bed, a very adult development for a cartoon.

## Introduction

We began work on L Couple in March 2011 and completed the project in Dec 2013. This film is my final project within the MFA animation program at The school of Film and animation of the Rochester Institute of Technology. My work on this project was supervised by my Thesis committee members: Brian Larson, Tom Gasek, and David Sluberski.

The making of the film began with preproduction: scriptwriting;,concept design,character and background design, storyboards and layouts; Production: animation, coloring and music design and postproduction: compositing , visual effects, color correction, credits and sound effects design.

I had three goals for my thesis project. My first goal was to make a funny film. When I began making animated films in 2007 I struggled to incorporate humor into the films I made. As my thesis was my last student project, I felt it would be a unique challenge to create a humorous film.

My second goal was to make a film with the full range of dramatic animation combining both full character animation with smaller facial expressions.

My final goal was to co-direct a film. Since 2007, I have produced 3 award winning solo short films proving myself to be a professional independent film maker. But because the animation industry is based on collaboration and group efforts, I felt it was important to learn how to work in a team.

Since mainstream animation requires intense collaboration on every level of a production, I felt I could best prepare myself for working in the industry by working in tandem with a fellow student. Which would also sharpen my communication skills and assists me in learning how to share ideas.

## Preproduction

### Script writing

Writing the script for an animated film is very different than writing for live action. Animation involves visual gags that must be developed into an idea. Also in the animation, the film's length is very limited by the great expense of well produced hand drawing animation. Also there is a great number of possible subjects for a student animated film than for a live action film. So it became a huge challenge for us to pick a subject for our animated thesis.

Junran and I spent a large amount of time discussing how to incorporate our strengths into our film. Our strengths were quite different. Junran has an amazing sense of humor. She is able to use minimum movement to convey character's inner world in a comedic way. I am good at character animation but wanted to challenge myself with different camera angles and broader character movements. As we are talented in very different aspects of animation we realized that we could make a great film that capitalized on our strengths.

One of our most important goals was to produce a piece which incorporated a full range of character animation showing both dramatic and subtle movements. We felt that the contrast could be used as part of the gags. And that it would also highlight our animation skills we had learned at RIT.

Junran and I considered many story ideas for this film. The first idea originated from a dinner date we had with a young woman who criticized her boyfriend during the entire meal. We abandoned this idea as it felt too similar to our two quarter film in which a shy young woman is forced to confront critical middle aged director.

After discarding that story we came up with an idea that took place in a fantasy world. An elf kingdom with little monsters embroiled in a long crazy war. It was a funny story and it had

the full spectrum of animation that we wanted. But in the end it was unrealistic as we would have needed to create a huge backstory which would make it impossible to present the inner core of the story. What we had to ask ourselves again was: what did we want to depict in our film and our answer was clear- what we learned in RIT.

At this point we decided to start again. Our thesis film was our opportunity to express our point of view as animators and story tellers. It is not only a show case of our technical prowess. We wanted to create a story that was funny and meaningful. Also, of great importance was that we were working in traditional animation - a field I have aspired to master for 8 long years.

The beauty of animation is that you can create a limitless world where everything is possible. Space has is a limitless frontier . And your world is not bound by the laws of nature. You can swim in the sky of your imagination and have all your dreams come true. Truly an exciting prospect but as I chose to work in a team, my freedom was going to be inhibited. Collaboration inevitably means including your partners point of view, and letting both voices be heard- as it is in the commercial world.

Finally we settled on a story of about a dysfunctional couple. The husband is an ineffectual office worker. He is the very definition of a wimp. The wife is a big woman who has lost her looks and figure and turned into a frumpy housewife who dominates the home completely. Her husband would not dare to complain, instead he ruminates on his revenge. His plans to get even with his wife form the subjective cutaways in the film. In these fantasies his wife turns into man-eating monster stocking him as runaway food.

But rather than end our film in cartoon violence we give our ending a twist in which the wife's voracious appetites become a plus in their happy grand finale.

This idea had its genesis in a couple whose long relationship soured, and they began to see only what they did not like about each other. They started to be revolted by irregular teeth ,



how their partner dressed and that their partner always arrived late. They started to wonder why their mate no longer was the perfect person they had met so long ago. What is ironic is that they didn't realize that they come to dislike everything that had initially attracted them to each other.

As a result, I decided to make a film about a relationship. The relationship in *Le Couple* like all relationships, has its ups and downs. With our duo the wife has lost her looks and the husband is not so successful financially. They are in short a normal family. Over the course of the film, their marital issues provide tension and dramatic action and surprisingly bring them together in an happy ending.

The psychodynamic of this couple is perfect for our thesis. It has a dramatic side, which lies in the realm of fantasy. And it also is grounded in real world emotional responses where we see subtle facial movements which the audience can read and identify with .

As a result, we wrote our script as follow:

### *Le Couple*

It's a quiet peaceful night. There is a couple sitting by the dinning table. A bony, wimpy guy looks at his wedding photo and smiles. In the photo, the wife is very sexy and beautiful. As the camera pans down from the photo, there sits the same woman, but she looks very different from the wedding photo. She is now quite fat, years into their marriage. She is watching a funny TV show, starts to giggle and turns to laugh. She does this every single night annoying her husband over and over again .

The husband sighs, looks at his soup and starts to drink it. But, suddenly, his wife's loud laughter makes him choke on his soup. Meanwhile, she is so happy that she starts pounding the table. All the things on the table are dancing. The soup splashes on his face, hair, and everywhere. Husband clenches his hands, grabs the soup bowl and throws it at his wife. The bowl is hits her forehead, bounces off the wall and drops onto her face.

He looks at her again, and looks back at his bowl in front of him. (None of that really happened, it was just imagination.)

She starts to wash the dishes. She goes to the table, takes all of his unfinished dishes to the sink, changes the TV channel, and starts to dance. Her heavy steps crack the floor, with the squeaking sound. And the whole house is dancing with her. He can not stand it. He starts looking for something that can shut her mouth. He opens his eyes wide and searches on the table. He finds a paper towel. He quickly grabs it, wraps his wife, puts her into an Egypt coffin, and locks it. Then the doorbell rings. The UPS guy is at the door. He gives the coffin to UPS. It is shipped onto a plane, onto a ship, onto a camel's back, and arrives at the center of the Egypt. But it's not enough. He then builds a pyramid onto it.

He is again by the dinning table. His wife with a night mask on her face takes the dessert out of the fridge. She thinks she is eating the cake like a lady, but actually is not. He looks at her sloppy mouth. Slowly, She is growing into a giant food monster. She bursts out of the roof, walks into the street and starts to eat buildings. He is dressed in a Superman costume. (Obviously it does not fit; he looks stupid and funny, but full of justice). He battles the monster and eventually kills it.

Back to reality again. The street is still quiet. He is sad. Everything that just happened is just his average day. He opens the door, and goes into the bedroom. Suddenly, he stands at the door. He is stunned by what he sees. The bedroom is cover with sexy silver violet moonlight. His wife drags him, and throws him onto the bed. He is so into this, looking at his big wife jumping upon him. He smiles happily. Yes, that's the one he loves!

## Dialogue

Junran and I discussed if we were going to include dialogue. We instantly decided that we would use neither Chinese nor English. Instead, we recorded a cartoony mumble for the vocalizations. We did not want to limit the story to a certain location or era. Just like the concept design, so that audiences could project the world they live in to the film. This way, our very universal story could be understood all over the world.

## Style/ Concept Design

Junran and I started writing concept ideas during the summer quarter of 2012. Though several continents apart - in China and Rochester - our schedule was not affected. Our research was done in libraries and online. The design of the film was created first. We decided it would be a traditionally animated 2D film created on paper and in TV Paint. Animating on paper gave us more fluency with the animation and also a more traditional look. Although we worried that taking the time to scan each drawing and testing the takes might hold up our process, in the end, we felt that we would get a superior film from traditional drawing and so we forged ahead despite the fact that we both were not at RIT for the entire production. After we settled that we would be working in TV paint, the rest of the production plans fell into place.

Like our two quarter film Audition, Le couple was to have clean lines and bold colors. The shades and shadows were to be simplified with straight lines to give the film a more stylized look. The characters would have a distinct design to magnify their personalities both in volume and in color. We wanted to make it easy to see that these two characters were in conflict and quite different from each other. During that summer, Junran and I watched a lot of animation. We both picked a number of films to analyze which would assist us in achieving the look of our film. In the end we had some disagreement over stylistic issues. Junran wanted a more boldly colored

stylized look, which she felt would work better for our film. While I wanted more of a watercolor effect. We debated this issue, and concluded a more colorful distinctive style would make it easier for the audience to read. We also felt that the fantasy sections would be more powerful and unique. As the husband's emotions changed the background changed from a normal world to something quite a bit crazier and better portrayed by wild color and design.



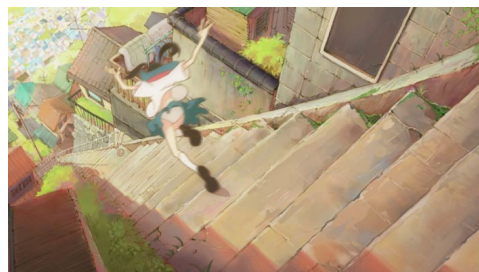
monstera deliciosa  
From Gobelines, Annacy signal film 2009



Illusionist (2010)  
Sylvain Chomet



Happy Anniversary (2011)  
Cheng Teng, Li Xia



フミコの告白 (2009)  
石田祐康

## Character Design

Our story has only two characters: a husband and a wife. The husband as designed is a diminutive, weak and almost pathetic man who is afraid to speak his mind at home. The wife is no longer the cute skinny blond she was on their wedding day. As the story develops we found it harder to build the characters and make them truly dimensional people. Brian advised us to write their backstory. He told us to fully develop the characters we might write their biographies, how they were educated when they were met, and what had made them into the people they were in our film. As we began to think about their personalities, this moved our character design to a more sophisticated level. The characters became fuller and resonated with more personality. As a result, their actions became clearer and made much more sense.

### Husband

The husband is definitely on the wimpy side of normal, certainly the type of man who would not draw much attention from strangers in the street. He is short and skinny. His head looks as if it was topple off his tiny shoulders. His clothes are too big for him emphasizing his diminutive stature. When he met his wife in college he thought he was the luckiest guy in the world. They got married right after graduation and everything seemed to be perfect back then. As time passed, their lives became dull and unhappy. His wife became a bloated housewife who is in touch only with her desires and completely out of touch with him.

She eats herself silly and his life becomes almost unbearable. For a while he is enraged about his wife yet he is unable to change their lopsided relationship. His only redress is in his vengeful fantasies. And it is here where the animation is allowed to run wild as he escapes into his fantasies. Ironically no matter how angry and frustrated he becomes, there is one thing that never changes, and this is not revealed till the end of our film: there is still an hidden

intimacy between them, which draws them both back into their youth together when the wife was beautiful and life was happy and they both could forget their current problems.

### Wife

She was a silly careless girl in college. She was never the best pupil in class but all her fellow students loved her. She was a happy-go-lucky girl with no plans for a career. She got married right after college and fell into the unrewarding life of a housewife. Desserts and television become the only rewards that mattered to her and her life spirals downward into gluttony and inactivity.

With the loss of her beauty, her life careens out of control. Her husband becomes annoyed, but he is unable to do more than hint at his dissatisfaction. And his hints and outright complaints are easy enough for her to ignore in favor of the ice creams, cupcakes and mindless TV programs. This is her life and she likes it that way.

## Background Design/ Prop Design

As the story happens in more than one location, the background design became very challenging. As we did not want to set the film in any one country and we wanted to have the story be identifiable to many people.

We researched many short animated films. What we found was that the most successful shorts, the background were very exaggerated yet with a simple straightforward execution.

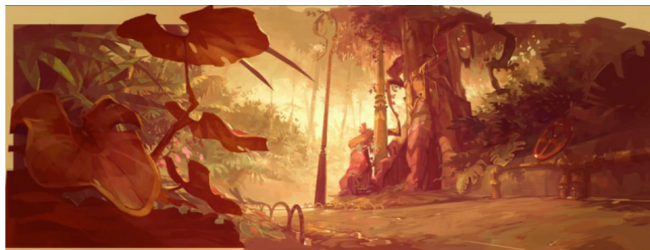
Using forced perspective, dramatic lighting and extreme point of view, the backgrounds force the viewer to follow the dramatic action. Not a moment of screen time is wasted for audiences to catch the details while a character is moving through a scene.



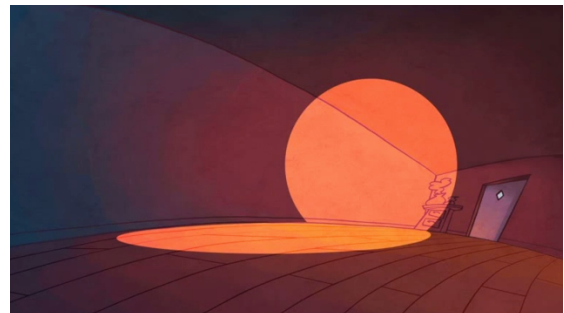
Jean Luc (2010)  
Arthur Peltzer



フミコの告白 (2009)  
石田祐康



monstera deliciosa  
From Gobelines, Annacy signal film 2009



Jean Luc (2010)  
Arthur Peltzer

Backgrounds are to enhance mood through color and lighting and set the stage for upcoming action. The color concept is important since it reflects the inner emotional state of the character. Shadows and spotlights act as traffic signs directing the viewer's eye not to miss important action. In all of the shorts we studied, the rise and fall of the dramatic action was mirrored in the type of the style of the background. For this reason, we planned our backgrounds very carefully.

For the everyday settings, which were meant to reflect the characters' everyday reality, the color is bright and warm, setting up a familiar everyday dinner environment. We slightly distorted all the furniture to fit into our background. While the background has a cartoonish look, we tried to create a world that was not a slave to "cartoon reality". In other word, we tried very hard to create our own world with its own substance and sense of verity. As we see this objective part of the film is in direct contrast to the husband's fantasy world, which is very abstracted and distorted and reflects his inner pain and anger.

Keeping the aforementioned in mind, we structured the film around three cutaways to the husband's flights of fantasy. Each successive cut is more extreme until the film's high point when the husband's envisions himself being chased by his wife who has morphed into a single cell slime monster.

The two earlier sections of "flights of imagination" are far less extreme as we sought to build the tension and not overwhelm the view. Furthermore, we wanted the view to experience the husband's revulsion, so we intentionally began very subtly with the first cut.

With the first cut to the husband's fantasy, the changes were barely perceptible. We wanted to make the changes subtle and follow the script. Also the color changes reflect the husband's growing anger. As the camera pans back (as seen in diagram), the color returns to the hues of the objective world. In this color shifting, we decided that the audiences would see that the previous action was subjective. i.e. From the husband's point of view.





Reality

imagination

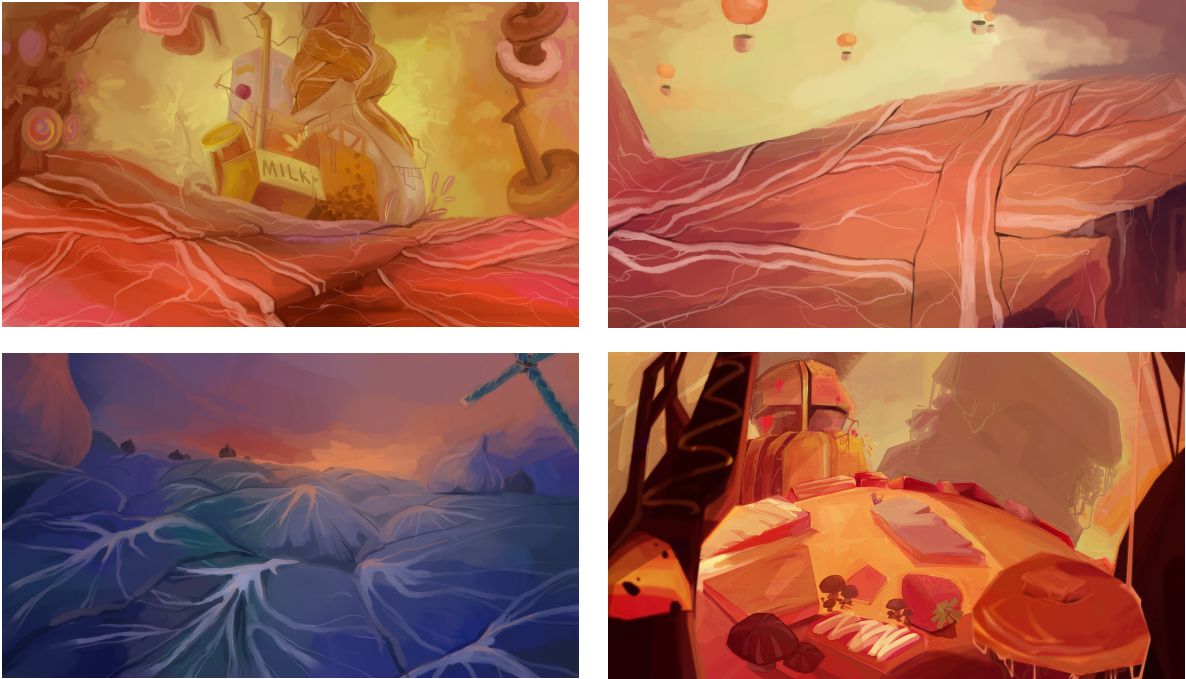
### Background design (First fantasy)

With the second cutaway to the husband's fantasy, we changed the background dramatically. The furniture is angular and the striking linear forces speak of the husband's emotional conflict. We consciously quickened the pace of animation as well. And to avoid the audiences missing important action, we focused the light and use large color blocks to simplify the background detail, creating what felt like a very focused stage.



### Background design (Second fantasy)

In the third flight of imagination, we purposely used a background that was different from the proceeding one and completely unexpected. The ground is covered with strips of bacon, burgers are mountains; and leaves of cheese hang from trees. The color is surreal as well, mirroring the action in the third part, which is fast and out of control. The backgrounds are populated with hugely oversized fast food items that are painted in garish colors. In this way we planned that the crazily over the top action would be more accepted by the audiences. This section of the film is my favorite and the backgrounds are my favorite as well.



Background design (Third Fantasy)

## Storyboard

I began storyboarding in the fall quarter of 2012 while I was doing my internship in New York City at Bill Plympton's studio. For me, the storyboard process is the most important stage of the planning. I really wanted to play with different camera angles and design dramatic scenes. Being away from school made the storyboard stage far more challenging. My internship was a full time job and storyboarding was equally time-consuming. I found storyboarding this film to be a complex process. As this is was also exercise collaboration, I tried to schedule frequent calls with Junran and made sure to keep in contact with the committee members. I also flew back to Rochester to meet with Brian every other week, to ensure that I was on schedule.

The main goal for a storyboard is to tell the story clearly. In the case of Le Couple where the plot unfolds in two separate worlds. The story board design was to separate the world, to avoid confusion. The point of view also changed within the different worlds. Also the transition between the husband's reality and fantasy was a huge concern for both Brian and I.

In the first transition, our objective was to keep the audience unaware that this is a fantasy sequence until the camera pans back to the husband. Our solution was to do a quick zoom into his close up where he is very angry at his wife. The color changes to a surreal reddish color in the next sequence and then back to normal in the last big pan. This device worked well in the boarding phase. However in the film itself, we thought that fact that we had entered a fantasy was not clear. To remedy this problem, I had to shift the palette so it clearly was depicting a world other than reality. So when the camera pans back, the color shifts dramatically along with the mood and music back to the color scheme of their normal world.

Having established the ground rules in the first transition, the second transition became easier to create, and hopefully easier for the audience to see. Hence the second transition begins with a zoom and a color change. Here though in the second transition the camera is tilted in a more extreme angle. From a bird's eye view the camera is looking down directly at the husband's head which gives the shot more tension. Also the audience has been prepared as this shot is repeated from the first transition yet pushes the emotion further. Our character acts in a way that he has not before. He lassos his wife with a roll of paper towels and wraps her like a mummy. The audience knows that the sequence is a fantasy as they also know that the appearance of the sarcophagus, the delivery people, the plan, the ship, the camel and the pyramid- are also parts of a fantasy montage. However, the transition back to reality was a bit more difficult as we had used a big pan after the first transition and I didn't want to repeat it. So after the pyramid falls from the sky, I used the spreading dust as a wipe which cross dissolves to the husband's face and his big satisfied smile. Clearly showing he is pleased with his fantasy and we had transitioned back to reality.

The third transition is far more intense and direct than the two preceding it. The wife is chewing her desert and I cut back to her reflection in her husband's eyes. And the camera zooms into a huge eating monster inside his pupil. In this transition I wanted the audience to step into his imaginary world rather than being just an observer. I also want people to realize that the husband is suffering and that the wife's behavior pushes her husband away till he finds being near her unbearable. For this reason I transformed the wife into a monster in front of the camera and made her many times larger than a human . After she has expanded completely fills the screen, breaking the third wall her husband transforms into a knight and slays her- cutting her into pieces- from which a white light emanates and wipes the screen.

The last transition from fantasy to reality is a dissolve. This last bedroom scene is more peaceful and romantic, but before we arrive at the love scene there is a pause in the action where the camera focuses on husband's anticipation. As he scratches his neck we wonder with him what will happen next. The action begins to build again as we hear the water running in the bathroom before the wife emerges from the shower. As we cut into the bathroom, the wife finishes her shower and steps from the bath. In the shot of her entering the bedroom the audience is signaled with the lighting and the music, a shift in mood has happened. This scene is amalgam of fantasy and reality, a state in which the husband's original fantasy - one foretold in the shot of the wedding pictures where he adoringly gazes at his bride is fulfilled. It is with the same gaze that he now watches his wife move towards him in slow motion - our cheeky tip of the hat to every lovers on the beach scene ever filmed.

Every element in these last shots tells the viewer happiness is on the way for it is in her preparation of herself for him that signals the audience, that rather than a cupcake, or a TV show, she is preparing to enjoy her husband and that is what he has longed for since the opening shot of the film. And ironically this has been possible all along, as it is his wife's enormous appetite for life that is the key to the couple's happiness.

## Production

### Animation

I have always found that animating is the most interesting part of filmmaking. In our last film "Audition", I was very interested in animating the transformation of a shy girl who turns into a sexy glamorous woman. I had to exaggerate the sexy and suggestive movements and animate the 2D particle effects to make the shots work. Animating the dance sections was also very different from what I had animated before. That part turned out surprisingly well so I wanted to experiment more with dynamic body movements and with different camera angles to challenge myself. One of my major animated scenes was the fantasy section with the wife. The actions are relatively broad and fast and similar to Audition. The movements include turning and flying. However in Le Couple the challenge was to make the action and timing work with two characters fighting. I created many animation tests to check the timing. I also animated both on 2s and 1s to see which would work better. For the fast chase section, 1s works much better than 2s. But for the relatively subtle part, animating on 1s could cause a "floaty" effect, which I did not want.

### Reference Shooting

Before I came to study in RIT, I did not understand the importance of reference shooting. At that time, I did not shoot film reference because I believed animators should "create" the movement themselves. I wrongly thought that shooting visual reference was cheating. I am so grateful that Brian corrected my thinking by showing us great animations made by shooting reference video even by rotoscoping.

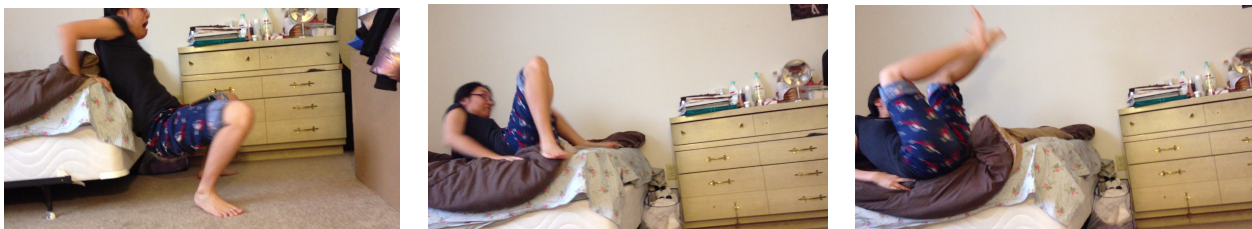
I came to realize that it is very important to shoot reference video since it is only through observing movement and natural behavior that one can animate it.

In this film, I shot 37 reference videos ranging from closing up facial expression to broad fighting movements. I imported all the reference into Adobe After Effects, so that I could experiment with the timing and framing. In the first transition shot from reality to imagination, for example, I shot the reference video to observe the subtle facial movements reflecting husband's inner conflict. How he got annoyed, and then exploded with anger at the end. I sped up the second part while the camera zooms in, to add more emotional impact.



Reference shot for first transition

In a later shot when the monster chases the husband, he climbed on the television and fell backwards. It is a complex shot and I struggled to have him shift his weight rearward and fall back naturally and avoid "floaty animation". Shooting the visual reference was definitely helpful. I shot the reference video and cut this long movement into different sections to observe the movement. I animated this shot in three parts; First he moves backwards on the television, stays on top of it for 4 frames and then he falls back when the monster devours the television in three parts. He climbs backwards on the television first, stays on top of it for 4 frames and then falls back when monster eats the TV.



Reference shot for husband falling back

## Music

I met Yuya Takeda, our composer at the thesis screening in RIT in 2011. He composed the music for Sean Malony's 2d animation thesis. The music was beautifully scored. I introduced myself to Sean after the screening and asked if he would like to be our composer. I explained the basic style that we wanted and sent him a link to our previous film *Audition*. We talked about the project and we learned that he would be back to Japan during our whole production. He asked if he could work remotely with us. We answered with a definite yes.

We started the composing process at May 2013, around the same time we started animating the film. We timed out the film and completed our animatic. We sent Yuya our animatic and explained how the film was to be made. We discussed how the music help the transitions from scene to scene. Working long distance with Sean did not cause any problems. We discussed the project in emails and Skype meetings and we came to a basic understanding of how to incorporate the music with the animation. The major problem we encountered was the time difference, since we were in totally different time zones. We found that scheduling our talks in the evening and early morning was the easiest.

I provided Yuya with my overview of the music for *Le Couple*. I wanted the music to support the animation and create a music bed rather than standing out and overpowering the action. I showed Yuya a section of *Jean Luc* and *Anniversary*, which are terrific films in which the music and the visuals combine seamlessly together.

The music for the objective reality world should highlight the husband's discomfort and make the audience squirm as the wife eats too much and dances around and generally acts out. The audience should feel the husband's revulsion through the music. However, the fantasy sections, the music had to be more rhythmically dramatic. Yuya understood our goal very well and provided us with the first draft very quickly. The style of the music was excellent but it is still overpowered the animation. Then there was a lot of back and forth between Yuya and us. At

this point, Yuya's having a part time job limited his time composing the piece. But he managed to pull it off and created an amazing work in a short amount of time, and in the end, made the music work perfectly for the film.

The hardest parts were the final sequences where the wife leaves the bathroom and moves into the bedroom. The music had to cue up a sexual mood right after the wife steps out of the bathroom. Yuya's first pass had a saxophone promptly playing and it pushed the action of the film to a climax. The saxophone was too sexy at first. After a discussion and several tweaks we decided to take out most of the saxophone, and instead let it start only after the wife jumps up and is air born. After a few versions, we got the music the way we wanted it. The final music was beautifully composed and we really appreciated Yuya's willingness to tailor the music to the animation.



## Post production

### Compositing

The compositing process was relatively easy since everything followed our storyboard and animatic, The compositing was done in Adobe After Effects Cs6. Composition format was HD widescreen, 1920 x 1080, square pixels, 24fps. We exported all image sequences from TV Paint Animation and imported them into After Effects. We did not make too many changes at compositing stage since the music score was locked to our animatic. But we did add some special effects, camera movements and transitions to the film.

The visual effects were added when we transitioned between the reality and fantasy sections. I added radial motion blur to the zoom in/ zoom outs to increase the sense of speed. Motion blurs were added during the second and third fantasy sequence when the characters were moving very fast. In the battle scenes, we added camera shakes.\

After adding visual effects and camera movements in separate scenes I exported them as 3 image sequences. I found this to be the best way to keep the best image quality. It is also the best way to keep everything organized as long as every shot has a separate folder and was labeled correctly. After finishing exporting, I sent all the image sequences to Junran to make a master composition and put the final film together.

### Sound recording and editing

What we were mostly concerned about was the tonal quality of the wife's voice. She is a very offbeat and somewhat comedic character, her voice needed to read clearly. I searched for a woman's annoying laugh on the web. The recordings I found worked pretty well, but we still wanted a more original sound. Junran and I tried recording the laughter in the folly room. Junran

folleyed an annoying laugh track that worked very well at the time. So we decided to make this a plan B and continue looking for other voice talent that might have the perfect sound.

Not until September 2013, at the beginning of our last semester, did we realize that we had a friend who could produce the perfect laughter right in our class. Arzouma Aime Kompaore is a friend who is studying film in RIT. He has a big deep voice and whenever he laughs, we could not help but laugh too. Arzouma recorded the laugh track along with the mumbles of the wife. After I got his recorded tracks I cut them in with the film in Adobe Audition 3.0. The sound and visual worked perfectly together. With the pitch change, Arzouma's male tone gave depth to the wife's voice and makes the audience feel the weight of a big woman. while Junran's young small voice did not . Arzouma's even aged the wife to make her sound older and we were thrilled with his performance and quite satisfied with what turned out to be a perfect match.

After solving our biggest concern, we recorded sound effects in folly room. Instead of editing sound directly in After Effects, I pulled all the footage including the finished animation into Adobe Audition 3.0, which is a more professional program for sound editing. It was a time-consuming work compare to the compositing process. In order to get the perfect sound, I sat at home for days mixing the effects together. The hardest part was before the second fantasy sequence while the wife is watching TV doing her exercises. There were multiple sounds from the TV, the wife's footfalls, hot boiling water and the clock ticking, etc. I listened to all the sound carefully with the film and tuned them each to the right level. For each shot I had to change the level of the sounds to make certain nothing was dominating the track.

Professor Dave Sluberski helped me with different ideas of sound editing from the beginning of the script through the end of the writing stage. He pointed that sometimes sound should lead the image instead of following it. He advised us to add some sound gags in the fantasy section where I did not need to use realistic sound to make things real. Xiaoyu Liu, one of our classmates helped us with putting all the sounds together. I spent two weeks at home cleaning up and mixing the sound. It turned out very nicely and I found it added more than a bit

of humor to the film. I believe the sound design was one of the most important aspects to make this film a success. I fully agree now that the sound track is 80% of a good film.

## Teamwork

### Proposal

"Le Couple" was the first collaborative graduate thesis animation at RIT, and because it was the first it was very difficult going when we first started the project.

We went to Professor Brian and asked him if he could be our thesis committee chair. He agreed and said it should not be a problem. After our one quarter and two quarter films, he believed we had proven ourselves to be great animators both solo and in collaboration. After getting his consent, we went to Professor Tom Gasek and David Sluberski and asked them if they could be our committee members. They both agreed as well.

When we presented the proposal, Professor Charles Bandla did not approve it because he was not so optimistic about us doing a team thesis. In his opinion, a graduate student should prove himself/ herself having the ability to produce a well-structured thesis film. Junran and I agreed him, but we still wanted to fight for a chance to work together. As a result, instead of getting a clear yes or no in the proposal, Professor Malcolm Spaul wanted to hold a faculty meeting to discuss whether we could work together for our thesis film.

Junran and I had wanted to collaborate on a thesis film since finishing our two quarter animation audition. We found our imaginative sensibilities worked great together and both of the story development and the animation could benefit from our working together. We both produced our first film at RIT individually, which proved our ability to be an independent director and animator. And our second film, which we both worked on, was a big success. It proved our ability to work as team members and our common sense of humor in animation. Also, in our opinion, animation is an art of collaboration. So we decided to break with the pas and tried to be the first thesis team.

After a week, we received an email from Brian saying that we could work as a team, despite the fact that it had never been approved before. It was great news and it showed the trust and confidence all the professors and faculty members had in us as filmmakers.

### **How do we work**

We found that the most challenging part of collaboration during this film was how to unify our styles when working separately. I moved to New York City for internship as soon as fall quarter started in 2012. We have been working separately since then. Professor Brian was concerned that we would fall behind the schedule since we were both not in Rochester area. And that was our biggest concern as well.

Before I started interning in New York City, Junran and I met with all our committees. We talked about how we would work long distance while we were not at school. We divided our work into two major parts during the preproduction stage. Junran would design all the characters and layout all the background in Maya. I would start doing the storyboard at the same time. In that case, we could work independently without many meetings. I would fly back to Rochester every other week for a meeting with both Brian and Junran. We would also send emails or meet through Skype if needed.

Our schedule fell behind at first. Even though we produced a film together before, being in separate cities was still tough for us. We found emails were not the best way to communicate when problems occurred. Brian was very concerned about our progress and asked if we should go back to RIT to finish the rest of the film. Junran and I thought it was time to set up a workflow that could allow us work separately but at a fast pace.

We tried to meet online as often as possible, and exchange opinions after each minor change. I started doing the animatic right after finishing the board and sent Junran the first draft. We found that rather than send everything to each other and ask for opinions, the better way was to ask specific questions and ask for a response only if we thought there was a specific problem. It saved us a lot of time. At the same time, this way of working gave us more freedom to express ourselves as artists. As a result, the designs and the board turned out more interesting than we had expected and we managed to deliver all the art on time.

Once the preproduction was finished, we divided the animation according our strengths. Junran would animate all the reality sections, and I was in charge of the fantasy sections. The number of shots for each of us was relatively equal, approximately 50 shots. As the shots were divided by reality and fantasy, we did not need to worry much about the difference in style since the animation style changed dramatically with each transition. And we could work at our own pace and be able to animate in a way we felt comfortable with. It saved us a large amount of time. We only needed to meet when we found problems and needed feedback from each other. Meeting every two weeks were enough for us to check our progress and solve problems as they came up.

After finishing animating, we decided to continue working on the backgrounds. It worked surprisingly well when it came to the background painting. I kept my own style of painting and exaggerated the background style and decided to go as far as I could. The effort paid off very well. The backgrounds really help to hold the story together and made the film much more visually rich and more interesting to watch.

We were able to work separately from preproduction till the finish of the film, in part because we trusted each other as artists. And that is one very important aspect of teamwork. Once we decided to make this film together, we decided that we would work as equals on a team , respecting each other's way of working, and trusting each other's aesthetics.

I would not have been able to finish a piece that is so humorous and well produced alone. Being able to work with Junran was a great honor. I believe that we produced a very satisfying film together, and hopefully our experiences could help those who would like to try working as a team on their thesis in the future.

## Critique reception

“Le Couple” was completed and presented at the SOFA Screening on December 15th, 2013. Professor Stephanie Maxwell was the respondent for our thesis presentation and provided a very helpful response to our film

The film was well received during the screening. The visual and sound gags worked for most of the audience. The questions were mainly focused on how we managed working as a team. There were not many questions and critiques about the film during the screening.

After the screening, I went back to New York City and began working with Debra Solomon, who is a well-respected independent animator. I had an opportunity to present my film to her and get her feedback. She loved the animation and thought it was well animated and painted. Her criticism was mainly about the transition between reality and fantasy be made more clearly. She was confused when the husband threw the bowl to his wife. She pointedly asked if it was happening in reality or fantasy. She also said it might cause some confusion if the audience missed the first fantasy section. The timing of gags needed some work. She felt that at some point the gags happened too fast that she missed several of them. She said if I wanted the audiences to get all the gags, I should leave enough space between them.

After that, I showed <Le Couple> to one of my best friends, who is also a great independent animator and now studying in Pratt Institute. He enjoyed the story, but his concern was more about the screening. He said that the film looks fine on a computer screening. But once it is on a big screening, there were too many close-ups and middle shots, which would make it hard to watch. He suggested during the storyboard stage, I should consider more about where this film should go. If it is a film for TV, then I can add more close-ups. However, a film like “Le Couple”, which is made for a big screen, should have broader shots to alter audience point of view and make it easy to watch.



Both of their critiques were very valuable to me. It is always great to get feedback from other experienced artists. I am satisfied with the way this film came out. I would definitely take their opinions and critiques into consideration when I am making films in the future. Each film is a process, I believe with the knowledge I learnt from producing this film and from the critiques, I will know better how to produce a film in the future.

## Conclusions

It is very hard for me to sit down and write about the making of my film. The experience throughout the production was like an adventure, and I had no idea where the film would end up. Junran and I started with a very little concept for the film we wanted to make. The only thing we were sure about was it would be a funny story. Then we produced the story from scratch, animated it and composited it together.

Our journey was not only one in which we made a film together but also a journey of friendship. And that is what drawn me to the field of animation. It is an art form that demands collaboration. It is a discipline in which we seek to improve our professional skills, but also create a world where magic happens. From the first class I took with Brian and in which I received a critique saying that I had to abandon all my bad habits when I animate, I realized that animation is not only making characters move, but giving them life.

From all of the years I spent studying at RIT, I discovered many new ways of producing films. I learnt how to tell a story not by narrative story line, but from the characters themselves. I learnt not to tell the audience what to think, but to let them draw their own conclusions about the characters' movement. No matter how intricate the moving image is, a successful animated film is always about what the characters is feeling and that can only unfold thru movement.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the amazing people I met at RIT. I will always carry what I have learned with me throughout my career.

## Acknowledgements

First I would love to thank my thesis advisor and chair, Professor Brian Larson. He was a great mentor for me at RIT. His critiques were always thorough and he expanded my knowledge of animation exponentially. His understanding of moving images and humor helped me find the right track for my storytelling. He always provided invaluable support for me to produce this thesis film as a team. Despite the fact that a team thesis had never been done before in RIT. With his help I kept on schedule during the entire production. We were even be able to complete the film weeks in advance of our deadline which afforded us the chance to make tweaks and changes.

I also would like to thank Professor Tom Gasek and Professor David Sluberski for being my committee members. They offered me valuable suggestions about the story line and helped me understand how the audience reacts to certain gags.

I would like to express my gratitude to Independent Film maker Bill Plympton, who rarely helped student animators with school projects but advised me on the script writing stage. His style of animation has strongly influenced how I animate. His advice on how to move from the real world into the world of imagination world helped me telling the story more smoothly.

I would like to thank my dear partner, Junran Mo. She was always my biggest support when I had problems during the process of animating this film. Her sense of humor helped us make this film an interesting, funny short. Whenever I was confused during the production, She was always there to advise me. And Even though we were in different states her constancy helped us thru many difficulties. She managed to work on schedule and produce great work. I would never have been able to present such complete and well-made film without her. We have produced two films together and both of which are a great success. I look forward to producing more films with her if we have chance.

I would like to Thank Xin Yin, who helped me during the coloring process. Heran Hao, who emotionally supported me during the hardest parts of the production. Xiaoyu Liu, who helped put our sound effects together, which made a huge difference in the film. Yuya Takeda, who is a very talented composer and who helped pull the music together on a non-existent budget. And I would like to thank all my classmates and professors during my time in RIT. I would not have been able to make this film without their help and support.

Last but not least I would like to express my gratitude to my parents. Both their financial and emotional support during my years of study at RIT made my education possible and their trust and encouragement allowed me to pursue my dream of film making.

## Appendix A

### Original Proposal

**“Le couple”**  
by Junran Mo & Jieting Chen

GRADUATE THESIS

Approved for submission by:

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Brian Larson(Chair)

## **Synopsis**

It's a story happens in a poor boney wimpy husband's imagination. He tries a lot of ways to express his grievances about his fat wife in his imagination. But there is one thing that makes him stay with her.

## **Rationale**

Our goal is to create an animated short, around 5 minutes. The story is about love and warmth in life, where there are always disappointments and annoying moments. Nobody is living a perfect life, but we all choose to value our own choices. The imagination is wild, maybe even violent. But the man still knows why he loves his family, and there is where the story ends.

The design of the characters will be quite dramatic, as well as the animation itself. After exploring the progress of film making, we discovered that the biggest difference between ours and the professional's is not only the ability to animate, but also the method of storytelling. So we want to challenge with the storyboard, to study different approaches of showing images and movements, and to play with transitions between shots and scenes. Thinking of the nature of animation, we decided to push the limit while designing animation. The humor and gags will be mainly shown through the acting of the characters, and also the nature of their physical figures.

## **Teamwork**

After collaborating on a 20-week project, we found our animation style and sense of humor matches very well. There are strengths we could share, and weakness we could improve during the film making progress. We also found team-work could produce a better work with good quality.

The work of script writing is shared to make sure both of our idea can be dissolved in the final piece. So the result will be a group work instead of a personal film.

Since the storyboard is an important part in our process, we are planning to split the duty in order to get a better result. Junran Mo's sense of humor will serve the gag design very well, so she will be in charge of the reality and gag development as we are storyboarding. Jieting Chen has a stronger sense of moving camera and fantasy effects; as a result, she will be responsible for the imagination and battle scenes.

We will search for a unique style of character and background designs. We will both engage in the designing process. We will each design more than one set of characters and backgrounds, and then pick a final set to be used.

In the animating progress, we will work relatively close together. The scenes and shots will be devised according to the action. Each of us will do half of all the shots, the ones that we feel stronger about animating. The same goes for how we separate our work in the background painting.

During the postproduction, Junran Mo will be doing the editing and visual effects while Jieting Chen will design and edit the sound.

## **Treatment**

It's a quiet peaceful night. There is a couple sitting by the dinning table. A bony, wimpy guy looks at his wedding photo and smiles. In the photo, the wife is very sexy and beautiful. As the camera pans down from the photo, there sits the same woman, but she looks very different from the wedding photo. She is now quite fat, after their marriage. She is watching a funny TV show, starts to giggle and turns to laugh. She dose this every single night. And that annoys him.

Husband sighs, looks at his soup and starts to drink it. But, suddenly, his wife's loud laughter makes him choke on his soup. Meanwhile, she is so happy that she starts pounding the table. All the things on the table are dancing. The soup splashes on his face, hair, and everywhere. Husband clenches his hands, grabs the soup bowl and throws it at his wife. The bowl is hits her forehead, bounces into the air and drops onto her face.

He looks at her again, and looks back at his bowl in front of him. (None of that really happened, it was just imagination.)

She starts to wash the dishes. She goes to the table, takes all of his unfinished dishes to the sink, changes the TV channel, and starts to dance. Her heavy steps crack the floor, with the squeaking sound. And the whole house is dancing with her. He can not stand it. He starts looking for something that can shut her mouth. He opens his eyes wide and searches on the table. He finds a paper towel. He quickly grabs it, wraps his wife, puts her into an Egypt coffin, and locks it. Then the doorbell rings. The UPS guy is at the door. He gives the coffin to UPS. It is shipped onto a plane, onto a ship, onto a camel's back, and arrives at the center of the Egypt. But it's not enough. He then builds a pyramid onto it.

He is again by the dinning table. His wife with a night mask on her face takes the dessert out of the fridge. She thinks she is eating the cake like a lady, but actually is not. He looks at her sloppy mouth. Slowly, She is growing into a giant food monster. She bursts out of the roof, walks into

the street and starts to eat buildings. He is dressed in a Superman costume. (Obviously it does not fit; he looks stupid and funny, but full of justice). He battles the monster and eventually kills it.

Back to reality again. The street is still quiet. He is sad. Everything that just happened is just his average day. He opens the door, and goes into the bedroom. Suddenly, he stands at the door. He is stunned by what he sees. The bedroom is cover with sexy silver violet moonlight. His wife drags him, and throws him onto the bed. He is so into this, looking at his big wife jumping upon him. He smiles happily. Yes, that's the one he loves!

end



## Timeline

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
Character Design																				
Concept Design																				
BG Design																				
Storyboard																				
Animatic																				
Reference Shooting																				
Animation (Rough KFrame)																				

	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39
Animation (Rough KFrame)																				
Animation (KFrame CleanUp)																				
Animation (Inbetween)																				
Animation (Paint)																				
Background																				
Music																				

	40	41	42	43	44	45

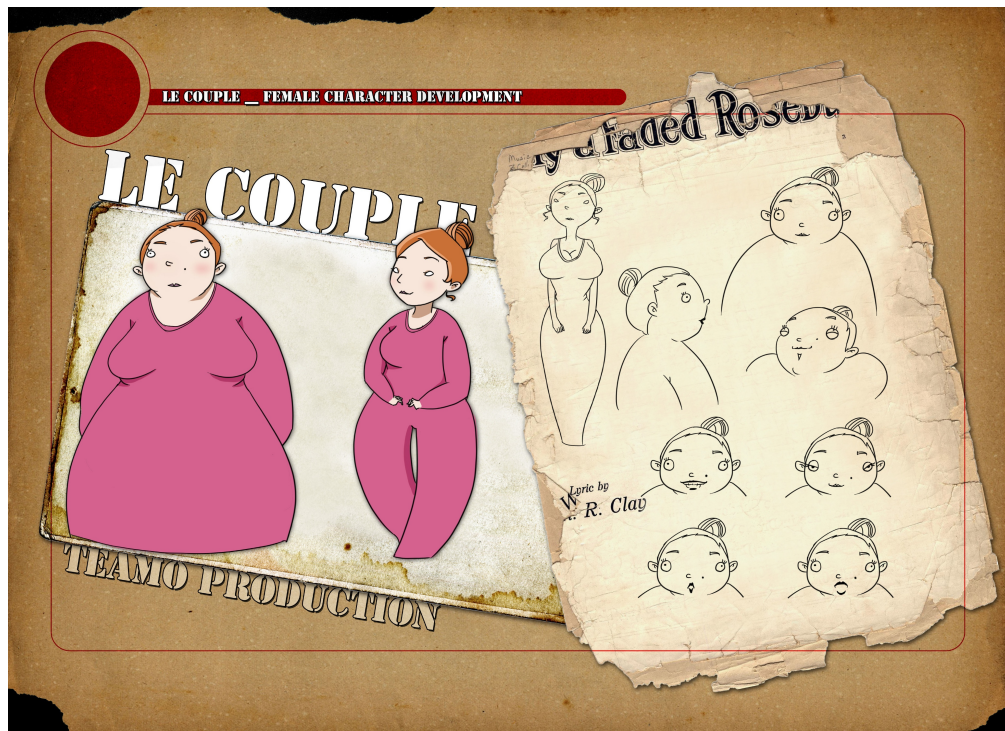
Animation (Paint)	■					
Background	■					
Visual EFX	■	■	■			
Compositing		■	■	■	■	■
Title/Credits		■	■	■		

## Budget

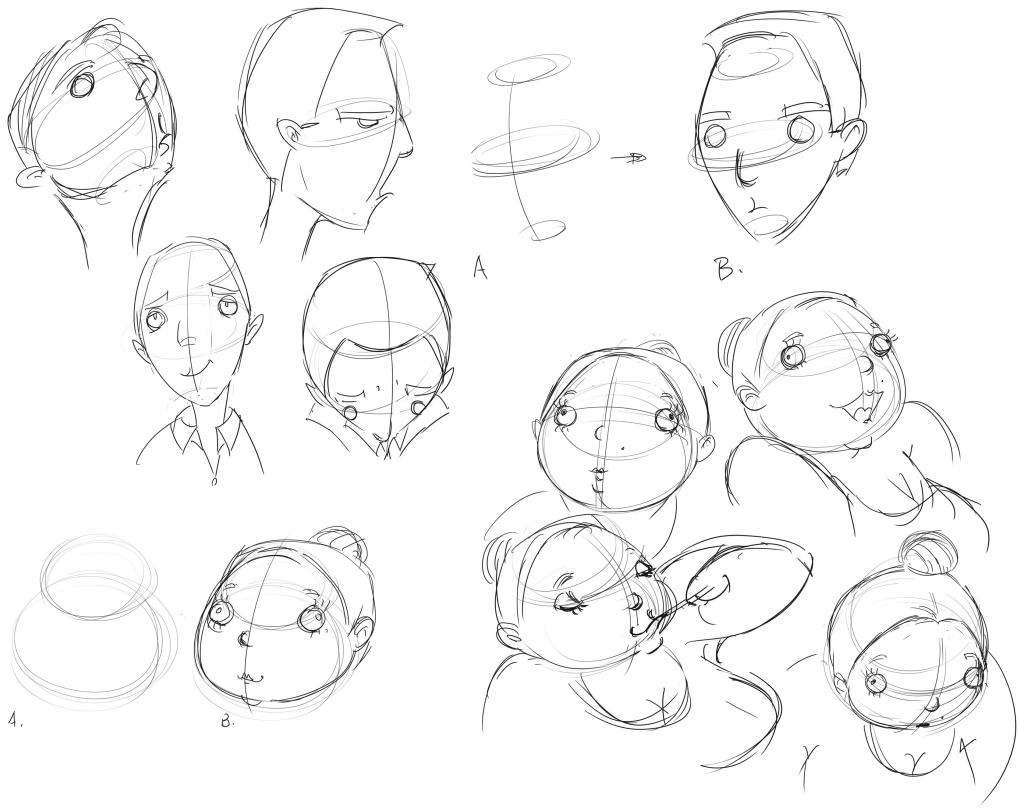
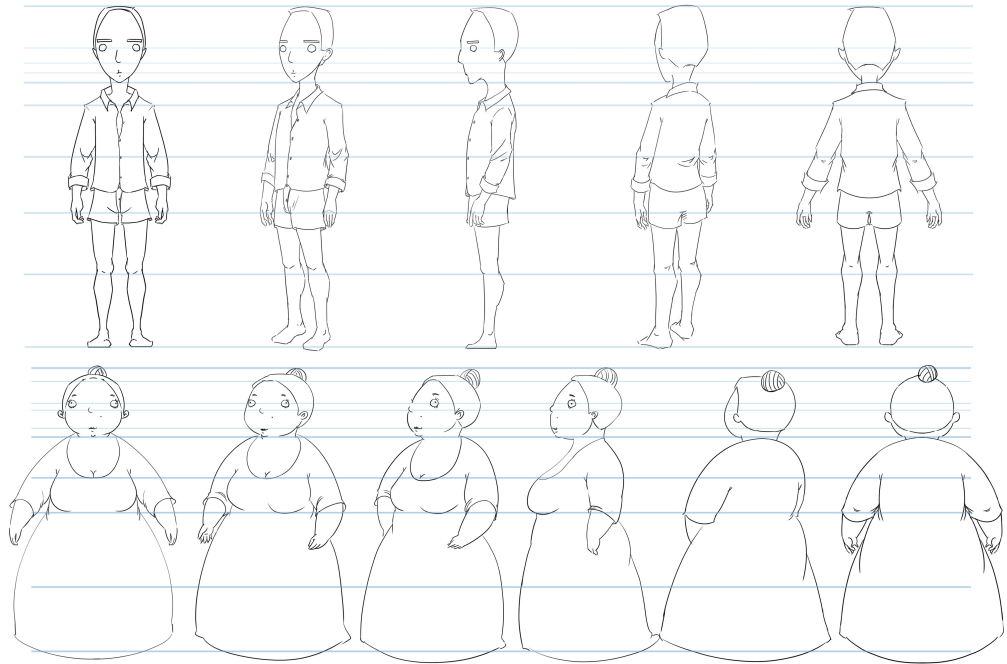
Categories and items	Cost
Hardware and Software	
Drawing supplies (pencils, paper, paint)	\$100
TVP Animation 9.5, Student discount	$335 * 2 = \$ 670$
Adobe Creative Suite, Student discount	$359 * 2 = \$ 718$
Sound	
Composer	\$300
Release	
DVD + case	\$50
Promotional posters	\$50
Festivals	
Entry fee	\$300
TOTAL	\$2188
Contingency 15%	\$328.2
FINAL TOTAL	\$2516.2

# Appendix B

## Character Design

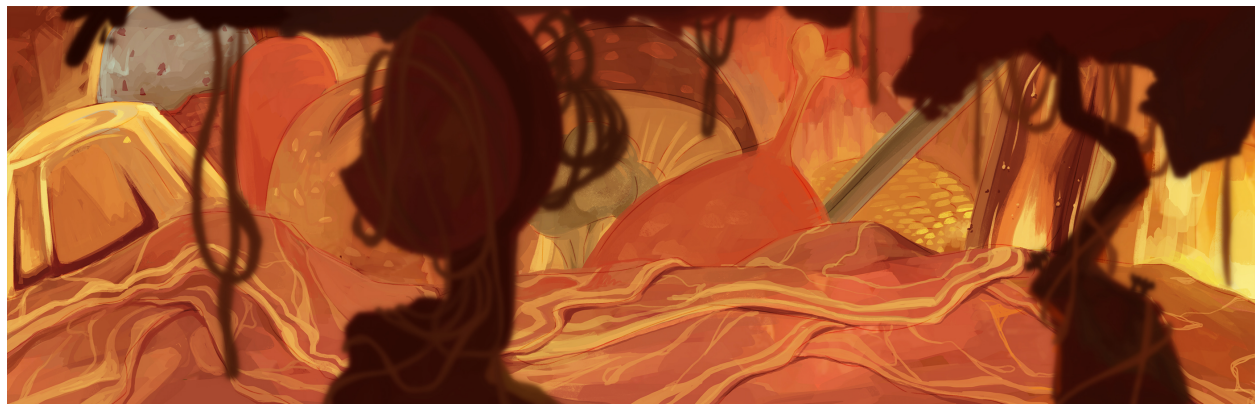






# Appendix C

## Background Design/ Prop Design

















# Appendix D

## Storyboard Excerpt

PAGE	SERIES / PROJECT	EPISODE TITLE	CODE	
20	Le Couple			
SCENE	LAYOUT - WIDESCREEN - ASPECT RATIO 16:9	ACTION - DIALOGUE - NOTES	PANELS	
68		Husband is scared by the monster.  SOUND / MUSIC		
69		The monster crawls down the sofa, approaching the camera.  Monster sound SOUND / MUSIC	a	
		SOUND / MUSIC	b	
		Monster swallows the camera.  SOUND / MUSIC	c	
70		Monster approaching husband.  Crawling sound. Monster sound. SOUND / MUSIC	a	

PAGE	SERIES / PROJECT	EPISODE TITLE	CODE
21	Le Couple		



SCENE	LAYOUT - WIDESCREEN - ASPECT RATIO 16:9	ACTION - DIALOGUE - NOTES	PANELS
		Husband climbs on the TV	b
		SOUND / MUSIC	
		Husband hides behind the TV. Monster eats the TV	c
		SOUND / MUSIC	
71		Husband is scared, hides from the monster. Monster approaching.	a
		SOUND / MUSIC	
		Monster gets bigger.	b
		SOUND / MUSIC	
		Husband changes from scared to determined.	c
		SOUND / MUSIC	

PAGE	SERIES / PROJECT	EPISODE TITLE	CODE
22	Le Couple		



SCENE	LAYOUT - WIDESCREEN - ASPECT RATIO 16:9	ACTION - DIALOGUE - NOTES	PANELS
72		Environment change to a world full of food. Monster bursts out. Husband jumps back.	a
		Explosion sound. Roar sound.	SOUND / MUSIC
			b
			SOUND / MUSIC
		Monster reaches husband.	c
			SOUND / MUSIC
73		Monster chases husband.	a
		Intense music.	SOUND / MUSIC
			b
			SOUND / MUSIC

PAGE	SERIES / PROJECT	EPISODE TITLE	CODE
23	Le Couple		



SCENE	LAYOUT - WIDESCREEN - ASPECT RATIO 16:9	ACTION - DIALOGUE - NOTES	PANELS
			d
		SOUND / MUSIC	
			d
		SOUND / MUSIC	
74		Husband jumps down on the ground.	a
		SOUND / MUSIC	
		Monster follows..	b
		SOUND / MUSIC	
75		Monster looks at husband.	a
		SOUND / MUSIC	