***Delayed*: Concept Art for a Proposed Animated Short**

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ARTDES 499 001

April 24th, 2019

Introduction

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communication, predating the invention of writing. From cave paintings, to Greek frescos and illuminated manuscripts, storytelling and visual art have evolved together over millennia. In contemporary society, film is one of the most predominant vehicles for narrative art. Growing up in the 21st century, the influence of the film industry on me was inescapable. As a child, movies, particularly animated movies, helped to steer my developing moral compass. Now a young adult, I am fascinated by the work that goes into making an animated film. Entering the mainstream in the early 20th century, the subgenre has spawned some of film's greatest work. In the past 20 years, animation has gone through significant developments in form, and more importantly in content. What was once an aesthetic medium in which to rehash fairytales has evolved into an art form with something to say. Storytelling is historically an indicator of where a society is at a moment in time.[1] With its aim towards children and cross-generational appeal, I believe animation is an indicator of our contemporary society and a powerful cultural tool.

It is animation's impact on culture that inspired my thesis project, concept development for a proposed animated short, entitled *Delayed*. The story of an airport gate agent, Owen, who feels stuck in his circumstances, *Delayed* explores the themes of family, human connection, free will, and love as a vehicle for growth. My thesis culminates in a comprehensive book that follows the development of *Delayed* through storyboards and process work. With *Delayed*, a gay love story, I want to express the similarity of our human experiences. Despite differences in background,

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[1] Parry, A. (1997). Why We Tell Stories: The Narrative Construction of Reality. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 118-127.

gender, and sexuality, we often go through similar trials and tribulations. To execute this project, I did extensive research into the history of storytelling, media, and the field of animation.

Context

Storytelling & Narrative Art

For millennia, stories have served multiple purposes: to explain the world, to educate, and to entertain. These properties of narrative often overlap. Stories of antiquity were of both cultural and religious significance. Tales from Greek and Egyptian mythology helped humans make sense of complicated natural phenomena. The Old Testament established laws and a moral code. Storytelling, both written and in oral tradition, can be seen across time in cultures from around the world.[2] In his book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker establishes that stories primarily exist as a way to understand our complex reality as human beings. Similar narratives can be seen in vastly different cultures because all stories are rooted in the human experience.[3] These archetypal plots reappear throughout history, although the meaning of the narrative is often altered. When first published, traditional fairy tales were used to teach ethics and enforce conservative social norms.[4] In the past century, these narratives have taken on new meaning by upholding more contemporary, broadminded ideals. Stories change because a society changes.

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[2] Davidson, Michelle (2004). "A phenomenological evaluation: using storytelling as a primary teaching method". *Nurse Education and Practice.*

[3] Booker, C. (2015). *The Seven Basic Plots: Why we Tell Stories*. London: Blomsbury Continuum.

[4] Gilbert, Sophie (March 31, 2017). "The Dark Morality of Fairy-Tale Animal Brides". The Atlantic. Retrieved 15 January, 2019

Narratives are not unique to the written word, and are historically present in a breadth of mediums. Throughout early and recorded history (roughly 3,000 B.C.E.), humans have use pictorial art to record their lives and stories. Cave paintings in western Europe illustrate the primeval lives of humans in the region. The earliest figurative cave painting is almost 35,000 years old. These early renderings can be observed in many regions of the world. The oldest known symbolic image was discovered in Indonesia in 2018.[5] The tradition of turning stories into art can also be traced throughout modern history, from Greek red-figure pottery to impressionist oil paintings. Societies have continually relied on the visual arts as a method of recording their myths, cultures and histories.

Film, Animation & Storytelling

The advent of film in the late 19th century marked the beginning of a new era for storytelling. In 1891, Thomas Edison demonstrated a successful prototype of the Kinetoscope, and in 1895 the first moving picture was presented to a paying audience in Paris. It would take almost twenty years before film developed from a novelty into an industry.[6] Since the medium's commercialization in the early 20th century, film has become one of the most popular forms of entertainment and narrative art.

Film is the apex of a millennium of artistic development. The desire to capture movement has been a creative goal since the inception of representational art. From the aforementioned Paleolithic cave paintings to sequential images observed in Egyptian burial chambers, preludes to

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[5] Aubert, M. (7 November 2018). "Paleolithic cave art in Borneo". *Nature*. Retrieved 18 January, 2019
[6] A Very Short History of Cinema. (2018, November 06). Retrieved January 17, 2019, from
https://blog.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/very-short-history-of-cinema/

film can be observed for thousands of years. These early artistic movements in narrative can also be considered prototypes for animation, a staple of the the film industry since the late 1920s.[7] Like film, animation consists of a series of sequential images. The medium has direct roots in the early 19th century, with children's toys such as the Thaumatrope (1825) and the flip book (1868). The idea of modern hand drawn animation was established in the late 1800s. In 1914, *Gertie the Dinosaur* premiered, a short film which employed both live actors and animated drawings. Like early film, animation was initially considered more of a novelty than an art form or serious method of entertainment.

As the film industry developed, animation grew in popularity. Walt Disney brought the art of animation to the masses in 1928 with *Steamboat Willy*, a fully animated short. Disney saw potential for animation as a way to tell long form stories. He premiered the world's first animated feature, *Snow White*, in 1937 to critical and commercial success. Fairytales were easy to adapt due to their popularity and prepackaged stories with a beginning, middle, and end[8]. During these early years of animation, the medium largely focused on aesthetics, working with simple stories when compared to the animated features of the late 20th century and today. The Disney Renaissance (1989-1999) and the rise of computer graphics with Pixar's *Toy Story* (1995) both helped mature the animation industry.

In the last decade, computer graphics have become the industry standard, as focus has moved towards creating more intricate narratives that hold emotional weight. This shift in focus has allowed commercial animation to tackle a variety of topics once thought too complex for younger audiences. Examples of this shift include films such as Pixar's *UP* (2009), a narrative about family and grief. *UP* is an interesting case study in making a complex film with potentially

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[7] Zorich, Zach (March 27, 2014). "Early Humans Made Animated Art". Nautilus. Retrieved January 2, 2019
[8] Gabler, N. (2008). *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

non-relatable characters engaging and successful. The main cast consists of a cranky old man, a whiny boy scout, and a talking dog. On the surface, these may seem like odd choices for an animated movie aimed towards a younger audience. However, in this unlikely crew, *UP* anchors its poignant story through specific characters in a way that both the youngest and oldest audience member can take something away from the film. The character of Mr. Fredrickson, the older man, helps to tell the story of someone coming to terms with the death of his wife and building a new future for himself. Russel, the boy scout, is dealing with feelings of abandonment, and the lack of a strong role model in his life. Doug, a golden retriever, feels lesser than his pack and is on a mission to prove himself.[9] At their core, these are human stories and emotions, ones that people can relate to no matter their age or background. As the animation genre becomes more successful at creating these complex stories, diversity in cast and characters has increased exponentially as studios play with the emotional universality of the human experience.

Social Issues in Media & Animation

Historically, western animation has struggled with how to approach a rapidly changing social climate. This can be attributed with the industry having to balance storytelling with marketability. Race, gender, and sexuality are sensitive, nuanced subjects that have only just begun to find their place in mainstream animation. Disney's *Princess and the Frog* (2009) was one of the first animated films with a largely African American cast. The studio's critically acclaimed *Zootopia* (2016), tackled racism and prejudice through anthropomorphic animals. Feminism found its way into animation in the 1990s with a notable rise in independent and self-actualized female

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[9] Docter, Pete, director. *Up*. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2009.

leads, a trend that continues today. Sony's *Into the Spiderverse* (2018) was the first animated film featuring a biracial protagonist. Peter Ramsey, a co-director of the film discussed the importance of the character, "…simply portraying characters of color in more than two dimensions and getting past the usual tropes and issues helped us say, 'Hey, it's a story about people.'"[10]. While the trend of diversity in cartoon features continues to rise, heterosexual character portrayals and storylines remain dominant. Nontraditional sexuality and gender identities are still noticeably sparse subjects in feature animation.

Through the past century, media representation of sexual orientation has been thorny, and varied. For much of the 20th century, the LGBT community was either ignored or vilified in media. Representation improved after the Stonewall Riots in 1969, although progress faltered in the 1980s with the emerging AIDS epidemic[11]. During this period of the late 80s and early 90s, LGBT characters in media were often portrayed as damaging stereotypes.[12]

Public attitude towards LGBT people has evolved rapidly since the mid-1990s, helping spur social change in the United States and around the globe. Recently, there has been a considerable spike in positive LGBT representation in film and television. Shows such as *Modern Family* (2009-2019) and *The Fosters* (2013-2018) were revolutionary in their portrayal of LGBT families. Each year, gay characters become more commonplace in film. As the public grows more comfortable with the LGBT community, there has been an increase in these characters in media aimed towards youth. This is particularly true in TV animation. Shows such Nickelodeon's *Legend*

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[10] Riesman, Abraham. "Is Miles Morales Finally Getting His Due as Spider-Man?" *Vulture*, 14 Dec. 2018.
[11] Steiner, L., Fejes, F., & Petrich, K. (1993). Invisibility, homophobia and heterosexism: Lesbians, gays and the media. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,10*(4), 395-422. Retrieved January/February, 2019.
[12] Johnson, Jo. ""We'll Have a Gay Old Time!": Queer Representation in American Prime-Time Animation from the Cartoon Short to the Family Sitcom.".

of Korra (2012-2014) and Cartoon Network's *Steven Universe* (2013-2019) portray a diverse cast of complex LGBT characters.

This representation is far less common in feature animation, with limited examples of gay or transgender characters and almost no LGBT protagonists. *In a Heartbeat*, a film by Estaban Bravo and Beth David, is one of the only animated shorts with a specifically LGBT storyline aimed towards a younger audience. Independently released in 2017, *In a Heartbeat* was successfully funded through Kickstarter, and has amassed over 39 million views.[13] While this bodes well for future of LGBT characters in feature animation, major studios have yet to participate in this rising trend of depicting diversity in sexuality.

Methodology

The process of *Delayed* was straightforward in execution, with the majority of experimentation completed in the early stages of script writing and ideation. I conceptualized the story of *Delayed* in the winter of 2015. I had made the decision to transfer out of the architecture program at the University of Michigan, which left me unsure of what my next steps would be. The idea for *Delayed* came as I sat between my mother and sister at a Hard Rock Cafe in the Orlando Airport. As I people watched, contemplating my future, I noticed a gate agent and a flight attendant strolling past, making idle chatter. I remember watching them and thinking, "you know, that could be a great story." There was something about the potential relationship between these two individuals that I found intriguing.

[13] Caron, Christina. "YouTube Falls Hard for 'In a Heartbeat,' a Boy-Meets-Boy Story." *YouTube Falls Hard for 'In a Heartbeat,' a Boy-Meets-Boy Story*, The New York Times, 4 Aug. 2017.

Process

Through the summer and fall semester, the script went through many iterations. In some of the drafts, *Delayed* was a love story between a man and woman. Receiving feedback from my faculty and peers, I realized the emotional heart of the story was missing. I decided to return to one of my initial ideas from back in 2015, and make *Delayed* a gay story. I recognized that by making *Delayed* a story between two men, the narrative gained depth and personality. The characters of Owen and Sam explore two sides of the gay experience: uncertainty, fear of the future, and feeling stuck (Owen) vs. joy, risk taking, and living one's best life (Sam). Initially, I was afraid going this direction with the narrative could isolate some of my intended audience. However, I realized I could make the story of *Delayed* accessible by playing on shared emotional commonalities, as with the aforementioned example of Pixar's *UP*. Additionally, I could insert my own experience into the narrative, helping add to the story's complexity.

I began working on an initial treatment[14] for *Delayed* in May of 2018. The original plan for my thesis was to create development work for not only *Delayed* but two additional animated shorts. After I began sketching for the extra shorts in September 2018, I realized I could either do a small amount of work for three stories, or a large breadth of work for one; I choose the latter. I followed a strict schedule for *Delayed* creating new work every week. In the early months of my process, I focused primarily on base character and environment design. By late December, the bulk of the the sketching and preliminary work was complete, and I began creating finalized art.

Story

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[14] A treatment is a rough, preliminary script. The final script for *Delayed* was completed in November of 2018.

A very quick summary of the narrative of *Delayed:* Owen is an airport gate agent who feels like his life is stalling. He falls for Sam, a flight attendant working in the same terminal. Owen goes through a series of near misses with Sam before finally building up the courage to introduce himself. I wrote two final scripts for *Delayed*, one with dialogue and one without (apart from a single word at the climax of the story, "Hi", spoken from Owen to Sam). I decided to go with the dialogue "free" iteration of *Delayed*, as I believed the story worked more successfully as a primarily visual piece. Additionally, the final line, "Hi", has significantly more impact as the only dialogue in the work.

Although the script was settled in November, I completed two storyboards for *Delayed* in early March. I chose pivotal scenes from the narrative, one that has a more humorous tone, and one that is more emotionally driven. I also digitally painted a two-page color script on Procreate for the iPad.

Color Script for Delayed

I wanted to wait until the character and environment designs were completed before beginning work on the story focused art. This was a time based decision, as storyboards and color scripts take significant time, and I did not have room in my thesis schedule to complete many iterations.

Characters

My focus when beginning character work for *Delayed* was figure out how to bring personality through into the designs. Since I began sketching the character in September, Owen has been through several iterations. His features are primarily comprised of rounded square shapes. In character design, the square represents honesty, stability, and stubbornness. In Owen's case, it also signifies the feeling of being stuck. Through the design process, the square was working in principle, but the result felt rigid and unlikable. By softening the edges of Owen's face, hair, and torso, he became a more likable character. I also considered color theory when designing for *Delayed*. Owen's scheme is primarily blue, a conservative color representing: loyalty, sadness, and responsibility. Additionally, blue is associated with innocence and wanting.

Sam is a flight attendant for North – South Air. An open and sociable character, Sam's features are mainly comprised of circular and oval shapes. This embodies his softness, sincerity, and approachability. While designing Sam, I had to figure out how to distinguish his character from Owen, and make their contrasting personalities evident through the designs. Color and shape

help to juxtapose the two main characters. Their costume designs also further this contrast: Sam wears a short sleeve button up and sweater vest, while Owen wears a heavier coat with a hood. This is indicative of their inner states, with Owen's clothing being darker and more closed off than Sam's uniform.

When thinking about *Delayed* I knew I wanted to create a diverse cast. Sam quickly evolved into an Asian American character to help distinguish between the two protagonists. Developing background characters for *Delayed*, I sought to capture some of the diversity seen in American airports. In total, I designed 14 characters and 26 variations. Designing multiple character iterations with alternatives for hair, eye/skin color, and clothing for a single model allowed me to illustrate more characters in a shorter period of time.

Environments

To create Midburgh Airport, I did research into contemporary and historical airport design. I drew from my background in architecture to create building renders and patterns. I looked at extensive visual reference to create detail work for the airport, including the airport signs and airplanes I illustrated. I created Terminal D, the location of the bulk of the story of *Delayed*, to fit the narrative and tone of the work. The terminal is split into three sections, a large atrium and food court with high ceilings, and two gate wings branching off either end. In the script of *Delayed*,

when Owen is feeling dejected it usually takes place in one of the two wings of the terminal. This space should almost feel suffocating, as if the airport is physically compressing the character.

During the early development of *Delayed*, I realized the whole story takes place in one terminal of Midburgh Airport. I understood this limited setting had the potential to be uninteresting. My goal was to make this environment as detailed as possible to maintain visual interest. I created several stylized brands based on archetypal stores you may find in American airports: a coffee shop, an Asian cafe, a candy store, etc. Additionally, these brands are evocative of foreign locales, helping add to Owen's wanderlust and feeling of being stuck. I designed logos to help introduce the stores and add to the brands' believability.

Summary of Process

In October, I had decided the main deliverable of my thesis would be a concept art book containing both process and final work completed throughout the year. I began compiling and designing this book in early February, and sent the final copy to print in March. Creating the book was an iterative process. I redesigned the book twice after getting feedback from faculty in Stamps, improving the organization and flow of the book with each revision.

Overall, the process of working on *Delayed* was fairly direct and linear because of my sense of organization, commitment to iteration and revision, and careful execution of even the smallest details. I entered into the thesis course with a strong idea of what I wanted to complete by April. Comments and critique from my professors and peers were invaluable, and helped my project evolve and steered the final direction of *Delayed*.

Creative Work

The final product of *Delayed* is an 84-page art book situated within a designed exhibition environment. The book contains character and environment designs, storyboards, and illustrations. The book is 13 by 11 in., created on InDesign and printed using Blurb. The majority of the work found within the book is digital, drawn and painted on Photoshop or Procreate for the iPad.

Art Book

Entitled, *Delayed: Concept Art for an Animated Short*, the book is split into three sections: characters, environment, and script & story. Each section is introduced with an illustrated depiction of the sky at different times of day, dotted with jet contrails, to tie into the overarching airport theme. The book's cover is a saturated yellow, representative of hope, optimism, and happiness. The title is presented like a Solari flip-board, reminiscent of the slip-flap displays that were commonly found in transportation hubs of the 20th century. A line of black suitcases wraps around the front cover and inner flap. This monotonous line is broken by a blue suitcase (representative of the character Owen) and a red suitcase (representative of the character Sam) above the book title.

The book begins with a table of contents giving the viewer an idea of what to expect from *Delayed*. The spread is designed with a sweeping diagonal blue background, evocative of the sky. Arrows similar to that of flight patterns enter from the left. There is then a brief background and introduction to the project before the section on character design. Each subsection is introduced with a new color block to break up the flow of the book. The first subsection and character

presented is Owen, the protagonist of *Delayed*. Pages 8 through 10 contain finalized work for Owen. Pages 12 through 15 contain work from the development of Owen, coupled with text introducing the reader to the design process of the character. The next subsection is about Sam, the deuteragonist of *Delayed*. The design of this section follows that of Owen's, with a few pages of final work, followed by several pages of process work. The last character subsection is background characters, and can again be identified by a new color block. I used a variety of illustration styles in *Delayed*. Drawing reference from a large selection of work when completing visual research for this project, and wanted to play with different styles I found and enjoyed.

The chapter on environment design begins with an introduction to Midburgh Airport, the setting of *Delayed*. This section includes building and texture designs, a map, and illustrations. A section on airport brands follows, with process sketches and a total of 6 stores introduced across 8 spreads. The chapter is capped off with a subsection on detail work, including sample building designs for the city of Midburgh. The final chapter of *Delayed* begins with a script, followed by two sample storyboards, a color key, and two pages of story illustrations.

Exhibition

At the time of writing, *Delayed: Concept Art for an Animated Short* is displayed within a planned exhibition environment. Three copies of the book are placed on an authentic airport bench consisting of an elevated table in-between two seats. I painted the wall behind the seating a vibrant, light blue, suggestive of the sky, and a direct link to the introductory page of the concept book. The seats are prune, which pairs with the blue of the wall and the books' saffron dust jackets.

Throughout the year, I had several ideas for how I wanted to present *Delayed*; the airport

seating, however, was always part of my exhibition plan. My original proposal was to include a

simulated movie poster for *Delayed* on the wall behind

the seating, along with some mounted illustrations and

storyboards. In March, I had a discussion with one of my

thesis classmates, Katie Spak, who believed this plan

could be busy and distract from the book. We agreed the

best way to use the exhibition space was to quickly

introduce the general public to my book and the

characters of *Delayed*. I ultimately settled on three 18 by

24 in. posters which sit on the wall behind the airport

seating. The left poster is a stylized illustration of Owen, the middle is the slip-flap title used on

the cover of *Delayed*, and the right poster is a stylized illustration of Sam. The posters are visually

connected by a yellow flight pattern which continues throughout the series. The background of the

posters is a stark white, contrasting with the wall and drawing attention to the work.
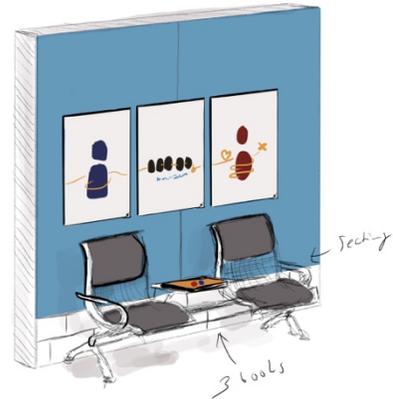
Goals & Outcome

When creating *Delayed: Concept Art for an Animated Short*, I wanted to sequentially

introduce readers to the detailed world I created for the project. I decided to make the first section

of the book character designs, as a way to familiarize the reader with the characters of *Delayed*.

This section is followed by environment designs, to root these characters in a realized world. The

last section is about the story of *Delayed*, a culmination of the work found within the sections on

character and environment. I included the script for *Delayed* in the last section of the book, with the hope that someone viewing the work could read the script would imagine the short using the designs found within the book.

Throughout the process of creating *Delayed*, I was worried that those coming to the gallery to view the thesis exhibition would not take the time to engage with the work. I am incredibly happy that this fear was unwarranted. The night of the opening, I observed dozens of people taking the time to fully read through each section of the book. For most of the night, the two seats were occupied by someone engaging with *Delayed*. I also observed several groups going through the work together, discussing the book and its contents. The three posters coupled with the wall and airport seating serve(d) as an effective way to introduce *Delayed* without overwhelming the book.

Conclusion

I believe that animation has the potential to positively influence the next generation in the way the genre effected me as a child. The recent trend and rise of diversity in animation is a promising start to what will be a long transition for the industry. Moving into the future, animation will still have to contend with marketability clashing with the stories artists in the industry want to tell. While this shift to more socially thoughtful narratives may be jarring for the animation industry, I like to believe this change will open the door to more impactful future films. Shorts like *In a Heartbeat* are a great indicator of the positive effect and popularity of broadminded narratives, and one day, I hope to see *Delayed* join the ranks of progressive animated films.

My goal when beginning work on *Delayed* was to create a wide breadth of work for a proposed animated short. The final product of my thesis, an 84-page concept book, succeeds in

this endeavor. My work went through significant development in intent and meaning throughout this yearlong process. Creating the story and art for *Delayed*, I realized I had something to say. This project will not disappear when I graduate. Even if *Delayed* is not ultimately realized as an animated short, I will enter into the animation industry with an understanding of how to add meaning into a work and simultaneously tell an effective story.

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