Sunshine

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SUNSHINE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Digital Production Arts

by
Katherine Elizabeth Crossan
December 2019

Accepted by:
Professor David Donar, Committee Chair
Professor Kathleen Thum
Professor Anthony Summey
ABSTRACT

Sunshine is a story about growing up. It’s a story that I feel is important to tell, because it’s a hardship that everyone can relate to. By sharing a story that other people can understand, I can create a connection between myself and my audience; or a feeling of empathy. I chose to tell this story through film, so I could share my story primarily through images, or visual narrative. Sunshine is currently in its animatic state, which is the preliminary version of the film. The animatic, or story reel, consists of the film’s storyboards put together and timed out in a video format, and includes a scratch track of the voices and sounds in the film. In this paper, I will be discussing some of the foundations of creating a visual narrative; including the process of story development and character creation, the necessity of storyboarding and its principles in conveying stories, and the digital tools and process that I used to create and assemble the final story reel.
ARTIST STATEMENT

_Sunshine_ is a 2D animated short story about growing up. People are natural storytellers; they do so in their everyday life, and by crafting a visual narrative experience like an animated film, an artist can take a story that they feel is important and can share it with others in a more meaningful, and entertaining way. _Sunshine_ is a coming of age story where a timid little girl is thrust into a new situation and must learn to grow from it despite her fears. From growing up, to overcoming adversity, to coping with depression; I wanted Sunshine as a character to represent a universal emotion that everyone can recognize and relate to; being unsure and afraid of the future.

During my research on storytelling and character creation, almost all my sources echoed the sentiment “write what you know” [6]. The concept of drawing on the artist’s own life or studying the habits and quirks of the people around them makes their stories and characters more, as Mark Andrews puts it, “honest” [7]. In Nancy Beiman’s _Prepare to Board!_ there’s an entire chapter titled “Putting Yourself Into Your Work” wherein Beiman discusses the validity of the artist adding parts of themselves, their life, and the people they’ve come to know into their work. The artist can have a story with outlandish characters or action-packed scenes, but without the story or the characters having that “human touch” to empathize with [1], the story and characters may not have the impact that they’re striving for.
When considering the visual narrative for *Sunshine*, I found that many storyboard artists and animators influenced my direction. One of which was Hayao Miyazaki, who has influenced me and my work heavily for much longer than my time working on *Sunshine*. One of the biggest ways that Miyazaki expresses his characters is through his incredible timing. In Japanese, they call this “Ma” or emptiness [4]. In other words, he allows his characters a moment to breathe. It gives the audience a moment of pause, a moment to see the inner workings of a character’s thoughts through their body language and expression. It gives the audience time to empathize, and this is what I want to achieve with my own characters. Being able to show instead of tell is, as Nancy Beiman states, a “general rule of animation” [3]. This moment of pause is a very emotional way to portray the character’s feelings, and a form of showing instead of telling the audience outright how the character is coping with their current situation.

Along the same line, the Pixar short *Kitbull*, directed by Rosana Sullivan, uses visual storytelling to convey a powerful and heartwarming story through the perspectives of animals who don’t have to speak a word to communicate how they feel. By discarding dialogue, the artist must now rely heavily on visual narrative as well as acting to deliver the story to the audience. Much like the characters seen in *Kitbull*, Sunshine is a character who never speaks, and because of this I took the opportunity to create a few moments in the film where she pauses, and emotes. From her indecisiveness when it comes to returning home or pursuing the bus, to her grief-stricken sobbing at the bottom of the pit,
I show moments of emotion and hold on these moments; using Miyazaki’s “Ma” to give the audience a moment to process her feelings. I rely on visual narrative as well as the gestures and expressions of Sunshine, as a non-speaking character, as a way to convey her emotions.

The significance of Sunshine is to demonstrate the power of visual narrative, and to create a more believable and empathetic story through a character’s struggles that come from a very real place and shared experience. Using storyboarding to stage the narrative in a more thoughtful way, and posing of the character and later applying animation to create believability, it’s my goal to create a short film that people will not only enjoy, but empathize with through the universal truth of the difficulties that come with growing up.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d like to take the time to thank my mom and dad for always supporting me and being as excited as I am about what I love to do. Thank you, mom, for your love, support, and inspiration. I’d also like to thank my best friend Sarah for lending her beautiful whistle to the project. And I’d also like to thank David Donar as well as the rest of my committee, Kathleen Thum and Anthony Summey, for their guidance and support.
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BACKGROUND

1.1 Connecting story to self

When I was eighteen years old, I was dreading the fact that I might not get into the University of South Carolina in Columbia, a mere twenty minutes away from my parents’ house. I told everyone that USC was the only school I wanted to attend, but deep down I knew I wanted to go so I could stay close to home. I was afraid of leaving. And in doing so, I putzed around for four years thinking I was going to become a dentist. And even though I didn’t end up pursuing that path, I don’t regret spending my undergraduate years at USC. By the time I was twenty-two and graduated, I started to realize that, if I wanted to pursue my passion, which was art, I’d have to leave Columbia. I got pretty lucky, since Clemson’s not too far away. But it was still difficult living on my own for the first time. Some drunk undergrad student tried to break into my apartment thinking it was his, the water heater burst at three AM in the middle of winter break, my car got totaled smack dab in the middle of downtown— and every time I would cry and cry, wishing that my mother could be there to hold me and tell me that everything was going to be all right. When you get knocked down, you can sit there and sulk or you can get back up. My mother always encouraged me to get back up. And so, I did, even without her right there to help me. Like most things, it became easier with time, and so this experience of personal growth became a topic that I felt I wanted to share in some way.
This short film is very near and dear to my heart, because the character, Sunshine, reflects my own experience. The story is the one I want to share with others who can relate to the same sort of struggles and to show them that, in the end, everything will be all right. While researching storyboarding, I found that many storyboard artists as well as animators agree with the sentiment that the artist should create characters that are relatable. Of course, this is the goal in animation; to create life. By making their characters more like themselves, the artist gives them flaws, which in turn gives the characters a more human quality to them; making them appear more than just a few lines on the screen, but instead a living, breathing character that the audience ends up caring about because they can relate to them in some way. In *Frank and Ollie*, the documentary on Disney animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, Frank recounts the fact that he knew a man in the army who would scratch his chest while thinking, and Frank then used this gesture as a piece of animation for the character Baloo in *The Jungle Book* [24]. Finding quirks, habits, and traits in others or in themselves, the artist finds that they’re studying life, and by referencing life in their characters they therefore make the characters more believable and relatable. Beiman encourages this form of creating characters and stories: “This will make your characters uniquely yours and not a mere imitation of a style.” [2]
1.2 Doing what you love

In addition to giving characters life experiences, as an artist, it’s important to create works and ideas that the artist is interested in personally. When asked about how *Kitbull* was developed, director Rosana Sullivan admitted that “…it started from a cat video….” Sullivan goes on explaining that initially she drew kittens because she personally enjoyed doing so, but then this character eventually developed into the protagonist of the short [18]. I feel that this is another important truth that artists should hold dear; creating something familiar to them will help the artist create a character that will resonate with their audience, and by incorporating an idea that they find appealing or just drawing something that they love adds a passion to their work that makes them want to pursue it, and it will show when the project develops.

For me, this passion is birds. I love birds, and I have, and had, several parrot companions since I was in my teens. My last project, *Mockingbird* [Figure 1.1, 1.2], was a short film that focuses on a bird character of the same name; a mockingbird. My professor and mentor, David Donar, gave me the opportunity to work on this project, and gave me the chance to create a character that I could enjoy working with, and I did. Having the opportunity to develop and animate a character that I found personally interesting resulted in a work that I really cared for, and so when I first started to think about *Sunshine*, I immediately knew I wanted the character to be a bird.
Figure 1.1 Still from *Mockingbird*

Figure 1.2 Mockingbird reference sheet
It didn’t take me very long to decide on chickens as my bird of choice when I was developing *Sunshine*. My initial idea for *Sunshine* as a short stemmed from wanting to create a loving, nurturing mother character. Here in the west, people have perceptions about certain bird species and the symbols that they associate them with; i.e. owls are associated with wisdom, eagles represent freedom, crows are often associated with evil or darkness. The concept of a “mother hen” is another association that people make with birds; the mother hen is a phrase that is used to describe someone who is protective, like a mother who is protective of her children, or a hen who is protective of her brood [Figure 1.3]. The classic folk-tale *The Little Red Hen* stars a hen character by the same name, who is a self-sufficient, hardworking hen who carefully plans to plant a grain of wheat and care for it until she’s able to bake it into bread, and she does this all on her own. Although not protective of any children in the book, the Little Red Hen possesses foresight, perseverance, and patience; all characteristics that I’ve seen in my own mother, who is the inspiration for Sunshine’s mother [Figure 1.4].
Figure 1.3 Chicken studies for *Sunshine*’s mother hen character
Figure 1.4 *The Little Red Hen* illustrated by J.P. Miller and Sunshine’s mother
INFLUENCES

2.1 Developing your story and character

Growing up isn’t easy, and although young people try to prepare themselves by asking their elders for guidance, it’s usually their own experiences that teach and truly change their character; much like the change the audience sees occur in a character in a film or story. They experience a character arc, wherein the character must overcome hardship and ultimately change, for better or worse. People also experience these arcs, they are always growing and changing, so in turn their stories have a similar structure that they can relate to. Although the narrative of *Sunshine* was inspired by my own experiences, many pieces of the project were influenced by other storyboard artists, animators, and storytellers. Going into this project, it was my goal for *Sunshine* to connect the audience to my character, Sunshine, on an emotional level; to create a sense of empathy within the viewer.

Animator Chuck Jones once said about his cartoon characters, “If they weren’t alive then how the hell could I care about them?” [20] This idea, of bringing life to characters, is essential to getting the audience invested in the narrative. Without that life, then the audience wouldn’t care about the characters or what they go through. To create life in characters, the artist must connect their character to their audience in some way, to get them involved in the character and their story. To get the audience involved, the artist
has to make their audience feel empathy for their characters. So, how could the artist create this empathy through their characters? Two of the Nine Old Men, Disney’s core animators, Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston describe how they create a character in *The Illusion of Life*; “We start with something they know and like… it can be a situation everyone has experienced, an emotional reaction universally shared, a facet of someone’s personality easily recognized, or any combination of these.” [26] Thomas and Johnston continue, “In our lives, we find that as we get to know people, we share their experiences—we sympathize, we empathize, we enjoy. If we love them, we become deeply concerned about their welfare.” [26]

To answer Jones’s question from earlier, Thomas and Johnston show the audience that if they love a character, then they’ll actually care about them. Both the Disney animators as well as Jones created an abundance of character animation that not only moved me as a child [Figure 2.1] but also brought me great joy and entertainment. Even during my research, I found myself laughing at Jones’s *Merrie Melodies* cartoons [Figure 2.2]. Thomas, in the *Frank and Ollie* documentary, puts forth that “One of the most important parts of animation is observing….” [24] Much like Beiman, both Thomas and Johnston assert that observation is crucial; not only to the development of the character and their personality, but how they act and react visually. When the artist finds themselves and others in how their characters think, move, and act, this then allows for
the audience to get involved with artist’s characters and care about them and their wellbeing.

With this method of character creation in mind, I was able to connect Sunshine’s character to myself. When I first started thinking of how to make Sunshine more like myself, I thought about how I felt and how I acted in my late teens. I found that a combination of being shy and my socialization as a young woman lead me to be very hesitant and timid when it came to most situations. Although I was outgoing as a child, I found that as I began to become more self-aware of myself and my surroundings, I became very self-conscious. I remember being about fourteen or so when I had to take gym in high school; I was never very athletic as a kid, and there were a few times where I was made fun of in front of the entire class, so I always dreaded having to go. But I had to go, and I did.

I decided to have Sunshine reflect this fear of leaving her comfort zone in the film, and even though she doesn’t want to leave, just like I had to, she has to. As I’ve gotten older I’ve found that everyone feels a similar way when they’re growing up; at some point everyone feels awkward or self-conscious about themselves, and this is a perfectly normal and relatable experience that comes with growing up. I felt that it would be worthwhile to apply this to Sunshine; making her young and inexperienced gives her room to grow, and by making her this way she enables the ability for the audience to
learn and grow with her, or to show that they’re not alone in how they feel, or have felt in the past. She is someone who the audience can relate to, and empathize with.

Figure 2.1 From the film *Bambi*; the emotional scene when Bambi realizes that his mother is gone [33]
Another influential artist that I mentioned previously is Hayao Miyazaki, the director and animator behind Studio Ghibli and some of my favorite films of all time; including *Princess Mononoke*, *Howl’s Moving Castle*, *Spirited Away* and *Kiki’s Delivery Service*. Miyazaki has never been afraid to tell stories that he thinks are important to tell, and although many of his stories have overarching themes of nature, the balance of good and evil, and the importance of hard work, it’s his leading female characters and their struggles that have resonated with me from a young age. Miyazaki’s work on both *Spirited Away* and *Kiki’s Delivery Service* were the two films that I looked to for inspiration for this project, due to the fact that both films explore the experiences and hardships of young women. Although Miyazaki himself doesn’t have the personal experience of being a woman, he still is able to put pieces of himself, and others, into his characters to achieve that empathy that the artist is looking for in their characters and narrative.
Kiki’s Delivery Service is a coming of age story, which is timeless and universal, making it a beautiful example of impressive character and narrative; despite being released in 1997, revisiting it during my first semester at Clemson in 2017, more than twenty years after its release, it resonated with me even more than my first time watching it as a teenager. Miyazaki makes it abundantly clear that Kiki has to struggle while finding her way in the world, and in the forward of The Art of Kiki’s Delivery Service he describes Kiki’s character as representing “…every girl who is drawn to the glamour of the big city but find themselves struggling with their newfound independence—in spite of their parents’ love and financial support.” [8] Although Kiki leaves her home freely while Chihiro is separated from her parents, both of these young women have to cope with loneliness, overcome hardship, and develop into more defined and mature young women by the end of their respective films [Figure 2.3].

Miyazaki concludes his forward in The Art of Kiki’s Delivery Service by expounding on the film’s theme, “Ultimately, this film celebrates their struggle to become independent… for its message must be relevant and universal.” [8] Again, ensuring that the character and their story has some sort of characteristic and experience that everyone can relate to, and making sure that its timeless, is crucial in storytelling and creating character empathy. Miyazaki’s message of hard work and life experience when growing as a young adult is what brought so many young people to see and to become fans of his films, and I’m no different. When developing Sunshine, I wanted to be sure
that I shared a story that was relevant and universal as Miyazaki describes, and I found that the story that fit that description was a story that came from my own experience in life. Miyazaki was able to stir such feelings in me when I saw Kiki because I saw myself in her character. And so, by applying my own experiences to Sunshine, I’m hoping to accomplish the same in someone who looks at Sunshine and sees themselves in her. Much like Kiki before her, Sunshine must struggle to find her way in the world.
Figure 2.3 Kiki and Chirico’s character arcs throughout *Kiki’s Delivery Service* and *Spirited Away* respectively [22, 23]
Another way to make a character relatable, besides the artist giving the character their personal touch by incorporating experiences or real life observations, is by giving the character desire. Having desires is another facet of what it means to be human; people all want something, and by giving a character something to pursue it gives the audience a reason to care about them. The audience will see themselves in that character, in that situation of wanting something. They’ll want the character to succeed, because they themselves want to succeed [11]. Dean Movshovitz writes in *Pixar Storytelling*, the artist “…must know (and convey) why…” their character wants that something [11].

Sometimes this desire can go against the character’s overall growth; such is the case with Sunshine. Her desire is to go home, to be safe and to be comforted by her mother. The audience sees this desire come through when Sunshine, almost instinctually, runs in the direction of her home after hearing the thunder rumble once more. Her desire directly conflicts with her situation when she ends up in the woods. Even though her desire isn’t initially met, it’s the driving point for Sunshine to continue going, much like Chihiro in *Spirited Away*. I’ve always felt that these characters, who are young and scared, and then thrust into a new situation where they don’t have what they want makes for a better story.

One of Movshovitz’s first points in his book on Pixar is titled “Leaving the Comfort Zone: More Discomfort = More Story” [10] which is true to the characters discussed so far like Kiki and Chihiro, as well as plenty of other characters seen in Pixar’s films.
In addition to giving characters some sort of trait or hardship that the audience can relate to, the art of visual narrative calls for visual communication, therefore making the character’s actions important as well. Even though there are very different cultures and languages around the world, everyone is human, and therefore they understand body language, facial expressions, and gestures despite language barriers. Thomas and Johnston write “Conveying a certain feeling is the essence of communication in any art form… this gives animation an almost magical ability to reach inside any audience and communicate with all peoples everywhere, regardless of language barriers.” [26]

Even if the audience doesn’t speak the language of a film, they can distinguish the tone of the scene based on body language of its actors; discerning information about the narrative and thereby understand the structure of the story to an extent. The concept of show don’t tell is very influential to my own work. I knew instantly that I wanted Sunshine to be a film without any dialogue, strictly relying on visuals to tell the story. And so, to help guide the audience through Sunshine’s emotional journey, I make sure that the audience knows what Sunshine is feeling at any given time during the film. The audience sees her emotions communicated through her face, as well as her body posture and actions. I was able to show instead of tell her feelings about her situation; throughout the film Sunshine is usually hiding, running, or crying. These are gestures that the audience can associate with being fearful or afraid, and for a majority of the film Sunshine does feel this way. From her frantically running home after hearing the thunder
rumble, to her slouching over and sobbing in the pit, I push her expressions and actions so that any viewer can immediately determine her intentions and feelings.

Although Sunshine is by no means drawn realistically, the drawings, or animation, still manages to convey how she’s feeling through her expressions and posture. In the past, I’ve worked with colleagues who have been very opposed to simplistic character design. They were adamant about making their characters very human-like, thinking that this would create a more relatable character, despite the fact that the character itself was anything but human. Then, and to this day, I stand by the fact that you can make characters relatable without adding unnecessary design choices to add emotional quality to the character. Needing human-like characteristics like appendages or even a mouth aren’t necessary to communicate visually. I first learned about this concept through Thomas and Johnston; their flour sack demonstrates that even facial features aren’t needed to represent emotion visually [Figure 2.4]. Chuck Jones once said in regard to characters, “You learn more from eyes moving than you do from the mouth moving.”

[20] Emotion and thought can be discerned from visual cues such as the eyes or the body’s pose, having a character with a complex, more human design is unnecessary in conveying the artist’s ideas.
To continue on design, Hayao Miyazaki and Rosanna Sullivan were both animators who were individually able to achieve amazing and very personable black cat designs [Figure 2.5]. These two characters show the artist that they don’t need complex designs or realism to convey the idea or personality of a cat to the audience. Much like
how people recognize a face in just two dots and a line, they can recognize shapes, color, and lines as things they see in their everyday lives. Not only is the artist reducing the workload of the drawing and animation when they remove unnecessary details that don’t need to be included in their character design, but it also makes the character easier to read. This, as Thomas and Johnston put it, makes the character more “appealing.” [29]

This idea of appeal that Thomas and Johnston talk about only adds to the audience’s liking of the character, and by making the character design easy to interpret and understand, the artist makes them more relatable. These concepts definitely pushed me to rely on shape and color when designing Sunshine; circles were very prominent in her design, making her very circular and friendly, I also had her eyes be the biggest and most noticeable feature on her face to help emphasize her expressions. Much like Jiji and the kitten, Sunshine is simple and easy to read, making her emotions and gestures easy to determine.

Figure 2.5 Jiji from *Kiki’s Delivery Service* and the kitten from *Kitbull* [22, 17]
Character and story are best told when they come from an honest place. Miyazaki in *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki* states, “Movies show who you are. No matter how hard you try to hide it.” [13] Even if the artist tries to remove themselves completely from the process, they will find that pieces of themselves will be rooted in that project. Allowing for an honest conversation between the artist and the audience through their work makes for a better, more meaningful film. And by opening themselves up to be vulnerable, letting the world see who they are, not only as an artist but as a person, and what they’ve experienced, the artist will find that people will respond in turn, and understand and relate to their characters and stories. Artists like Miyazaki and the Disney animators have guided my art in many ways over the years, and with this film I’m striving to exercise my ability to think creatively and put my heart into a piece of work that I believe in. During my last committee meeting, my committee chair David Donar commented on the film, saying that it was very tender and very much like me. I was happy to hear that remark.

### 2.2 Visual narrative and the art of storyboarding

Disney animator Eric Goldberg once said, “What a great storyboard artist is, is a great communicator.” [34] Being a storyboard artist encompasses a number of roles that must be filled, so the artist can better communicate their story. Some of these roles
include being the director, cinematographer, and editor of the story. Understanding
draftsmanship, cinema language, and story all have a part in creating clear and readable
storyboards. And to create clear and readable storyboards, I’ve learned that, as a
storyboard artist, I must be willing and able to redo my work. Thomas and Johnston
explain the role of a storyboard artist in *The Illusion of Life*; “Because their contribution
to the whole picture was so great, only artists who drew with a special appeal or a
sensitive style were put in story sketch, and the very sensitivity that made them valuable
was what made them so depressed when the storyboard was changed. And it was always
changed. That is the point of a storyboard.” [30] They even go on to recount a time when
an artist pleaded with Walt Disney not to take out his boards, to which Disney
deliberately took the boards and ripped them up [30].

Although the artist may become attached to a particular idea or shot that they
liked, it’s important to put the story first. “Sometimes cutting out parts that have been
overbuilt or become confusing (even though they might be entertaining) will simplify the
story and make it clearer.” [31] By allowing storyboards to change, the artist enables
exploration of their story and characters; trying new ways to accomplish the point of that
particular shot. Storyboard artist Sergio Paez writes in *Professional Storyboarding* that
every shot, every panel included in the storyboards “…should have a purpose for the
story.” [14] And this is the point of storyboarding; it’s a way to quickly and efficiently
see if the artist’s ideas work. By pitching the storyboards to their team and taking notes

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on their work, the artist has the ability to go back and improve the visual narrative through editing the boards. Taking out scenes, putting in establishing shots, reworking the staging on a particular shot—these are just a few ways that the artist has the power to improve their storyboards. Being conscious of the fact that storyboard artists almost always rework their boards, I went into Sunshine ready to take feedback from my committee. As discussed later in the production section of this paper, not only were scenes cut out from the final reel, but many shots were also reworked.

The key to a storyboard artist’s job is to convey the story point; to help communicate a part, as well as the whole, story to the audience. As mentioned earlier in section 2.1, the concept of showing the audience instead of telling the audience is a key part of animation. This idea can, of course, also be applied to storyboarding, because of the fact that through storyboarding the artist can visually communicate to their audience based on what they include in the frame. These visuals can help guide the audience through the narrative, and can create a cohesive story that the audience can experience. Some of the principles of storyboarding that help convey the story include the use of staging and composition, the posing and performance of the characters, and the choice of shots as well as the order. Later on, when the artist puts their story reel together, timing also becomes essential to the presentation of the story.

As mentioned earlier, being a skilled draftsman is a definite advantage when developing storyboards. At least having an understanding of the elements that make up
art such as line, shape, value, as well as being able to convey perspective can help the artist draw their storyboards. Disney animator Marc Davis is quoted in Thomas and Johnston’s *The Illusion of Life*, “Drawing is giving a performance; an artist is an actor who is not limited by his body, only by his ability and, perhaps, experience.” [29]

Coming from a fine art background myself, understanding these elements of storyboarding were already ingrained in me in my undergraduate studies. However, understanding how to use composition in a way to make sure that every single panel was relevant and necessary to the film’s development was something I needed to learn, and I continued to learn as I worked on *Sunshine*. Throughout my process, I found that I was creating scenes and situations that were unnecessary to the story as a whole. As seen later in the production section of this paper [Figure 3.10], I had to rework and “trim the fat” from my film a few times to help get the most important story points that conveyed the narrative. Thomas and Johnston discuss this process that took place on a scene in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, “The crew concentrated on just the essence of the story situation… they used carefully planned dramatic staging rather than explanatory scenes… the less that was said, the more they seemed to understand.” [32]

Although being an artist can be important to the storyboarding process, storyboard artists are not making one singular image, but instead they’re making thousands of images to help guide the audience through a narrative. With this in mind, it’s crucial that the art and storyboards aren’t necessarily artistic masterpieces, but instead ensure that
they’re clear and readable. Although each audience member can’t understand every nuance or idea that the artist puts forth in the story, especially on the first viewing, visual clarity can still be achieved. By using basic storyboarding principles such as staging and composition, the artist can guide the audience’s eye to important information, as well as tell them about the mood of the scene or the emotion of the character in the scene. Paez explains in *Professional Storyboarding*, “Expression is conveyed by the staging, the environment, and the character’s whole body language. You can’t say ‘loneliness’ or ‘isolation’ better than putting the character small and alone in the middle of the frame with lots of empty space around them.” [16] Whatever staging is chosen, it’s wise to remember that sometimes simple is the best thing. As discussed with character design, Thomas and Johnston’s words apply to storyboarding as well. If a “…drawing that is complicated or hard to read lacks appeal.” [29] This idea of visual appeal is a basic concept of all visual art; artists want to create something that the audience can understand, appreciate, or think critically about what they’re viewing. And by using staging in a simple, readable way the artist can better convey their message to the audience. Thomas and Johnston reinforce the importance of staging; “The most important consideration is always the ‘story point.’” [28] Once again, the artist must understand that storyboards must above all convey the narrative.

When developing the film *Sunshine*, I decided to use the weather as an opposing force, because it better displayed the main character’s own inner struggle and character
arc without having her explain her feelings to the audience. Rain, storms, and cool colors associated with this kind of weather usually conjure sad or melancholy emotions within the audience. I found that a few lines from a song by The Oh Hellos influenced my thinking on how rain works within a story. The song is *I Have Made Mistakes* and it goes: “The sun, it does not cause us to grow. It is the rain that will strengthen, the rain that will strengthen your soul.” [25] This sentiment not only resonated with me personally, but ended up being the main force behind Sunshine’s character development. The idea of developing as a person by way of difficult obstacles is by no means a new storytelling concept—as discussed earlier both Kiki and Chihiro go through similar character arcs—however I feel that embracing the visuals and emotions associated with rain and thunderstorms would emphasize Sunshine’s struggle. This visualization of the character’s inner struggle through rain is seen in *Kiki’s Delivery Service*, where Kiki flies through the rain after dealing with a customer who wasn’t appreciative of her work [Figure 2.7]. In this particular scene Kiki doesn’t speak, however, the shot says it all; through her posture, her expression, and the tone that the rain sets. She’s upset, and she doesn’t have to say a word about it. Rain is used in a similar manner in *Kitbull*, when the kitten, out of fear, scratches the dog who was only trying to help free the kitten [Figure 2.7]. As seen in figure 2.7, using weather can heavily influence narrative. Thanks to the rain and the mood and colors that come with it, the audience can better understand the character and the emotional turmoil that they’re experiencing.
Figure 2.6 Kiki from *Kiki’s Delivery Service* and the kitten from *Kitbull* in the rain

[22, 17]
Besides weather, physical placement in the world, and how the artist stages it, can
tell the audience a lot about the character and where they are emotionally. I took this idea
to heart and used it for the climax in *Sunshine*, putting her at the very bottom of a hole to
show how low she really is. This idea is explored also in *Kiki’s Delivery Service* and
*Howl’s Moving Castle* as well; both Kiki and Sophie display their emotional low in their
respective films by falling into deep ditches [Figure 2.8]. Again, the audience can see in
the final film how color plays an important role in determining the mood of the scene.
Although color isn’t absolutely necessary in storyboarding, using simplified color and
tone in storyboards not only distinguish characters from the background, but they also
help set the mood for the scene early on in production.
Figure 2.7 Kiki and Sophie at their lowest point (emotionally and physically) in *Kiki’s Delivery Service* and *Howl’s Moving Castle* [22, 21]
Being able to edit and revise storyboards to help better convey visual narrative is a must as a storyboard artist, and by studying the works that have been discussed in this section of the paper I feel as if I’ve learned and improved as a storyteller; understanding how to give my character life as well as making sure that my storyboards are readable as well as visually conveying the emotion and mood were my top priorities while working on *Sunshine.*
PRODUCTION

3.1 Story and characters

Figure 3.1 Chick life studies

My first step in production was to observe, which I did by studying chickens and chicks. I did plenty of life drawings [Figure 1.2, 3.1] and took trips to the zoo as well as farms to observe how chickens move. As described in section 2.1, my goal for my final
animatic as well as animation is to create believability with my character rather than imitate reality.

With believability in mind, when I started designing the characters for the film, I also wanted to try and find that appeal that Thomas and Johnston describe [29]. Like most of my character designs that I intend on animating, I prefer to keep the character relatively simple. Thankfully, a chicken’s silhouette is comprised of a few simple, but appealing circles. Especially young chicks, which is another reason why I chose chickens for Sunshine’s characters; Sunshine is a very soft and timid little girl, so using shape to my advantage, I wanted her personality to be reflected in her design [Figure 3.2].
Figure 3.2 Sunshine’s design
The same applied to Sunshine’s mother; I wanted her to be big and round, appearing warm and motherly. I actually found that her mother’s design shared similarities with Osono, the motherly figure who cares for Kiki in *Kiki’s Delivery Service* [Figure 3.3]. Although I didn’t necessarily design Sunshine’s mother with Osono in mind, I find that the visual similarities to be very appealing. In a way, Sunshine’s mother was meant to reflect my own mother, so the viewer could see her and understand that she’s a mother or guardian type. So, I gave her visual qualities that I personally deem as motherly: a round, feminine figure with soft edges and warm colors. Katsuya Kondo, the character designer for *Kiki*, describes Osono as “strong-willed.” [9]

![Figure 3.3 Sunshine’s Mother concept art next to Osono from *Kiki’s Delivery Service*](image_url)
I’ve heard from people that they think birds are either scary or have little personality, due to the fact that their faces don’t especially emote in ways that humans can relate to. However, thanks to design, artists can control the portrayal of character in birds in animation. Characters such as Piper, from the Pixar short of the same name, retain a lot of the true to life characteristics of a sandpiper, the bird that Piper is based on. As discussed in section 2.1, when designing and then animating a character, it’s important to remember that the artist doesn’t need to rely on complex or hyper realistic designs to make a character relatable; recall Thomas and Johnston’s flour sack [Figure 2.4], and Jones’s comment on a character’s eyes [20]. By pushing posing and taking liberties with the design, the artist enhances the quality, the dynamic, and personality of their drawings. And seen in Piper’s design, despite being realistic, her posing as well as her large expressive eyes allow the audience to see her personality and her feelings very clearly, making her a more relatable character [Figure 3.4]. Sunshine’s character design, although not photorealistic like Piper, still retains the visual information that is needed to assess and understand that she’s a chicken. The visual information in her design such as the beak, wings, and the coloring of her feathers give enough visual context to determine what she is. Sunshine’s face was designed deliberately cartoony, much like Piper’s, so I could push her expressions and explore her character [Figure 3.5].
Figure 3.4 Piper’s posing as well as her expressions give us insight on who she is as a character [19]

Figure 3.5 Exploration of Sunshine’s emotions
With the designs in mind, I then considered the story and Sunshine’s character arc throughout the story. As I’ve reiterated in this paper, it’s important to implement real life experience or habits into the character and story to help breathe life into both. By doing so, the artist allows for an additional way for the audience to relate to the character, besides just finding the character design appealing. Although Sunshine was designed to be very cute, I agree that Thomas and Johnston’s comment that cuteness isn’t necessarily the key to appeal [29], so I also use her character arc as an additional element to make the audience like her. Sunshine’s story comes from a very real place, and so by creating a character that has fears that come from a real place, I’m hoping that the audience will relate to her, and in turn care about her and like her.

Throughout the film, the audience sees that Sunshine keeps getting knocked down. She falls down the stairs, she trips over a snail, and eventually she ends up in a deep hole. I wanted these falls to show the audience that, despite her fears, Sunshine—and the viewer—is capable of getting back up. Again, this theme of getting back up and trying again is something that was instilled in me by my mother, and so I’ve passed this onto Sunshine and her mother who teaches her the same lesson. Through the lullaby Sunshine’s mother teaches her, she knows that she’s never truly alone. However, when Sunshine is trapped in the hole, she’s at the point where things have been so hard for her, that she doesn’t feel strong enough to get back up. Despite getting back up and trying up
until this point, she feels as if she can’t overcome this obstacle. It isn’t until she sees the frog try to get out that she realizes that she must at least try; not just for her mother’s sake, but for her own. Alan Barillaro, the director of Piper, also explores this idea with Piper’s story, “…that’s how life is, you’re more resilient than you give yourself credit for.” [5] The comfort of her home and mother resonate in her lullaby, and knowing that she will ultimately be all right because she always has her home and her mother is the reason why she gets back up. This has been her motivation from the beginning, to get back home. Although she didn’t realize it before, Sunshine was resilient this entire time. And facing such a tough task and experiencing it firsthand made her realize her strength, and ultimately changes her as a character [Figure 3.6]. This independence and the fears that come with it is something most people, if not all, can relate to, and by giving my character this experience I’m hoping that she and her story will be empathetic to the audience.
3.2 Storyboards

Sunshine’s storyboards and animatic were developed with Toon Boom’s Storyboard Pro, and production will continue later in Toon Boom Harmony. Storyboard Pro is a program dedicated to the development of previsualization, and takes storyboarding from the very beginning all the way to the animatic stage. Harmony, although not used in this stage of Sunshine’s development, is Toon Boom’s animation program, which will be used to animate as well as ink and paint the final film. Since Thomas and Johnston’s days at Disney, storyboarding has been an integral process to making animated films. Because of the high risks that come with making animation, such
as the time and effort that goes into animation, creating storyboards as well as a story reel were, and still are, necessary to the process. Disney popularized the idea of creating storyboards, and his team of storyboard artists would just use pieces of paper and a pencil to quickly illustrate their ideas. They’d then pin them up on a board, and then pitch them to their team [30]. With Sunshine’s development I wanted to do the same; using sticky notes and a pen, I’d quickly get down gesture sketches and put them up on the wall around my workspace [Figure 3.7]. After working out my initial ideas, I later refined them digitally with Storyboard Pro. Thanks to this program, I was able to not only illustrate my storyboards but also implement camera movements and sound design to create an entire animatic to present to my committee [Figure 3.8].

![Figure 3.7 My workspace surrounded by gestural storyboards for Sunshine](image)
Keeping storyboards clear and readable is key to conveying the narrative. As discussed in 2.2, staging—when used properly—can convey the story point, emphasize emotion, and even reveal other extra information to the audience. To make sure that my storyboards were reading correctly, I made sure to show many iterations of my storyboards to my committee, in particular my chair David Donar. Having the opportunity to show my work to my committee often allowed me to take many tries at different staging, so I could achieve the best staging that could convey that particular story point [Figure 3.9]. As many of the artists I’ve discussed thus far have stated on storyboarding, simple and to the point is the best way to help guide the audience through the narrative.
In addition to trying different compositions for my shots, I also ended up cutting a lot out of *Sunshine*. The original runtime of the short was about eight minutes in length, and roughly 850 individual drawings. Of course, this leaves room for self-editing; another crucial process in storyboarding as discussed earlier. Drawing and redrawing and throwing away entire scenes is just part of the creative process, and by exploring possibilities early on in the development process, the artist leaves room for discovering the most important shots that tell the story, while removing the fluff that, while it may be fun and builds character, ultimately does not convey the story [Figure 3.10]. At the time of writing, over 250 drawings have been scrapped from the film, and even more have been reworked. With these changes the film’s run time has been cut down to six minutes. Being able to take criticism and notes about the work and allowing for bits and pieces to be taken out or changed allows for the film to grow, for the story to improve. As mentioned earlier, Walt Disney himself was no stranger to redoing storyboards again and again to achieve a better, clearer visual narrative [30]. And as an artist who, for the longest time, only drew illustrations and standalone images that I spent long spans of time on, it’s been enlightening to realize that I don’t have to be so captivated by my own work and ideas. Being able to play with my work, try multiple passes at certain shots and ideas, and encouraging teamwork among other artists and my committee has made for a better film in the end. Disney animator Glen Keane mentions a proverb, “Iron sharpens iron” and goes onto say that Frank and Ollie truly reflected this; the two pushed each
other to improve their work, and they knew that’s how “…the best things happened…” by working as a team, my work could improve. [24]

Figure 3.9 Multiple passes at the staging for the tracking shot of Sunshine falling down the stairs
Figure 3.10 Two cut scenes from *Sunshine*
3.3 Animatic

During the last part of the process, I had to consider the timing of my animatic. Since the storyboards inform the animation, the animatic must inform the timing. Film critic Leonard Maltin recalls a comment that Chuck Jones once said; “Chuck has often said that the difference between a laugh and no laugh can be as little as one frame.” [20] Timing out the animatic, although it doesn’t include all of the animation, is important to help the artist get a sense for how the final film will look and feel like. My first few passes at my animatic were too slow; my committee chair David Donar made me aware of this when I showed him my first animatic.

By allowing for fresh eyes to look at my project, I had a better sense of how the film flowed. Again, allowing for input and change in storyboards also applies to editing the timing. And while I wanted to ensure that the audience had time to read and process some of my shots, I realized that some of these moments did drag on. Storyboard Pro has a very helpful timeline view, where the artist can look at the length of the film as well as the duration of the frames, or panels [Figure 3.11]. During the animatic phase of the project, I relied a lot on the timeline view; which also shows the camera and audio in addition to the storyboards. Using the camera tool, the artist can change the duration of the camera movement, put in keyframes, and can even ease the camera movement in and out [Figure 3.12]. And these are just a few of the things the camera tool can achieve. I also used the timeline view to incorporate sound effects and timed them out to the
appropriate panels. As a side note, in animation it’s important to try to line up the sounds with the associated character actions. In Richard Williams’s *Animator’s Survival Kit*, he recommends that the images lead the sound by about two frames to create a better sync between the action and the sound [36].

3.11 *Toon Boom’s Storyboard Pro* timeline view

3.12 *Toon Boom’s Storyboard Pro* camera transform tab
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

I’m very fortunate that I’m interested in pursuing a career in storyboarding. Given the fact that I only had four months to produce this animatic, with my initial goal being to develop the film from start to finish, I feel that getting the film to the story reel, or the animatic, stage was fitting for what I’m interested in and what I found worth studying when writing this paper. If I had to repeat this process, I would have given myself a year to work on the project; one semester for preproduction—story, concept, and storyboards—and the other for layout and animation. However, as stated previously, storyboarding is the process in which I find the most power and influence in, and what drives all other parts of the film. The ability to visually work out the narrative, characters, and even the visual gags is a process that is crucial to the rest of the film’s workflow. And in many cases, the storyboard artists keep working until the very end of production. Exploring through storyboards in this stage of development saves time and money, as well as improves the work and narrative, thereby strengthening the message that the artist set out to achieve with the film.

Although *Sunshine* and this paper are not revolutionary in their execution, I feel that it’s necessary to discuss the importance of designing characters, narrative, and the ideas as well as developing storyboards to help convey those ideas. There are institutions, including Clemson’s Digital Production Arts program, that are dedicated to teaching artists and programmers 3D animation, digital effects, and other technological skills.
needed in today’s animation industry. By focusing on these aspects, I believe that it is possible to lose sight of what made the medium of animated film so amazing in the first place. With this paper I take a look at how visual art and the artist can make an experience like a film feel so personal. Art, and the basics of art, much like the stories I’ve discussed in this paper, are timeless. Technology will change, but what makes up the elements of art and storytelling will always be the same. While companies like Pixar strive to advance their 3D films with software like RenderMan, it isn’t necessarily their technology that audiences find appealing, but their stories are what they always come back to. Much like Pixar director Pete Docter explains in *Pixar in a Box*, the artist wants to get their audience to feel the same feelings that the artist feels [6].

Although people are natural storytellers, just like any other art, storytelling and storyboarding are both a craft to study and improve on. Although I feel that I’ll always grow and learn as an artist, this journey thus far with my film has been a very insightful experience. Being able to discuss my process and feelings with my committee as well as close friends and family has given me the opportunity to take something that I believe in and make it more entertaining as well as meaningful than my initial ideas, and as an artist that’s what I wanted to come out of this film; I want it to be a story that reflects me and my sense of humor, my sense of self, and what I think is important to talk about with an audience. I wanted to create a character and a narrative that were honest, and in my own interest. Using story art to stage a believable narrative, my goal was to create a short film
that people will not only enjoy but empathize with. *Sunshine* is, in essence, a telling of my own experiences; and I’m hoping that she and her story can be an empathetic experience for anyone who watches the film.
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