Rewriting the Narrative that Surrounds Mental Illness

Ashley Johnson
ahj3@g.clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

Part of the Film Production Commons

Recommended Citation
Johnson, Ashley, "Rewriting the Narrative that Surrounds Mental Illness" (2022). All Theses. 3806.
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/3806

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.
REWRIITING THE NARRATIVE THAT SURROUNDS MENTAL ILLNESS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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

by
Ashley Hallock Johnson
May 2022

Accepted by:
David Donar, Committee Chair
Eric Patterson
Dr. Cynthia Pury
Abstract

The focus of this work is to change the narrative that surrounds mental health issues by portraying mental battles through animation. Buddhism heavily influenced the crux of this project, which is the conscious decision to accept oneself and choose to work towards inner balance instead of battles. 3D animation is used to distill complex thoughts into simplified characters that drive the narrative through performance and choreographed fight scenes.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my classmate and friend Harrison Diesl. He is an incredible artist and a beacon of warmth to the people around him. He motivated me to continue this project in solidarity of mental health. The impact of your life will never fade.
Acknowledgments

I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank my Committee Chair and storytelling exemplar David Donar. He has been a huge influence on my graduate school career ever since day one, and I couldn't imagine crossing the finish line without him. Dave's unending guidance, support, and encouragement have been irreplaceable to me these past few years. With his mentorship I was able to improve more than I thought possible. Dave, I couldn't have done this without you, and I hope to continue on your legacy.

Thank you to my production team and close friends for your companionship through the good times and the hard. Each one of you are irreplaceable and cherished. You enrich my life beyond words. Thanks to you all, the future is bright and flourishing.
# Table of Contents

Title Page ................................................. i
Abstract .................................................. ii
Dedication ............................................... iii
Acknowledgments ........................................ iv
List of Tables .......................................... vi
List of Figures .......................................... vii

1 Artist Statement ....................................... 1

2 Background ............................................. 4
  2.1 Personal Development ............................... 4
  2.2 How do we deal with the battles that stem from mental illness? 5

3 Influence ................................................. 6
  3.1 Mental Health .................................... 6
  3.2 Acceptance and Commitment Therapy .......... 7
  3.3 Tradition of Story Telling ....................... 7
  3.4 Narrative ........................................ 8
  3.5 Characterization of Mental Illness ............. 9
  3.6 Buddhism ......................................... 12
  3.7 Choreography ................................... 13

4 Design and Implementation ........................... 15
  4.1 Choosing a Visual Medium ....................... 15
  4.2 Buddhism and Shaolin Martial Arts .......... 16
  4.3 Characters ....................................... 17
  4.4 Environment ..................................... 22
  4.5 The Crystal ..................................... 26
  4.6 Choreography ................................... 28

5 Conclusions and Discussion ........................ 34
Bibliography ............................................ 36
[Page vi is blank]
List of Figures

3.1 Anxiety Characterized as a Crocodile in *In Between* .......................... 9
3.2 Depression Characterized as a Void Creature in *Tzadik* .......................... 10
3.3 *Seven Against The Dream* by Anon (Kim Noble) .................................. 11
3.4 Training of the Purple Spirit by Anon (Kim Noble) ............................... 11

4.1 Cave Painting with War Scene ............................................................... 17
4.2 First set of character designs ............................................................... 18
4.3 Four Anecdotes from the Life of Wang Xizhi ......................................... 19
4.4 Second Pass of character designs with calligraphy influence .................. 20
4.5 Concept art for Gris by Conrad Roset .................................................. 20
4.6 Concept art for Pixar’s Soul ................................................................. 22
4.7 The final character design package .......................................................... 23
4.8 First set of environment designs ............................................................. 23
4.9 Second set of environment designs ........................................................ 24
4.10 Cover art for Gris ...................................................................................... 24
4.11 Third set of environment designs ............................................................. 25
4.12 Eighth chakra Scene from Avatar: the Last Airbender ............................. 25
4.13 Eighth chakra Scene from Avatar: the Last Airbender ............................. 25
4.14 Final Environment Design with Characters ............................................... 26
4.15 Star Seed from Sailor Moon ................................................................. 27
4.16 Gemstone in Steven Universe ............................................................... 27
4.17 Shot comparisons from my own animatic ............................................... 30
4.18 Season 1 Episode 6 Avatar: Legend Of Korra ....................................... 31
4.19 Season 4 Episode 6 Avatar: Legend Of Korra ....................................... 31
4.20 Season 4 Episode 10 Avatar: Legend Of Korra ..................................... 32
Chapter 1

Artist Statement

Allowing yourself to exist is the greatest act of defiance you can make. When war wages inside your mind, it weaponizes every fiber of your being against you. It is fueled by unrealistic expectations, equipped with the intimacy of your deepest flaws, disarms with a voice so familiar it beckons you into your most vulnerable state, and ravages your soul until you’re left with nothingness. And yet, despite all this, we keep going.

My mission is to change the narrative surrounding mental health issues. I want to spread a hopeful message that mental illness is not some mental battle we have to beat and overcome, but a part of how we function that should be accepted in order to grow. I believe portraying internal thoughts in a physical form allows my audience to better relate to these struggles, and ultimately empower them with a message of solidarity through their own mental health journey.

Mental health extends its influence into every facet of my life, especially my art. The process of creating this piece has been a personal journey to accept myself, and to rewrite my own narrative in order to fight for balance instead of battles. My work is inspired by exploring my own mental health journey and its nuances, which has caused the creation of a piece that is deeply personal. It is through this vulnerability that I choose to connect with my audience in a more intimate and authentic way.

My work is also inspired by many outside influences as well, most notably the game Gris by Nomada Studio and fight choreography from Avatar: the Last Airbender / Legend of Korra. Gris encouraged me to pursue the conceptual aspects of this project, as its plot is also a story of self reflection through one’s mental growth. The developers told the story visually and emotionally
in such an abstract way that the audience was able to glean whatever interpretation best fit their own narrative which greatly aided in its fanbase’s personal connection to the game. As one plays the game, one engages in a meditative state, as the game was designed to be “fail-proof”, allowing players a more relaxed experience that shifts focus to self introspection. The two Avatar series heavily influenced much of my fight choreography and reliance on Buddhism as the fighting styles in the shows pull heavily from Shaolin martial arts and contemporary dance. I particularly studied many of the airbender and waterbender movements as their movements pull from Tai Chi, an art form which focuses on redirecting the flow of energy. This skill is the cornerstone of change for my protagonist in order for them to redirect the attacks of the antagonist and regain leading the pace of their dance.

I chose animation to tell this story because animation is a powerful visual medium that incorporates movement, allowing the medium to capture energy and emotion in a raw and humanistic form which deeply resonates with audiences. Another strength is the opportunity to deal with complex issues like how we interact with our own thoughts through a story that progresses from the interaction between characters, color, and form. Even the creation of animation requires the artist to replicate the choreography themselves, which has allowed me to participate not just mentally, but physically in the recreation of the meditative process. Not only that, but this reenactment also inspires me to add my own personality to the performance, ultimately making the characters more human and easily relatable to the audience. Finally, the movement itself incorporates dance-like elements that visually depict a way of finding balance through meditation, self-reflection, and acceptance.

Portraying internal mental struggles in a physical visual format allows me to connect to my audience on a deeper level of empathy. The fight choreography pulls heavily from Shaolin martial arts, which is rooted in Buddhist beliefs. I feel these references appropriate as my message is a kind of manifestation of Buddhist theology: mastery of the mind through meditation and self reflection. Watching my animation is the first step in this process as each audience member places themselves in the role of the protagonist, and begins their own self-reflection. As the viewing experience goes through this change from objective to subjective, my message is received on a personal level: we can choose to find balance with the parts of us we are so used to battling, and in this decision, we choose to allow ourselves to exist.

My animation portrays the intangible thoughts that accompany mental struggles through
carefully constructed character performance. My work is an enlightening piece that validates these struggles and sends a message of solidarity to those who face similar narratives. Through my animation, it is the personification of the internal battle inside of one’s mind that creates a unique narrative surrounding mental illness. Pulling significantly from Chinese Martial Arts and Buddhism, my message is one of finding balance within ourselves through meditation and self-reflection.
Chapter 2

Background

2.1 Personal Development

The spark that ignited the creation of this project was the desire to animate a fight scene. This choice of animation, however, is merely a mode in which to tell a story. I still had to fully flesh out a narrative. I began by asking myself the biggest question that needed to be answered; "What sparks this fight between two characters?" When I reflected on what the crux of this fight would be, I kept returning to how I felt constantly at odds with myself, and how I felt I was always fighting against some mental adversary. On days when I was able to accomplish very little, it was because inside I was fighting a costly war against my own thoughts. When mental health is portrayed in media, we rarely see the moment of conflict, only the aftermath of the toll of the battle. I chose to take my portrayal of mental illness into a different direction, as I feel portraying the fights as a physical one better portrays how truly exhausting this process can be.

With resolution, I decided to use my own life experiences as inspiration to create a visual piece that embodies the intensity of the mental battles we face everyday. As the conceptual development went on, this project became a way for me to meditate and take time to reflect on the source of my personal mental struggles. I asked myself why I fought aspects of my own nature. Ultimately this journey brought to light a few truths that I hope to share through my production. Before beginning this journey, I had a vague understanding that many of my mental hurdles stemmed from my mental illness. The deeper I dug, the more I saw its influence in every aspect of my life. Around this time I started to ask myself why I see these aspects of mental hurdles as
something that I automatically framed as negative. I realized many of my mental quirks are not qualities that benefit the deeply instilled toxic idea that my worth was somehow achieved through productivity and profitability. Traps like these cause us to continue these vicious cycles of fighting our own natural tendencies and ways of functioning. After this introspection, I began to focus my energy on balancing the natural ways my brain functions with the needs of my daily life. While my practice is far from perfect, the peace I’ve felt from accepting old struggles and finding new ways of balancing them has brought a form of peace that inspires me to continue this hard work. Just like how the creation and production of this project has been a great opportunity for my own journey of self-acceptance, I want the viewing of the final animation to spark the same meditative experience towards acceptance and balance in my audiences own lives.

2.2 How do we deal with the battles that stem from mental illness?

Learning to actively balance our lives is a personal and individualized journey. While I will discuss my own personal journey of using this project for my own introspection, I will also discuss tools that can help begin the process of finding balance between ourselves and our mental hurdles. My project pulls heavily from Shaolin martial arts and Buddhism, which together focus on inner peace through mastery of the mind and body through mindful meditation and physical training. These concepts are very similar to a more modern psychological school of thought known as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). ACT focuses on changing the very framework with which we view ourselves. One of the biggest tools my project uses to fight for balance is the practice of ACT. This means changing the language we use to help cultivate a healthier internal dialogue in our lives, and consciously strive to redefine our personal self-image [10].
Chapter 3

Influence

3.1 Mental Health

My project is about navigating the nuances of mental illness. The story I tell is not some grandiose tale about overcoming challenges. Instead, I propose something much simpler. Before we delve into the solution, we must first fully understand the problem which we are facing. What is mental illness? This grossly overextended term describes a health condition that is associated with distress and problems functioning in social, work, or family activities [20] [12]. But what does this all mean, exactly? Medical jargon hardly gets close to describing what mental illness truly feels like. Distress isn’t a solidified state of being after all, it’s a response. For those of us who live with mental illness, we know it’s not something that can be so easily defined. But what we do know, is that mental illness affects every way we interact with the world.

It is well known that untreated mental illnesses can lead to serious and dire consequences. Studies have shown that between twenty and twenty-five percent of all adults suffer from some kind of mental disorder [3] [4]. Of these reports, less than half of people receive any kind of treatment [3]. In a study carried out by the World Health Organization, it was calculated that mental illness accounts for at least 160 million years of healthy life lost [14]. These statistics are abysmal.

Urgently we return back to our original question, how do we overcome mental illness? The problem isn’t actually mental illness, it’s the context of the question itself. By asking this question we are assuming mental illness is something that with enough effort or willpower can be done away with, and failure to do so is somehow a negative reflection on ourselves. This is simply not true.
Mental illness isn’t a disease that can be cured, it’s how our brains function in response to various stimuli. It is here that I begin the message of my project: mental illness is not an enemy that we have to beat and overcome, it is a complex way of functioning with which we as individuals should actively strive to balance when navigating our daily lives. We do not need to change who we are, we need to change the context of how we live. Although the journey will look different for everyone, the first and most vital step remains the same: accept yourself as you are and allow yourself to exist.

### 3.2 Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

The psychological concepts I’m exploring through this project are backed by a practice call Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). ACT focuses on changing the framework of how we view ourselves. This means changing the language we use, especially when referring to ourselves, to help cultivate a healthier and more accepting internal dialogue [11]. As the name suggests, acceptance is a very important step in the healing process and teaches to allow painful and wanted thoughts to come and go without struggles to fight with or against them. Next comes mindfulness which mentally grounds us to the present moment and allows us to take a step outside of our own heads. Finally the most fundamental foundation of ACT is commitment to action. Once goals are set according to our own individuals values, we consciously make decisions towards change in order to reduce suffering caused by mental illness [16].

### 3.3 Tradition of Story Telling

The art of storytelling has been around as long as humanity has been alive [19]. Stories are as informative as they are entertaining, and are one of the most effective modes of spreading messages. Continuing this tradition, I recount the dramatic narrative of internal struggles that accompany mental illness. I achieve this through a dramatic performance based on the interaction between two humanoid characters who themselves symbolize our own thoughts or feelings. I based the narrative of my animation off of my own life experiences. The story I tell is not an epic tale of heroism, but rather a vulnerable confession of humanness. My goal is to spread a message of solidarity when facing these struggles. Telling those who identify with similar experiences in their own lives that they do not fight alone in this war.
I use strategic moments of suspense in my film to make the audience question the protagonist's ability to overcome the challenges they encounter. I do this to draw parallels to how we doubt ourselves. Despite every hardship the protagonist faces, the story resolves with a message of hope as the protagonist and antagonist resolve their fight and together restore balance to their world.

### 3.4 Narrative

Researching various ways of progressing a narrative brought me to a video game called *Gris* produced by Nomada studios. What stirred my interest in this game was the game's use of only visuals and movement in order to tell an epic tale of tragedy and recovery. This heavy reliance on only visual elements and color keeps the story indeterminate, allowing a more universal reception by the game's audience.

*Gris* is definitely one of the most visually and emotionally compelling games I've played about recovery and mental health. The founder of Nomada studios, Roger Mendoza, partnered with artist Conrad Roset in order to turn his style into an interactive narrative through intense and saturated visuals [23]. It would be an injustice to not discuss this game in some detail, as its success without a spoken narrative was a huge encouragement for me to pursue this project. Gris is a game that tells the story of a traumatized girl on her journey to bringing meaning through color back into her life. While the visuals of the final game are stunning, the road to find balance between Roset's style and readability was a challenge for the development team. Ultimately the writers decided to tell the story by unlocking color and creating more visuals to the environment as the game progresses. Mendoza describes the narrative of the game in one interview as being progressed through mainly color [23]. *Gris* is a fail-safe game that is heavily story driven about pain, loss, and perseverance. I knew when creating my own story that I wanted it to feel universal, and one of the big downsides of that was excluding language and dialogue in the narrative. However, *Gris* turned this disadvantage into a huge advantage as they put more effort and attention into the visual storytelling. This also allows the audience to glean whatever meaning they want, and to project their own story of recovery onto the character. I incorporated elements from this mode of storytelling to my advantage, as I wanted to portray a mental battle that the audience could use to project their own struggles on to help start the process of self-reflection.
3.5 Characterization of Mental Illness

The animated film "In Between" depicts mental illness in such a unique and refreshing way I couldn’t help but use it as inspiration. This film was directed and written by Alice Bissonnet, Aloyse Desoubries-Binet, and Sandrine Han Jin Kuang and produced by Gobelins. This film tackles the complicated topic of living with anxiety and what that feels like for the afflicted individual. Anxiety is personified in the film as a crocodile who harasses the protagonist on a daily basis. My favorite metaphoric scene in the film is when the protagonist attempts to answer the phone, but must reach her hand into the maw of the crocodile in order to retrieve it. Upon attempting to retrieve the phone, the crocodile snaps its maws shut, effectively making the character unable to accomplish her goal as seen in figure 3.1. What I took away from this film was the innovative way of depicting mental illness. Especially the lesson at the end of the film, which resolves with the protagonist learning to live with the difficulties the crocodile presents in her life. Instead of fighting against the crocodile, she begins to reassure it before taking action the crocodile would have prevented her from doing before. This message presents mental illness, and specifically anxiety, as something that won’t just ‘go away’ but instead is something we have to learn to live with, and is just a way we interact with the world.

A film with a more serious characterization of mental illness is a film called "Tzadik," written and directed by Oriel Berkovits and produced at Bazalel Academy of Arts. This film deals more
specifically with depression, and the complicated relationship between the person and their illness. The physical representation of depression in "Tzadik" is less based in realism when compared to the crocodile in "In Between." Instead, director Oriel Berkovits depicts depression as a dark, shapeless void creature (figure 3.2). The film begins by the protagonist being comforted by his depression, snuggling close and seeking refuge. However, as the film progresses and the protagonist tries to move on to his next goal, the creature quickly becomes an adversary, growing in size, attacking the protagonist and physically blocking his path. Ultimately the film ends on a bittersweet note, one that resonated with me; and that is despite the protagonist ending up being held by his depression once again, the camera shows that he has made progress in his journey. The idea that mental illness can both be a way of coping but can also be debilitating was a message that inspired me to take my narrative in a similar direction. I chose to portray the antagonist, my personified version of mental illness, as a character who helps to maintain balance in their realm. This decision added new depth to my message, that mental illness is simply a part of who we are and is something we must continually accept and consciously balance with our lives.

Turning away from film to more traditional contemporary art brought me to a very interesting painter who lives with mental illness. Kim Noble is a European woman who experiences a severe case of dissociative identity disorder (DID), which her psychotherapist explains is a creative survival device in order to overcome past trauma [13]. Kim, or more accurately whichever personality is active, describes her whole as "the Body" which is the collection of personalities. Within Kim are
Figure 3.3: *Seven Against The Dream* by Anon (Kim Noble)

Figure 3.4: *Training of the Purple Spirit* by Anon (Kim Noble)
countless persona’s that come and go, of which more than a dozen have taken to making art after one of her alter egos, Patricia, began art therapy. Each artistic persona has their own unique style and process of art making [13]. The artist that specifically caught my interest among the myriad of personalities is one that simply refers to themselves as Anon. This particular persona only paints in the middle of the night using visceral techniques to paint like pouring paint straight onto the canvas and using a palette knife to create form and movement. The two paintings that caught my attention and started to inspire conceptual ideas for my project where "Seven Against the Dream" (figure 3.3) and "Training of the Purple Spirit" (figure 3.4). These pieces have a spiritual feel about them, disregarding realism for pure unbridled emotion. The figures appear ethereal as they float cleanly off the background of the canvas. These paintings are comprised of movement, free of clutter that do not hinder the figures. This ethereal feeling and clean portrayal of figures visually influenced my design choices for hue, saturation, and color. I chose to also keep my color palette as minimal as possible to allow my figures and be easily distinguishable from the background. This choice allows my narrative to progress purely from the performance of my characters, with nothing detracting the audience away from them. Another design idea that arose from viewing Anons paintings was the pure simplicity of the human form. These forms were readable as human, yet without gender, body type, or race. I chose to distill the human form in a similar fashion in order to allow my characters to feel as if they were the embodiment of pure energy. This design choice ensures the narrative stays universal, regardless of what the audiences background might be, mental battles can be understood universally.

3.6 Buddhism

Buddhism played a heavy role in the conception of this project, especially early on in development. I began by researching the key practices and values of this widespread eastern religion. The biggest part that stood out to me was the very essence of what Buddhism strives to achieve. Nirvana is an interesting and surprisingly human concept in religion. This core of Buddhism is defined as liberating beings from suffering [17]. Early on this inspired my goal; lifting the burden of pain from endless mental battles. While the end goal is shared between my message and the teachings of Buddhism, the process of arriving there look a little different. In Buddhism Nirvana is obtained through knowing the four Noble Truths and following the Eightfold Path. First, the four
Noble Truths are as follows: life is suffering, suffering is caused by attachment, there is an end to suffering, and following the Eightfold path is the only path to Nirvana. The first three of this list are pretty universal in their definition. The Eightfold path is also incredibly straightforward. These are right thinking followed by right decision making, right speech, abstaining from harmful behavior, promotion of good thoughts, and mindfulness or awareness of ones body, mind, and emotions through meditation [17]. While these may not be revolutionary statements, the applicability of the Eightfold path is undeniable.

Within Buddhism, there is a subsection from which Shaolin martial arts was conceived. This unique fighting form is a combination of ancient Chinese martial arts and Buddhism that melded together at the Shaolin temple by practicing monks. Despite the inherent nature of martial arts contradicting Buddhist teachings of non-violence, Shaolin monks focused on mastering both the mind and the body through meditation and physical training respectively. In order to mimic this mastery, the viewing of my animation begins a sort of pseudo-meditation for the audience. The viewer inserts themselves into the place of the protagonist and engages in self reflection of their own mental health and mental battles. Ultimately my message was deeply inspired by Buddhism, and that is that inner peace and balance are lifestyles we constantly make an effort to achieve.

3.7 Choreography

Choreography plays a strong role in my film as I chose to progress my narrative through performance in choreographed fight scenes. Conceptually, fight scenes are for me one of the most accurate ways to depict what living with mental illness truly feels like. Fight choreography are powerful visuals that can portray raw emotion and further character development. Characterization is improved through each characters choices, which reflects what is ultimately on the line if they win or lose [2]. Another reason I chose fight scenes over other modes of storytelling are because of the way fight scenes progress the narrative through action [15]. This can be seen depending on which character controls the flow of the movements, the choices a character makes depending on the consequences of their loss, and by what type of fighting style the character uses [2]. Returning to the two films analyzed earlier, In Between and Tzadik, both portray what it feels like to live with mental illness by engaging their protagonists in a fight with their illness in some fashion.

Taking a closer look at In Between, this can be seen when the main protagonist physically
grapples with her mental illness. While the crocodile, the characterized version of her mental illness, never physically attacks the main character, it does constantly harass and try to physically block the hero from her goals. Growing more desperate, the main character tries more and more daring methods to get rid of this creature, going so far as to even kick it into a river. Unrelenting, the crocodile quickly returns to her. In this film, the struggle between the two characters is not just physical but verbal as well. At the climax of the film, with the main character at her breaking point, verbally assaults the crocodile, causing it to cower away in fear. Once again the creature soon returns, but after releasing all her built up stress, the protagonist is able communicate with the crocodile. The protagonists acceptance allows her to begin her journey of balancing the existence of the crocodile in her life.

Switching to a more somber depiction of mental illness, the fight in the film Tzadik is much more serious, with the outcome resulting in serious consequences. Mental illness, or more specifically depression, is depicted as a blob shaped void creature. The fight begins when the protagonist leaves the comfort of the creatures side and swims towards a light in the distance. In response, the creature becomes aggressive, growing in size and physically attacking the hero. The fight sequence in this film is one sided, since the creature is the only one who attacks. While the main protagonist does not fight against the creature physically, he still shows resistance to the creatures blockade by resolving to breakthrough to his goal.

While the tone and mood of these two films couldn’t be more different, they both depict their protagonist engaging in a fight with the personification of their mental illness. These films both inspired and encouraged me to take this metaphorical fight with mental illness to the next level in an intense and fully fleshed out fight sequence. Viewing the fights in these two films inspired me to depict my characterized version of mental as something that grows from being a nuisance to outright being capable of causing devastating and permanent damage. I chose to be inclusive of all mental illnesses by starting the fight from a seemingly silly conflict and having it ramp up to a full blown battle of life or death. This decision strengthens my narrative by portraying that any mental illness at any given time can be something manageable or something that requires all our attention and energy. The resolution of both films also inspired the outcome of my fight, as both films portray their respective main characters continuing to live with their mental illnesses. I chose to continue this message by concluding the fight not with a victory, but with acceptance, forgiveness, and ultimately balance achieved through corporation.
Chapter 4

Design and Implementation

4.1 Choosing a Visual Medium

In order to bring my ideas to fruition, I decided to tell my narrative using 3D animation. Producing with animation was the only choice for me. Animation is a special visual medium that allows the audience to open up to a certain kind of vulnerability. Whether this is because animation reminds us of our childhood wonder, or that the very nature of animation calls for the suspension of disbelief, the viewer is always more receptive to fantastical ideas. The less restriction the audience has on their imagination, the greater immersion they feel in the story, and animation with it’s exaggerated movements and character performance is the perfect medium for this.

Another strength of animation over other visual medium is that animation allows a much simpler and more easily digestible portrayal of complex and abstract ideas through visuals of movement, color, form, performance, etc. This means it’s the perfect medium for me to retell stories of complex inner narratives. There are also a few psychological reasons I chose animation over other time based medium as well. For starters, animation is a powerful time-based medium that incorporates movement. This movement activates humans kinetic empathy, allowing the audience to partake in the movements as it if was performed by them themselves and ultimately immersing them even more in the story. Next, animation allows for exaggerated movement, or more precisely, movement that would otherwise be humanly impossible. Since my animation is a portrayal of the interaction between sets of thoughts and emotions versus another set, I wanted the movements of the characters to be grandiose, free, and not bound by any physical limitations. Just like how in our
minds we can do anything we want, I wanted my characters to feel as if they live in this same realm of infinite possibilities. This becomes especially apparent as the movements I pull from Shaolin martial arts are pushed to extreme levels.

4.2 Buddhism and Shaolin Martial Arts

Buddhism not only conceptually inspired my work, but inspired it artistically and narratively as well. The main crux of Buddhism centers around exercises to train the mind. This meditation includes mindfulness and focus on ones breathing [8]. The visual of training taking place inside the mind informed my decision to place the battle arena in an incorporeal space, as opposed to a real world location. This choice in location better served my narrative as it made the story feel more spiritual in nature. This choice also allows my characters to perform more exaggerated, even inhuman, feats of physical expression. This allows the performance to carry even more suspense, as the true power of my characters is no longer constrained. Buddhism also played a part in the conception of my narrative as well. With meditation comes acceptance of what humans cannot change, and a positive decision to change what we can [17]. It was this inference from the Noble Eightfold Path that guided me to rewrite the climax of my film. For a good chunk of the story writing process, I couldn’t figure out why the protagonist defeating the antagonist left the narrative feeling empty, like it lacked a true moment of empathy and human connection. It was only after further studying the Eightfold Path that led the main characters decision to accept their mistakes and accept what they can longer change. In doing so, the narrative began to more accurately depict what the first step to approaching mental illness should be: acceptance.

While researching the many subsections of Buddhism, I came across a unique culture at the Shaolin Temple in the Henan Province. The Buddhist practices of Shaolin monks are unique and interesting because they are one of the only Buddhist culture to develop a form of martial arts. The combination of ancient Chinese martial arts and Buddhism merged together to create a physical practice that is both spiritual and practical. Shaolin monks go through intense physical training which is seen as a form of meditation that is a tool for them to master both their minds and their bodies [21]. I chose to inform all of my fight choreography based off of the specialized martial arts practiced at the Shaolin Temple. This decision unified my concept and my narrative together as Shaolin martial arts are used to master the mind and also used to serve a more practical purpose.
of self-defense. From an aesthetics perspective, the exaggerated move-sets from Shaolin martial arts provides a visually appealing array of poses that the audience has a more enjoyable time viewing.

A specific example of a martial arts style that provided a great foundation for my fight choreography is Tai Chi. This martial arts form focuses on balancing the flow of energy throughout the body and redirecting it. This form is often described as "meditation in motion" and is used to build strength, flexibility, and improve overall well-being [7]. Studying the practice of Tai Chi informed my choices for some of the protagonists fight choreography as I decided the protagonist would use motions based off of Tai Chi in order to bring the antagonist back to a balanced state.

4.3 Characters

I began visual research at cave paintings (figure 4.1). These images from centuries past depict the human form refined to its essence. Despite the time that’s passed between their creation and now, we are still able to have a basic understanding of the purpose of these images because of their simplicity in form. Petroglyphs, which are close cousins to cave paintings, were next on my search. These I had the pleasure of being able to see in person at the Hagood Mills, a site dedicated to the protection, preservation, and study of Upcountry life and Native American rock carvings in South Carolina [1]. These icons are human figures carved into large boulders from humans past. The exact purpose of these carvings is unknown, but we do know humans from long past wrote their existence down for us to see centuries later. Both cave paintings and petroglyphs informed
Figure 4.2: First set of character designs
my decision to design characters that were distilled to a style that portrayed the bare essence of the human form. I chose to develop ambiguity in my characters (figure 4.2) because this design direction allowed me to exclude dialogues that come with race, gender, social status, etc. and instead be more inclusive with my message because mental illness does not discriminate and can affect anyone regardless of their background. Mental illness and mental struggles are a universal human experience, and I wanted my characters to reflect that. While stick figures were a great starting place conceptually, from a technical standpoint the line and mass of the characters was too thin, and the background began to inhibit readability as it overpowered the characters silhouette.

Moving on, I began to look at Chinese calligraphy as influence for character design. One of the pieces that drew my particular interest was the Four Anecdotes from the Life of Wang Xizhi depicted in figure 4.3. The energy behind each brush stroke makes each word flow seamlessly to the next. Chinese calligraphy inspired me to animate the characters to appear more fluid instead of stiff (figure 4.4). Developing my characters to be more agile would strengthen the character performance and posing, ultimately making my animation more appealing. However, I began to run into the same issues as before with the character being too thin or unreadable.

Taking a look at more contemporary works, and specifically video games, brought me to the character design of Gris (figure 4.5). What I found useful from Gris’ character art was that her arms and legs are simple bendable cylinders without hands or feet. This was done in order to keep focus on her cape which is a key part of the narrative. I chose to develop my characters in this same fashion because from a technical standpoint this design simplifies the rigging and animation process.
Figure 4.4: Second Pass of character designs with calligraphy influence

Figure 4.5: Concept art for Gris by Conrad Roset
Not having to worry about the complications that arise with hands and feet allows my animation time to be spent further refining character posing and acting.

The colors of the characters was another tricky hurdle to cross, as I wanted them to be distinguishable from each other without using colors associated with race. I made design choices avoiding race for two reasons. First, my goal is for my message to be universal and inclusive to people of all backgrounds because mental illness can affect anyone regardless of race, gender, etc. The second reason is because conceptually any colors associated with race automatically grounds my characters to the real world which contradicts with their ephemeral nature, being the avatars of thoughts and emotions. Naturally I began with one black and one white character, hearkening back to the classic Chinese concept of yin and yang. I quickly ran into one unavoidable issue with a black and a white character. No matter what tone the background was, one character always popped out more than the other. I wanted the characters to read equally, so I had to continue playing with various tones. Eventually I decided to have varying shades of light grey. While the protagonist maintains the same light white tone, the antagonist will change to a darker but still relatively medium grey so they are able to be read against a neutral background.

Through story boarding I came to the decision to have the antagonist change colors as part of the crux of the story. This change is symbolic of things that happen in our lives that permanently change who we are. However, these changes do not make us less valuable, they just make us different and more unique. In order to portray this, I have the characters starting as the same color so that the audience doesn’t know which one is the protagonist and which one is the antagonist. Once the antagonists appearance changes, the two are thrown out of balance with each other, and the epic fight begins. Despite this change, the antagonist is able to make amends and find balance with the protagonist once again. I chose this portrayal to show that no matter what events happen in our lives that leave permanent changes to who we are, we can always find balance again.

The surface quality of the characters was greatly inspired by Pixar’s Soul, and in particular from the Councilors design as seen in figure 4.6. Soul was directed by American director Pete Doctor for Pixar Animation Studios. The original concept art by Pete was further refined by renown artists like Jason Deamer, Celine You, Ricky Nierva, Steve Pilcher, and Kristian Norelius [18]. Soul’s Councilors in the Great Before were designed to have some slight transparency to them with a thick stroke around the outside. This surfacing choice makes them feel extra ethereal and otherworldly, like their presence is just barely contained. I chose to develop the surfacing of my characters in
a similar fashion because this particular nuanced strengthened the idea of my characters being intangible spirits. This design choice also reinforces the characters ability to perform inhuman feats, since they containers of pure energy they are not bound by physical human limitations. The final design can be seen in figure 4.7.

4.4 Environment

Like with the characters, before I began designing the environment I had a few goals for what I wanted the final look to achieve. Again, like with the characters, I wanted a space that felt it doesn’t really exist. One that was ethereal, a transient space where only pure energy took shape. I knew I wanted the environment props to be kept to a bare minimum to keep the main focus on the characters performance. Lastly, I needed the color palette to be very toned down and neutral so that both the antagonist and protagonist maintained readability regardless of their appearance.

Since Buddhism had a strong influence on my project conceptually, naturally I turned to Buddhist temples and similar real world places for inspiration. During this first round of iterations as seen in figure 4.8, none of the environments felt appropriate as they were too grounded in reality. However, an element from these real world influences that I continued to use in development was a circular, slightly raised arena. I chose this design element because it’s nuance further strengthened the analogy of balance and the mind. Conceptually, the characters on the stage are forefront thoughts. When my characters work together to maintain their world they dance symmetrically,
Figure 4.7: The final character design package

Figure 4.8: First set of environment designs
always near the center of the stage which symbolizes a balanced mind. However, during the fight, the characters move rabidly around the stage, and suspense builds as they near the edge of the raised arena.

I continued my research with the art of *Gris* because every aspect of the games environment was carefully constructed to inform the story. Every prop in the game is intentional, with all superfluous objects discarded so as to not distract from the narrative (figure 4.10). The visuals in *Gris* inspired the development of more distilled backgrounds for my animation. This decision helped me to further the narrative through character performance and interaction. An environment containing only the most essential elements also allowed me to play with symmetry and balance visually and compositionally (figure 4.9 and figure 4.11). These visual cues can help inform the state of imbalance that these mental wars can bring.

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* greatly influenced the direction I chose to develop the surface
Figure 4.11: Third set of environment designs

Figure 4.12: Eighth chakra Scene from Avatar: the Last Airbender

Figure 4.13: Eighth chakra Scene from Avatar: the Last Airbender
quality of my environment floor. In *The Last Airbender* Aang enters an ethereal spiritual realm in order to unlock his final chakra. This realm contains a barely touchable floor (figure 4.12 and 4.13) which felt as if it was a creation of solid energy, and was something that could easily disappear at any moment. This one shot was a large inspiration for how I wanted the stage in my environment to feel. Like an aurora borealis you could just barely stand on.

Armed with these sources and the informed design of my characters, I created an environment that accented the forms and shading of the characters while still giving an open and infinite ethereal plane feel. The final designs can be seen in figure 4.14.

### 4.5 The Crystal

The one and only prop in my entire scene, the crystal plays a huge role in creating the rift between the two characters and ultimately carries the permanent change left by the series of climactic events. The inspiration for the crystal came mostly from an old but influential anime called *Sailor Moon*. This show used various crystal elements to portray different kinds of energy. The most notable of these in terms of inspiration was one called the star seed (figure 4.15), which made an appearance in the final season of the show. These crystals symbolized someone's life energy, heart
Figure 4.15: Star Seed from Sailor Moon

Figure 4.16: Gemstone in Steven Universe
and soul. I wanted the crystal in my animation to portray similar ideas. For me in symbolizes a persons core. While this object may change over time, the core or essence of who we are never loses it’s importance. Another popular show that reinforces the idea of a crystal containing ones ‘life’ or ‘soul’ is *Steven Universe*. The majority of the characters in this show are gems who take a humanoid form. The actual gemstones on their bodies contain the life and personality of the gem as seen in figure 4.16. Although my characters do not contain actual gems or crystals on their physical forms, they still are connected to the crystal and any changes to the characters are reflected in the crystal as seen when the crystal transforms to match the coloration’s of both the characters at the end of the animation. I wanted this transformation to be symbolic of how we change based on events in our own lives.

4.6 Choreography

Inspiration for my choreography started in storyboarding phase. A long time favorite influence for my style of animation comes from Spencer Wan. Spencer is an animator best known for his work on the *Castlevania* animated series. What draws me to his style of animation is the way he utilizes timing. He animates his characters to wait for the last possible moment to move which builds as much anticipation as possible to add extra power and force every movement. I studied his technique in order to exaggerate the anticipation behind each move in order to ultimately make each characters strike feel more powerful.

Researching real life reference introduced me to an interesting form of Chinese martial arts competitions known as Duilian. During these events two martial arts perform a choreographed fight that includes sets of attack and defense movements that can be performed with weapons or barehanded [6]. While martial arts has become more of a sports competition in our modern day, it’s movements still pay homage to it’s traditional foundation of being a means of self defense. Modern martial arts might be used more for performance than practicality, however the practice and mastery of it’s movements are still impressive feats of human athleticism. Duilian competitions provided a good foundation of pre-choreographed fighting moves from which I could use as a base for my own characters. Using this as a foundation ensured my fight scenes were well timed out with a balance of intense fast paced movements and slower more deliberate moments.

While I use Chinese martial arts for inspiration, it’s worth noting how the art form has been
sterilized throughout the last decade, with much of the individuality from each region being lost in favor of homogenisation [5]. The Chinese regime divorced many of the movements from their folk origins in order to create a few pre-choreographed mandatory routines as a form of ethnic extinction. Complete eradication of minorities in favor of a pure ethno-state is still an injustice that continues today. Most notably, the cultural elimination of the Uyghur people by the predominately Han government. Reeducation camps, monolingual residential schools, deprivation of political recognition, forced sterilization of Uyghur women, and destruction of sacred Uyghur landmarks are just a few of the ways Chinese authorities have carried out to completely eliminate Uyghur identity [9].

For camera angles a huge inspiration came from Avatar: Legend of Korra. This animated TV series was directed by Bryan Konietzko and delves into complicated issues about self worth, mental health, and world politics. A large portion of this series’ narrative and characterization progress through fight scenes that were carefully choreographed by Sifu Kisu, a martial arts master of more than nine different styles from around the world [22]. In order to choreograph each fight scene dynamically, Kisu and the Avatar team would film real actors performing before taking the footage back to the studio to be turned into 2D animation [22]. This footage could then be used by animators to create a more compelling and realistic shot. This approach allows for the characters in Avatar to appear more 3D in combination with dynamically placed cameras. I chose to pull heavy reference from the Avatar series because fight choreography from real life makes a huge difference between static fights and dynamic ones. As homage to this series and Sifu Kisu, I recreated some of my favorite camera positions and shots in my animation (figure 4.17).

Here I’ll break down the scenes I drew inspiration from and include a few reasons why I chose these shots. One of the first fight sequences I drew inspiration from come from Legend of Korra Season 1 Episode 6. This fight is between the main protagonist, Korra, and nameless grunts of the main antagonist who are only known as chi blockers. In this shot (figure 4.18) I drew inspiration from both the fighting styles of Korra and the chi blockers for my antagonist. Motivation strongly influences how each character decides to approach their actual fighting moves. Both combatants attack aggressively, throwing each strike with the intention of ending the fight immediately. I chose only to borrow from the most aggressive attacks of both their move-sets. This helped add power to the choreography of my antagonist, ultimately raising the stakes taken from each blow.

The next major fight sequence that I drew inspiration from came from Legend of Korra Season 4 Episode 6. This fight is a major turning point in the narrative of the show as Korra faces
Figure 4.17: Shot comparisons from my own animatic
Figure 4.18: Season 1 Episode 6 Avatar: Legend Of Korra

Figure 4.19: Season 4 Episode 6 Avatar: Legend Of Korra
off against Season 4’s main antagonist, Kuvira. In order to state her dominance as a feared military power, warmongering Kuvira provokes the main protagonist into a one on one fight. Korra, already tired and mentally defeated, tries her best to defend against Kuvira’s cool and sharply calculated moves to no avail. In this shot in particular the combatants fight with large chunks of rock as seen in figure 4.19. Seeing how the characters used these large objects to either attack or defend are what inspired me to have the antagonists use the crystal as a weapon in my fight choreography. Incorporating the crystal in the fight adds a lot of new layers of conceptual meaning to the narrative. Being the shared responsibility of both characters to take care of the crystal, the antagonist using it as a weapon against the protagonist becomes a metaphor for how mental illness won’t hesitate to use our own essence of who we are against us. In response, the protagonist must be vigilante of the antagonists attacks and of the protection of the crystal. An exhaustion tactic mental illness uses all too often.

One of the final major influences come from the Legend of Korra Season 4 Episode 10 animatic. I chose the animatic over the final animation because the poses and character performance in the animatic are better staged and more easily read. What’s interesting about this fight is the two combatants, Kuvira and Suyin, are both master benders and silk dancers, making their movements
more fluid and appealing ( figure 4.20 ). This fight has a perfect balance between which character leads the pace through the push and pull of battle. Watching the carefully crafted choreography and the way these two combatants danced around each others attacks greatly inspired how I decided to choreograph my own characters. While ultimately the protagonist would receive more blows, I drew inspiration from this scene to add more flow to the fight. I decided adding more exchanges between the characters would add more interest and allow me to better flesh out my characters performance.
Chapter 5

Conclusions and Discussion

Though this project is far from reaching it’s conclusion, there is much about its current strengths and weaknesses that can be discussed. Beginning with the project’s strengths, I think the performance between the characters as a way to progress the narrative is one of the strongest aspects of the piece. By focusing on posing and staging early on in the storyboarding process, I was able to create a clear narrative that progressed the characterization of the characters’ personalities and world. Another key strength of this project is the representation of internal battles as a choreographed fight scene. This visual allows the audience to gain a deeper understanding of what these internal wars feel like, and the amount of energy and carnage the fight takes.

In order to focus my time and resources of character performance and animation, some aspects of the project weren’t able to be fleshed out to a more complete stage. For example, the characters’ designs are one of the weakest aspects of the project. One key aspect of the character design that I needed to achieve was for the characters not to have aspects of race, gender, ethnicity, etc. While this was mostly achieved, as the characters’ general shape is gender-less and lacks any defining physical or facial features, the color treatment of the characters has not completely eliminated racial associations. I wanted to keep the colors as simplified and monotone as possible, however one major shortcoming of that means using gray-scale colors for skin tones. While this is an issue with the current character design, it is certainly an issue I can resolve by continuing to further explore the visual development of the characters through more emotionally based colors.

The overall focus of this project from the beginning was the focus on animation and character
performance. As a whole I believe the project achieved this. Despite only a very small section of the main story being produced, it is a strong proof of concept of what the project could become with enough time and labor.
Bibliography


