Making the Subconscious Conscious - Showcasing Unresolved Childhood Trauma Through Animation

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Making the Subconscious Conscious - Showcasing Unresolved Childhood Trauma Through Animation

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
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May 2023

Accepted by:
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Abstract

The focus of this work is to shed light on unresolved childhood trauma that can contribute to mental hardships - whether people are aware of its presence in their lives or not. In this paper, I will discuss childhood trauma, its impact on adult life when left unresolved, self-parenting as a method to manage it, and how it is portrayed in various media. Drawing inspiration from my research on trauma and visual storytelling, I will present a proof-of-concept for a 2D animated short film, *Strongholds*, which visualizes the internal mental struggles through the character dynamics of the personifications of the self and environmental storytelling.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my classmate and friend Harrison Diesl. Thank you for being the first to say hi to me every time I entered the DPA lab, giving solid advice on how to navigate graduate school, and giving feedback on my thesis visual references. I will always remember your kindness and your smile.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my Committee for working with me on this project. I would like to thank David Donar for helping me with this project since its conception. Dave’s patience, encouragement, and understanding of my vision have helped me make this into what it is today.

I would like to thank my family and classmates for giving me a lot of feedback and encouraging me throughout this process. To my production classmates and friends, I am grateful to have met you all, and you have made my life so much better. Ashley Johnson, thank you for believing in me and giving me so much reassurance. Thank you for listening to me and helping me figure out what to do when I got stuck and frustrated. Those late-night calls we had mean more to me than you will ever know.

Finally, I would like to thank God for giving me this idea to run with. Because of this project, I see the importance of prioritizing your mental health, and I will do so for the rest of my life and encourage others to do the same.
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Chapter 1

Strongholds

My body is trudging through the present
Because my mind is trapped in the past.
Every time I take a step forward,
A memory causes me to look back.

I stumble, and with nothing to grasp,
I fall to the bottom of a murky pit,
Filled with the sticky residue of sorrow.
But I don’t submit.

With the little strength gathered from
My loved ones’ affirmations,
I pull myself out, only to be dragged back
Into a fate seemingly worse than damnation.

Buried in my head are
Those burning words from long ago,
Their roots now planted in
The soil of my soul.

Now those words have transformed into
A monster that echoes every word
From my past I tried to subdue,
Making memories clear that I have blurred.

Every time I fight it head-on,
It roars in my face and knocks me down.
I try to run away,
But it drags me back in the pit to drown.

How can I be more than a conqueror
When I can’t even overcome
the leeches of the past that
bleed my essence and then leave me numb?

What else can I do
When I have been drained to the core?
Should I even try to fight again?
What is the point?

Wake up!

You are worthy.
You are above.
You are mighty.
You are more than enough.

Wake up!

You are strong.
You are embraced.
You are precious.
You are graced.
Wake up!

Monster, you are hurting like me.
This muck is nothing but scars.
The only way to help you
Is to speak to your heart.

You are loved
You are seen.
You are heard.
You are free.
Chapter 2

Artist Statement

Treat yourself the way you would want to be treated. I believe that it is important to take care of yourself physically, emotionally, and mentally. Life is not always easy, and we all have gone through hardships, no matter how big or small. When those triggering moments come, it seems easier to repress emotions and numb the pain than to comfort your scared inner child that is reliving those moments. You cannot change what happened in the past - the events that have traumatized you and have influenced your behavior and mental state as an adult - but you can control how you treat yourself when dealing with mental hardships and seek the healing you need.

My goal is to shed light on a factor that can contribute to mental hardships - unresolved childhood trauma - whether people are aware of its presence in their lives or not. I want to help normalize the topic of mental health in a way that emphasizes moving forward from trauma without negating or ignoring it. I found freedom when I became open about my mental health and realized I have control over how I respond to my trauma. I believe that portraying this visually will help people recognize this and take the necessary steps toward the continuous healing journey.

My mental health is heavily involved in the process of creating my art. I use art, particularly poetry, to express my mental state and process my emotions, and after finishing, I leave as a changed person. This is the same process I applied to this project, so in a sense, this is my visual poem. This project has allowed me to face my trauma and leave feeling hopeful about facing the next day. By sharing my experience with my audience, I connect with them and give them the opportunity to become vulnerable too.

My work is inspired by many outside influences as well, including Hannah Spangler’s ani-
mated short film, *Overcomer*. In *Overcomer*, the main character understands how her traumatic past is causing her to unintentionally hurt and bind her younger self. Spangler visualized the abstract concept of trauma that allowed the audience to connect with the characters and story and showed how to overcome trauma and take care of one’s inner child. This plot and character dynamic are the epitome of my story.

I chose to tell this story in a stylized visual representation because I can use imaginative elements to help the audience connect with the characters and story without barriers or biases. Because trauma is a serious topic, I created playful and cute characters to bring ease to the audience and make the topic more digestible. I animate my story because the movement brings my characters to life and is universally understood beyond language. Once the audience makes the connection, they can feel less alone and empathize with each other, which will ultimately help them look inward to uncover internal issues.

*Strongholds* reveals the subconscious and internal torment of unresolved childhood trauma through the dynamics of the self and the mind. My story uproots the idea of isolation and encourages the viewer to take care of the most vulnerable part of themselves - their Inner Child - through the triggering moments. Healing is a continuous journey, and by sticking by your own side, you can make it through life.
Chapter 3

Background

3.1 Personal Development

This project is very personal to me. At the very core, it is based on the thought of going back in time and hugging my younger self. As a child, I have been in traumatizing situations, and I kept a lot of my struggles to myself, unknowingly leaving my problems unresolved. As an adult, I thought I overcame the trauma of my past, but degrading thoughts would occasionally invade my mind. The reality was I never dealt with the issues of my past but instead shoved them away, running away from my problems, and ultimately abandoning my emotional needs. Because I did not want to be stuck in this mental place, I knew I eventually had to face my mental hardships, and in facing them, I discovered that I was just a hurt child who needed to be cared for.

3.2 Removing the Stigma

Oftentimes, we see people with mental issues or who act out in a way we do not understand, and sometimes, we do not stop to think about why they are behaving the way they are. A possible reason could be that they are dealing with unresolved trauma from their past and do not know how to properly manage it. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), “unaddressed trauma significantly increases the risk of mental and substance abuse disorders and chronic physical diseases” [1]. This insight could allow us to be aware of the impact of trauma and be more empathetic toward each other.
Chapter 4

Unresolved Childhood Trauma

4.1 Trauma and its impact on children

Throughout this paper, I will refer to the term trauma from the psychological perspective. According to the American Psychological Association, trauma is “any disturbing event that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings” [3]. Trauma is determined by the three e’s: event, environment, and effect [1]. The event itself must threaten the individual’s physical and emotional well-being, but how the individual perceives the traumatic event matters. Each person experiences a situation uniquely, so an event that may seem insignificant to one person can be traumatizing to another [1]. No matter how big or small a negative situation may be, no matter if it happened once or multiple times, it can still be traumatic. Trauma has long-term adverse effects that impact people emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually [2] [1]. Symptoms of exposure to trauma include, but are not limited to, recurrent distressing memories, recurrent distressing dreams, flashbacks, irritable behavior, angry outbursts, restlessness, and detachment [2]. Symptoms can occur immediately after the traumatic experience or be delayed [1].

Trauma can develop at any age from direct and indirect experiences and can be passed down through generations [22] [1]. The experiences can be natural or human-caused and can impact individuals or groups [19] [22] [1]. The focus of this paper is adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which are potentially traumatic experiences that occur before the age of 18 [17] [23] [5] [16]. ACEs include the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) definition of trauma (“exposure to actual or threatened death, serious
injury, or sexual violence”) as well as household challenges (i.e. domestic violence, parental divorce, parental death) and community challenges (i.e. bullying, racism, war) [2] [17].

The infant brain’s first task is to form neural pathways in order to learn the environment - understanding external and internal sensations - and prepare for survival. The environment shapes the brain, and the environment is not only the place where the child lives but the people in the child’s life who may or may not give proper care. The people who interact with the infant have a strong influence on the child’s brain development, and as the child gets older, more people enter their life and shape their environment. The brain seeks to be efficient, so it goes through pruning periods during the person’s life where it decides what neurons to keep and what neurons to dispose of. Basically, the brain determines what information is necessary for survival based on the environment. As a result, the child’s brain is malleable and adaptable, able to quickly learn based on the stimuli around. That means that children who have experienced trauma will hard code responses to trauma in order to protect themselves in the future. While children learn these responses, they can also learn other ways to cope with their situation [22]. Without the proper tools and support from the home or community to handle the situation, children will have to deal with trauma and carry its negative effects with them into their adulthood [1].

### 4.2 How childhood trauma affects adults in their present lives

“Trauma triggers are events or experiences that remind us of our earlier trauma, igniting the feelings that we had when we first experienced the trauma” [22]. Feeling triggered is not only feeling uncomfortable about a certain topic or situation but feeling like you are reliving the traumatic experience when confronted with what reminds you of that situation [9]. “In adults, exposure to trauma produces an immediate response to the stimulus, whether that stimulus is an event in the present, a triggered memory, or both” [22]. A trigger can be anything, whether external or internal, from a sensory cue, like a smell, to a word that they were constantly called during the traumatic event [22]. Whatever the case may be, whether extreme or subtle, the trigger is powerful enough to take a person back in time and retraumatize them.

Continuous exposure to trauma can provoke the toxic stress response, which can damage the developing brain and lead to adulthood physical and mental health issues [5] [23] [24].
ongoing toxic stress response wears down the body, leading to physical health problems, such as heart disease and diabetes [24]. According to a 2015 study conducted in Wales, “those with four or more ACE were 2 times as likely to develop a chronic disease before the age of 69” [5].

Given that trauma- and stressor-related disorders are purposefully placed between obsessive-compulsive disorders and dissociative disorders in the DSM-5, there is a clear relationship between trauma and other mental disorders [4]. Trauma, especially when it has occurred in the past, can even lead to the development of other mental disorders. Childhood trauma and ACEs have been linked to mental disorders including anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), psychosis, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [14] [17]. Mental disorders are developed from genetic and environmental factors, and childhood trauma exacerbates the chances, making it three times more likely to have mental disorders as an adult and an increased risk of suicide [14] [2].

As mentioned before, children quickly adapt to their environment, so responses to trauma are ingrained in their developing brains and can stay with them in their adulthood. Children impacted by trauma, whether from the caregiver or the environment, learn to not expect care and cannot distinguish the reason. They place the blame upon themselves and ultimately think it is because there is something wrong with them [22]. This all leads to them developing feelings of shame. “Shame is a result of early emotions tied to disruptive early attachments” [22]. Their self-worth is impacted, and their behavior reflects it. For example, they can become codependent.

“Codependency is a type of attachment to another person, an organization, or a cause in which we place a greater value and priority on his or her needs than we do on our own” [22]. This can get developed at an early age and get carried along to adulthood. As children, we are dependent upon attachments to caregivers in order to survive. “When we attach to a caregiver whose caring is unpredictable or unreliable, we attach in a manner that is less than ideal for our future development” [22]. As adults, our need for relationships does not go away, so we search for attachments that we want but also what we are familiar with. Those with codependency show the love and attention they need to others yet feel like they do not deserve it, leading to this unhealthy attachment style [22].
4.3 Unhealthy coping mechanisms

Those who have experienced trauma become creative and try different ways to cope with it. Coping mechanisms are voluntary or involuntary responses to trauma and can lead to changes in behavior and lifestyle. Not all coping mechanisms are unhealthy and dysfunctional, but it is important to remember that it is not easy dealing with past trauma without the proper guidance and tools.

People search for an escape when dealing with ordinary life, and that is no different for someone who has dealt with trauma. They may try to numb the pain with alcohol and drugs, leading to substance abuse. They may also try to isolate themselves from other people and social situations to avoid stress instead of getting support. Instead of facing their emotions, people may tend to avoid any negative thoughts related to their traumatic experiences [21]. There are many negative coping mechanisms that I have not mentioned, but in one way or another, it seems easier to disconnect yourself from your issues than to face them head-on. However, using mechanisms like these to avoid your problems can deteriorate your physical, emotional, and mental well-being.

Trauma can lead to dissociation, which is when one disconnects from the present world, surroundings, and memories [28]. The disconnect can be from one’s mind, body, and self (depersonalization) or reality (derealization) [2]. Dissociation can be an unwarranted symptom, but in some cases, it can be used purposefully as an escape to cope with the pain of trauma. “Dissociative identity disorder is a severe form of dissociation, a mental process which produces a lack of connection in a person’s thoughts, memories, feelings, actions, or sense of identity” [8]. According to WebMD, research indicates that it is likely caused by early childhood trauma, and it affects one percent of the population [8]. The person has two or more distinct identities and does not have a recollection of what each personality does when they are in control. Other symptoms can occur with DID, including, but not limited to, anxiety, depression, amnesia, and self-harm. The identities can switch when the person is triggered, so it is thought to be a creative way to cope with the pain of a traumatic experience [8].

4.4 Resiliency and healing through self-parenting

Resiliency is the wisdom to deal with trauma and the conscientious effort to work through it so we can “manage and eventually master our traumas” [22]. Resiliency is taking our trauma and
understanding and growing from it. “It’s what we do to actually support ourselves with the cards we have been dealt” [22]. Being resilient does not mean that one is not prone to get triggered, but it is about responding to the trauma with determination for a better future and care for oneself in the moment.

“The Inner Child is the aspect of our personality that is soft, vulnerable, and feelings-oriented - our ‘gut’ instinct” [25]. It is the being within us before the environment influenced our identities. On the other hand, the Inner Adult is the logical part of us that has an understanding of the world from experiences collected throughout the years [25]. “It is the part of us that is thought and action, as opposed to feeling and being, which are the realms of the Inner Child” [25]. The Adult is the present self who can make reasonable decisions based on past experiences.

Everyone has an Inner Child, and becoming an adult does not make your Inner Child go away. There will always be this part of you that reacts to the present world and situations in a childlike manner - with curiosity and wonder, yet with uncertainty and fear. The Inner Child is helpless and does not form logical responses [25]. For those who have experienced childhood trauma, it acts out based on what it knows - the hardwired responses to life and trauma formed at the early stages of development. Our Inner Child is our unhindered feelings and emotions, and the Adult in us can choose to either abandon or comfort our Inner Child in troubling times.

“Self-parenting is about guiding yourself through a process that allows you to become who you would like to be - who you were meant to be - by healing yourself through self-nurturing” [22]. How you treat yourself during adverse moments matters. For those with codependency, it seems so easy to treat others with kindness, but when it comes to themselves, they may speak poorly to themselves in order to power through the triggering moments. We all self-parent in each moment whether we realize it or not, but by consciously being patient with yourself and practicing methods to manage those moments, you are practicing healthy self-parenting.

As one goes through the self-parenting process, they learn techniques like self-soothing and self-affirmations to soothe themselves and heal as they manage their trauma and emotions. According to Wright, self-soothing is “an individual’s efforts or capacity to calm oneself while in a state of emotional distress” [11]. Techniques include taking deep breaths, visualizing your happy place, doing pleasant activities, and exercising. The point is to keep yourself in the present moment and be reminded that you are no longer in the past. Self-affirmations in pop psychology are statements one repeats to themselves to shift their mind to positive thinking [10]. With this technique, people
learn to stop feeling the shame they developed in the past and start loving themselves.

By self-parenting, those who have been traumatized learn to become self-aware, acknowledge the impact of trauma in their lives, and regain control of how they manage their emotions and triggers. They learn to stop relying only on themselves and allow others to help them, gaining a support system. They learn to turn a negative situation into a lesson and try to improve their character. When people learn to nurture themselves, they let go of shame and will be able to take care of their needs.
Chapter 5

Influences

5.1 Narrative influences - trauma portrayed in animations and video games

There are countless media that include traumatized characters, but the media that inspired me showed the effects of unresolved trauma in the characters and how that trauma manifested in their current lives. Their trauma affected their mental state and their view of others and the world around them, which has caused them to unintentionally hurt themselves and others in the process. Some of these media also present the power of positivity over negativity and how self-parenting and positive affirmations can uproot years of abuse and neglect. These characters either examine themselves or receive help from others in their lives to take the step toward healing.

5.1.1 Overcomer

*Overcomer* is an animated short film created by Hannah Spangler for her Experimental Animation class at Kalamazoo Valley Community College. This narrative is what inspired my story. In this film, the main character falls asleep and comes face-to-face with her inner child who unlocks repressed memories of the main character getting bullied and feeling lonely growing up. She realizes that her past trauma has caused her to have low self-esteem and degrading thoughts that stifled her inner child and creativity.

*Overcomer* reveals how the effects of unresolved childhood trauma can lead to one unin-
tentionally hurting their inner child and themselves, and this is one message I want to share with the audience for my story. A powerful moment in the film was when the main character saw her inner child in shackles and chains, a negative thought manifested and entered the inner child’s heart, adding another chain to the collection, as shown in Figure 5.1. When the main character realized she was hurting herself, she decided to take care of her inner child and counter all of the negatives with a positive - “You Matter”. That one positive affirmation wiped away all of those chains. That is not to say that those chains will never come back, but this example of healthy self-parenting is a step toward continuous healing. This is what my story is ultimately about.

Figure 5.1: “You’re Unloved” Enters Inner Child in Overcomer
5.1.2 Disney and Pixar’s *Soul* - “22 is a lost soul” scene

Disney and Pixar’s *Soul* was written by Peter Docter, Mike Jones, and Kemp Powers, and was directed by Docter and Powers. It is about a man, Joe Gardner, who learns what the purpose of life means with the help of an unborn soul named 22. I was inspired by the scene “22 is a Lost Soul”, which occurs in the latter half of the movie.

In the scene, Soul Joe runs after 22’s lost soul in the Great Before to give her back her Earth badge and convince her that she is ready to live. The lost soul swallows Joe whole, and inside, Joe is in a black sandy environment. 22 is tormented by the hurtful statements of giant sand creatures in the form of past mentors and Joe. Joe tries to get closer but ultimately gets pushed away by Sand Joe. Joe loses the Earth badge in the sand and while searching for it finds the flower petal that 22 enjoyed on Earth. Joe presents the petal to Sand Joe, and Sand Joe disappears, as shown in Figure 5.3. Joe walks up to 22 without any hindrances and puts the petal in her hand. I was inspired by how the negativity of the past forms these seemingly uncontrollable monsters, but then a small petal, a positive affirmation for 22, erased those giant monsters. This moment shows that even the smallest positive affirmations can overcome negative thoughts that have been deeply rooted for years.
5.1.3 *The Medium*

*The Medium* is a third-person psychological horror game developed by Bloober Team. The game is about a Medium named Marianne who goes to the Niwa Hotel to uncover the truth behind its unspeakable tragedy, a massacre, that happened many years before. Along the way, she also finds the answers she has been looking for concerning her past, her gift, and a dream - a girl shot dead on a dock. As a Medium, Marianne can traverse the natural and spirit world as well as talk and interact with other spirits. As Marianne is learning more about the truth, she is being chased by The Maw, a spirit that wants to “put on” people and kill them from the inside out. We learn about three characters - Richard Tarkowski, Henry Wilk, and Lilianne “Lily” Rekowicz - who have experienced some form of childhood trauma, yet their coping mechanisms, mindscapes, and trauma manifestations are unique.

Richard and his mother were physically abused by his stepfather, and Richard’s Jewish childhood love, Rose, was killed by the Nazis. Richard felt guilty about being incapable of taking care of his mother and Rose and is mentally stuck in the past. Henry’s father was a butcher who presumably physically abused Henry as a kid. He was taught by his father to be emotionless and get the job done, and that carried over into his adult life. The traumas of Richard and Henry impacted Lily who already dealt with the loss of her mother who died while giving birth to her younger sister, the protagonist, Marianne. Richard sexually assaulted Lily when she was thirteen who was obsessed with her because she reminded him of Rose. Lily and Thomas, her and Marianne’s father, are also
Mediums. Henry interrogated Thomas who put Richard in a vegetative state because of the assault. Knowing that Thomas’ daughters were inside his house, Henry started a house fire, causing Thomas and Lily to go into hiding in an underground bunker. Thomas ran experiments on Lily to keep her subdued and not use her powers. She eventually escaped but is drained physically and wants nothing more than to die and end the suffering of those around her.

I was inspired particularly by the mindscapes of the traumatized characters. The mindscapes reflected the person’s state of being and the places where their trauma took place. Given that Richard is stuck in the past, his mindscape is his childhood home and garden. Given that Henry will do anything to get the job done and enjoys torturing others in the process, his mindscape is his workplace and later, a prison. We do not see Lily’s mindscape since her spirits traverse the natural world. These characters have the power to shape their environment, whether it be a safe and happy place or a prison, and that was a part of my inspiration for the environment in my story.

![Figure 5.4: Henry Wilk’s workplace mindscape in The Medium](image)

I was also inspired by how The Medium portrayed unresolved childhood trauma through the manifestation of monsters. The Medium showed how childhood trauma led to the manifestation of monsters that took over their hosts’ bodies and did nothing but caused trouble for those around them. Richard’s monster, The Childeater, caused him to sexually assault the 13-year-old Lily. Henry’s monster, The Hound, turned him into a sadistic sociopath who can’t properly care for his loved ones and only seeks to physically torment anyone who goes against his allegiance to the people. Lily’s monster, The Maw, was released into the world and caused a whole massacre. He only wants
to drain the life out of those around him. To me, trauma appears larger than life and consumes the person’s life and being when left untreated, so I created a trauma monster that reflects those characteristics.

The ending of the game helped me think critically about how trauma should be handled. Marianne, Lily, and The Maw are at the dock. Lily is holding a gun, and she said the only way to get rid of The Maw was to kill herself. This puts out the message that traumatized people will only continue to hurt those around them, and the only way to stop trauma is to die. I watched Gab Smolder’s gameplay, and this comment from a YouTube user, Hasenru, really resonated with me:

I wish there was a way in which they could both survive by turning that giant gaping maw into a more manageable size. Something that could fit into a shoebox or your back pocket. Kinda like in therapy when we learn to subjugate our fears and triggers by working through them. Exposing fear is just one fight. Actually withstanding and conquering it is a whole different battle. [12]

I agree with Hasenru that showing Marianne and Lily working together to make The Maw “a more manageable size” would send a more hopeful message to the audience. The game ends on a cliffhanger, so we do not know exactly what happened in the end, but no one has to die for the suffering to stop. The healing journey is ongoing. You do not necessarily have to defeat your trauma and overcome it in one big fight. You just need to take life one day at a time and find ways
to properly manage it with the help of a support system.

### 5.1.4 Persona 5: Royal - Futaba’s Arc

*Persona 5: Royal* is a video game developed by Atlus and P Studio. In the game, the Phantom Thieves are a group of high schoolers who save others from their distorted desires and change their hearts by entering their mindscapes, known as palaces, and stealing their most valued treasure. The Phantom Thieves typically enter the palaces of corrupt adults, but in this particular arc, they enter the palace of Futaba Sakura, the teenage adoptive daughter of Sonjiro Sakura, the coffee shop owner and boss and caretaker of the protagonist. Two years prior, her mother, Wakaba, “committed suicide” by jumping in front of a car, and men in black blamed Futaba for her death. That led to Futaba blaming herself, becoming depressed, having hallucinations, and shutting herself in her room.

What intrigued me about this arc is Futaba’s distorted view of her memories and her mother as the result of her trauma. Inside her Palace, an Egyptian pyramid, are three scrambled murals of the events surrounding Wakaba’s “suicide” and how she treated Futaba, which represent her distorted memories. When Futaba remembers the whole story and realizes the truth, the literal picture changes - her mom’s frown turns into a smile. In the boss battle, Futaba’s cognition has manifested her mom as a giant sphinx who wants her dead. Her desire for her mother to still be alive mixed with the lies implanted by those heartless adults manifested into this monster. Futaba rejects and kills the false image of her mother, and that cognition is replaced with the real image of Wakaba, a loving and kind woman.

I believe that it is important to help people understand how unresolved trauma can change one’s view of others and the world around them, and I wanted to include this in my story. This arc accurately shows how trauma can distort a person’s view of that given situation and anything and anyone associated with it. It was not until Futaba decided to face the situation and accept the truth that the images of her mother changed.
5.2 Artistic influences

These artistic influences, both traditional paintings and animated films, have influenced the visual style of my story, from the environment and character designs to the animation.

5.2.1 South Carolina Botanical Garden - Clemson, SC

When I want to relax and become calm, I like to go out in nature. It allows me to shift my focus from my daily problems and gives me a moment to breathe and appreciate the beauty that surrounds me. The Botanical Gardens in Clemson capture what I want my environment to look like. The calmest environments to me are open fields with green grass and a clear sky. The Xeriscape Garden is what I envisioned before I even went to the place. Although there are man-made structures in the garden like the gazebo and surrounding rock wall, it feels like an open space where you can lie down and touch grass. In another area, there are these vertical rocks that are scattered throughout. I knew that I could use these to add visual interest to the environment and give some verticality to the horizontal landscape.
Figure 5.7: Xeriscape Garden at the SC Botanical Gardens (Clemson, SC)

Figure 5.8: Boulders near the Arboretum Trails at the SC Botanical Gardens (Clemson, SC)
5.2.2 Steve Henderson

Steve Henderson began as an illustrator but decided to pursue fine art. He paints the world as a beautiful and peaceful place although he recognizes that it is a brutal place. He sees that the world is our home and wants to show our home in the best light and spread hope [13]. He paints these vast landscapes and seascapes that capture the essence of tranquility, and that was what I wanted to portray in the mindscape. In each of his paintings, including Peace, he has a “free, yet controlled, use of color and brush stroke movement” [13]. He paints the bigger picture and is not focused on extraneous details, which ultimately translates to freedom and tranquility.

![Figure 5.9: Peace by Steve Henderson](Image)

5.2.3 Edvard Munch - *The Scream* (1893)

Edvard Munch was a “Norwegian painter and printmaker whose intensely evocative treatment of psychological themes” [27]. He dealt with mental health issues and had a mental breakdown in his later years that impacted his art. His paintings marked the different stages and events in his life, and *The Scream* is no exception. It is Munch’s most famous painting, and it is a visible representation of trauma. He described it as the following:

The sun was setting and the clouds turned as red as blood. I sensed a scream passing through nature. I felt as though I could actually hear the scream. I painted this picture,
painted the clouds like real blood. The colors shrieked. [29]

This painting clearly explains to people who do not understand trauma what it looks like when a person is triggered. The viewer does not know what the trigger is, but that does not matter. What matters is the agony on the person’s elongated face and the bloody clouds swirling in the background. Trauma distorts the person’s view of the world, and it affects how they interact with it. Even the couple in the background is unaffected by what is happening around them, which is how it is in reality. The cause of trauma and triggers are unique to each individual, and everyone reacts differently. I want to reference this piece directly in my animation by warping the characters and the environment when there are triggering moments. I will not overuse this, but I want it to be dramatic.

![The Scream by Edvard Munch](image)

Figure 5.10: *The Scream* by Edvard Munch

### 5.2.4 Fantasia (1940) - visualization of the abstract

*Fantasia* (1940) is Disney’s experimental film where in concert, a live orchestra played simultaneously with animated sequences shown on screen. What I liked about *Fantasia* was that the orchestra played classical music created long before the animation medium and the animation was a visualization of these non-visual abstract pieces. The movement of the characters and environment were well synchronized with the music. I noticed that when the music was slow and harmonious,
the animation was smooth, flowy, and bouncy. However, when the music grew faster and more discordant, the animation was more dramatic and sharp.

Because there was nothing to base the visuals on, the Disney animators used their boundless imagination to interpret the music. Oskar Fischinger was a German animator, painter, and cinematographer who created abstract animations of classical music. It was revolutionary during his time, and he became famous for doing this experimentation. He worked on *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor for Fantasia* but quit without credit because Disney simplified his designs so they could be more representational [26]. Although his designs were watered down, his influence remained. The shapes were pure energy that responded to the music.

My goal is to make the subconscious conscious, to visualize the abstract nature of trauma and recurring childhood memories. For my animation, I want to visualize what trauma looks like for the mind, which is something that only the person traumatized can see. I want the timing and actions of the characters, environment, and props to correspond with the narrative, so in peaceful moments, everything is calm, but in triggering moments, everything gets chaotic.

![Figure 5.11: Abstract visualization of music in *Fantasia* (1940)](image)

5.2.5 Disney and Pixar’s *Soul* - character designs and animation of soul characters

I turned again to Disney and Pixar’s Soul for inspiration. I liked the character design and animation of the soul characters. I particularly liked the design of the unborn souls because they
do not have any defining features that would give away a gender. I want my story to be universally understood, and I do not want the audience to associate gender with trauma and let that be an obstacle to immersion and empathy. I noticed that the general design for the souls, unborn and born, is rounded edges and unrealistic proportions, making them look approachable. Also, the souls are blue with chromatic aberrations, giving them an ethereality. I want my characters to look friendly and abstract to balance the harsh reality they face as they deal with the effects of trauma.

Studying the animation, I loved the squash and stretch of the soul characters, especially with 22, the Jerrys, and Terry. It adds to their fluidity and makes their movements more lively. It was also a joy to study the movements of the unborn souls. They behaved like ragdolls at times, not having complete control over their bodies. The souls’ performances were believable, and that is how I envision one’s Inner Child. On the other hand, when one is dealing with trauma, they can be extremely cautious, trying to protect themselves at all costs. I can imagine a character of that nature to be more rigid and balanced.

![Soul characters](image)

Figure 5.12: *Soul* characters

### 5.2.6 Canvas - pantomiming and character dynamic

Canvas is an animated short film produced by Netflix and directed by Frank E. Abney III. In the story, a grandfather grieving the loss of his wife struggles to ignite his passion for painting but
with the help of his family finds inspiration again. What I liked about this film is the performance, which is strictly pantomime, and the interaction between the grandfather and the granddaughter. The characters did not speak throughout the entire film, and their emotions and gestures were very expressive and dynamic, even in the subtle moments. Since I want my story to be universally understood and transcend beyond language, I will rely more on pantomiming to tell the story. It can be seen as a limitation, but looking at Canvas, I believe that removing speech will give me the freedom to explain my story through the characters’ movements and interactions.

Looking at Canvas’ realistic depiction of pain and trauma allows me to give a concrete root to my abstract story. The character dynamic between the grandfather and granddaughter is beautifully done. There are moments when the grandfather unintentionally hurts his granddaughter because of his pain and grief. This speaks powerfully to how traumatized people sometimes treat themselves and others. When one leaves their past unresolved, they perpetuate the pain associated with it. If at any point, they are reminded of that situation, they relive it and lash out, hurting or neglecting their Inner Child and sometimes those around them. Also, like our Inner Child, the granddaughter constantly sought the love and attention of her grandfather in spite of how he treated her because of his pain.

Figure 5.13: The Grandfather embraces his granddaughter in Canvas
Chapter 6

Design and Implementation

6.1 Choosing a visual medium

I decided to produce my film in 2D because I am personally in love with the craftsmanship of 2D animation. Everything is drawn by hand, from the environments and characters to the visual effects, and the medium has a personalized touch. This topic is personal to me, so I wanted to have full control over the art style and animation of my film. Also, because I have unique characters, it would be nearly impossible to achieve the look I am going for with live action.

Animation allows for heavy, stigmatized topics to be digestible. Suspension of disbelief comes into play. According to Animation World Network, it means “the people in the audience know that what they are seeing on stage or screen is a pretend reality, but they are pretending that they do not know that” [15]. The medium allows for a creative way to portray the subject without the limitations of realism. In his book, Understanding Comics, Scott McCloud talks about masking, which is when the audience is able to identify with a character because of its simplified design. “By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning” [18]. The audience is able to immerse in the world and empathize with my fantastical characters with more ease. With this, it will be easier for the audience to be more open about talking about trauma and mental health.
6.2 Narrative Process

My story as a whole is about a person who currently deals with the trauma of their past. They try to live their life but are subconsciously impacted by the pain. I maintain the theme of running away (avoidance) throughout the conception process.

6.2.1 Original Arc

Originally, I wanted my story to be about a person whose mind forces them to get to the root of their mental health problems - their unresolved childhood trauma. I initially wanted my narrative to be closely tied to my Strongholds poem but not be a direct interpretation. I was inspired by some of the media previously mentioned, but I was also inspired by Dante’s Inferno: An Animated Epic because it is an animated story of the Electronic Arts video game loosely based on Inferno in Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy. In the film, Dante travels through the nine circles of Hell to find his lover, Beatrice. Based on Dante’s descent, I created my narrative with the theme of falling. The main character will go through these different stages of agony until they get to the root of the problem in their mind. The overall arc is broken up into a prologue - Real World, three chapters - Mind, Belly of the Beast, Equilibrium - and an Epilogue.

In Real World, the main character gets tormented by sinister voices whispering negative words, which are supposed to be self-deprecating thoughts indicating low self-esteem. After leech monsters appear and trap the person, they get transported to the mind and transform into their Soul form. In Mind, Soul lands in a murky pit and faces their trauma in a form of a leech Monster. They try to run away, but the Monster catches them and swallows them whole. In Belly of the Beast, Soul meets Inner Child who is tormented by the same voices from the real world. Soul hugs and comforts Inner Child, causing the Monster to explode and allowing them to escape. In Equilibrium, Soul has the opportunity to escape but decides to stay with Inner Child and take care of them. In Epilogue, the person is back in the real world at a beautiful park on a bright and sunny day, feeling reassured that they can handle life.
Figure 6.1: Prologue: Real World - Animatic Still Frames

Figure 6.2: Chapter 1: Mind - The Eating
My narrative is an epic story, but I knew from the beginning that I wanted to focus on a section and refine it as much as possible. With that in mind, after working on my original arc, which presented the general scope of the story, I decided to focus on the Belly of the Beast sequence. I made an animatic in Adobe Animate.

### 6.2.2 Focusing on Belly of the Beast - Iteration 1

After landing in the Monster’s belly, Soul meets a menacing ice creature, who is actually Inner Child with a hardened heart. Negative voices start to echo in the belly of the beast, and
Inner Child starts throwing ice shards all over the place, not necessarily targeting Soul but at the disembodied voices. Soul runs away to dodge the shards, but as they run, shards land and form an ice dome around Soul. I did not get to this part in the animatic, but in the dome, Soul sees how Inner Child turned into the ice creature from the trauma and empathizes with them. Soul uses words of affirmation to melt the ice dome and the incoming ice shards as they walk toward Inner Child. When Soul presents themselves with open arms, Inner Child slowly walks toward Soul, and as they walk, the ice melts away to reveal Inner Child’s true form. The two hug, and then the Monster shakes and explodes, freeing Soul and Inner Child.

Figure 6.5: Chapter 2: Belly of the Beast - Animatic Still Frames

After developing this arc, I decided to keep Inner Child in their fiery form because I felt that first having Inner Child in their ice form was too literal of a representation of their heart turning cold. With that, I decided to start over and create another arc for Belly of the Beast. For the first couple of iterations, I experimented with Soul dealing with the agony of their past without the presence of Inner Child. I wanted to focus on establishing Soul’s personality and have the audience empathize with them before introducing Inner Child. I experimented with not showing the hopeful ending right away but instead ending with Soul succumbing to the trauma. Then for future work, Soul would use words of affirmation and self-parenting methods to escape.
6.2.3 Focusing on Belly of the Beast - Iterations 2-5

For the second iteration of the Belly of the Beast arc, Soul’s goal is to escape. However, fleshy hands are trying to pull Soul into the lining of the stomach, which is the Monster trying to consume Soul. Meanwhile, negative voices echo in the background. For the climax, the hands stretch Soul to an unrecognizable tormented figure, reflecting The Scream. Soul can no longer fight against the despair and allow themselves to be absorbed in the belly. I realized that I wanted to show that hopeful ending quicker. I wanted to tie in self-parenting by having Soul escape the Belly of the Beast using words of affirmation.

For the third iteration, the goal and conflict are the same - Soul wants to escape the Belly of the Beast but deals with fleshy hands grabbing them from the walls of the stomach. This time, the hands trap Soul. For the climax, Soul speaks words of affirmation, causing the hands to explode.
and upset Monster’s stomach. This causes Monster to throw up, freeing Soul.

At this point, I knew I strayed too far from my original concept, and I was unsatisfied with that. Even though it would take some time and care, I wanted to bring back Inner Child. The whole point of my research and project is to show how one treats their Inner Child and how to properly take care of them, so showing how Soul and Inner Child interact with one another is important. I still wanted to include self-parenting as a solution to healing trauma, so it was more important to end with a hug than escaping the Belly of the Beast at this point.

Figure 6.7: Chapter 2: Belly of the Beast - Arc Iteration 3

For the fourth iteration, Soul’s goal is different. They want to comfort a crying Inner Child. However, goop creatures formed from the tears torment Inner Child and Soul. For the climax, Soul speaks words of affirmation, destroying the creatures. The story concludes with Soul stopping Inner Child’s torment with a hug. For the fifth iteration, the arc is the same as the fourth iteration, except
Soul uses a sword with words of affirmation to destroy the creatures instead of speech.

Figure 6.8: Chapter 2: Belly of the Beast - Arc Iteration 4
6.2.4 Reviewing the Original Narrative

After reviewing this narrative as a whole, I noticed a disconnect between Soul and Inner Child. They are the same person, yet they are unfamiliar with each other. I realized that I could not talk about self-parenting without establishing the dynamic between Soul and Inner Child. I wanted to make sure it was clear that they are the same person but distinct entities, so I decided to create a new narrative surrounding their dynamic but still draw inspiration from what I originally created.

In this new narrative, I wanted to establish Inner Child and Soul’s character dynamic. Before I could show any form of self-parenting, it was important for the audience to get to know these characters and see how they interacted with one another. With that, I created the origin story of Soul and Inner Child. I developed the sequence of how Inner Child ends up inside the Belly of the Beast, and it had to be Soul’s decision.
6.2.5 New Narrative: Focusing more on Soul and Inner Child’s relationship

I wanted to maintain elements from my original concept. This new arc is set in the same mindscape with a lake in the middle and rocks surrounding it. However, because it is the origin story, the water is clear instead of murky, and the colors are more harmonious than dreary. In this new arc, Soul’s goal is to live in peace, run daily tasks, and maintain balance in the mind. However, Inner Child keeps bothering Soul. After some time, Soul has had enough and becomes triggered, causing the lake to drain, revealing Monster who threatens both Soul and Inner Child’s lives. Soul is holding onto the ledge of the newly-formed pit with one hand and Inner Child with the other. Soul knows that they cannot save both themselves and Inner Child, so Soul makes the decision to let go of Inner Child and save themselves.

Figure 6.10: Origin Narrative - Arc Iteration 1
This shows how some traumatized people unknowingly treat their Inner Child. Inner Child’s pesterling is a representation of Soul getting reminded of the horrible past, although Inner Child just innocently wants to play like they used to before. It may not be intentional, but when we avoid the pain of the past and do not properly deal with it, we allow our inner child to be consumed by trauma, a form of self-abandonment.

This is the arc on which I based my current arc. I still had to show how Soul and Inner Child are the same person, but I was getting closer to showing their interaction in this manner. Also, I decided to not include a lake but to initially make that area grassy like the rest. Wanting to connect this story with my original concepts by including the pit, I decided to have the ground crumble and form a pit later in the story. I still had to figure out how to fill the composition because it seemed empty without the lake. I was inspired by the image of Aang in the iceberg from Avatar: The Last Airbender for the idea of Soul meditating in the bubble. Metaphorically, it reinforces Soul’s desire to focus on getting through life peacefully.

Figure 6.11: Book 1: Iceberg by my-girl-katara (Redbubble handle)
I did not create this narrative in chronological order. After I started thumbnailing this arc, I saw that Soul and Inner Child's dynamic was better defined, but it still was not clear how they are the same person and what Inner Child's motivation is to get Soul's attention. I created two other sequences to answer those questions. I believe that my current narrative ties my research together to showcase the impact of unresolved childhood trauma.

### 6.3 Current Narrative

#### 6.3.1 Origin of Soul and Inner Child

The story begins with Inner Child drawing on the ground in their makeshift playpen, while Soul is in the background meditating in their bubble. We get a closer look to see that the drawings...
depict the story of Soul and Inner Child’s relationship. Soul starts off as a child and looks identical to Inner Child. Soul grows up with Inner Child living inside them, and Soul’s flame diminishes over the years. Soul removes Inner Child and distances themselves, causing Inner Child to have a broken heart. Inner Child looks up at Soul and back down at the drawing. They reach down to the drawing of Soul, showing their desire to be with them like before. Inner Child becomes determined to make that desire a reality and heads over to Soul.

6.3.2 Inner Child Wants Soul’s Attention

Inner Child, in awe, is now standing near Soul, watching them meditate in their bubble. Inner Child waves and hops around to get Soul’s attention, but Soul is too focused to notice them. Inner Child gets frustrated and knocks repeatedly on Soul’s bubble, causing Soul to get irritated and the calm skies to rapidly change to orange and red swirly chaos. Soul takes a deep breath and everything returns back to normal. Afraid of creating any more consequences, Inner Child gives up and walks away. However, they stop in their tracks and regain the courage to try again. Inner Child looks at Soul and at the top of the rock. With a plan in mind, Inner Child runs toward the rock.

6.3.3 Mind Cracking

We cut to an establishing shot of Soul floating in their bubble. Implied that Inner Child jumped from the rock shown earlier, they plop on top of the bubble, causing Soul to be in shock and the bubble to pop. Inner Child lands on Soul’s arm, who is still floating, and swings back and forth. The swinging causes Soul to lose their balance, but they regain it. Soul gets irritated, and the ground starts cracking. Then Soul takes a deep breath to calm down, causing the cracking to stop. Soul floats down a bit and shakes Inner Child off, causing Inner Child to slide off and bounce onto the ground. Inner Child claps their hands in amusement and rocks back and forth.

Soul notices how adorable Inner Child is and looks at them with awe but snaps out of it. Soul tries to resume their meditation, but Inner Child grabs onto Soul’s arm and tugs them back and forth. Soul becomes increasingly more irritant, and the ground cracks even more. Soul yanks their arm, causing Inner Child to lose balance. Soul regrets how aggressively they pulled their arm away and is worried Inner Child will get hurt. Inner Child lands on their bottom and reaches out to Soul. Soul reaches back, but we cut to see Inner Child warp into a distorted creature. Soul gets
scared and shakes their head. They look again to see Inner Child back to normal. Soul tries to resume their mediation again, but Inner Child launches themselves toward Soul. Soul catches them midair and throws them back. Inner Child tumbles on the ground and looks sad. They get scared and scoot away from Soul.

Soul falls to the ground and grabs their head. They shriek, and the ground quakes. Soul and Inner Child try to run away, but the cracks quickly catch up to them. The ground crumbles, forming a pit. Soul and Inner Child begin to fall, but Soul jumps and grabs onto the edge of the pit. A Monster emerges from the ground, and Inner Child lands on top of it. The Monster rises, tossing Inner Child in the air. Inner Child falls toward Soul, and Soul reaches out their hand and grabs Inner Child’s hand.

6.3.4 Sacrifice

Soul is hanging onto the edge of the pit with one hand and holding onto Inner Child with the other hand. Monster has its mouth wide open and its long tongue out, ready to eat them both. Soul tries to pull themselves up but is not strong enough. Soul slips but manages to hang on for dear life. Soul looks down sadly at Inner Child who is crying. Soul looks back and forth between Inner Child and the ground. Soul looks down at Inner Child again, sorrowful. Soul lets go of Inner Child, and Inner Child looks hurt and betrayed as they are falling down in slow motion. Inner Child gets snatched by the Monster’s tongue. Soul pulls themselves up and runs away, not looking back as Monster tosses Inner Child in its mouth and swallows them whole.

6.4 Characters

I have three characters in my film - Soul, Inner Child, and Monster. Soul represents the present self, the person dealing with the current woes and trauma. Inner Child represents the past self, the embodiment of innocence and joy, the person before the trauma. Monster represents the manifestation of Soul’s trauma.

A person’s soul is their essence, their personality, their true self. As the present self, Soul’s goal is to get through life with as few problems as possible. Their desire is to keep the mind at peace and maintain a safe space where they cannot be hurt or reminded of the past. To focus on the tasks at hand, Soul meditates in the middle of the field and encases themselves in a bubble that’ll keep
out any distractions.

A person’s Inner Child is their younger version. Originally, Inner Child is the “true monster” and controls the Monster that constantly puts Soul in danger. They are directly affected by the trauma and fight against Soul. In my current narrative, Inner Child is the constant reminder of Soul’s past - the good and the bad memories - though Soul mostly sees the bad as a result of the trauma. Inner Child is a literal child, and they are oblivious to the pain that Soul is facing, although they are the same person. Their desire is to reconnect with Soul and have the same relationship they used to have before the trauma. They are aware that Soul does not want anything to do with them but do not understand why.

I designed Soul and Inner Child simultaneously because they are similar in form. Inner Child is the younger version of Soul, so they have to look like the same person but slightly different.

For the base design, I wanted their silhouettes to be simple for animation but also because souls are supposed to be pure forms. With that being said, I wanted to make the characters genderless to help the audience empathize more with the characters and see themselves in them. I also wanted to eliminate any preconceived notions and stigmas about who deals with trauma and mental health issues. To keep the design genderless, I kept the form of the body straight instead of giving any curves that defined the form.
Figure 6.13: Inner Child Concept Sketches

Figure 6.14: Soul Concept Sketches
For the face, I knew from the beginning that I did not want the souls to have a mouth or nose. In my concept art, I drew Soul and Inner Child without eyes, but after going through another round of designs, I decided to give them eyes so they can emote. I looked at Marvin the Martian, as seen in Figure 6.17, for guidance on how I could make grand expressions since he also only has eyes on his face. He has his voice to help translate his feelings, but his eyes are very expressive. The eye shape has a lot of squash and stretch and exaggeration. When boarding and animating, I made sure to not hold back on facial expressions like Marvin’s.
Originally, I designed Soul with the flame head to represent a defined personality, and Inner Child had a round head to represent a malleable personality. However, I was given the suggestion by my fellow classmate and friend, Julie Huang, to switch them. In my final design, Inner Child has the flame to represent the childhood spark before the trauma, and Soul has a round head to represent the result of trauma affecting their life.

When rewriting the narrative and redesigning Soul and Inner Child, I did color tests for Inner Child to see if I wanted to give them another color, but after looking back at my concept art, I decided to keep Soul blue and Inner Child orange. For Soul, I was heavily inspired by Disney and Pixar’s Soul since their characters are blue. I made Inner Child orange because it is the complementary color of blue. Complementary colors “play off of one other’s intensity,” simultaneously creating a dynamic effect and balancing each other out [20]. Like their colors, Soul and Inner Child are seemingly opposites apart, but together, they balance each other out, creating a dynamic harmony.

The color choices for Soul and Inner Child are also symbolic of their personalities. In Western culture, blue psychologically communicates calmness and stability, which correlates with Soul’s mature character [7]. Also in Western culture, orange psychologically is energetic, friendly, and happy, much like Inner Child [6]. Orange is also a warm color, and Inner Child is literally a young fiery version of Soul.
Figure 6.18: Inner Child Color Tests - Light Background

Figure 6.19: Inner Child Color Tests - Dark Background
Monster is the manifestation of the person’s trauma. It is a big and daunting black leech creature with sharp teeth. Because trauma is consuming, I gave Monster a long and slimy human-like tongue. I based my design on Venom, No Face from Spirited Away, and Shu’ma from Hearthstone. I did not draw much concept art for Monster because Soul and Inner Child’s character dynamic is more of my focus, but Monster’s design in Figure 6.21 is what I envisioned.
6.5 Environment

Like the Xeriscape Garden, the environment itself is an open and vast field with blue skies and green grass. There are four rocks symmetrically aligned in the middle of the field where Soul meditates. The rocks curve and point at Soul. In the far distance is a sandy area where Inner Child draws pictures. I decided to make the mindscape a natural landscape as opposed to an abstract void to give a concrete interpretation of a happy place, and I believe that people can connect with nature. Soul has shaped this place, so I left visible brush strokes like Henderson. My backgrounds have cloudy skies instead of clear skies because I like to paint clouds, but the clouds will change when Soul is triggered. I designed the environment to be simple and minimal so the focus can be more on the character dynamic of Soul and Inner Child but to also communicate the unrealistic expectations of what the mind should always be like.

In my story, Soul’s goal is to balance the mind. They want to paint this picture that the mind is stable and there is nothing wrong when, in fact, there are repressed issues that are bound to come out. Like Henderson’s paintings, I made the initial state of the mindscape tranquil and still to communicate the harmony that Soul desperately wants to have. I also made the environment
spacious to convey the grandeur of the mind but also insinuate the distance between Soul and Inner Child in their relationship. The last shot in the animatic where Soul is disturbed is heavily inspired by The Scream since it portrays what it looks like for a person to be triggered. The clear blue sky transitions to red and orange swirling chaos.

The mindscape is very symmetrical, including the arrangement of the rocks, to indicate this false sense of balance and harmony from Soul’s attempt to avoid the trauma. The rocks have two strong interpretations. They can be seen as an extra line of defense and protection because the mind is trying to stay secure and defend itself from trauma and pain. Soul already has the bubble to protect them while meditating, but the way the rocks curve around the bubble can be seen as a cage, an extra layer of protection. On the other hand, the rocks can also be seen as an allusion to the trauma monster. Their formation around Soul can be seen as monster teeth, showing that the Monster (trauma) has its hold on Soul and symbolizing the consuming nature of trauma.

6.6 Discussion on the section I animated

I decided to animate the beginning part of “Inner Child Wants Soul’s Attention” because this sequence shows Inner Child and Soul’s dynamic and connects well with my thesis - Soul is too busy dealing with life and ignores Inner Child’s need for love and attention. Also, there is action with Inner Child knocking on the bubble and the reaction of the bubble and the environment as a result. I personally love to animate scenes with pathos, and in this scene, the viewer gets to empathize with Inner Child as they try to restore their relationship with Soul.

6.7 Storyboarding Process

I initially drew my thumbnails from my original arc digitally, but having to transfer boards for each iteration took longer than I expected. For my current arc, I decided to draw the thumbnails on Post-it® Notes. I placed the sticky notes on copy paper, so I had six squares per page. With this method, I could easily switch and rearrange boards, making the process faster versus drawing them digitally. Once I was satisfied with the sequencing, I redrew my thumbnails digitally and readjusted the composition.

As I already mentioned, I did not create the current narrative chronologically. I thumbnailed
most of the Mind Cracking sequence before I realized that I needed to fill in the missing pieces to better define Soul and Inner Child’s distinction and character dynamic. I then drew the boards for “Origin of Soul and Inner Child”. Knowing that I wanted to animate part of “Inner Child Wants Soul’s Attention”, I decided to create an animatic in Adobe Animate for the beginning and thumbnail the rest of the sequence to speed up the storyboarding process and set myself up for animating. I could have only made the animatic and moved on to animating, but I wanted to complete the narrative as much as I could and have it make sense chronologically as a package.

For me, the storyboarding process was not one-and-done. As I was animating, I came up with more ideas for how to visually tell the story, and I often went back to my animatic and made new iterations to see how I could execute these ideas and get the timing right.

6.8 Animation Process

I decided to animate in Adobe Animate because I have proficiency in it, having used it since my undergraduate years. Deciding to animate one shot at a time, I built the assets I needed for the shots I was working on. Starting with shot 1 of the scene where Inner Child tries to get Soul’s attention (scene 2), I painted the background in Photoshop and created the character puppets and prop (Soul’s bubble) in Animate. I also created secondary assets like shadows and highlights in Animate. The background and bubble were simple to approach, but I went through multiple iterations to figure out how to the character puppets. For almost all of the objects I created in Animate, I gave them each a symbol, which is a container for the drawing. It makes it easy to group and reuse different drawings and animations. The only drawing I do not have symbols for is the background linework. I initially had them in symbols to create a boiling line effect, but it was best to remove that effect so the focus would be on Inner Child, Soul, and Soul’s bubble.

The Soul puppet was fairly easy to create. Since Soul would meditate inside the bubble and have minimum movement when they got agitated, I made a cutout puppet of Soul in that pose. The different pieces included the head, eyes, body, upper arms, lower arms, and bent legs. I moved the pivot points to their appropriate positions so the parts would rotate where they are supposed to. In Animate, I have each part in its own layer, and I parented the layers so that Soul would have a forward kinematic rig. In the hierarchy, the body is the root or highest parent, so when I move it, the other parts follow. The lower arm is parented to the upper arm. I can move the lower arm
independently, but when I move the upper arm, the lower arm follows. The same goes for the eyes and head. I can move the eyes independently, but the eyes follow the head. I gave Soul a glow by blurring a silhouette of the characters and parenting it to the body, but I hid it because it was a low priority and I wanted to complete the primary animation first.

The bubble is made out of a circle. I decreased the opacity so that when I place it over Soul, it would look like Soul was inside. I also added a glow to the bubble by creating a bigger circle and blurring it. I created a symbol with Soul and the bubble together, so I could move them together. I parented Soul to the bubble so I could move Soul without affecting the bubble.

Inner Child was tricky to figure out, but I eventually figured out what to do. Inner Child would have the most movement, so I had to get the articulation of their parts correct. I took the same approach as the Soul puppet and created a forward kinematic rig by parenting the appropriate layers. I initially gave Inner Child a glow using the same approach I did for Soul’s glow, but I hid it for the same reasons I hid Soul’s glow. I also initially tried to create the puppet out of all cutout parts. The parts included the head, eyes, arms, body, and legs. For certain shots like shot 2 where the arms bend, I created an upper arm and lower arm and placed them in the appropriate layers. However, the leg pieces caused the silhouette to not match the concept art. I could not find a way to get them to connect seamlessly with the body, so I decided to draw the body and legs together.

Figure 6.22: Inner Child Cutout Puppet

I wanted to ease the animation process as much as possible, so I tried to create a deformer rig using the Asset Warp Tool (AWT). With the AWT, you place pins on the drawing. You cannot place pins on a symbol. When you click on the drawing with the AWT, it creates a mesh over the drawing where you can place pins or joints. I placed the first pin on the hip, which served as the
root, then on other places that I wanted to move. I mainly wanted to move the legs, but I also saw that I could bend the back too.

However, I was running into issues when I tested this rig. When I moved a joint, it warped the linework. When I tried to make a rig for the arm, the mesh was wonky, so the arm did not bend smoothly as I would have liked. I am assuming that because of the parenting system, the deformer rig also affected the other parts that were on separate layers. Moving certain joints translated and distorted the head and arms. I thought that I could fix these issues as I animated, but I noticed that it was hard to revert back to the original drawing. If I did not like the animation, I would have to start over. After figuring out all of these issues, I decided to traditionally animate the different parts of the body when necessary.
The approach I took for animating was to animate the base movements within the symbols (i.e. the bubble pulsating, Inner Child waving, Inner Child bending down to jump, etc.) and animate the translations and squash and stretch on the symbol itself (i.e. the bubble floating up and down, Inner Child hopping up in the air, etc.). I also did not animate every movement on one symbol but created different symbols for separate movements (i.e. there is a symbol for Inner Child hopping and another symbol for Inner Child emoting). This allowed me to divide the movements and focus on their particular animations without having to worry about the overall timing, which I adjusted throughout this process. This was especially useful for the secondary actions (i.e. the bend of Inner Child’s arms and the flop of Inner Child’s flame) because I had to figure out where to place them based on where I put the keyframes. For these actions, I placed them on every two frames within the symbol (i.e. arm bending left on frame 1, arm straightened on frame 3, arm bending right on frame 5, etc.). This allowed me to reference and hold at the appropriate frame for as long as I wanted within the base animation. I did not have to consider the timing within the secondary animation symbol.

With this approach, I animated twenty-five seconds of a scene that highlights an important part of my research - the unintentional neglect of one’s Inner Child. I am proud of what I created, and I learned a lot throughout the production process.
Chapter 7

Conclusions and Discussion

The purpose of my project, Strongholds, is to help others recognize the impact of childhood trauma in their adult lives and show how we can unintentionally treat ourselves in adverse times. I have discussed the definition of childhood trauma, its impact on adulthood, and healthy methods to manage it. I have taken inspiration from various sources - animations, video games, paintings, and nature - to shape how I want to tell this story in a manner that is digestible for the viewer.

After going through the iterative process, I have created a proof-of-concept package - concept art, storyboards, an animatic, and an animated section of the storyboards. My story arc showcases the struggle of dealing with one’s emotions while trying to manage one’s daily life and steer clear of traumatic triggers. I have shown Inner Child and Soul’s initial character dynamic within the environment and conveyed Inner Child’s yearning and endeavor for Soul within a few seconds of animation.

I have found strengths in my narrative and production process. I created my narrative with an open mind to executing new ideas. When I started animating, I thought of more ideas for how to express Inner Child’s emotions - Inner Child’s eyes twinkling in awe for Soul, Inner Child turning red with anger, and Inner Child launching themselves onto the bubble in fury. I could have continued with what was in my animatic, but instead, I went back to my animatic to see how the new ideas could work within my narrative. I made adjustments and incorporated those changes into my animation. I kept my imagination active, and it strengthened my narrative. With that in mind, from a production perspective, I would have benefited from spending more time on the storyboarding process. I appreciate coming up with more ideas while animating and experimenting
with how to incorporate them, but the pre-production phase is typically when artists would come up with creative ways of telling the narrative so animators can bring those ideas to life. Being involved in both parts of the pipeline, I have learned that I should solidify my concepts earlier to make the animation process more efficient, but I will still be open to implementing new ideas if I think of them during production.

*Strongholds* is my visual poem that has brought to life the heavy topic of unresolved childhood trauma. With my proof-of-concept and the knowledge I have gained while creating it, I can develop my story even further in the future and continue to spark the conversation about the importance of self-care.
Appendices
Appendix A  Storyboard Thumbnails

A.1  Scene 1: Origin of Soul and Inner Child

Zoom out to establishing shot of Soul meditating in their bubble.

Cut to establishing shot of Inner Child drawing in the sand.

Bird’s eye view of IC drawing in the sand.
D3: Happy Child Soul.
D2: Less happy teenage Soul with Inner Child inside.
D1: Unhappy adult Soul with Inner Child inside.
D4: Soul reaches inside...
D5: ...and pulls out IC.

IC draws a heart...
...moves their hand up...
...and draws a zigzag, making it a broken heart.

IC moves their hand out of the way, revealing the completed drawing.
Cut to full shot of IC looking down at the drawing.
IC looks up.
Cut to ots shot of IC looking at Soul.

Cut back to closeup of IC looking at Soul.

IC looks down sadly...

...and reaches their hand down.

Cut to bird’s eye view of IC touching the Soul drawing.

Cut to full shot of IC touching the Soul drawing.

IC looks back up at Soul.

Cut back to closeup of IC looking at Soul.

IC gets in a sitting position with their arms wrapped around their knees.

IC looks disappointed.

Wait a minute...

IC straightens up with resolve.
Determination!

Cut to side view of a determined IC.

IC stands up...

...and starts heading toward Soul.

IC steps over the playpen.

IC continues onward.

Cut to back quarter view of IC walking toward Soul.
A.2 Scene 2: Inner Child Wants Soul’s Attention

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Cut to establishing shot of IC standing in front of Soul’s bubble. Hold for a few seconds.

Zoom in to a full shot.

Cut to medium shot of IC looking at Soul with awe, eyes twinkling.

IC jumps up and down twice while waving their arms... lands...

...and hops side to side while waving their arms, trying to get Soul’s attention.
Cut to back view of IC hopping side to side.

Seeing that Soul has not noticed them, IC stops hopping.

Cut back to medium shot of a disappointed IC.

IC clenches up...

...and becomes red with anger.

IC turns back to orange but is still visibly upset.

IC steps back,...

...moving forward while stooping down....

...and lunges forward,...

...smacking onto the bubble.

IC bounces off the bubble...

...and lands head first on the ground.
After a brief pause, IC's body falls over.

IC is offscreen.

IC enters back in the shot, head first.

IC slowly stands up...

... and rubs their cheek to soothe it from the impact of the fall.

IC puts their arm down.

IC gets frustrated.

Cut to the back view of IC.

IC bangs on the bubble with both arms.

Suddenly, the bubble begins to warp.

Unaware of the change, IC sporadically bangs on the bubble with even more fury.

Still in meditation, Soul becomes slightly disturbed.
IC brings one arm up to continue banging on the bubble.

Cut to medium front shot of IC with their arm up.

IC opens their eyes...

...and is shocked about the current state of the bubble.

IC becomes worried.

IC puts their arms down.

Cut to wide shot of IC and Soul.

IC turns around...

...and runs away from Soul, towards a rock.

IC hides behind the rock.

IC turns around and settles against the rock.

Cut to a front shot of the rock that IC’s hiding behind.
IC peeps their head out from the rock.

Cut to worm’s eye view of Soul in the warped bubble.

The sky is suddenly filled with red and orange clouds violently swirling.

Zoom out to wide shot of the chaotic scene.

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Cut back to IC.

IC is terrified.

Cut to full shot of Soul.

Soul takes a deep breath in...

...and a deep breath out. Soul relaxes.
Cut to establishing shot of Soul in bubble.
The sky clears up...
...and the bubble returns to normal.

Cut back to IC.
IC is relieved.
IC retreats behind the rock.

Cut to medium shot of IC leaning against the rock.
IC takes a deep breath in...
...and a deep breath out.

IC is determined to see Soul.
Cut to a full shot of the rock.
IC pops out from behind the rock and walks toward Soul.
Cut to worm's eye view of IC looking at Soul.

Cut to bird's eye view of IC looking at Soul.

IC gets hesitant.

IC reaches up to Soul.

Cut to worm's eye view of IC reaching up to Soul.

Cut back to worm's eye view of IC reaching up to Soul.

IC is sad.

Cut to establishing shot of IC looking sad.

IC turns around...

...and walks away from Soul defeated.

Cut to IC walking away from Soul with Soul in view.

Cut to medium shot of IC looking defeated.
IC looks back at Soul.
Cut to establishing shot of IC looking back at Soul.
IC looks at the top of the rock.
Cut to closeup of the top of the rock.
IC has an idea.

Determination!
Cut to IC running toward the rock with a newfound hope.

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A.3 Scene 3: Mind Cracking

Zoom in to establishing shot of Soul meditating in their bubble.

Cut to full shot of Soul.

Suddenly something smacks on top of the bubble.

Soul is startled and looks up to see...

Inner Child on top of the bubble as it wobbles from the impact.

Cut back to full shot of Soul doing a take.
Cut to establishing shot of IC on top of the bubble.
The bubble pops.
Cut to full shot of Soul and IC.

IC falls down and latches onto Soul’s arm.
Cut to full shot of IC swinging on Soul’s arm, having a good time.
The swinging starts to make Soul lose balance.

Soul regains their balance.
Cut to close up of Soul.
Soul starts to get irritated.

Cut to bird’s eye view of the ground.
The ground starts to crack.
Cut back to close up of Soul.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Soul takes a deep breath in...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>...and a deep breath out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Cut back to bird eye's view of the ground, which stopped cracking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Cut to full shot of Soul and IC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Soul looks at IC...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>...and floats down a bit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Soul shakes their arm...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>...and after a brief pause...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>...IC slides right off...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>...and bounces onto the ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Cut to full shot of IC clapping their hands, entertained yet again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>IC starts rocking back and forth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cut to Soul looking at IC with awe.

Soul suddenly snaps out of it...

...and resumes their previous posture.

Cut back to full shot of Soul and IC.

Soul holds their hands out to tell IC to stay put.

Soul closes their eyes...

Soul starts to float up.

Cut to medium shot of Soul.

Soul puts their arms up in meditation.

Zoom into Soul meditating.

Closeup of Soul.

Suddenly, Soul gets pulled down a bit.
Cut to full shot of IC hanging on Soul’s arm.

IC drops down to the ground feet first, lower Soul a bit.

IC yanks Soul back and forth, but Soul remains in place.

Cut to closeup of Soul getting yanked.

Soul begins to get mad...

...and their eye starts twitching.

Cut to bird’s eye view of the ground as Soul is getting yanked.

The ground cracks more...

...and more with each yank.

Cut back to full shot of Soul and IC.

Soul yanks their arm out of IC’s grasp...

...causing IC to lose balance.
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Shot 21 panel A  Cut to closeup of Soul.
Shot 21 panel B  Soul looks regretful of how aggressively they yanked their arm away.
Shot 21 panel C  Soul is worried that IC will get hurt.

Shot 22 panel A  Cut back to full shot of Soul and IC.
Shot 22 panel B  IC falls on their bottom.
Shot 23 panel A  Cut to bird's eye view of IC from Soul's perspective.

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Shot 23 panel B  IC reaches out to Soul.
Shot 24 panel A  Cut to closeup of Soul.
Shot 24 panel B  Soul reaches out to IC.

Shot 25 panel A  Cut back to bird's eye view of IC from Soul's perspective.
Shot 25 panel B  IC warps into a distorted figure.
Shot 26 panel A  Cut back to closeup of Soul looking scared.
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**Shot 26**  
**Panel A**  
Soul shakes their head rapidly...

**Shot 26**  
**Panel C**  
...and look at IC again with unease.

**Shot 27**  
**Panel A**  
IC is back to normal.

**Shot 28**  
**Panel A**  
Cut back to closeup of Soul looking relieved.

**Shot 29**  
**Panel A**  
Cut to full shot of Soul and IC.

**Shot 29**  
**Panel B**  
Soul looks at IC with hesitation...

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**Shot 29**  
**Panel C**  
...but then with disdain.

**Shot 30**  
**Panel A**  
Cut to full shot of Soul.

**Shot 30**  
**Panel B**  
Soul faces forward wearily...

**Shot 30**  
**Panel C**  
...closes their eyes...

**Shot 30**  
**Panel D**  
...and resumes in meditation.

**Shot 31**  
**Panel A**  
Cut to bird’s eye view of Soul meditating.
Shot_31 panel_B
IC flies toward Soul.

Shot_31 panel_C
Soul turns and notices IC.

Shot_31 panel_D
Soul gets upset.

Shot_32 panel_A
Cut to full shot of Soul and IC.

Shot_32 panel_B
Soul catches IC midair...

Shot_32 panel_C
...and pushes them away.

Shot_32 panel_D
IC is offscreen.

Shot_33 panel_A
Cut to empty shot of bird’s eye view of the ground.

Shot_33 panel_B
IC flies in...

Shot_33 panel_C
and lands on the ground...

Shot_33 panel_D
...rolling...

Shot_33 panel_E
...to a complete stop.
IC looks sad.
Bibliography


