Autoethnographic Research through Storytelling in Animation and Video Games

Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis serves as a deep exploration of myself through my storytelling work in animation and video games. In this thesis study, I seek to build a philosophy that explains my value about what storytelling can do. The objective is threefold. I aim to use storytelling to reveal a deep sense of myself, unpack social and cultural biases to express my values within my design work, and affect the viewers by fostering empathy. By adapting my attitude and my values to visual components, I seek to find ways to use storytelling as a voice for social-justice purposes. The reflective process of this thesis provides me a way to see a holistic picture of the relationship between society and me, and how my pessimistic worldview may have been formed.

Storytelling, in my philosophy, can serve as an acceptable reprisal to seek social justice. For this reason, I choose to use storytelling as a social experiment. I see the viewers’ responses as an acknowledgement of my emotional pain, and as an attack to the offenders in society. I use storytelling as a cathartic method to tell society that it has wronged me. I see this process as a coping mechanism for artists who are as hopeless about changing society as I am. Each of my animation and video game processes is led by storytelling. Each one is a micro-lens focused on a particular personal crisis that connects to a larger cultural and/or social issue.
In this study, I use autoethnography as the research method to discuss my work and how it relates to my pessimistic attitude towards society. Autoethnography is a method to describe personal experiences in connection with cultural contexts (Ellis 2004, 37). It acknowledges the state of multiple truths, such as the truth I believe and the different truths that exist in different people’s minds. Instead of looking for a universal truth, my thesis explores my values and my beliefs expressed through storytelling.

Autoethnographic research often results in written texts only. However, my approach to research is first initiated through making animation and video games, then analyzing the storytelling content and identifying themes inherent to them. The autoethnographic research method then serves as a self-reflective process, and promotes awareness of the relationship between self and other, self and society.

The reflective nature of this thesis study enables me to become critically aware of my values and my own deep-seated feelings and enables me to contextualize my storytelling work into broader socio-cultural phenomena. I have been labeled as a person with special conditions including MDD (Major Depressive Disorder) and PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder). Through a new lens of personal development, my research process itself has helped me explain my psychological wounds developed during my socialization process in childhood and early adulthood. With a new understanding of the socio-cultural causes of my discomforts, I can gain more control over my anger and anxiety towards society. With an elevated knowledge base of my cognitive process, I can understand myself beyond any label.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my dog Emma for her unconditional acceptance.
Acknowledgments

There are many people I would like to announce my gratitude towards including Maria Palazzi for pushing me in media production and guiding me to learn theories in feminism, Linda Mizejewski for introducing theories about horror genre, Kim Lopez for helping me build my knowledge base in social psychology, and Alan Price for his knowledge in the video game area which helped me in my video game production. I am especially thankful to my advisor Susan Melsop for taking the responsibility of becoming my advisor when I and my study were in a miserable state and for her open mind about my way of thinking and conducting research. I would like to thank my supervisor Don Stredney in The Ohio Supercomputer Center for giving me the opportunity to make video games and thank my fellow colleagues Bradly Hittle, Jessica Kasson and Hector Medina-Fetterman for their generosity in guiding me to practice object-oriented programming. I appreciate my writing instructor Candace Stout’s help in introducing me a new form of research that fits my needs so well that I could legitimize my graduate study and describe it in depth. I also acknowledge Malory Spicer for publishing her thesis Animation as a Method of Inquiry (2005), which gave me courage and made me feel secure when conducting my research. I owe my gratitude to Dr. LaRae Copley for always being there throughout the four years of my graduate study, and to my counselors Jennifer Taylor and Sandra Facemire for discussing my personal crises with me.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

General Description

*Storytelling as Investigation*

This thesis documents my storytelling-as-investigation process. My research method is built upon an art-based research (ABR) practice. In Leavy’s publications about the ABR method, she suggests, "an artistic method, such as visual art or performance, can serve as an entire methodology in a given study" (2015, 20). As an animation and video game artist, I use storytelling as an ABR method for reflexivity and self-discovery. My intent in this thesis is to use this method to identify and explore my introspective storytelling process. I look at my storytelling process to seek an understanding of myself, my psyche, and an understanding of recurring themes in a larger cultural context including social psychology and gender studies.

*Autoethnography as a Method*

This storytelling-as-investigation process is led by an ABR method called autoethnography, which, in my thesis, serves as “a method of self-study” (Leavy 2015,
I choose this method because it fits many characteristics of my thesis. Among them are two essential features it offers my study.

The first essential feature is that the result of an autoethnographical research helps both “cultural insiders (culture members)” and “cultural outsiders (culture strangers)” understand the culture (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010). Another aim of my storytelling is to share my experiences as a cultural insider and communicate with cultural outsiders. In this study, I will continue to use “cultural insiders” to indicate those who have experience in a particular culture, and use “cultural outsiders” to describe those that learn about a culture from others’ experience.

The other essential feature is that the autoethnographical method is critical for exploring the experience of pain (Leavy 2015, 54). My storytelling activity is mainly inspired by my personal experience of pain. By conducting this research, I aim to identify and to explain the negative part of my psyche that my storytelling work reveals to me. I then embed the negative part of my cognitive activity in storytelling to trigger the viewers’ responses.

Von Der Haar explains Cooley’s theory of looking glass self by saying, “our self-worth reflected in the attitudes and reactions of others towards us” (Von Der Haar 2005, 110, Cooley 1970[1902]). I look at my glass self through others’ emotional participation in the stories I create and I interpret their participation as an acknowledgement of my
emotional pain. This acknowledgment serves as a psychological compensation for my suffering caused by society.

For clarity, I explain the term psychological compensation here. Ci, in his book *The Two Faces of Justice*, explains a vengeful relationship between resentment and punishment (2006, 182). When there is a gap between material loss and insufficient psychological compensation, resentment comes out and strives to fill this gap by punishing the offender (Ci 2006, 182-183). My storytelling seeks to help me gain psychological compensation and decrease resentment to help me get closer to the state of justice.

*The Interdisciplinary Investigation*

I consider my research an interdisciplinary investigative process of my storytelling activity. The disciplines include my main area of study, which is digital animation and video games, combined with an understanding of social psychology and gender studies. Animation and video games are the main disciplines of my graduate study. They are the forms I use to present the product of my autoethnographical storytelling process. Animation and video games to me are ways of writing. Like the written word, animation and video games are also forms of expression, and they can serve as tools for identifying, exploring and presenting my attitude.

I study social psychology and gender studies to help expand this investigation process. The subtopics include autoethnography, feminism, horror genre, self
psychology, socialization, and popular culture. Each of these provides me ways to connect and contextualize my body of work to broader themes of alienation, gender discrimination, trauma, and identity issues.

I created a simple diagram (Figure 1) to help explain how my study of personal psyche and the main discipline and disciplines in other areas work together to support my storytelling process:

![Figure 1: Research Process](image)
The areas on top of the diagram, such as Entertainment and Personal Experience represent the beginning of my graduate studies and research process. The area labeled Studies is my disciplinary expertise. The Cultural Observation area includes disciplines outside the fields of digital animation and video games that relate to my research process. I aspire to learn about these disciplines to achieve an understanding of my own psyche and use it to create meaningful stories. The lowest, Psychological Compensation is the ultimate goal of my storytelling activity. The goals of my storytelling include self-understanding, acknowledgement from others, and punishment to the offenders by revealing and criticizing what I think they have done wrong.

Points of Entry

*What Do I Want Storytelling to Do?*

In Spicer’s thesis *Digital Animation as a Method of Inquiry*, she challenges artists to ask themselves what animation can do except its typical roles (2005, 95). Here I am going to answer her question about what I want animation to do for me.

Carolyn Ellis agrees when Lloyd Goodall talks about autoethnography: “you don’t choose to do it so much as it chooses you” (Goodall 2000, 9, Ellis 2004, 26). Some people are like Carolyn Ellis, curious about people’s motivation of thinking and doing something. Ellis is always curious about what is behind a closed door since her childhood (Ellis 2004, 27). Some others might be like me, led to autoethnography because of their
socialization processes. My socialization in childhood and early adulthood shaped me, helped me become a sensitive person, and made storytelling a meaningful activity to me.

In my childhood and early adulthood, I faced personal crises and some traumatic events. As I learned about social psychology and gender studies, I connected my personal experiences of crises and traumas with larger socio-cultural issues. Therefore, today, I am in a better position to acquire a vision of clarity of my everyday suffering. Additionally, I gradually started to use animation and video games as my voice and an outlet for value expression. Animation and video game production is now, to me, more than tech shows or entertainment. In my study, they serve as tools for self-development and social justice purposes.

Self-Alienation

The strongest motivation of conducting this research is my desire to understand and explain the underlying problems of my feelings of suffering. Although I participate in a civilized society, I feel confused by its hypocritical and repressive nature. As Freud said, “civilization is repression” (Feinberg 2002, 55). Civilization represses “the level of open conflicts in primitive society” and supports “camouflaged competition” (Feinberg 2002, 56). Wearing a mask is a living skill that provides social convenience (Mattoon 2005, 17).

Growing up without knowing theories in social psychology, I used to believe that my mask or my persona, which was usually seen as childish and funny, was my true self.
The mask itself became a form of social repression when I believed that only my visible psyche, the socially acceptable part of my psyche, the mask that works to cater to society, was my whole self. This confusion eventually led me to experience mental breakdowns.

According to Mattoon, the shadow is the hidden part of the psyche perceived as negative and socially awkward (2005, 26). The social part of me could not explain my hidden psyche, the shadow, the negative, and the socially awkward part of my psyche. This sensation creates a feeling of alienation, which generally means “unable to understand these events and structures adequately” (Schacht 2015[1970], 106). Since I could not understand the structure of my own psyche, I had a feeling of alienation towards myself. In other words, I needed to identify the hidden part of my psyche to wholly understand myself and to decrease this feeling of alienation.

Powerless Rebel

My feeling of powerlessness is the other motivation for conducting this research. I acknowledge that this research cannot make enough contribution to change society. I only seek to understand how my psyche functions under the influence of society so that at least I am not confused or deceived, but can defend my self-esteem. I see my storytelling as the last resort and the only mean I can actually use to deal with my feeling of powerlessness.

Because of my socialization process such as how I was raised and how I was treated in schools, I developed great sensitivity to social issues such as psychological
violence from the powerful such as employers, teachers, and parents. Because of this sensitivity, I held a pessimistic attitude that was challenging to explain with clarity. However, after taking some courses in gender studies, I now can clearly state that I identify myself as a powerless little person like most people who cannot have “influence over sociopolitical events” (Schacht 2015[1970], 183). I understand that biological traits and the power of socialization are strong and one little artist like me is not going to change a large group of people. I do not believe that stories I produce during my limited life time can impact people in any significant way. However, I do believe I can affect the way I feel to cope with my contempt of the status quo. On a personal level, my storytelling activity is beneficial, it helps me understand the causes of my psychological pain and provides me an outlet so I can be less resentful. Since I am part of society, this personal benefit might in some ways benefit society as well.

I identify as a woman discriminated against and mistreated by social institutions such as family, school and the Taiwanese government. My suffering caused by gender discrimination and the authority’s abuse of power made me develop a rebellious personality. The dissonance between my feeling of powerlessness and my rebellious personality irritated me. To reduce this discomfort, I found a coping mechanism—storytelling. Now I use storytelling as an implicit protest. Even though I cannot change society, I still wish to have a voice and tell the viewers my reasons for having a pessimistic attitude. I express my pessimistic attitude in my storytelling work to seek acknowledgement of my standpoint and my emotional pain from the viewers.
Society restrains my impulses to create conflicts such as quarrels or physical fights. After all, what I can do, at least, is to find an outlet to ease the tension between my feeling of powerlessness and my rebellious personality. Like Von Der Haar describes, society channels people to find socially acceptable outlets (2005, 52). Society channels me to my storytelling activity, as a socially acceptable outlet.

*To Be Free*

The influence that feminism has on me is undeniable. It teaches me to think outside of the dominant box and to free myself and my negative, socially awkward way of thinking. It encourages me to use media as a voice to express my values.

Feminist bell hook honors everyone’s voice (2000, 8). She encourages feminists to spread the word by different media (2000, x). By publishing a highly accessible book, *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics*, she teaches people about feminism and about thinking outside of convention so that people “can be free” (2000, 103). If people can see from outside of the dominant box, they might not be constrained by stereotypes so much and will be more open-minded to different perspectives.

Like feminism, my pessimistic attitude is repressed by the civilized society. Therefore, through this study, I challenge the academic norms as a way to demand my freedom of expressing my pessimistic attitude. I want to free myself from the box and see both the inside and outside of the box. I hope I can have voice in the area of media and
earn understanding from some of those who are unconsciously manipulated by the dominant value.

Questions for Discussion

The first research question is based on the main purposes of this thesis—to decrease my feeling of alienation from myself by understanding my psyche within socio-cultural contexts. The other research question is based on a more ambitious goal of this thesis—to seek understanding from others. This research follows these two questions:

(1) **How does the storytelling process and the final product expose my psyche to me?**

The following is what I do in this thesis to answer this question:

a. Identify the most suitable methodological genre for this question.

b. Explain my relationship between my real life experiences and the stories I create.

c. Contextualize the concept that I present in my stories with the help of socio-cultural knowledge.

d. Look back at my storytelling products I made to identify shifts in the thinking, design, and making processes.

(2) **How do I explain the shadow of my psyche to the viewers to help them understand it?**

This is what I do in this thesis to answer this question:

a. Discuss my choice of media.
b. Discuss the concept development process of the stories I create with help of scholarly literature.

c. Look at the graphic style I used in my previous work. Discuss how the idea was formed and contextualize it with literature.

d. During and after the viewers look at my storytelling work, observe their bodily responses and interpret what I see in the glass self.

Statement of Purpose

The primary purpose of this study is to help me identify the cause of my emotional pain in social settings. The secondary reason is to present an understanding of my emotional pain to the public to ask for understanding from others. In this study, I draw research data from my storytelling process to investigate the relationship between society and me. Through this investigation, I hope to find out the hidden, underlying social issues that cause my discomforts, and find effective ways to have a voice in design and visual language to expose the dark side of society.

I believe that, with sufficient understanding, pessimists can also be proud of their attitudes and their insightful knowledge. Just because the pessimistic attitude is not the norm does not prove that it is fundamentally inadequate or bad. As long as the causes and effects can be explained, the pessimistic attitude should be understood but be repressed or ignored.
Ignoring the negative side of human nature can cause problems. For example, Lerner explains that most people tend to have the “belief in a just world” (Lerner 1980, Von Der Haar 2005, 144). People feel comfortable believing that misfortune happens to those who deserve it (Von Der Haar 2005, 144). Delusional positive thinking causes social issues such as “blaming on the victim” (Von Der Haar 2005, 142). Human beings believe in this kinds of positive thinking because they want to believe that misfortune does not happen to them haphazardly (Lerner 1980, Von Der Haar 2005, 144). This human nature makes positive thinking dominant but it does not indicate it is realistic or adequate.

To ease the discomfort that negative thinking produces, understanding is a better solution than repressing and ignoring. Mattoon indicates two categories of people that manifest shadows. The first category is inclusive of those who see themselves as inadequate and bad (2005, 29). They usually suffer from low self-esteem. The second category is mainly criminals who praise the dark side of themselves and feel ashamed of their positive side. I consider myself as a cultural insider of these two groups of people. Based on my own experience as an insider, I feel that judging their attitudes as wrong or sick is wrong-minded and might lead them to an outburst of destructiveness.

As a pessimist myself, I understand that when these two groups of people do not know how to communicate to society and they do not know how to rationalize their ways of thinking, they are most likely to fail to protect their self-respect, which might result in suicide (Feinberg 2002, 10). Suicide is a form of destruction. Some people might not
show their destructiveness through suicide but through crimes or by making scenes. If more of these people can understand their thinking outside of box of the traditional value, they might have more control over the level of destructiveness in them, their behaviors, and their bodies to fit in society and to be happy spiritually.

The secondary purpose of my storytelling is to lead the viewer to gain acknowledgement of my negativity and suffering with mass media’s great power of manipulation. Mass media has long been known as a tool for crafting public image since the famous Kennedy-Nixon presidential debate in 1960, in which Edwin Shneidman concludes that Kennedy looked like a doer while Nixon looked like he would do things wrong (Barry 1997, 182). Nowadays, mass media is considered one of the primary agents of socialization along with the family and schools (Von Der Haar 2005, 68). Because of mass media’s power for manipulation, I construct stories with the help of this strong patriarchal power as a way to challenge patriarchy itself, in other words, to combat poison with poison. As a creator, I have the power to control what the viewers can see or do in my storytelling, which, to me, means I am given the dominant power at the moment when the viewers are engaged in the stories I create. I use highly accessible media including animation and video games to spread my values and compete with the dominant value. However, using media to influence a large group of viewers is, at this stage, an overly ambitious goal. More study will need to be conducted in the future. For example, it might become more realistic and achievable if I target the area of animation and video games to design experimental research to find out how well I can use media to
manipulate a large group of viewers by documenting and analyzing from the viewers’ points of view. However, the viewers’ own interpretation about my storytelling work is not the focus of this study. I aim at using my interpretation of their bodily responses to interpret how I, as the creator of the autoethnographic stories, feel about these responses.

Significance of the Study

Introducing New Knowledge

When Dr. Feinberg says that “Institutions, like individuals, almost never admit that their behavior is selfish or their philosophy self-serving” (2002, 19), I thought about a question that instructors asked me quite often: “What will your contribution be to your area?” I conceive of my research as selfish and my philosophy as self-serving. Therefore, when they challenged me with that question, I stayed in silence. I did not see contributing to my area as something meaningful and I feared that this thought might cause me to be disqualified as a graduate researcher. Now, I am still a selfish human being without the saint quality. I only wish to see that more scholars with a similar worldview can surface in this research area so my pessimistic perspective can be more acknowledged and validated.

My contribution to my discipline or society are all by-products of my graduate study. None of the contributions I discuss in this section were purposefully made but I cannot deny their existence. I worked on this thesis with only self-centric purposes in mind. I only thought about how I wanted to understand myself and guided the viewers to
understand the social factors that shaped my attitude. I was not conscious about the
collection that this study could make until my advisor Susan Melsop gave me an
example. She indicated some possible contributions of this study, which led me to start to
believe that this study may be able to contribute to the academic area of digital animation,
video games, and social psychology. I agree with Melsop because I recognize there are
many storytellers using their personal experiences to construct stories about their moral
reasoning. I am eager to learn from them and their experiences with research methods,
analysis, and storyboard development. I have experienced the difficulty of the lack of
similar research methods to follow in the animation and video game area. An
autoethnographic research methodology might be one of the methods to follow.

I used to not recognize knowledge in non-technical areas until I reached out to the
field of study of social psychology and gender studies. Many other students in the area of
animation and video game may have experienced similar difficulty. Mass media includes
animation and video games because “the term mass media refers to all of the ways used
to spread cultural knowledge to large audiences” (Von Der Haar 2005, 66, Ryan and
Wentworth 1999). Social psychology sees animation and video games “as powerful
agents of socialization” (Von Der Haar 2005, 67). It is similar in gender studies. In
Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics, bell hooks discusses how mass media
influences the patriarchal society such as how it controls masses of people’s perception of
lesbians (2000, 97) and how it gives masses of people a false idea that feminism is about
hatred towards men (2000, 117). The power of mass media is well discussed in social
psychology and gender studies but its influence seems to be dismissed by most of those who actually study to produce animation and video games. I have been in the animation and video game area since 2008. I have not seen any class in these programs that exposes animation and video game artists to mass media’s power of socialization and how we could use it as social acts. One of the contributions of this thesis includes encouraging other artists in the animation and video game discipline to reach beyond technical skill development in order to infuse interdisciplinary knowledge into their creative productions and to recognize the power that mass media production can have to influence social behavior and cultural perceptions.

Introducing a New Freedom

The self-oriented nature of my thesis might become a contribution because other artists can follow my research method and use their chosen format of expression to explore their own perspective from direct experiences—their own lived experience and their own work. Additionally, other ethnographers might use the result of this kind of research in social psychological research as highly detailed participant observation data.

On a personal level, this thesis encourages artists with similar aspiration to find an answer to explain their own experience and challenge the dominant perspective in society to defend for their own cultural groups. I introduce a new purpose of doing research to them to help them investigate their selves through their chosen format of media despite that their attitudes might be socially awkward. My thesis may help them liberate their
ways of thinking and have their voices heard by society. By following this thesis as a research method, artists are informed that they are allowed to use their work for self-discovery and social-justice purposes.

Socially, this study might open people’s minds that a person with a pessimistic attitude toward society can make contributions. I tend to see myself as an evil and selfish person with pride. Most of the time, I have no choice but pretend to be nice. Some people have told me that I am a nice person. I believe that they were telling the truth. Some people discuss their distress with me and even their suicidal thoughts because I do not blame them or overreact on these topics. Even a selfish and pretentious person like me can make contributions to benefit people around. Therefore, I am not surprised that a study like this that features the personal could make a contribution.

Definition of Audience

There are two audience groups that my storytelling targets. The first group is the cultural insider, the like-minded. The second group is the cultural outsider, the general viewers. Additionally, a group of readers, the like-minded artists, may get the most benefit out of reading this thesis.

*The Like-minded*

The primary audience group of my storytelling is the like-minded. The like-minded have some similar dispositional characteristics to me. They do not want to be tamed and repressed by the dominant ways of thinking. They have resistive thoughts that
are hard to be phrased and rationalized. They are like me in the past who fail to wear proper masks so they risk the loss of emotional resources they need such as understanding, love, and companionship. Since they already agree with my pessimistic attitude on some level, they are the easiest for me to get acknowledgment from. The more people agree with me, the louder the voice my storytelling work has.

Some of the like-minded might be artists, which made them the perfect readers of this thesis. They seek to improve and expand their concept development ability for artistic, personal and social purposes. My thesis might help them to think how they can make their storytelling processes benefit themselves in new ways. Their production for sharing might talk to other insiders and inspire them. They may be able to learn a way to gain acknowledgment from the outsiders through the stories they create.

*The Cultural Outsiders*

The second audience group of my storytelling is the outsider. I seek acknowledgment of pain from them. Autoethnographical storytelling is a method I use to understand and justify my negative thoughts. It is not without risks. For example, it gives this group of audience opportunities to make harmful judgments towards me. Other risks will be discussed in Chapter 3. Even though autoethnographical storytelling is risky, it is a chance to defend and justify my thinking as a defense to protect my self-respect. I conduct this research with hope that I can lower risks of being judged and raise the possibility of being understood by this audience group.
Scope and Limitation of the Study

(1) This thesis focuses on my explanation of why I work on visual and digital storytelling for social psychological purposes. It will not provide an analysis of the technical methods implemented in the production of my modeling, animating, drawing, and programming.

(2) Visual arts can be used for different purposes. Some games are gameplay-oriented and some are for training. This thesis only discusses when they are used as storytelling tools.

(3) This thesis only focuses on the personal narrative genre within the scope of autoethnography. Other types of autoethnography will not be discussed.

(4) I look at my glass self and use my perception to evaluate the effectiveness of the viewers’ responses. Therefore, survey research, questionnaires and experimental research will not be conducted of viewers’ responses.

(5) I might unconsciously lie in my research since I am a human. Human beings rarely say anything that constitutes the entire truth (Feinberg 2002, 58). At least, on the conscious part, I would like this research to be mostly honest.
Chapter 2: Background

Common Issues

The Conceptual Problem

Generally speaking, the area of animation and video games seems to be isolated from disciplines that might be able to provide helpful references for meaning making such as social psychology and gender studies. Animation and video game makers have a tendency to focus on how to produce effects and overlook the importance of meaning making for storytelling. My formal education was not an exception. As a digital animation and game artist, I became familiar with many media production tools such as Maya, Photoshop, After Effects, and Unity, and developed a variety of digital production skills, such as modeling, animating, storyboarding, and programming. I have found, however, that relying heavily on production tools has a great chance of producing vague or even meaningless eye candy.

In eight years of practice in the animation and video game area, I now recognize the reason why in a period of time I lost interest in this area—skills used only for the production of eye candy do not satisfy my intellectual curiosity. The skills necessary to create them by themselves are empty and meaningless. While learning tools for animation and video game production are practical, learning and applying the tools alone
does not satisfy the conceptual needs to bridge the divide between skills applied and attitudes and beliefs expressed through storytelling. I decided to pursue this M.F.A degree with a vision that I would be able to present the stories that can cause meaningful effects. This thought led me to put my intensive technical practice aside to start thinking about using animation and video games as a practice to investigate my emotional pain and as a socially acceptable outlet.

I identified one of my two weaknesses as not knowing how to express my thoughts in storytelling in a way that may foster empathy in the viewers to ask for their understanding of my attitude. I found the other weakness as not knowing how to identify the cause of my emotional pain. Then, I found two possible ways to define and overcome these weaknesses. First, by studying other disciplines that discuss topics related to my thoughts, I could understand my personal experiences within socio-cultural contexts. Second, I could use this new knowledge to construct stories so the viewers can easily relate to the value embedded in the stories I create.

In the first two years in my graduate studies, I made the stories that relied heavily on my lived experience and my existing technical skills. In this stage, I often felt absurd about my design choices because I lacked any knowledge of related theories or cultural references. This lack of knowledge limited my ability to explain the design choices I made. For example, I was unclear about the reasons why I chose to use unicorns as the characters in my film The Buried Unicorn (2013) despite that it was my own choice. The design choices for The Buried Unicorn will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3.
There are more problems to state. I ran out of ideas for representation quickly because I relied only on my intuition. I could not draw inspirations from a broader socio-cultural context or reference literary themes because I did not know them or how they might connect to my own work. To solve the problem, I started a self-investigation process, in which I looked for answers in different disciplines to search for knowledge and references, and reflected on my storytelling process in animation and video games I produced. I needed to make sense of them by connecting them to broader themes with knowledge from other disciplines. The purpose of this was to have a deeper sense of what I had created, i.e., what had been produced, and how, in the future, I could visualize my thoughts for my storytelling work.

Knowledge from other areas may help me develop story concepts and prevent artistic exhaustion. This consideration led me to social psychology and gender studies. When absorbing new knowledge from other areas, I looked back at the relationship between my personal history and my previous storytelling work. A new understanding of my own psyche and the meaning of producing animation and video games gradually revealed themselves to me. Now I believe that an open mind and new knowledge from different disciplines can be a solution for my conceptual problem.

*The Methodological Problem*

Autoethnography has existed for decades and there are many other terms associated with it such as qualitative research, ethnography, and art-based research. Many
scholars support these methods of research (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015, Chang 2008, Ellis 2004, Leavy 2015, Jones, Adams and Ellis 2013, Douglas and Carless 2013, Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010) because this method provides answers to complicated phenomena that cannot be measured, artificially experimented, or generalized. This new method was developed because the traditional way of conducting research does not provide a basis for addressing some research topics including this one.

Autoethnography is a method for building knowledge-based experience in particular lives (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015, 21). Before this methodology came into popular use, qualitative researchers in sociology, psychology and communication struggled to have this new methodological genre gain acceptance because the practice of mainstream social research was against it (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015, 8-9). Traditionally, scholars stressed only social facts and the universal truth (Leavy 2015, 7, Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015, 8). They did not acknowledge ethnographic practices and the researchers’ influence on their studies (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015, 8). The debate between subjectivity and objectivity played a major role in the developing process of this research genre.

Ellis explains that at the time the book titled *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* was published in 1963, it became the bible of qualitative research (2004, 10). She further explains that, in that period of time, successful qualitative research was formalized and linked to quantitative research. It was hard for qualitative researchers to be considered successful. Ellis found it difficult to follow the traditional way of doing research and stay
entirely objective when conducting research in sociology because she, as a researcher, emotionally participated in the research (2004, 10).

Kitrina Douglas and David Carless also felt that “something was missing from the academic writings” (2013, 85). They gave an example: it is hard to analyze thoughts of a person with schizophrenia by counting the amount of women he has had relationships with or the how many suicide attempts he has made (Douglas and Carless 2013, 86). Some topics about human beings are difficult to be operationalized such as the amount of love and the meaning of a stable marriage (Von Der Haar 2005, 11). The full picture cannot be uncovered by measuring. It also requires a qualitative discussion of the individual’s experience.

*The Need of a New Freedom*

Like Kitrina Douglas and David Carless, I felt “something was missing” (2013, 85) in the animation and video game area—the meaning of making—what the artists sincerely want their storytelling to do. Although, as I observed, the use of personal experiences has informed the content in other scholars’ animations and video games, I do not hear much discussion in my discipline about why the scholars use their personal experiences as an inspiration to create products and why the products are important to them on a personal level.

Based on my observation as a graduate student, the animation and video game area is preoccupied with how to operate devices such as software, programming,
storyboarding, emotional curve, archetypes, rigging, animating, editing, effects, and rendering. The personal purpose of making is usually seen as the icing on the cake that comes after all the technical issues. This condition of my academic area caused me to think that when I mastered these skills, I might be able to make money by entertaining the viewers. In that state, I would probably still think animation and video game production were nothing more than a money making tool and would think that my life as a maker was all about playing this meaningless survival game. Since I developed these thoughts, I became somewhat laid back about how to master technical skills to make eye candy. Because I needed storytelling itself to not only serve as a breadwinning career but also be meaningful on a personal level, I slowed down my intensive technical practices and started focusing on the storytelling component of my work.

The False Assumptions

I made many attempts to design an insincere and unrealistic thesis study. I tried to hide the personal into a study misunderstanding that objectivity was required of me. I made these attempts because I could not break the three early false assumptions of mine about research:

1. I had personal experiences about topics including discrimination, depression, and cancer. However, since I had the impression that the personal was not allowed, that it was too subjective for scholarly research, I did not see any meaning of designing research on these topics.
While I was making these attempts, some instructors asked me about the kind of contribution I was going to make. At that time, I thought contribution could mean anything other than seeing society from a negative perspective and presenting this perspective through media. I thought only researchers with altruistic spirits, such as the will to encourage the viewers to do helpful things to others, could be successful.

I tried to build research topics that were related to me but from an objective perspective such as satire, black humor, cuteness, tragedy, horror—none of these could make me come up with a genuine and meaningful topic.

It was only later that I realized I was allowed to use storytelling as a method to discuss my personal experiences, my values, and my attitude on particular socio-cultural topics. I was fortunate to find a new freedom to conduct this research. I found that qualitative research has been widely accepted in the social psychology area and has been known as naturalistic observation (Von Der Haar 2005, 21) and visual arts have been acknowledged as valid research methods (Leavy 2015, 20). The acceptance of naturalistic observation and the art-based research (ABR) practice gave me this new freedom to present my personal thoughts in my graduate study.
Method

Autoethnography

Carolyn Ellis’ definition of autoethnography speaks to this thesis well. She describes autoethnography as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis 2008, 349). This thesis can be categorized as autoethnographic research, because it emphasizes using storytelling to investigate the relationship between my lived experience and the interdisciplinary studies. In autoethnography, the relationship between the author and the work and how genuine the work reflects life experiences is especially important. Autoethnography has many characteristics that match my thesis as listed below:

(1) It pays attention to “aesthetic considerations, emotions, and embodied experiences,”

(2) it values different social identities and encourages people to fight for who they are,

(3) it causes a disruption of traditional research practice by connecting the personal to research,

(4) the researchers can work with their insider knowledge,

(5) the researchers are allowed to describe the experience of “pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty,”
(6) It values voice and it is used to break silence, and

(7) It features accessibility (Jones, Adams and Ellis 2013, 29-37).

(8) “It places equal importance on intellect/knowledge and aesthetics/artistic craft” (Adams, Jones and Ellis, 25).

(9) It seeks “responses from audiences” (Adams, Jones and Ellis, 26).

The Two Poles

For clarity, I present the definition of autoethnography I use throughout my thesis. There are two poles in autoethnographic research, the right pole and the left pole (Eisenhart and Jurow 2011). The right pole sees autoethnographic research as an objective method while the left pole allows subjectivity (Denzin 2013, 391).

Leavy and Ellis are on the left pole. Leavy’s definition recognizes the subjectivity of the researcher in autoethnographic research. She acknowledges the new definition of autoethnography that allows the researcher to be visible in their research (2015, 42). As for Ellis, she describes autoethnography as a research and writing method that “seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010).

To scholars on the right, autoethnography does not have the same meaning. Chang promotes the definition that autoethnography is objective (2008, 46). She clarifies that auto, to her, does not refer to the storyteller but to the informants the researcher
collects data from. She explains that if the storyteller uses storytelling as a self-study within a culture, the study is not an autoethnography. Instead, she sees this storytelling activity as the storyteller’s “autobiographical connection to the ethnography” (2008, 47).

In this thesis, autoethnography is a research method to study my storytelling process that involves my subjectivity. I believe no one can be entirely objective. I agree that there can be multiple definitions of autoethnography. Both poles make sense. To scholars on the left, autoethnography can be subjective. To scholars on right, this thesis is about my “autobiographical connection to ethnography.”

**Personal Narrative**

There are many different types of research methods under the heading of autoethnography. Among them, the subgenre *personal narrative* gave me a chance to discuss using animation and video game media for self-study and for social justice. In this study, I investigate my process of creating stories based on my pessimistic beliefs concerning the socio-cultural factors that drove me to these beliefs. I found that this type of research of my storytelling process fits the personal narrative category under the definition of autoethnography provided by Ellis:

Personal narratives propose to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives. (2004, 26)
Personal narrative, the subgenre this thesis is categorized as, is the core methodology I use in this thesis. It is the most controversial autoethnographic research method especially when it lacks connection with scholarly literature (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010). There are different terms for it including “personal ethnography,” “reflexive ethnography,” “systematic sociological introspection,” “narrative inquiry,” and “biographical method” (Ellis 2004, 46).

I designed this study so I can use my storytelling process to help identify my social psychological struggles that remain compounded by repressed emotional pain. This thesis includes the creation of four pieces of my storytelling animation, *The Buried Unicorn* (2013), *Square Cat* (2013), *The Thing on My Belly* (2013), and *Angel's Spirit* (2013), and two storytelling video games, *The Falling Star* (2012), and *Forsaken* (2015). Each of these stories deploys storytelling as a method to explore both personal experiences and socio-cultural underpinnings.

*Exposing the Shadow*

Leavy briefly explained that autoethnography can be used to explore personal experiences (2015, 54). Based on my experience in storytelling, I feel that she either oversimplified the process or she intended to make her book only about the method. Exploring personal experiences is a complex psychological activity. It requires another important subject: the shadow part of human psyche. Mattoon explains that the shadow is the part of psyche that tends to be hidden and uncontrollable (2005, 28). She goes further to
explain that the shadow “may express itself in moods, irritability, physical symptoms, accidents, emotions, behaviors and even in cruelty” (2005, 29). A clear view of personal experiences does not just reveal itself in storytelling especially when it is associated with the shadow part of human psyche. If storytellers can bring their shadows to consciousness, it means that they suffer from it. In the meanwhile, the shadows are a treasure for storytelling. Storytellers have to be gifted by the cruelty of life to be able to use storytelling as a method to explore their shadows and develop a holistic understanding of their personal experiences.

*The Backwards Process*

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is usually not well-planned in the beginning of the research process. My qualitative research, this autoethnographic study, also has this feature. In this research, I went straight into hands-on production, then looked back, and felt more able to define how I wanted my storytelling process to work for me. This process seems backwards to the traditional research process: asking questions, making hypothesis, and then conducting research. However, qualitative researcher Wolcott sees this backwards procedure as “standard procedure in most qualitative inquiry” (Wolcott 2003, 72).

The concept of my research process is similar to the field research method in the qualitative research area. My research process started with hands-on production, continued with intuitive design decisions, proceeded through a deep dive to understand
relationships between personal experiences and socio-cultural contexts. My process matches Becker’s description about the process of his naturalistic observation and field research:

In one sense, our study had no design. That is, we had no well-worked-out set of hypotheses to be tested, no data-gathering instruments purposely designed to secure information relevant to these hypotheses, no set of analytic procedures specified in advance. Insofar as the term “design” implies these features of elaborated prior planning, our study had none. (1961, 17)

Von Der Haar supports Wolcott and Becker by indicating that field research does not typically start with a theory (2005, 24). Instead, she states that field research is a way to generate theory. Similarly, my hands-on production helped me observe my own psyche and develop this art-based research practice.

*Intuition to New Knowledge*

When I started creating stories, I did not have the knowledge base of social psychology or gender studies to identify and explain my attitude embedded in the stories I was creating. Therefore, I immersed myself in the actual hands-on production until a pattern emerged so that I could discern what disciplines could relate to the root of my social and personal crises. Because this method has been helpful to me, I can see that it may be a starting point for other artists who have conceptual problems.

In the beginning of my storytelling practice, I created stories from pure intuition. When I felt something was wrong, I made another piece, and then repeated the process. This old school trial and error process did not stop until a pattern emerged: the stories I
created tended to be my perspective about my personal crises in connection with social issues. I felt that learning about popular culture would help me express my values and my attitude in storytelling. After I studied a little popular culture, I came to understand that the amount of experience or technical knowledge was not the reason why I could not understand myself and the meaning of my work. The problem was my lack of understanding socio-cultural phenomena. I became desperate for new knowledge from gender studies, which, in addition to my storytelling habit, led me to this interdisciplinary research.

My intuitive storytelling practice was the fertile ground for inquiry. The practice helped me identify my communication flaws and lack of knowledge. The hands-on production stage eventually helped me find a direction to pursue in seeking knowledge to better understand my storytelling philosophy. The process guided me to look for what I needed to learn to make a story capable of helping me understand myself, express my values, and communicate with others to justify my pessimistic attitude.

*Social Psychology*

As Mattoon explains, “individuation is collective and universal and, at the same time, intensely individual” (2005, 173). Heewon Chang supports this idea by saying “culture and individuals are intricately intertwined” (2008, 44). This social psychological relationship between individuals and society is critical to this thesis. Presenting my own
situation in social psychological contexts can help me understand myself, visualize my attitude, and increase the accessibility of my work.

It is impossible to entirely differentiate the public and the private (Leavy, 43). There is always a connection between the private and the public. I understand this concept because of Hemmeter’s analysis about the horror film *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960). In the film, a female character Marion Crane steals money and flees home. Hemmeter explains that Marion Crane's behavior is interpreted as personal problems but the social construction behind it is the real cause. In the 60s in the U.S., society expected women to get married when they reached thirty years of age. Marion Crane’s financial situation does not allow her to marry so she steals money and flees out of this trap (Hemmeter 2003). Hemmeter justifies Marion Crane’s actions because he sees the social problem. This example shows that human behavior can be justified if it can be explained in social psychological contexts.

My storytelling is not merely about conveying the facts or what exactly happened like documentary films. Instead, it is about contextualizing and communicating my experience within frameworks of social psychological concepts. My truth and the meaning I ascribe weigh more than historical facts. If distorting what actually happens with cheap dramatic plots can help a story plot evoke “reflexivity, empathy, and understanding in the viewers” (Leavy 2015, 23), I will strongly consider telling stories that way.
I hope I can, in an understandable way, explain to the viewers my attitude that sometimes portrays me as socially awkward. Therefore, it is critical that the concept I present in my storytelling can add more understanding to what the viewers have already known. The accessibility of my storytelling work may increase because I intend to make the decoding process of the conceptual meaning simple to the viewers. Kandel says that “we remember scenes and people that have meaning to us and relate the work of art to those memories” (SR12). The viewers can easily decode the message I send through visual symbols based upon what they have seen in their lives, on television, or in other forms of mass media. Therefore, by contextualizing my personal situation with broader themes, the conceptual meaning embedded in the story plot can easily come across to most of the viewers.

Feminists’ Observation

Feminist theory is one of the investigative tools I use in this thesis. It helps identify social issues regarding the dominant value in the patriarchal society that establishes stereotypes and social roles. People are expected to follow those roles to be considered normal. This is a form of patriarchal violence (hooks 2000, 61-66). Patriarchal violence does not have to be men against women. It does not have to be physical violence. Instead it can also be emotional violence. Anyone, man or woman, who has the dominant power can be a violator. The human culture of dominance can be hurtful to folks like me who feel that the dominant value is absurd and unfair.
Even though I did not intend to make this study much about feminism, my study might end up becoming a feminist’s argument. I used to think feminism is an ideology that does not seem practical, and I used to think feminists repressed the human nature of discrimination while discrimination was inevitable. I thought feminism had a firm standard about morality, which was not so different from the dominant value. I did not understand that feminism is not about making one group of people superior to other groups. Instead, it supports difference, the minority, and it protects the marginalized, which is a very important point of this thesis.

Although this study does not focus on gender or racial issues, it supports feminists’ idea about understanding and protecting the marginalized. According to my instructor Linda Mizejewski in gender studies, my intention to protect this group of people gives me the feminist’s quality. My work only states the hopelessness about changing the status quo and the horror of not being able to escape from difficult situations such as isolation and psychological violence. My hopelessness and my feeling of horror make me the minority and I am supported by feminism to have a voice. I study feminist theory to understand how some scholars explain the social status quo, how media influences cultures, and how to have my voice heard through my storytelling work. In gender studies, I learned that the dominant culture uses media to influence masses of people. Gender studies not only led me to see how harmful media can be but, meanwhile, guided me to see the usefulness of media for supporting difference.
Morality does not play the center role in this thesis. Instead, the causes and the effects are the center of my attention. I focus on the low-mimetic style, which does not elevate morality; this style does not strive for perfection but is “close to our own level of experience” (Frye 1957, 38). In my storytelling, I acknowledge my negative feelings as glorious. I encourage artists who suffer from emotional pain to see negativity as a beautiful style, and I encourage them to make decisions about whether they fancy finding their true selves or prefer staying pretentious in their storytelling.

I agree when Burdo says that “change is usually arduous and slow” (2003, 456). It is so slow that satisfying change might not occur before my death. Because I am so hopeless about changing society, I use storytelling as an outlet. In my work, I humiliate the situation that caused me to feel hopeless and I humiliate the endless suffering caused by social structures as a way to relax myself because I have no hope for change.

Unlike me, Leavy says that the purposes of producing is to “stimulate change, transformation, and even transcendence” (2015, 20). She believes that visual communication can be used for social change (2015, 327) but I do not agree with this idea. I have no intention or any hope of pushing for change. As I claim in Chapter 2, it is meaningless to force researchers to have altruistic spirits or to be a saint. I prefer to stay low-mimetic—“close to [my] own level of experience” (Frye 1957, 38).
The *art* part I choose for my art-based research (ABR) practice is visual storytelling including animation and video games. Animation is the art and design form I practice often. It guides me to think about the persona I want to present in my work. My choice of using animation in the first place is not because it is superior to other storytelling forms. There are two reasons why I choose it. The first reason is its accessibility to both me and the viewers. The second reason is that it features a sense of closure at the end of the story.

As for accessibility, since I have spent years in the area of animation, I am comfortable using this media. I can focus on developing the concept of stories without worrying much about technical difficulties. As for the viewers, it is a media that they are usually not afraid of receiving information from because they are familiar with the form of the media and how to use it. In terms of accessibility, video games are not as accessible as animation to either the viewers or the artist. To me, the artist, I used to fear that I was not able to do object-oriented programming well. To the viewers, they might not be familiar with the control of the game and might be in fear of not being able to beat the game.

The second reason why I choose animation is that most of my story has a “narrative closure” (Cameron 1995) at the end and I do not expect the viewer to
intervene. Animation is a media that viewers regard as a complete form and as others’ experiences that they can learn from. It is what Bernard Comrie cited in Andy Cameron’s description as the perfective: “a situation viewed from the ‘outside’ as completed” (Cameron 1995, Comrie 1976).

Although, in most situations, animation is a good form because it is accessible, there are times when this feature of closure does not serve the stories I create well. For example, I would not choose to make *The Falling Star* (Chen and Larrimer 2012) an animation. In the game, the player’s mission is to approach an abused fearful star. They have to figure a way to do it. I gave the player a difficult decision to make—either to approach the star with patience or to chase him. I designed this decision-making challenge with the intention to give the player hints about the subjective moral standard I setup for the story and to have them consider the story concept on their own. The reasons for doing so will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4. In the form of animation, I am unable to make a decision-making challenge. This indicates that, in some cases, the form of animation could influence the viewers less than video games. In animation, viewers do not experience the story plot as an ongoing event.

I use the form of video games when animation limits my ability to tease the viewers. Even though video game production is less accessible to me and to the viewers, it serves the need of my storytelling: it allows the player to experience the story as if it is ongoing. In video games, the players experience the story as a current event—“a situation viewed from the ‘inside’ as ongoing” (Cameron 1995). They are given a level of control
over the avatars’ movements and decisions to change the status of the game. The length
of the story partially depends on the players. Storytelling video games serve as the what-
if-I-am games that put the players in someone else’s shoes. It provides a simulated
experience that is impossible to happen in real life. My storytelling work, *The Falling
Star* (Chen and Larrimer) and *Forsaken* (Chen and Hopkins 2015) will serve as examples
in Chapter 4 to help explain why I use video games to present the stories I create when I
need to.

*Popular Culture and Horror Genre Conventions*

The main purpose for using popular culture elements and horror genre
conventions in my storytelling work is to communicate with the viewers in an accessible
visual language. I believe popular culture elements and horror genre conventions can help
the viewers easily understand the concept of the stories I create by assembling new
cognitive knowledge based on what they already know. This strategy is based on
Kandel’s neuroscientific perspective: artists use the viewers’ built memories to
communicate (SR12), and Piaget’s social psychological perspective: human beings
assimilate and accommodate new stimulus to interpret their experiences (Von Der Haar
2005, 40). Emotional manipulation such as fostering the viewers’ empathy and asking for
the viewers’ understanding can only occur after successful communication. My intention
is to create and present the stories that promote emotional responses to guide viewers to
understand the cause of my emotional pain as a compensation for my anger of being
mistreated by society.
**Manga Stories**

Manga stories are Japanese comics; they inspire and encourage me to express my pessimistic attitude in my work. Manga stories have been the most influential format of storytelling to me since childhood because it is popular among Taiwanese children and very accessible in my country. In college, I developed a strong resonance with manga work that focuses on psychological struggles, social issues, and suicidal thoughts. I enjoyed reading manga stories that expose the artists’ hidden psyche. Reading manga is my way to find answers that fit with my worldview and inspirations for my storytelling activity. I am particularly interested in medical, crime topics, and those that expose the dark side of human beings. There are some very influential pieces such as *Say Hello to Black Jack* (Shuho 2002-2016) that features many medical cases that cause ethical issues, *No Longer Human*\(^1\) (Furuya 2009), which is about the life of a man who appears to be social and friendly but he actually has strong fear towards human beings, and *Battle Royale*\(^2\) (Taguchi 2000-2005), a story in which 42 students were forced to kill each other until there is only one survivor left.

These stories taught me that storytelling can be about the dark side of human nature. The stories fulfilled my curiosity about how human beings might behave when facing extreme difficulties. In these manga stories, many of the characters abandon their

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\(^1\) It was originally written by Osamu Dazai as a novel and published in 1948.

\(^2\) It was originally written by Koushun Takami as a novel and published in 1999.
virtue and morality in difficult situations. That is exactly the attitude I want to expose in my own work—human beings abandoning morality to get what they need.

In these manga stories, most leading characters are unattractive to me because they tend to hold a positive delusion called the just-world bias like most people in real life. This concept will be further explained in Chapter 3. However, as Mattoon describes, shadow is a negative, socially awkward characteristic and tends to remain hidden (Mattoon 2005, 26). Most people have a positive delusion and do not allow the shadow to be discussed. A character with a cheerful spirit serves as a hero prototype that caters to people’s positive delusion. These characters are designed to attract an audience that holds the same delusion. This type of leading character can be found in Battle Royale and Say Hallo to Black Jack.

I favor characters that turn immoral for their own benefits because that is what I have experienced in real life. For example, the leading character in No Longer Human, Oba Yozo, fears human beings, but pretends to be friendly. In Battle Royale, Takako Chigusa, the supporting role, lies and murders to survive. I can understand these characters from a social psychological perspective and from my personal experiences in interpersonal relationships. Even though I did not literally experience the fictional plots, when I read these stories, I can recall the real life examples of these fictional stories and the kinds of people in reality these characters represent.
Encouraged by many manga characters, I avoid moral perfection in any of my characters in my work. The characters’ bodily responses that I create reflect their emotional states, which in turn should reflect my attitude and my real life experience. They are like me, mostly passive. They allow the environment to control them as if they have no choice. Most of the time, they are not to blame but instead it is the situation, cultural factors, or the background that can be held responsible for their actions. I believe environmental causes result in most of human suffering. Most of the time, individuals are not to blame.

*No Longer Human and Its Connection to Social Psychology*

The original author of *No Longer Human*, Osamu Dazai, and his fame encouraged me to express my perspective in storytelling and use storytelling as an outlet to release my frustration of the hypocritical nature of social life. Manga has a high level of accessibility to a group of readers. The manga form of the *No Longer Human* story (Furuya 2009) caught my attention. The manga depicts the hypocrisy, power, and dissonance in human nature addressed in the original novel.

The leading character Oba Yozo’s monologue reveals what Dazai concealed in daily life. Through Yozo’s monologue, Dazai admitted that he could pretend to be childish to deceive others to earn laughs (O’ Brien 1975, 142). Through Yozo’s behavior in this biographical story, Dazai expresses that his pretentious behavior later caused him more issues including his cognitive dissonance and self-destruction.
Through the story, Dazai uses Yolo to explain the reason why he quit school in real life. Dazai has a cognitive dissonance in which he was shameful that he needed financial help from his family, but he genuinely disliked to be financially controlled by his family. In the story, Yozo caters to his father to get what he needs such as a place to live and money. This explains the author’s original value. In Dazai’s personal history, he lived under his family’s control until one day he could not tolerate it. He then quit the chance of graduation despite a professor in his school assuring him that the final test would be very easy to him. Yet he was unwilling to graduate merely to satisfy his family (O’Brien 1975, 40). By using his storytelling work to explain his cognitive dissonance towards the control his family had, he was able to rationalize the self-destructive behavior of choosing to not graduate.

Social psychology can explain the environmental cause of a rape in the story. One of Yozo’s colleagues loses his job. Out of anger and envy towards Yozo, his colleague rapes his wife, which leads Yozo to more self-destructive behaviors. In this case, the economic status and the fact that men see women as properties are the causes of the sexual assault. These examples taught me that in order to communicate the cause and the effect with the viewers, understanding socio-cultural factors are important for storytelling.

Developing empathy for destructive characters is how I wish the viewers to respond to the characters I create. I desire to observe viewers to see how influenced they are. Like Dazai, I camouflage myself as the most pathetic character in the stories I tell. I
interpret the viewers’ emotional participation as an acknowledgment of my psychological pain that is usually ignored by people around me in everyday life. This is a way that I seek understanding of others and have some emotional relief. This rewarding effect keeps me in this area to find out the meaning of my storytelling.
Chapter 3: Concept Development

Coming to Storytelling

Personal Crisis

I have a painful experience that explains my transformation from a repressed person to an open pessimist today. I was the victim of a crime. Following the incident, the shadow part of me exposed itself to me like opening Pandora's box: every horrible thing imaginable came out except hope. The crime itself did not upset me enough to make me fall sick. It was the people around me that terrified me by minimizing the problems that the crime caused, telling me that I was insane, and blaming the fault on me.

When I was trying to solve the problems as a victim, people I trusted blamed me and tried to teach me what I should have or have not done. They told me if I had sought direct confrontation, if I had got back to the crime scene to collect evidence, and if I had not revealed this incident to the public by holding a press conference, my situation would have been better. At that time, I did not understand that most people blame the victim (Von Der Haar 2005, 142); yet their blaming caused extreme harm to me. If I had known why they blamed everything on me, I might have been able to tolerate this kind of attitude. Sometimes after I poured out my grievances, people around me said, “I don’t know what to say,” “you just need to think positive,” or “I will put you in my prayers.” In
these circumstances, I immediately sensed carelessness and dishonesty because these words were so empty and meaningless. When I argued or rejected their decisions for me, they seemed to be enraged. With time, I learned that I should not argue with them.

Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance indicates that, to most people, there is a “usual state” (Von Der Haar 2005, 164). Breaking the consistency of the usual state motivates people to restore the consistency by changing their attitudes or by rationalizing their beliefs (Von Der Haar 2005, 164-167). My situation challenged most people’s usual state in which “people deserve the rewards and punishments that life bestows” (Von Der Haar 2005, 143). This is called the “belief in a just world” bias (Von Der Haar 2005, 143). Sadly, again, at that time I did not understand this bias. Because it was hard for people to accept the inconsistency in their beliefs, they put blame on me to rationalize what they believed as the usual state to help themselves feel that their beliefs were consistent to comfort themselves. I was traumatized because I did not have knowledge in social psychology to explain my confusion.

In addition to that, I did not understand that hypocrisy is an unavoidable essence in individuals and institutions (Feinberg 2002, 6) and everyone resents criticism (Feinberg 2002, 22). Through arguing, I unconsciously criticized the decisions those people made for me, which made them feel that the priority was to defend themselves instead of helping me. Without these understandings, these circumstances resulted in incredible psychological harm to me. Their dishonesty and rage might not have hurt me so much if I had had some degree of understanding of social psychology as I do now.
People around me were unwilling to help me. Society failed to provide justice. I was unable to protect my self-esteem. Finally, I lost all hope. My brother announced that I was a lunatic while I felt entirely rational to be emotional. My mother threatened to hospitalize me to stop me from hours of crying. All these people finally drove me to obvious symptoms of PTSD accompanied by major depression. For one year, I was heavily dependent on tranquilizers. I used them to keep myself asleep as a pause to all my confusion, anger, and anxiety in that period of time.

*Therapy as a Solution*

Through psychological therapy, I had an impression of what is required to socialize human beings, and that is, that the human psyche has to function in ridiculous ways. My experience in therapy gave me a feeling that the first step in the process of therapy was secretly based on human’s hypocritical nature. At the time, I had a psychologist who taught me how to hide my true feelings and how to put on proper masks for social convenience (Mattoon 2005, 18). When I came to my therapist with tears and hatred towards the world, she provided hugs for that and then she taught me how to act normal under distress. She made sure that, before I met with her again, I showed to others only my persona instead of my distress. For example, the therapist guided me to treat all my coworkers with food before I left my very first job. She understood that I did not develop friendships with them and I even disliked many of them. I learned from her that I had to pretend to be generous. Otherwise, I would get the consequences in which my disposition would be criticized and my self-esteem would
suffer. My therapist at that time taught me how to be hypocritical and social. The strategies she taught me, in Feinberg’s words, were hypocritical acts of describing reality “in more gratifying terms than it deserves” (Feinberg 2002, 13).

The therapist was quite successful at teaching me how to be social again after I experienced cruelty. I learned to shut off the dark side of me, pretend to be all right, and not argue. The world calmed down and no one seemed to remember the emotional pain I experienced except me. However, although mental therapy brought human hypocrisy to my consciousness, it did not help reduce my cognitive dissonance when my mask did not cohere with my mind. These early sessions of my mental therapy provided me little chance to understand and justify the pessimistic part of myself. It did not teach me much about how society affects me and people around me. Without a level of understanding about the relationship between society and individuals, I would have to always rely on therapists to teach me what to say and I would never be mentally liberated.

*Storytelling as a Solution*

My storytelling activity started as a form of revenge and later became a process for understanding human phenomena and a relief of my emotional pain. Although I have no choice but appear to be normal on a superficial level to fit in with society, I do have some choices to defend myself against harm. My storytelling activity allows me to look for personal growth to defend against harm from society and other individuals.
The first time I learned from my therapist about the inconsistency between human beings’ cognitions and behaviors, I was quite surprised and enraged. Virtue was a delusion, yet was allowed to be performed, and ignorance was a reality secretly happening most of the time. This hypocritical culture created a feeling of alienation, confusion and loneliness that drove me to prolonged suicidal thoughts. Meanwhile, I thought about why I chose to live. At that time, I had a strong belief that anger kept my life meaningful. Even though this may sound irrational, it was this clarity of thought that I had during my severe episodes of illness. I used to live for opportunities to act on revenge towards everyone who had hurt my feelings. This anger expanded and was magnified from those particular people to all human beings. I found storytelling the opportunity for revenge. I saw it as a chance to have a voice that I could use to blame the fault on others.

While this revenge was ongoing, it was also leading me to a new understanding about what storytelling could do for me—I began to study human nature and developed a level of acceptance for personal suffering. Now I am in the place where I understand that not all individuals are to blame but the hypocritical culture that affects individuals. This understanding about myself and acceptance about the dark side of human beings has made me less angry and anxious when I think about most of the issues I face. I see the hypocritical culture as a human phenomenon with much less confusion and anger than earlier. My acceptance for personal suffering along with my feelings and behaviors construct my pessimistic attitude. I now accept that human suffering as inevitable and
hopeless to change. I modified the figure that Christine M. Von Der Haar’s uses to measure “the attitude towards gun control” (2005, 155) to another figure to help me demonstrate how my pessimistic attitude is constructed:

![Figure 2: Attitude](image)

In order to take part in society, I have no choice but to learn to pretend and be polite. Otherwise, I will waste all my time arguing with people and might eventually be hospitalized. However, in the world of storytelling, I can let the shadow out without
severely interrupting my daily activity. In storytelling, I discuss my shadow and allow it to show. I let the shadow part of my psyche become the persona of my work so it can be liberated in an alternative way.

*Risks and Rewards of Autoethnographic Storytelling*

Autoethnographic storytelling is a risky method to the researcher. In my case, it requires me to open up myself for criticism and it requires me to recall my traumatic experiences. Autoethnographers often need to ask themselves if their research is worth risking their intimate and professional image (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015, 64). In my storytelling, I often choose to minimize the positive side of human nature to present the negative thoughts I have during an episode of major depression. The risk is that, by doing so, I reveal my pessimistic perspective to the public, which might portray me as a sick and socially awkward person. In addition, recalling traumatic experiences might be risky to many autoethnographers (Jones, Adams and Ellis 2013, 252). This study requires me to recall the traumatic events that I regard as the direct cause of my mental illness. Recalling these events has caused a lot of emotional burden to me.

Despite the risks, this research is worth doing. This study provides a way to learn causes and effects of my psychological struggles, and a way to improve my storytelling process that I use as a voice to strive for social justice. In this study, I examine my discontent about power in social structures and the psychological harm it does to me. By
doing so, I seek to find a view of clarity and to find visual ways of persuasion that help convey my attitude and protect my self-respect.

Visual communication can serve as a way to protect self-respect and is an act to pursue happiness. As a human being, I am inevitably a hypocrite. Not only is my daily life hypocritical, but also my storytelling activity. According to Feinberg, most people feel hurt when they are criticized (2002, 22). Like most people, when I open up myself for criticism, I am afraid that I might get hurt. Therefore, I must rationalize my attitude in storytelling, which makes me a hypocrite like every normal person.

As Feinberg says, self-respect is “one of the components of happiness” and without it, the result could be one’s suicide (2002, 10). Preserving my self-respect is the hypocritical part of this research. The essence of hypocrisy speaks to me: “all group hypocrisy is essentially the same kind of casuistry by which an individual convinces himself, or herself, that what he or she is doing is wrong for other people, but right in this instance” (Feinberg 2002, 7). In my understanding, when my idea is not supported by the majority, my idea is perceived as wrong. I personally do not think my perspective is wrong but I absolutely understand that my attitude expressed through my storytelling is socially awkward. In addition, I understand that a study that is obviously about the personal might not be acceptable to many researchers but I choose to strive for it and I can justify it. This study provides a chance for me to justify and rationalize my attitude and the method I need as a researcher. This is the way I preserve my self-respect and
fight against criticism. As long as my self-respect can be preserved, this study can provide me, a patient with major depression and PTSD, happiness.

The second reason is that my autoethnographic study provides me a chance to free the repressed part of myself. In this study, I can investigate and explain my own perspective to others. In animation and video games, I can use my perspective to guide the viewer to the information I want to send to them. I promote the use of storytelling as a tool to expose the hidden part of psyche. To me, storytelling is usually a struggle of putting my socio-cultural understanding and creativity together. My personal suffering brought the shadow part of my psyche to my consciousness. Then, my struggle in storytelling pushed me to gain new knowledge and helped me develop an understanding towards the shadow part of me. Now I have recognized some of the hidden part of myself and I have the desire to find out what constructs my pessimistic attitude. In order to understand my psyche and share this experience, the first step is to understand how society influences and oppresses me and to identify my feeling of discomfort caused by it. I believe the art-based research (ABR) practice can provide me a chance to understand what causes me to develop my negativity.

The Pleasure of Soulfulness

The inspiration of my storytelling work is usually the repressed or the shadow part of me and my negative point of view about society that, I feel, is too risky to expose in general superficial conversations. In a civilized society, “pretense of nobility” is a
dominant surviving skill (Feinberg 2002, 24). Revealing my spirit that is against the moral norms of society can lead people in general to label me as abnormal or insane and therefore damage my mental health. However, the lack of discussion about the dark side of my psyche in real life can also make my mental state weak and vulnerable. That is why even though storytelling is not entirely safe, I must discuss the dark part of my psyche in the stories I create.

Although the dark side of myself should not be shown in daily life, it should not be neglected. Jung sees the hidden parts of human psyche, the shadow, as necessary for psychological wholeness (Mattoon 2005, 28). Mattoon explains that the shadow is destructive when it remains in the unconscious, but valuable when “brought to consciousness and developed” and might lead to some good qualities such as “appropriate reactions, realistic insights and creative impulses” (Mattoon, 28-29).

Autoethnographers including Adams, Ellis, and Jones acknowledge that epiphanies can possibly result in both sadness and satisfaction of life (2015, 27). This triggered me to recall Tennessee William’s statement—“I think that hate is a thing, a feeling, that can only exist where there is no understanding” (T. Williams, FORWARD 2000). Understanding may relieve, at least, a level of my resentment and alienation, and may lead to some inner peace.

bell hooks supports their ideas when she discusses Alison Saar’s artwork (1995, 17). She indicates that to know the self, it is necessary to be open-minded to every part of the self which includes “the unacceptable, the perverse, the strange, even the sick” (1995,
hooks goes further to explain that Saar thinks that spiritual purification is not necessary for self-understanding. Instead, Saar sees the soul as a place that stores “emotional meaning to be examined without judgment” (1995, 18). “While Saar constructs a poetics of soul in her work that compels recognition of its dangerous mysteries and power, she also revels in the pleasure of soulfulness” (hooks 1995, 19).

Like Saar, while I understand that my shadow is dangerous, I also desire and enjoy this pleasure of soulfulness and the strength it gives me. Like bell hooks, I “embrace a negative, darker side of being” (hooks 1995, 18). Through opening up the awkward side of myself in storytelling and in visual media, I seek to find clarity in social structures and their influence on me.

Coming to Autoethnography

*Being a New Researcher*

During a clinical session, my psychiatrist Dr. Copley and I had a discussion about my enrollment in graduate school. She argued that it was my choice to leave or stay in graduate school; I just had to accept the consequences of whichever I chose. My tears started flowing. I said that I had no choice because the consequences forced me to stay in school even though graduate school had been so painful to me. “In what horrible way is society going to treat me if I quit?” I wondered. Society was going to see me as a loser and I could only wish myself to die to avoid its gaze. This imaginary scenario left me no choice. I had to continue.
Clearly, Dr. Copley and I had very different truths. She thought the choice was mine while I thought the choice did not exist. I did not know who was more right. We both had a truth, and at least I could rationally explain my truth. This state of having multiple truths disagrees with the goal of the mainstream research method—to look for a universal truth (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015, 8). Therefore, I was extremely stressed at that moment. First of all, because of society’s gaze, I could not leave graduate school. Secondly, I did not know that there was actually another valid and academic way that works for exploring my psyche and the problems I was facing.

I used to think that graduate school limited me and forbad me to explore what I wanted, until I found a new method that works: the art-based-research (ABR) practice. The ABR practice encourages new ways of thinking and new ways to constitute knowledge in what and how we do research. In spite of the previous struggle, maybe my graduate studies could have a new freedom, a way to avoid the previous trauma that caused all the tears when I had the discussion with Dr. Copley.

Looking for a Method

My graduate study was a horrible struggle when I started. I decided to write about this topic in my fourth year in graduate school for my master’s degree. In the first two years in graduate school, I had the idea that doing personal research had never happened and should not happen. Even though I use my personal experiences to tell stories all the time, I feared using I in my research. This contradiction had been confusing and trapping
me for years. It was not until later that I found out that research can be about the personal. I accepted this false assumption of mine about research as an American way of doing research. Since I am a foreigner, I did not argue about it. That was why I felt so hopeless about graduate school. To me, graduate school was a product of the dominant culture and I despised this kind of human culture most of the time. My advisor and committee members all seemed to feel just as hopeless about my writing and research. They told me to do a non-thesis project. I tried to refuse but could not find a legitimate reason. The decision they made for me did not satisfy my desire to dig deeper about the research topic that was deep in my mind. I failed to describe the research topic because I did not know there was a research method suitable for me and I did not have proper terms to describe the kind of research I wanted to conduct. Then, I thought; "well, I am just not qualified to be a researcher, maybe." I felt forced to do either research or the non-thesis project. I found them both meaningless until I found another way to explore the ideas that I felt, all along, were so important to investigate.

Luckily, in my fourth year in graduate school and in a new course titled: *Re-imaginining Writing through Creative Inquiry*, I was introduced to a new method called art-based-research (ABR) practice that gave me license to include myself, my own experience, and to be subjective in my graduate research. I later read an article *Autoethnography: An Overview* (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010). Ellis, et al., defines a genre under autoethnography called *personal narrative*. It allowed me to do research about myself and to see myself as a phenomenon. To guide me to look deeper at
autoethnography, my writing instructor, Dr. Stout, introduced me a book titled *Autoethnography* (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015). In the book, Ellis says that she would like to feature the personal in her work (2015, 8). That was exactly what I had wanted to do.

The dominant research method is the scientific and the quantitative (Ellis 2004, 10). I found this method inadequate to my need. Instead, qualitative inquiry is the most suitable way to investigate the idea I felt important. This form of research with its new methods for investigating lived experience finally liberated me to do what I needed to do. My advisor Susan Melsop was open-minded about this form of research. I finally started to feel that research could be meaningful to me.

*Research that Features the Personal*

Prior to my discovery of this existing and quiet research method, I had shown strong interests in social issues, tragedy and horror genre. Professor Maria Palazzi guided me to take courses in gender studies to help me find a suitable research topic. I did not realize that my interests came from my background and personal experiences. I was a sufferer of social issues and I felt the horror long after it. Before discovering the qualitative paradigm, ABR practice and then narrative inquiry, I was confused and I had little idea that my true research interest was to research myself and how my life might fit into a world of personal and social injustices. Now I know that, at the very heart of my narrative interests and the investigation of my personal psyche, is a methodology called
autoethnography that allows research to be based on personal experiences and to be used as a social-just act (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010).

Looking for the Meaning of Storytelling

I thought about leaving the animation and video game area. I graduated from a college program, multimedia and game science, in which my focus was on 3D animation. After I produced several animation productions, I noticed that I became bored by the coldness of technology and the endless technical practice. I wished to change my career path.

While I was bored of the technology taught in my main discipline, I desired to know more about people in different cultures. I was more interested in the critical cultural issues that affect people’s emotions in mysterious ways. I was curious and I wanted to learn new perspectives that might help explain my confusion about human behavior. As a result, I earned a minor for Applied Foreign Languages. While this minor helped me to learn English and Spanish as new languages, it did not satisfy me. Instead, the teachers’ guidance stimulated my curiosity even more. At that stage, however, I was too naïve to know the possibilities of integrating aspects of human culture with my work of animation and video games.

Because I did not have enough knowledge about socio-cultural patterns and their influence on individuals, I was unable integrate my perspective with my work. I became increasingly dissatisfied with my work; this, in addition to a past traumatic experience,
made me feel ill. I quickly developed strong resentment towards society as a whole, which was a result of a crime along with hurtful languages in school, academic burdens caused by the lack of ability of my classmates, and an unsupportive family. For one and a half years, I needed medicine and an intensive schedule of therapy, once to twice a week, to try to get my resentment under control.

I lost the motivation to do anything except that I was desperate to figure out—“what was going on between society and me?” I wanted to regain my control over my mentality and my physical health. I repetitively asked social psychological questions such as “why do people tolerate crimes?” “Why can the powerful get away without punishment?” And, “Why do institutions, my friends, and my family all want me shut up about my emotional pain and my anger?” In countless circumstances, I listened to others’ explanations about my confusion. Most of them, I assumed based on their bodily responses, thought I was insane so they stopped communicating with me. Eventually, I realized that no one could make this explanation for me. I needed to find my own truth, a philosophy that satisfies me. I wanted to present my truth in my work to reduce prejudice from “culture outsiders” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010), those who have not experienced a similar situation.

Therefore, I came back to the animation area. Even now I am still not passionate about the cold technical making process of animation but I am definitely in need of a voice. Although people might not believe me, I have a clear, rational mind. I do not wish to become an outcast. Many groups of people, including my family, school teachers,
scholars and professors, believe the stereotype that people with any kind of mental illness are all insane so they refuse to trust that my voice can be valid. Even though I get upset and become fearful easily, I have a reason to be so and I wish to be heard without prejudice. On the other hand, I believe that there are people like me who are also mentally ill but still feel entirely rational. A lot of them are repressed and unable to tell their truths. I hope my action in animation, video game production, and the writing of this thesis can encourage them to find and tell their own truths so as to defend themselves and their ways of thinking.

I need a voice about how society wrongs individuals and groups. I am seeking social justice this way. I believe that media can give me a voice that masses of people are interested in listening to. Then, there is a chance for me to pursue the feeling of justice through storytelling. In this civilized hypocritical culture, honest statements can be unexpected, inappropriate, and therefore, humorous and amusing (Feinberg 2002, 62). I feel that social justice has not been achieved to compensate for the damage that society has done to me. As I stated in Chapter 1, there is still a gap between the material loss and the psychological compensation; the gap causes resentment (Ci 2006, 183). I hope to create a mirror as a punishment to society to fill the gap and make me feel better.

All these reasons above are how this research came together. This thesis is personal and features “the personal” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010). I am glad that I not only can be genuine in my work, but that I can pour my heart into genuine research like this.
Jones states that the autoethnographers who work with narrative and storytelling need to study and practice “the mechanisms and means for making art” (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015). In my thesis, “art” includes two visual media—digital animation and video games. I partially disagree with Jones because I do not promote excessive technical practice. In other words, I partially agree with him because my technical practice led me to where I am. Therefore, I am able to handle visual media as a way to conduct this study.

My earliest animation practice already showed some of my current traits of storytelling. I was often inspired by my emotions and my perspectives affected by socio-cultural issues. There was only one topic in each storytelling work such as my impatience to do schoolwork in The Girl in the Attic (2009), my depiction of love in Love (2010), and my understanding of women’s destiny in Mom in the Box (2011). Until now, my fourth year in graduate school, these traits are still in my storytelling.

In college, I created plots to practice my technical skills so that I could be seen as a successful student. In graduate school, I no longer desired of getting society to admire my intelligence. Instead, I desired a reprisal or, in hypocritical language, social justice. This thought gave my storytelling activity a new meaning. I started to expose my negativity in my storytelling and I got bolder over time. I started to actively find materials and ways to make my style more aggressively pessimistic and closer to my attitude. I seek to explain my own philosophy that may one day satisfy me and make me happy.
Many philosophers and religious people developed their own philosophies and beliefs. It is hard to say that only one of them tells the objective truth (Feinberg 2002, 53). I wanted to develop my own philosophy, my own truth that would satisfy my temperament and would help me see the relationship between society and me with a view of clarity.

In graduate school, I showed my resentment and humiliation towards society in my storytelling. In this stage of my animation practice, my first storytelling work was the video game The Falling Star (Chen and Larrimer 2012) in which I talk about how one of my therapists approached me and helped me trust her. In the animation The Buried Unicorn (2013), I discuss my financial difficulty and my unwillingness to leave school and go back to the country I fear. In another animation Square Cat (2013), I discuss my perspective about hypocrisy and cognitive dissonance. My identity crisis inspired me to create the other animation The Thing on My Belly (2013). The other animation Angel’s Spirit (2013) is about a vicious cycle of socialization that transforms innocent individuals to evildoers by “redirected activity” (Feinberg 2002, 31), which means redirecting anger to the vulnerable. The video game Forsaken (Chen and Hopkins 2015) deals with discrimination against female children. These stories along with my earlier work will be discussed in Chapter 4 within social psychological contexts.
Chapter 4: Practice

After many years of practice in storytelling, I now see a pattern in the stories I create. I use the thought that troubles me personally to develop a core concept that I want to convey through a story. I then present it with visual conventions that can easily be understood because these conventions have been proven successful. I use conventions in graphics such as cuteness and violence with the intention to guide the viewers to feel empathy towards the character that represents me. I want the viewers to nurture the character that represents me so as to have my perspective be more acceptable to them. I want the plot to emotionally affect the viewers as a punishment for social offenders.

This chapter discusses the development and application of my storytelling pattern through my hands-on practices of animation and video game production. This chapter presents my understanding of the connection between my work and my personal experiences from a social psychological perspective, and provides practical examples of how my storytelling in animation and video games serve social-justice purposes.

First of all, I will explain the improvement I made according to the process of trial and error. The improvement of my design principles makes storytelling function more efficiently and effectively as I strive to have a voice for social-justice. Secondly, I will discuss the three features of my recent storytelling work including: (1) personal
experiences in social psychological issues, (2) visual representation that builds from popular media tactics to emphasize visual accessibility, (3) and a story plot that can clearly present the social psychological concept of my personal experiences.

Afterwards, I will discuss my storytelling work and its connection with the three features of my storytelling pattern. The storytelling work I will discuss includes four pieces of animation work, *The Buried Unicorn* (2013), *Square Cat* (2013), *The Thing on My Belly* (2013), and *Angel's Spirit* (2013), and two video games, *The Falling Star* (2012), and *Forsaken* (2015). In this section, I will explain my real life experience that inspired me to create the story, my design decisions in the visual components and the story plots, my perception of the viewers’ responses, and the rewarding feelings after the process.

Preliminary Practice

*Technical Practice*

When I first entered this area at the end of 2008, I was amazed by what technology allowed me to do. In college, I received a message that even though learning to handle production tools was time-consuming, it would eventually lead me to some sort of success. With this false assumption in mind, I entered this area as a young college student with aggression, ambition and high self-efficacy. At this stage, I did not have a clear purpose for production or a clear definition of what success meant for me.
**Intuition**

![Image: The Girl in the Attic](image)

**Figure 3: The Girl in the Attic**

My purpose of creating story plots was to demonstrate technical skills. Storytelling itself did not serve much purpose other than supporting my technical practice. I formed ideas intuitively without going through much design decision-making process. That was how I made my first short film in 2009 named *The Girl in the Attic* (Figure 3). The little girl represents me. She sits in front of a monitor. On the monitor is a digital window of the 3Ds Max software. She soon gets impatient about studying how to make animation and starts destroying her furniture. I did not realize that my first film was already an autoethnography that showed my experiences, emotions, and the social power that forced me to study.
I used to obtain information passively in my socialization process and I made films related to this information. The film *Love* (2010) (Figure 4) serves as an example. In the film, I depicted love as devious, unfaithful, and full of envy between women. This animation shows my attitude towards the concept of love. I developed this attitude based on my personal experiences in interpersonal relationships. I got angry when I saw the person I cared about paying more attention to others than to me. I expected that there should always be a loser in the competition and I felt that most of the time the loser was me. The competition for love and attention was the major feeling I experienced about love at the moment. In addition, I was prone to watching Chinese and Korean drama shows on television. In these shows, there tends to be many female characters who feel resentful towards each other because they compete with each other for the love of one
man. When watching these shows, my attitude towards love was confirmed. At the end of the *Love* story, one of the women is killed but the viewer will never know who that is, and neither do I. This film triggered some laughter and discussion among the viewers. I did not know what the viewers’ responses meant, but somehow their reactions gave me a sense of achievement and reinforced my will to continue to produce stories with my personal perspective on certain topics.

*Representational Weakness*

![Figure 5: Mom in the Box](image)

Since I was from a school that emphasized technical practices and was less concerned about the art quality of students’ work, my cap stone project *Mom in the Box* (2011) (Figure 5) was mostly perceived as a technical success, but as a representational failure. I used layered representation that I constructed in my cognitive activity and arranged deep symbolic meanings that could not be understood by most instructors and
students in the school. Only those who received a lot of art and design training would try to decode the complicated symbolic meanings I constructed.

This representational failure, the low accessibility of my use of symbolism, overwrote the technical success. Since the meaning embedded in *Mom in the Box* was not accessible to most of the viewers, the film did not provide me the rewarding feeling that *Love* provided me. This experience reshaped my idea of success in animation and video game production. I noticed the importance of visual communication skills for storytelling in animation and video games.

![Mother](image)

*Figure 6: Mother*

*Mom in the Box* was adapted from an illustration I drew in early 2010 titled *Mother* (Figure 6). My relationship with my mother inspired me to create this illustration. The yellow creature represents me in my preliminary socialization process. The blue creature represents my mother who I perceive as an overly talkative and anxious woman.
I gave the yellow creature no mouth and gave the blue creature no ears. This illustration represents the communication issues between my mother and I.

In this illustration, there are many symbols I made up without referring to popular culture references, which makes decoding the symbolic meaning of the graphics difficult to most viewers. I did not use scholarly literature or other artists’ work that had been proven successful, which would have been a way to avoid risks. Most of the time, this illustration requires my explanation to be understood by the viewer.

The blue creature’s action represents the psychological damage caused by my mother. I drew some other little monsters in the blue creature’s mouth to criticize my mother for babbling. This illustration triggered an interesting discussion in the illustration class that I took for fun after school so I thought it could be interesting as a piece of animation. I went to the illustration class to free my style from the mainstream. I had a belief that a distinctive visual style could bring me success. It might be true in the area of illustration but it turned out to make my animation less accessible to most viewers. Without much art training or without my explanation, the viewers are most likely to be puzzled by the distinctiveness of my work. In the technical school, I heard people talking behind me saying that my illustration was weird. This kind of criticism was not hurtful to me because a small illustration usually costs me only a few hours to finish. It costs the viewers only a few minutes to look at and discuss. Therefore, even after two years of practice in illustration, the shortcoming of my use of symbolism did not get my attention.
Unable to predict the representational failure, I adapted this illustration to the animation *Mom in the Box* which also features a babbling mother. In the film, the mother pours Chinese characters from her mouth throughout the film as she watches her daughter going through all stages of life. Following the mother’s death, the daughter goes on the same path—a life that is similar to her mother’s—becoming a mother trapped in the same box. The box represents stereotypes and women’s traditional roles. The mother and the daughter characters both have fabric on their faces; they are both placed in a box at one point in the film, and men are presented as pets. These visual symbols cannot be commonly understood at first glance. It was unnecessarily creative to most of the viewers. If I create another film discussing objectification, I will frame the male characters in my film as music videos do in mass media to objectify women such as “cutting them up in visual pieces.” This is Emerson’s description about music videos: “cutting Whitney [Houston] up into visual pieces undercuts her power” (2002, 122). I found it important to learn the shared meaning of certain symbols instead of creating symbols based only on my own cognitive activity.

Only in the form of animation did this representational problem become my concern, because accessibility is so important to me and the film turned the viewers away. Only in the form of animation did I not want my work to appear distinctive. Instead, in the length of the animation, I want the viewers to focus on the concept of my work—women living in the box of stereotypes. Since *Mom in the Box* is an animation instead of an illustration, I devoted considerable time and effort to making the story
presentable. The film took the viewer six minutes to watch, which was a lot more than looking at an illustration. Therefore, a failure of communication in the form of animation could hurt both the storyteller and the viewer. Eventually, the representational problem caught my attention.

While my skills in digital animation production was praised by the professionals, most viewers could hardly understand the socio-cultural concept I wanted to convey in *Mom in the Box*. I kept this storytelling problem in mind when I graduated from college. In addition to my determination to use my personal experiences to develop story concepts, my wish to solve the representational issues motivated me to come to graduate school to find solutions.

**Current Design Choices**

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, I will discuss my newly formed choices for design decision-making—the three features that appear in most of my storytelling works in graduate school. These include personal experiences, social psychological issues, and visual representations.

*Personal Experiences*

Scholars in the autoethnography area recommend that researchers start their research on topics that are meaningful to them on a personal level (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015, 47). In personal narratives, the *data* source is the “author’s academic, research and personal lives” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010). I, too, use this kind of data source
to construct the stories I create. I use my personal life as data to develop story concepts. I then present the data in the form of animation and video games, my academic expertise. I analyze these data to reveal the relationship between my work and myself and the relationship between my work and socio-cultural issues and their psychological affect on me.

Autoethnographers usually rely on other resources such as texts and photographs to help them recall their experiences (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010). I am not an exception. I found my experiences and intuition to be insufficient to help me clarify why I used certain visual components to explain my attitude in my storytelling. Therefore, I began studying disciplines beyond animation and video games with the hope that I would be able to understand the social psychological reasons of my design choices.

Social Psychological Issues

In gender studies, I learned to see socio-cultural issues such as stereotypes and the power of mass media. Gender studies led me to social psychology. In social psychology, I studied the relationship between society and individuals. By studying these disciplines, I developed the ability to contextualize my situation with visual symbols and language. I expected to solve representational problems and to improve the accessibility of my storytelling. I hoped, after all, I could use storytelling as a social act to satisfy my need to justify my pessimistic attitude and preserve my self-respect.
My work usually shows a pessimistic persona because the stories I create are usually inspired by my personal experiences that cause emotional burden to me. Although looking through the lens of pessimism sometimes makes me feel anxious or depressed, I gain pleasure from using my storytelling to criticize socio-cultural causes of my pessimistic point of view. I tell stories to express my values and attitude towards particular socio-cultural issues that cause psychological wounds to me. I do not have the interest to stress one particular social psychological issue from an objective point of view. The focus of this study is myself. Human beings are complex creatures that cannot be limited by the study of one particular topic. For example, one particular issue can shape my attitude but it cannot determine it. Professors asked me what socio-cultural issue I wanted to focus on. I considered quite a few such as abuse, alcohol, cancer, discrimination, and ignorance. However, I was under the impression that I could only choose one, but, I could not make a choice. So many of the socio-cultural issues that influence me psychologically are interwoven—and cannot be studied independently or objectively. Therefore, I did not take the advice; my attitude is shaped by many socio-cultural phenomena. Focusing on one issue may work if I wanted to discuss a particular issue objectively. In this thesis, this is not the case. This thesis focuses on a particular person: me, and my subjectivity towards many socio-cultural issues that have affected me psychologically. There are multiple issues that led me to my current mental state. Focusing on one issue only limits the potential of what my storytelling process can reveal about me.
Visual Representation

To efficiently express my values in a simple, understandable visual language to others, I must look for clear visual representation to explain my perspective towards the socio-cultural phenomena I have experienced as an insider. I avoid thinking too critically about symbolism or too deeply about representation. I refuse to apply experimental ideas in the visual component of the stories I create to avoid the risk of diminishing the accessibility of my work. Using layered visual representation that I construct in my cognitive activity might boost the esteem of my work because it gives my work an artful quality. However, to me the most important information I can convey in my storytelling is the social psychological concept I want the viewers to understand. Constructing layered representation does not make the stories I create any more meaningful or deeper. The aesthetics of the product are secondary to my main purpose. The shortcoming of the layered representation is that it requires the viewers to have art training and to watch my work many times to decode the layered visual representation. This limits the accessibility of my work and, therefore, limits my chance to be heard. Since accessibility is so important to my storytelling work, I often seek simple visual representation for the concept I want to convey.

Sociologist Von Der Haar explains that “language and other symbols provide a shared definition of a situation that allows us to perceive and interpret the world in a common way” (2005, 4). In college, I failed to use visual language and symbols as a shared definition that can be commonly understood. Having learned from my early
exploration and my experience with communication failure, I decided to take a new approach in graduate school—to use symbols based on their shared meanings. With references from popular culture sources, I aim to express my values and explain my attitude to a broader audience through visual symbols that have shared meanings. Later in this chapter, I will demonstrate this approach through discussing many of my animation and video game practices.

I found drawing popular culture references that has been proven successful as a strategy to engage the viewers. Richard Butsch, a sociology professor at Rider University, demonstrates a business strategy that broadcast and cable networks use (2010, 103). He points out that some TV programs are very costly. Most corporations are unable to afford them. The corporations that can afford these programs demand that they attract a large number of viewers. Therefore, they must use a strategy that has been proven successful to avoid risks. Similar to these corporations, I refer to what has been used in popular culture media in my work to attract a large audience. By this means, I use popular culture elements that people see frequently on mass media to make my message clear. The popular culture elements include unicorns, rainbows, meteorites, stars, mushrooms, girls that have big eyes, and zombies. My intention is to increase the accessibility of my storytelling work so that I can have a group of listeners to whom I can let my voice be heard and with whom I can rationalize my attitude.

In order to design characters or proper settings to influence my viewers, I listen to popular songs, play video games, and watch videos on Youtube. I use symbols that I see
often on popular culture sources such as Katy Perry’s music videos, animation *Charlie the Unicorn* (Steele 2005), and the cartoon *Adventure Time* (Cartoon Network 2010-2016). I follow shows such as *The Walking Dead* (Circles of Confusion; Valhalla Entertainment; Idiot Box Production 2010-2016) and *American Horror Story* (Television, 20th Century Fox; Productions, Ryan Murphy; Teley-Vision, Brad Falchuk 2011-2016) to find inspirations. Most of my storytelling work has popular culture references in them.

I study horror genre to make the character that represents me in my animation and video games excessively vulnerable and miserable. My aim is to foster empathy from the viewers. After I made *Square Cat*, I realized that, unlike in real life, the viewers could make me feel that they paid attention to my emotional pain and listened to my beliefs. To feel that comforting feeling of being acknowledged and being comforted, I aim to trigger more responses from the viewers and observe how they perceive me. I observe their emotional responses by labeling their bodily responses. Von Der Haar says that emotion consists of physiological arousal and a cognitive label (2005, 116). I attach the viewers’ physical responses with cognitive labels to determine what their emotional responses are.

I embraced horror genre for its effectiveness of triggering passion and bodily responses. From *Frankenstein* (Universal Pictures 1931) to *American Horror Story* (Television, 20th Century Fox; Productions, Ryan Murphy; Teley-Vision, Brad Falchuk 2011-2016), horror films has attracted a lot of attention in mass media. Many horror films disgusted me so much that I held my fist tight or even screamed. These strong and uncontrollable bodily responses the horror films triggered from me made me feared that I
might go out of my mind. To let the viewers experience the same kind of disgust for my protagonists, I needed to understand how horror genre works.

When Linda Williams says that “pornography is the lowest in cultural esteem, gross-out horror is next to lowest” (Summer, 1991, 3), she confirms that embracing horror genre will lower the esteem of my work. Linda Williams states that the body genres—horror, pornography, and melodrama—cause excessive “convulsion or spasm” from viewers. She further explains that, the sources of excess in these genres are “cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama” (Summer, 1991, 4). These behaviors are obviously inappropriate to be shown in public. When I chose to have horror elements in my work to benefit its communication, I sacrificed the esteem and a group of audience—those who publicly despise these genres so they can protect their social status or professional image.

Similarly, I chose to sacrifice the cultural esteem of my work when I decided to refer to popular culture elements. I have heard people describing popular culture elements, such as songs written by Katy Perry, my favorite signer songwriter, as stupid. In an art class, I declared that I wanted to use a doll-looking character with big eyes and a tiny mouth as the leading character of my storytelling work. Some of my classmates and the instructor held their lips tight. Later on, many of them tried to tell me this style is cheap. They did not favor conventions that many commercial animation and video game companies use. Even though they did not have an exact reason to explain their prejudice, it was clear that when using popular culture elements, the cultural esteem of my work and
the audience group that favors complicated use of symbolic meanings were going to be sacrificed.

I tend to apply cuteness to my films as ways to foster empathy from the viewers. Ellison explains, “the cuteness of an infant can motivate an adult to take care of it, even if the baby is not a blood relation” (2013). Her definition of cuteness helps me explain my belief that hurting an infant looking character in my film may trigger emotional responses. There are many cute traits shared in the animation industry. Chappell Ellison listed many basic ones such as “big eyes and head, fluffiness, warmth and chubbiness” (Ellison 2013). Ellison cited Preston Blair and listed more cute traits including ”head large in relation to the body,” “eyes spaced low on the head and usually wide and far apart,” ”fat legs, short and tapering down into small feet for type,” “tummy bulges—looks well fed” (Ellison 2013, Blair 1947). I use this strategy in most of my practices.

In order to be socially acceptable, I do not intend to show people my desire to be taken care of or present myself as a vulnerable person. In real life situations, the common actor-observer bias might cause the observer to blame the cause on the disposition of the actor (Von Der Haar 2005, 140, Jones and Nisbett 1971). Although presenting the shadow part of my psyche in real life is usually dangerous, in storytelling, it is less so. I can implicitly show my psychological needs in the narrative. I can present my personal experiences in an indirect way to distract the viewers’ attention away from that fact that I am the actor. I replace the actor role from me to the cute character. I believe this can reduce the chance for the viewers to blame the fault on my disposition.
Recent Practice

As I stated in the beginning of this chapter, I will discuss my recent practices that reflect the three features of my storytelling pattern. The storytelling works discussed in this section include four pieces of animation work, *The Buried Unicorn* (2013), *Square Cat* (2013), *The Thing on My Belly* (2013), and *Angel's Spirit* (2013), and two video games, *The Falling Star* (2012), and *Forsaken* (2015).

*The Buried Unicorn*

![Image of The Buried Unicorn](image)

**Figure 7: The Buried Unicorn**

I made *The Buried Unicorn* (Figure 7) to express my personal experience in which I was burdened by the high tuition rate of graduate school. I felt that no one could help me. I worried that I would use up all my savings before I graduated. I was unable to
My financial difficulty was a topic I avoided discussing with others in real life because it was a socially awkward topic to me. Therefore, I used storytelling as an outlet to discuss my financial situation and the psychological burden it caused.

In the film, the word *tuition* was clearly written in a bloody style on the meteorite that represents burden. Instead of creating layered representation, I used very simple means to represent the financial burden I had. This design decision may have reduced the artful quality of *The Buried Unicorn*. However, as long as the message was delivered effectively, the artfulness was less of my concern.

I used a meteorite to represent my psychological burden and used a unicorn to represent me. The popular culture reference was the meteorite in Jeremy Clapin’s animation *Skhizein* (2008). In *Skhizein*, the main character Henry hallucinates a meteorite that he blames as the cause of his socially awkward visual perception—he perceives himself as being 91 centimeters away from his physical body. The meteorite successfully plays its role as an environmental factor perceived by Henry. Therefore, I regarded it as a low risk symbol and used it in *The Buried Unicorn* to represent the financial situation that caused me to feel stressed.

I humiliate society and myself by designing the look and the action of the unicorns. This is my way to tease the audience and criticize society. When the screaming of the troubled unicorn, that represents me, triggers the audience to laugh, the audience’s laughter tells them that they are not as moral as they might think they are. The unicorn is
traditionally perceived as a mysterious creature that possesses magic power. It is also used as the visual of some frivolous characters or objects in popular media including *The Adventure Time* (Cartoon Network 2010-2016), *Charlie the Unicorn* (Steele, Charlie the Unicorn 2005), *Despicable Me* (Illumination Entertainment 2010), *Robot Unicorn Attack* (Spiritonin Media Games 2010). By ridiculing my own situation, I aim to criticize society for not helping me. I made the falling unicorn scream with a woman’s voice to drive the viewers to laugh at him. The falling unicorn represents me and those facing financial problems. My intention was to put the viewers in the place of social offenders who do not pay empathy to those in need while they are watching the animation. Mocking people who are suffering is obviously not a socially acceptable behavior. I use black humor to reveal the dark side of the viewers and to make them feel guilty that they feel my financial situation is laughable. I developed this sense of humor as a way to criticize society. This strategy was an outlet to release my anxiety generated from the constant high stress of living that I experienced daily in that period of time.

*The Falling Star*

My experience in participating in mental therapy inspired me to create the background story of *The Falling Star*. In the story, the moon, shown in Figure 8, unintentionally kicked the star out of his home, the sky. The moon’s behavior hurts the star. The star then falls on the ground and escapes from a stranger, the player. The player’s goal is to win the star’s trust with patience. If the player approaches the star with
fast pace, the star will run away. Only when the player approaches him slowly will he start to develop trust in the player.

Figure 8: *The Falling Star*

I embedded my real life experiences in the rule of the gameplay. The moon represents those who are powerful, such as teachers and parents, and cause harm to those who are powerless. In the moral standard of the game, the player should not approach the star with fast pace. The running action of the player represents the behavior of people around me in reality who get frustrated or even enraged when I discuss my emotional pain with them. To reach the *win state* of this game, the player should approach the star slowly. This game rule represents the behavior of the therapist who talked to me with patience and waited for me to trust her. Because I had learned helplessness from my earlier therapists, I did not trust my therapist at that time. I stayed in silence from time to
time. After a long while, the therapist won my trust, which is the reference of the win state of the game.

The purpose of producing this game is to express my value by setting my moral standard as the norm in the game. I made *The Falling Star* as a game instead of an animation because I wanted to find an acceptable and ethical way to shame the players who play as if they are social offenders. I test the players whether they have patience when others express their emotional pain to them. Those who fail what the game assigns them to do, suffers a consequence: they do not gain trust from the cute, infant looking star. They see the trust level of the star through his bodily responses including running away and changing skin color. The game gives those impatient players these hints to humiliate their behavior, and at the same time educates them to slow down and be gentle to the star to reach the success state I set up.

This game revealed the value I cherished and favored. Making and presenting the game eased my pain by allowing me to use my attitude towards certain behaviors as the norm of the game world to tease the players. As one of the game makers, I have the choice to punish the players who get frustrated and enraged and reward the ones who act as the therapist did, who treated me so well. One of the functions of attitudes, defined by Daniel Katz, is “the value-expressive function” (Von Der Haar 2005, 161, Katz 1960). This function of my attitude motivated me to tell this story. By creating this story, I helped myself reduce my emotional pain caused by my traumatic experiences. The design and development of the game enabled me to enhance my “favorable self-image, self-
expression and self-determination” (Von Der Haar 2005, 162, Katz 1960, 192). I used this game as a voice to express what I thought people should do when they communicate with those in distress. This storytelling game serves as implicit social criticism by explicitly punishing those who are impatient. This is an ethical way of taking revenge; the practice releases my resentment towards social offenders and I have a feeling of justice.

*The Thing on My Belly*

The story plot of the animation *The Thing on My Belly* (Figure 9) is based on the identity crisis I had about my nationality. The story features a boy born with an extraordinarily big belly button that he feels ashamed of. One of his peers recognizes it as
a mushroom which, in Asian culture, resembles the male genital. The boy made three attempts to get rid of his belly button but they all failed. He falls on the floor in despair. A huge hand, referring to God’s hand in the painting *The Creation of Adam* (Michelangelo c. 1512), uses its index finger to take the boy’s belly button as if taking a booger out of his nostril. At this point, the boy realizes that the belly button is one characteristic of his self-identify. His gesture of falling on the floor suggests that he is, again, in despair. The huge hand then comes back and gives his belly button back to him.

I used the boy’s situation to present the cognitive activity I had about my constant discomfort related to my nationality and the possible loss of self-identify if I successfully get rid of the source of my discomfort.

The real situation embedded in this story is the identity issue about my nationality. I identify as Taiwanese. I was born and raised in Taiwan. However, since I have come to the United States, I am often misunderstood as Chinese. I grew up in the culture that taught me to despise Chinese people. In Taiwan, most people consider themselves morally and behaviorally above Chinese people. This prejudice tends to motivate them to magnify the negative traits of Chinese people on mass media. My cultural background created an identity crisis because, according to Cooley’s looking-glass theory (Cooley 1970[1902], Von Der Haar 2005, 110), my self-identity is partially dependent on how others perceive me. My glass self and my cultural background together disturbed my cognition and made me felt that I ought to dislike the self that most non-
Taiwanese people perceive I am. Cooley explains how human beings identify themselves with his looking-glass theory:

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and soon, and are variously affected by it (Cooley 1970[1902], 152, Von Der Haar 2005, 111).

How I identified myself was inconsistent with what I saw in the social glass. In the social glass, people around me presented me as a Chinese, which, in addition to my cultural background, gave me a conclusion that I should not like myself. This confusion triggered my desire to escape from my nationality. Then, I asked another question— “if I was not Taiwanese, am I still myself?” At that moment, I raised an imaginary crisis—the absence of identity.

In *The Thing on My Belly*, I fictionalized my identity crisis as a way to bring attention to my experiences of the socio-cultural prejudice against Chinese people in Taiwanese culture and the stereotype many people in the United States holds against Taiwanese people. The boy wears a uniform and looks the same as his peers except that he has a big belly button. The uniform represents my race and my Chinese heritage. The only way to identify the boy is by his huge belly button. His belly button represents my nationality and my self-identification. The belly button is, in the boy’s social glass, perceived by others as a mushroom that resembles a male genital. The feelings of embarrassment, discomfort and abjection caused by the huge belly button represent my
feelings towards the reflection of myself, my glass self. In the animation, I made the boy’s wish come true. I let God take his belly button away as a way to present my imaginary crisis. When he finally loses his belly button, another crisis happens—the loss of identity. He does not know who he is any more, similar to how I wondered who I would be if not Taiwanese. God gave him his belly button back. However, the negative effects of the belly button will still trigger embarrassment, discomfort, and abjection of his self identify in the future. The struggle can last forever.

Other than the idea of using the mushroom to refer to male genital, there is another popular culture reference in this film. My idea of using God’s hand from Michelangelo’s painting is from a Youtube video titled Jesus Pranks – Best of Just For Laughs Gags (n.d.). This series of Jesus pranks inspired me to think of one of the posters of the comedy film Bruce Almighty (Shadyac 2003) that refers to Michelangelo’s The Creation of Adam. This design decision has a connection with my personal experience; I was forced to go to church in childhood but I turned out to be a non-Christian. Sometimes when Christians talk about God to me to explain my suffering or to convince me to think positively, their ways of persuasion most of the time sound ridiculous to me. Although I do not argue with my Christian friends to avoid social consequences, I still embed my perspective toward Christianity in my storytelling as an outlet. I use God’s hand as a symbol to construct a humorous plot and express that I do not take Christianity seriously.
The animation *Square Cat* (Figure 10) demonstrates a particular kind of hypocritical behavior related to my personal experiences. I found that it was extremely hurtful when people around me showed their concerns about me but quit helping me when helping became too challenging. This behavior underscored my suicidal thoughts. I would rather these people ignore me completely than try to help half-heartedly. I saw this hypocritical behavior as their way to raise their social status and as a betrayal because they acted as if they cared about me. Although my attitude towards this behavior was logical, it did not seem acceptable to most people. Most people blamed these interpersonal dynamics on my disposition. As a response, I could only use storytelling to justify my attitude. I blamed my negativity on people around me who, I felt, wronged me...
by trying to help me but quit half way. Storytelling is my way of expressing my values and a way to protect my self-respect. It is a method I use to defend myself against hypocrisy.

In *Square Cat*, a pink round cat invites a square cat to a house with the friendly intention of providing the square cat shelter from the bitter winter. Unfortunately, the square cat does not fit in the door of the house. Inside the house, many pink round cats are chatting and ignoring the square cat. He takes three attempts to fit in the door. Eventually, he gives up hope, quits struggling, and conducts passive suicide in the snow at the door of the round cats’ house.

One of my classmate’s situations helped me recall my personal experiences so I could construct this story. When my classmate and I were in an animation class, we were assigned to use Maya, a 3D animation program, as the main tool to produce visual sequences. Unlike me, she was a 2D animation artist and was not familiar with 3D animation programs. With a strong will to learn 3D technology, she spent a significant amount of time but attained little success. The classmate may have felt that she was as an outcast in the society of 3D technology.

In the same period of time, I learned a phase from a friend, “you can't fit a square peg in a round hole.” I mispronounced “peg” as “cat” so it became “you can’t fit a square cat in to a round hole.” Soon after, I was introduced to a video game *Sushi Cat* (Armor Games n.d.). My mispronunciation of the word and the design of the characters in *Sushi*
*Cat* helped me create the visuals for the story. My friend’s situation, a mispronunciation, and the video game *Sushi Cat* together stimulated my interests to embed my own experiences of being an outcast in my story.

I used to think that *Square Cat* was just a discussion about my classmate’s situation. I later found out it was, in fact, an expression of my attitude, my revenge to shame those who hurt me, and an outlet for my disappointment in those I used to trust. In the beginning of the film before the round cat comes to help the square cat, the square cat stands on the side of a street struggling. At this point, he has not given up his life. The reason why he conducts passive suicide in the end of the film is due to the round cat’s desultory help. The square cat could have survived the winter otherwise.

The aesthetic quality of the square cat features cuteness. The square cat has most of the traits of cuteness such as big eyes and fat legs. I made the design decision to motivate the viewers to take care of him. Because he represents me, I made him look cute. He has big eyes and a small nose—a face that resembles infants. This is my strategy to foster empathy in the viewer. This film was successful in that I manipulated the viewer’s emotion. Following a screening event, one of the viewers yelled at me and blamed me for letting the square cat die. This kind of viewer reaction gives me everlasting pleasure. To me her reaction indicates acknowledgement of my psychic wounds. She seemed to not understand that the square cat actually represents me. It means I successfully hid my actor state. Instead, I let the square cat act. My intention was to avoid explicit self-disclosure and by this, the viewer’s direct criticism towards my
disposition. Many other viewers suggested to me that I produce a sequel to revive square cat. They clearly had compassion for the square cat. I found this kind of response comforting and this method for value expression quite harmless to my professional image.

*Angel’s Spirit*

![Image of Angel’s Spirit](image)

Figure 11: *Angel’s Spirit*

The animation *Angel’s Spirit* (Figure 11) demonstrates the cycle of evilness. As an evil cloud hurts an angel the first time, he does not destroy her. The angel still has the will to fly towards a city that represents hope. However, the cloud continues to hurt her. Eventually, she falls and turns into another evil cloud. The cloud and the angel eventually became the double of each other, which implies that the newly turned cloud will hurt
future upcoming angels. I developed this story to justify my reactions to becoming indifferent, hurtful, and selfish. This story expresses my belief that socially unattractive attitudes are learned in social settings. These personality characteristics might be caused by socio-cultural factors, which are not completely under an individual’s control.

In the story, I suggest that people do not behave hurtfully without a reason. Instead, hurtful behaviors are learned. This story is reflective; it is a discussion and a justification of the development of my attitude that might lead others to perceive me as cold-blooded. I believe there are external factors that cause some people to become criminals. Mass media usually faults on their disposition. Most people see them as outcasts. My sympathy towards them might render me as a person with the wrong attitude. To avoid criticism, I feel the need to hide this thought in my storytelling work. The cloud represents people with a criminal quality and the angel represents how they used to be. I made the angel look and babble like an infant. This is a strategy that asks for the viewers’ empathy. By telling this story, I aim to make my attitude more agreeable to the viewers.

Forsaken and Horror Genre Conventions

Forsaken (Figure 12) is a storytelling video game that tells my experiences of being discriminated against as a female child. In this storytelling process, I purposefully contextualized my experiences with my new understanding in social psychology and gender studies. To create this story, I fictionalized a personal event and fit it with my
experience of being a woman suffering from gender discrimination in Taiwan. I used elements I learned from a horror film class and applied the new knowledge to the visual language of the *Forsaken* story.

![Forsaken](image_url)

**Figure 12: Forsaken**

Gender discrimination was an influential social psychological issue that I experienced but could not find a way to construct it in a story. I have the personal experiences of being discriminated against as a female child. The story plot can be linked to an incident in which I was told, “you were almost aborted.” At this stage, I still did not have much idea about what kind of visual representation I could use until I learned about some horror genre tropes.
My mother considered aborting me simply because she was pregnant with me too soon after the birth of my brother. She believed that being pregnant again too soon after giving birth would cause too much damage to her body. Eventually, my father convinced her to give birth to me because he was afraid of the mental disturbance that can be caused by abortion. This incident does not have much to do with gender discrimination. Instead, it triggered interesting thoughts such as “I am alive but I almost died.” I then used this thought to frame and present my attitude towards gender discrimination in the Forsaken game.

My experiences of being discriminated against by my mother, I believe, happened after I was born. The cause of my mother’s attitude towards me could be how she was raised and educated. In the 19th century Taiwanese culture, people in general thought raising a female child was a waste of money. At that time, only sons could carry on the family name while married daughters belonged to another family. This cultural background of Taiwan might be the cause of my mother’s unfair behavior towards me.

I ruminated some questions in the first place: “Where would I be if I was really aborted? If I became a ghost, what would I do? Why was my brother born but I wasn’t? Should I take revenge?” I later realized that I was asking the wrong questions and was inferring the issues from the wrong incident. I was connecting the incident with my experiences of being discriminated against. The real problem was gender discrimination and the questions were not about almost being aborted. The underlying questions should have been, “I am discriminated against by my family. What should I do? Why does my
brother get better treatment? How should I be in my family if I have all of the power? Is it moral to dislike my mother?” By creating this storytelling game, I aimed to provoke the player with these questions and hoped they could understand my experiences of being discriminated against. I wondered how they would treat their mothers if they were in my situation. This storytelling game enabled me to induce struggles on the players to have them think about the same moral questions I experienced. I hoped the players could put themselves into my shoes and rethink the morality of my attitude towards my family.

The new concept I learned in horror genre conventions—abjection—finally made the visual representation of this personal experience feasible. The concept of abjection helped me construct the visual part of the story. Creed explains the meaning of abjection with Kristeva’s definitions:

The place of the abject is “the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 1982, 2), the place where “I” am not. The abject threatens life; it must be “radically excluded” (Kristeva 1982, 2) from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. (Creed 1996, 37-38)

This explanation made by Creed with help of Kristeva’s essay taught me how to make the player feel sick, which Creed describes as “abjection at work” (1996, 40). To the mother, the baby is the bodily waste that must be expelled (Creed 1996, 40). Creed stated that, “we can see abjection at work in the horror text where the child struggles to break away from the mother, representative of the archaic maternal figure, in a context in which the father is invariably absent” (1996, 42). This concept is used in Forsaken, the
baby girl struggles to break away to avoid being destroyed by the mother. After she breaks away, she is physically separated from the mother. However, because the decision her mother made, she can never live like a normal child. The mother’s decision victimizes the child and makes this mother-daughter relationship unbreakable. This is a very terrifying concept I experienced personally. My experiences of being discriminated against by my mother have impacted my lived experience in some ways. Even though my mother and I are no longer physically connected, the psychological connection between my mother and I are impossible to break.

Coral J. Clover’s horror theory demonstrates the horror genre convention that has been used in the movie industry since the production of Psycho (Hitchcock 1960). I considered using these conventions as low risk and effective. She categorizes horror tropes in five categories—killer, locale, weapons, victims, and shock effects (1987, 194). Her theory is very influential for my design decisions in Forsaken.

Similar to Psycho, in Forsaken, “the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family” (Clover 1987, 192). The leading character, the baby that represents me, plays as the role of the victim in the uterus level and later she switches her role with the mother in the village level. She then becomes the killer. She is the psychotic product of gender discrimination. The seriousness of the dismemberment of the baby’s body equals the psychological effect that gender discrimination has had on me. The baby’s broken body is the result of the mother’s decision to abort her. The mother’s decision-making about aborting the baby girl in the game world represents my personal experiences of being
discriminated against. The broken body in the game world represents the psychological damage my family gave me. While the psychological harm my family had done to me was not visible, the harm to the baby in *Forsaken* can be obvious. I made the harm excessive in the fictional world so I could challenge the players to make a decision. I ask them if it is acceptable to cause harm to their own family to balance the dynamic of the mother-daughter relationship to gain a feeling of justice. However, the mother’s fear of being pregnant of a female child is because of her cultural background. The abortion is not entirely her fault. The moral question of the game rises— “becoming the killer is not entirely her fault. If not, is it right to blame and destroy her?”

“The Terrible Place, most often a house or tunnel, in which the victims sooner or later find themselves is a venerable element of horror” (Clover 1987, 197). In the history of horror genre, there are many haunted houses such as the mansions in *Psycho*, *Rosemary’s Baby* (Polanski 1968). In *Forsaken*, the terrible place is the uterus (Figure 13, 14) where the baby was killed and turned to a monster by her mother’s decision. The decision for abortion is what Clover describes as “the perversions that have transpired there” (1987, 197). To the mother, the terrible place is the village, where her own child becomes the killer and considers taking revenge on her.

Inspired by the horror nature of the archaic mother, I chose to use the uterus as the terrible place in the story. The archaic mother can invoke desires of going back to where one was from and invoke fears of its power of destruction. Barbara Creed describes the archaic mother as “the gestating, all-devouring womb of the archaic mother that
generates horror,” and “the archaic mother is present in all horror films as the blackness of extinction—death” (Creed 1996, 55-56). The most famous example of the archaic mother is the spaceship in horror the film Alien (Scott 1979). Clearly, in Forsaken, I presented the mother in the form of the archaic mother to show her power of destruction towards the baby girl. I, then, in the village level, took away the form of the archaic mother to diminish her power and make her seen vulnerable.

Figure 13: Forsaken—Uterus Level Design  
Figure 14: Forsaken—Uterus Map

In the village of the Forsaken game, the players can pick up weapons to increase attack points. The selected weapons are knives and benches. The weapons can only be items that can be used to stab or strike the target in close distance. According to Clover,
the weapons in horror genre are regarded as the extension of body (1987, 198). The attack resembles “the animalistic embrace” (Clover 1987, 198, Kaminsky 1977, 107). For example, attacks with knives resemble bites from werewolves (Clover 1987, 198). This choice of weapons, in horror genre conventions, “signifies a collapse of the boundaries between human and animal” (Creed 1996, 39).

Within the female victim story, there is usually one survivor, who, in horror genre, is called “Final Girl” (Clover 1987, 201) or “victim-hero” (Clover 1987, 106). In the Forsaken story, the baby could be seen as the Final Girl type because she has to fought to survive and to kill her killer in the village level. As Clover says, Final Girl is “the distressed female most likely to linger in memory” (1987, 201). The Final Girl state of the baby fulfills my need to have her or my suffering to be remembered. The Final Girl has two traits including being sexually ambiguous and not sexually active (1987, 221). Both of the traits are used in the design of the baby character.

In horror genre conventions, the monster and the mother roles are both different from ‘a phallic “norm”’ (L. Williams 1996, 23). According to Susan Lurie, there is the “imagined dread” that many boys fear about the mother: “[the mother] is obviously not mutilated the way [the boy] would be if his penis were taken away from him” (L. Williams 1996, 23, Lurie 1980). In other words, the fear of mother partially comes from the fear of being mutated but the mutilated person has no power to mutilate the mother. Creed states that, this fear of mother is similar to the fear of vampire and zombie (L. Williams 1996, 23). They have the power to mutate others while they are not mutilated.
Similarly, the baby girl in *Forsaken* falls to be a victim and eventually a monster because she does not meet the phallic norm. In the phallic norm, the baby girl lacks a penis. That makes her a female, gives her an inferior status in her family, and leads her to be destroyed by her mother.

Eventually, she strives to become the Final Girl. According to Clover, “The stages of the Final Girl’s evolution—her piecemeal absorption of functions previously represented in male” (Clover 1987). The baby girl is brave, which is traditionally a masculine quality. Aborted children normally should be dumped like wastes, but she strives to be born as a zombie, a monster and she eventually gains the power to decide the faith of her family. The masculinity in her female body makes her different and gives her the “monstrous-feminine” (Creed 1996) quality.
Chapter 5: Evaluation

My Storytelling Philosophy

My hands-on practices became secondary after I found the pattern of my storytelling, the art-based research practice, and the interdisciplinary knowledge I needed to construct my storytelling philosophy in my thesis study. Therefore, I did not finish two pieces of work, the animation Angel’s Spirit and the video game Forsaken. I considered explaining my storytelling philosophy as the primary task of my graduate study. Identifying the social psychological context of the stories I created was more important than presenting the animation and video games as fully finished work. Figuring the meaning of my storytelling was more valuable than the labor work because no one could explain my storytelling philosophy for me with social psychological contexts. Therefore, I decided to spend the rest of my time in graduate school developing this thesis instead of devoting to hands-on production so I could be capable of explaining my storytelling philosophy.

This thesis documents the development of my storytelling philosophy. Studying the self is important because I believe that only I can define my values, my attitude, the meaning of my life, and the meaning of my storytelling. Through this thesis study, I confirmed that I have the freedom of defining the purpose of my storytelling. In this
study, I gained confidence to believe that storytelling can be a meaningful and beneficial activity on a personal level. This study also makes me believe that a study that features the personal can benefit society and the academic area because it is impossible to separate the individual from society.

Focusing on my practice in the animation and video game area for years, I found that this area provides art forms for visualization but it does not provide the knowledge that I need when I want to embed my values and my attitude in my storytelling. I must reach out to other disciplines to gain new knowledge. I studied disciplines such as social psychology and gender studies. However, this new knowledge did not open the door for me to do this thesis until I learned about autoethnography. When I learned that autoethnography is a methodological genre that emphasizes accessibility, I realized I was given the voice I need to do research in storytelling. This method also supports that the idea that the researcher’s opinion can be included or even be featured. I was very excited to learn about this methodology because I saw a possibility for my research to be meaningful, personal, accessible, and fun.

I want my storytelling in animation and video games to do more than serve as a tech show, entertainment, or a breadwinning career. I realize that I actually have been using storytelling as a coping mechanism to balance my mental state. Storytelling is an activity that must be meaningful and supportive to my existence. Otherwise, if I asked myself why I create stories and failed to define the meaning of creating stories to me, my existential crisis towards this activity would drive me away from it.
Social psychology, gender studies, and autoethnography all together helped me realize that the purpose of storytelling is not universal. By using autoethnography as a method, I can be honest about my subjectivity in my thesis study and define the meaning of my storytelling activity. By reaching out to social psychology and gender studies, I can explain the causes of my psychological discomfort during my socialization process. In addition, I can use this interdisciplinary knowledge to improve my strategies of visual representation to help my storytelling serve as my voice for social justice.

In my storytelling philosophy, storytelling can be a method for inquiry. In my storytelling practice during graduate school, I intuitively created stories with my personal experiences and then used these stories to guide me to find new knowledge to help explain these experiences within socio-cultural contexts. Storytelling is a new way to accumulate knowledge for me to explain my social experiences. By studying interdisciplinary areas including gender studies and social psychology, I gradually learned to understand the cause of my attitudes and others’ behaviors and to go further to analyze my work from a social psychological perspective. I learned to develop my own philosophy to explain my worldview instead of waiting for others to tell me. I might still not be able to control the affective components that construct my attitude. At least, this knowledge helps me make sense of why people around me hurt me, and the new knowledge helps me construct stories that provide an outlet for my emotional struggles.

Storytelling to me is also a way to protect self-respect, and a way to seek justice. I use storytelling to reduce my resentment towards society by using it as my voice to
protect my self-respect and to explain my socially awkward pessimistic beliefs. I believe that evilness and suffering is inevitable in the human world. In the meanwhile, in my storytelling, I shame the offenders in society to reduce my resentment towards society. When using the stories I create to explain my values and my attitude, I use characters to represent me. I trick the viewers to see the characters as vulnerable to earn their empathy and to earn their acknowledgement of my psychological pain. Therefore, I, a victim of crime, gender decimation, hypocrisy, and carelessness, can get a feeling of justice.

My Existential Crisis of Research

I felt that introspective storytelling is repressed in graduate school until I found the existence of the art-based research (ABR) practice and other related research topics such as qualitative research, autoethnography, and personal narrative. I strongly recommend these methods to be spread in design programs. These methods taught me to do a study that is meaningful to me. It taught me that I can do research about myself and be honest. It validates my personal experiences and acknowledges my storytelling philosophy as new knowledge. It freed me.

Many scholars are not as fortunate as I am. A classmate of mine watched my animation *The Buried Unicorn*. She had a good laugh and she complained, “I want to do fun things, too, but I am doing a thesis. I can’t!” Another day, she walked by and questioned, “Why do we have to write a thing that no one wants read?” She probably saw my production as an activity that I did merely for fun but anything meaningful. I believe
that many researchers can relate to her but to me the correlation between doing fun things and conducting research is spurious.

In an online community, there are people with depressive disorders, they often post online discussions about their existential crises and question their reasons for living. Like them, I have experienced major depressive disorder. I, too, have asked similar questions many times, “If living is so painful and death can solve problems, why do I live?” I wonder: why I stay alive, why I stay in the animation and video game area, what storytelling can do to satisfy me, and how, in the future, storytelling can still be meaningful to me.

In the first three years of my graduate study, I was afraid of using my true interest—myself—as a research objective. After looking at many other scholars’ theses in the animation and video game area, I became ashamed of my work. I developed a false assumption that subjectivity is not allowed and only the mainstream research methods, such as surveys and questionnaires, were acceptable. Unlike most scholars, my storytelling work mainly served myself. I used my work to ask for comforting and rewarding feelings. I was not like the majority of the scholars who were willing to devote their time to help global issues such as supporting the environment or looking for medical solutions. Although I could not help, I thought my attitude was wrong and that I should change my attitude.
I tried to convince myself that I had pro-social motivations to conduct research such as to educate people to have a cheerful mind, to contribute to my academic area, and to be like bell hooks, expressing an ideology that makes a group of people feel hopeful. However, I found that I could not afford to pretend pro-social in the academic area. My mental state did not allow me to do pro-social research that is meaningless to me. I was afraid that convincing myself to do pro-social research could traumatize me. Research is a complicated process that requires me a lot of time to solve problems and defend my solutions. When I attempted to conduct a personally meaningless thesis study, the existential crisis of research came to me and I started questioning about the very fundamental purpose of my graduate study. Since I was not interested in making this world a better place, research on these terms was surely meaningless on a personal level. A master’s degree surely would make me look smart to others. However, I feared that my self-deception in my meaning of research could make my graduate study eventually become a traumatic experience. My experiences of living with a trauma inferred that I was not in the place to lie to myself that pro-social research was meaningful to me, and I could not store more trauma in my memory. Since I could not lie, I had no choice but continue to create stories the way that was meaningful to me.

I believe that existence precedes essence. Defined by Sartre, “Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be” (2007[1947], 22). I always need a reason to stay alive and a reason for everything I do when I live. I cannot compromise my values or conduct research that seems superfluous. I must use
storytelling for social purposes to help me release the pressure that the socio-cultural problems cause. Otherwise, I may become completely helpless. If I cannot defend myself or reduce my resentment towards society through storytelling, I would lose the meaning of living. In comparison to the existence of myself, satisfying the standard of the dominant value in the academic area is less important.

My worries about conducting meaningless research could have been eliminated if I knew there was academic support for autoethnography and if I knew personal narratives could benefit society. Even though this autoethnographic research may seem egoistic, it still validates as knowledge; as Leavy indicates, “the private is indeed public, and vice versa” (2015, 43). Additionally, the core of social psychology is to study the relationship between the individual and society. The initially personal may eventually contribute to society and to the academic area.

By conducting this study, I hope my research can become a model for pursuing autoethnography in the area of animation and video game development. Encouraging using this study as a method may broaden the way academic research is conducted and help break away from the limitation set forth by preferences the dominant group of scholars have, such as seeking universal truth (Leavy 2015, 7, Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015, 8) and avoiding the personal (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2015, 8). Other researchers in the animation and video game area might need this freedom to pursue the knowledge they truly desire.
Future Research

A future possibility to my design research is to examine how efficiently and effectively my storytelling can provoke the viewer’s emotions and maneuver their thinking closer to my truth. Handelman gives an example by stating that joke-tellers manipulate by making the audience laugh (2009, 47). Storytelling is definitely a tool for manipulation; it influences the audience in a hidden way (Handelman 2009, 7). The reason why I want to do this is simply because I want a realistic understanding of how others perceive me.

In this study, I promote the use of popular culture elements and horror genre conventions to construct visual components of my storytelling. This strategy helps the viewers to understand my stories easily; they can refer to what they already know, which helps them understand my work (Kandel, SR12, Von Der Haar 2005, 40). Through their bodily responses, I am able to interpret the viewer’s responses. From this, I feel rewarded by being heard.

In this study, I found that I saw through my own lens to interpret the viewer’s bodily responses. I considered the viewers’ own interpretation as outside of the scope of the study. Initially, the purpose of my storytelling is self-serving. I thought, “as long as I feel rewarded, I do not need to care about what the viewers really think.” Although this strategy sounds logical, in the process of this thesis study, I gradually started to feel that there was an insufficient part of the study. I do feel rewarded when seeing the viewers’
emotional participation in the stories I create. I can interpret their responses through my own lens. However, my strategy of looking glass self may not give me a realistic understanding about the influence my storytelling actually has to the viewers. I lack realistic understanding of the viewer’s perception towards my values expressed through my storytelling. I can no longer ignore this issue because now that I know more about social psychology. I have learned that I might misinterpret the viewers’ perceptions. I wonder if my explanation of their reactions is just a projection of my thoughts. In the process of this study, I have started to feel that observing the viewers from my own perspective is self-deceiving. I now have the need to know if I am misinterpreting the viewers’ reactions. There might be a divide between how I perceive the viewers’ reactions and how they explain them. Using merely my own interpretation of the viewer’s bodily responses can no longer satisfy me. I have the need to understand from the viewer’s perspective.

In this research, I found the methods I need to define the frame of my work and my purpose of staying in the animation and video game area. This provides me a solid research foundation and confidence for conducting further autoethnographic studies in relation to social psychology. In the future, I will take the viewers’ own interpretations seriously to see if their interpretations match what I glean from their bodily responses. By identifying the viewer’s attitude towards my work, I seek to prove that I am able (or unable) to influence the viewers’ perspective. The proof of how effective my work is in
influencing people may increase my satisfaction in my autoethnographic storytelling activity. The research questions I may ask include:

(1) How can I learn what the viewer’s perception is in the stories I create?

(2) Do the stories I create really influence viewers to develop empathy towards the characters that represent me? If so, is it short term or long term?

There is another question I want to ask. The use of popular culture elements drives the viewers to like the characters because, in social psychology, generally, “familiarity leads to liking” (Von Der Haar 2005, 185). I drew these references from theories of neuroscience and social psychology. These theories surely can be applied to real life situations but I wonder how accurate these theories speak for fictional characters. I did not conduct a study targeting the viewers of stories in animation and video games. Later on, I realized an experimental research might need be conducted to figure out how effective the concepts in social psychology really are when used in digital and visual storytelling. Therefore, in the future, I may ask:

(3) Do the strategies I develop based on social psychology and/or gender studies cause similar results in my storytelling of animation and video games?

My curiosity about society has expand to outside of myself. I became curious about other people’s experiences and perceptions about the issues that have influenced both them and me. Additionally, this study made me more sensitive to other people’s problems. I now have more vision of clarity to explain the causes of other people’s
suffering. Although I see the problems, I am, however, still afraid of telling my truth directly to other people. For example, I am afraid of telling other people my explanation about and the cause and the effect of their suffering. Therefore, I want my storytelling to be affective, and I need to know whether my truth can really influence their ways of thinking.
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Appendices A: Media

Website

This section includes my work that is related to the process of this study. These pieces can also be found on my website, http://www.reneechenwork.com, or on the archival disc in The Department of Design of The Ohio State University.

Animation


*Square Cat* (2013): https://vimeo.com/reneechen/sc


Video Games

*The Falling Star* (Chen and Larrimer 2012): http://reneechenwork.com/theFallenStar

*Forsaken* (Chen and Hopkins 2015): http://reneechenwork.com/forsaken
Appendices B: Storyboards

Storyboard of *The Falling Star*

Figure 15: Storyboard of *The Falling Star*

The images start from up-left and then go down.
Storyboard of *Angel’s Spirit*

The order of pictures is left to right.

Figure 16: Storyboard of *Angel’s Spirit*—Part 1

Figure 17: Storyboard of *Angel’s Spirit*—Part 2
Figure 18: Storyboard of *Angel's Spirit*—Part 3