“Awake:” An Animated Exploration of Self-Discovery Through Mindfulness

THESIS

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Abstract

My thesis film, “Awake,” explores the animated expression of self-discovery through mindfulness. I employ a variety of 2D animation techniques in order to visually depict the character’s internal transformation. Specific colors, line quality and brushstrokes reflect inner thoughts and feelings. This allows visibility of the “artist’s hand” in the drawings. By hand crafting each image, I aim to impart a personal connection to my work as well as communicate my ideas with the audience. In my film, the main character uses meditation to find some kind of inner peace, or balance. Self-discovery in my film is the mode of stillness and self-reflection that helps get one to a point of personal growth, or realization. I use meditation as a vehicle for mindfulness and self-reflection. Mindfulness involves becoming receptive to the process of self-discovery by fostering openness to psychological flexibility and change. The main character’s efforts are continually derailed by distractions in the form of thoughts. These are representative of a universal, although frustrating, aspect of humanity: the tendency to get caught up in thoughts at the expense of experiencing the present moment. The main idea of the film is the suggestion that there is no way to fully remove the presence of unwanted thoughts. However, it is possible to change one’s relationship with them. Eventually, she comes to the realization that her environment doesn’t have to be “perfect,” or totally free of mental noise, in order for her to succeed.
Dedication

For my Grandma, Mom and Dad.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my thesis committee members for their encouragement, support, and wealth of expertise in helping me bring my ideas to life. I am incredibly grateful to Maria Palazzi, my advisor, for her support, patience and guidance in helping me become a better artist, and making my film the best it could be. To Candace Stout, who helped me become a better writer, and for her endless encouragement and support. To Alan Price, who offered valuable insight that vastly improved my work, and for supporting and aiding in my development as an artist and animator throughout my time at ACCAD. To my sister, Shari Ross, who assisted in coloring and backgrounds – I couldn’t have done it without you. To all the faculty, staff and students of the Advanced Computing Center for the Arts and Design at The Ohio State University. And thank you to my family and friends for everything. You mean the world to me.
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Introduction

I believe that gratifying work comes from somewhere personal. Artists create to express themselves, and to communicate ideas they are passionate about. By creating work that is important to us, the result comes from an honest, authentic place. It is the artist’s intention that this work then resonates with audiences, allowing them to share in the artist’s personal vision. The creation of art purely for oneself can be valuable, but sharing with others is what brings it to life, giving it longevity and a lasting presence.

Animation is a medium capable of bringing people together by encouraging thought, inciting conversation, and inspiring change. The artist’s ability to communicate a feeling, or idea, to an audience - and for the audience to share in that - is an integral part of the human experience. This is why I am an animator. I aim to explore and express what resonates with me, and share that experience with others. In my case, this starts with drawing. I work primarily in 2D, drawn frame-by-frame animation, which involves a great deal of time, dedication, and skill. My need to tell a story and express it in a visual, artistic way is more than just a career choice. The act of creative expression is important to me both as a maker and a viewer.

Universal Concept/My Story

My thesis film, “Awake,” explores the expression of self-discovery. The concept of self-discovery is one that has always interested me. It is present in films I’ve worked
on in the past, as well as films that serve as inspiration for my own work. The concept of my thesis involves the expression of self-discovery through mindfulness.

There are two main design problems, which I am tackling with my thesis project. These are: 1) creating a work in which the universal experience of self-discovery is relatable to an audience, and 2) expressing my personal ideas about of self-discovery in a compelling way, by utilizing animation as a visual medium.

To address these ideas, I have created a story that is broken down into four separate sections. Each designed to capture the main character’s evolving mental and emotional state. The initial section is the “Reality Sequence”, which takes place in the main character’s environment. In this section, I set up the character’s external world. She is frustrated at her inability to succeed at the task of meditation, which is meant to represent a form of mindfulness that can lead to self-discovery.

I then reveal my character’s mind state in the “Fight Sequence.” True to the section’s title, there is a conflict between the main character and her meditation impediment distracting, intrusive thoughts. She tries to fight, push away and avoid these mental distractions. Her attempts, to so ardently remove these from her world, backfire. By reflecting upon her situation, in the “Transformation Sequence,” she learns to become more tolerant of the obstacles and succeed. The resolution bookends as the character returns to the external environment, in the same meditation pose as before as the audience understands that the transformation is an internal one. The crucial realization is that success is attainable. This relates to my time in Israel, which I discuss in the “Concept Chapter”, where I accomplished tasks I previously thought impossible. Realizations such
as these are universal, and personal growth begets self-discovery. This is the idea I strive to convey in my work.

Animation: Storytelling Through Visuals

There is something unique about animation, present in both storytelling and visuals. As a viewer, I respond to works of animation differently than live-action films or other forms of creative work. This is because I too communicate thoughts, feelings and ideas through drawing. This personal predisposition contributes to my preference for 2D (or hand-drawn) animation. The act of drawing helps connect me to my work. Drawing is something I have always done, being my personal vehicle for storytelling and communication. I was making personal comics at age 8; since then I have used drawing to express my thoughts and feelings about various life experiences. While other aspects of my life have changed or evolved, my love of drawing has been a constant. Whether I am drawing on paper or digitally, I am allowed the freedom to express myself creatively.

More recently, I became proficient with digital technology, such as working with 3D animation and using a Wacom tablet to draw directly in programs such as Flash and Photoshop (both being utilized heavily in my thesis project). The tactile feel of drawing directly on paper is lessened; however, I gained both speed and efficiency and continue to be dedicated to the act of drawing as a form of hand-crafted expression. This is invaluable in not only my present project, but future projects as well. Integrating both traditional and digital methods allows for the exploration of new methods, both in the design and implementation of 2D animation. I used this to my advantage when developing my film’s style.
There is also a personal dimension involved in the creation of hand-drawn or traditional animation. This is notably inherent in independent films, in which the animator has creative control. As Paul Wells states, “Animation has always been intrinsically authorial and intrinsically self reflective” (Dekel 3). This attests to the deeply personal relationship between the animator and the animation; the animator has complete control over the world he or she invents by originating the frame, subject, and timing, as well as all other aspects. This intimate connection allows for unique visual and storytelling opportunities. The individual artist has the opportunity to fully bring his or her personal vision to life. This is important to me; it is a personal, intrinsically rewarding aspect of the process of animation.

How the Animator Communicates Visually

In deciding on a stylistic look for this film I am intentionally using style to communicate aspects of the story. My love of drawing and a hand-drawn aesthetic contributed greatly to the visual development of the film. This thesis film heavily involves the use of color and brushstrokes to reflect the character’s internal state and to visually reinforce the ideas I wish convey. The mental state of the character over time drives the visual style. A hand-crafted drawing style, where you can see the trace of the ‘pencil,’ adds this dimension to the work. In my film, hard, disjointed brush strokes indicate anger and frustration; loose, flowing brushstrokes portray inner calm and peace. Textured brushstrokes have a different aesthetic than the clean vector lines found in software packages such as Illustrator or Flash. This aesthetic is important for the film because with soft, pastel-like brushstrokes, the style is more suited to changing throughout, as the character’s emotional state changes.
To develop the style, I looked at different visual source materials for inspiration. Where the human mind is concerned, there is a sense of mystery, or unknown territory. This should also be evident in the space the character inhabits. Thoughts constantly change and morph; the style of both character and environment reflect this. The space around the character is as important as the character herself.

Making for an Audience: Use of Universal Themes in Animation

Whether or not the finished work does justice to the concept is also important in discerning whether my work succeeds or fails as animation. How successfully those ideas come across in a finished film depends on how both the audience and animator are affected. “According to Monroe Beardsley, a work of art is intentionally endowed with a disposition to produce aesthetic experiences (in an audience)” (Zangwill 315). Animators gain distance and objectivity by attempting to see their film through the audience’s eyes.

To connect with the audience, universality of themes is an important factor in the relationship between animation and the audience. “Universal Themes imply ideas about the human nature and the relationship of human beings to themselves, each other, and the universe” (Universal Themes 2). Everyone who makes creative work does so for different reasons. In creating work that is valuable to us, filmmakers hit on themes that are, in some part, both personal and universal. The goal in making a film that carries a universal theme is to reach and affect a wide audience.

An important question to ask is, “Once my work leaves this easel or the confines of my computer, what will happen to it? Who will contemplate this work and what sense will they make of it? Who will own this visual text?” (Stout 11). I learned in Dr. Candace Stout’s class, “Re-imagining Research Writing Through Creative Inquiry,” about the
collaborative nature of the writer and the audience. These are ideas that can be applied not only to writing, but also to other art forms. Due to the more abstract nature of animation, the audience is free to impose their own thoughts, feelings, opinions, and meanings.

When the work is fully formed and we’ve given it everything possible, there remains a gap. That space between the work and the audience where the audience creates its own experience. The audience interprets meaning, events, intention, and receives the work through the filter of their own experiences and associations (Reque-Dragicevic 1).

The interpretive nature of art contributes to its impact. One person may walk away from an animated film with completely different thoughts, feelings and opinions than someone else based on personal experience.

We need to leave audiences enough room to engage in this creation. If we spoon-feed them every aspect, spell-out every meaning, leave nothing of intrigue or uncertainty, we deprive audiences of their ability to receive the full impact of what the work desires to create in them (Reque-Dragicevic 1).

If a work of art has the power to incite discussions, thoughts, and feelings, then that work has had an impact. The audience’s many varied reactions are part of what keeps a film alive. The fluid, interpretive nature of independent animation, in particular, allows for a wide range of analyses.

My process in making this thesis film was to always keep the audience in mind, as I worked to convey ideas that are meant to be both universal and open to interpretation. For each section of the film, I discuss my intended meanings in detail in the Concept
I strove to leave that space between the work and the audience that Reque-Dragicevic describes as “enough room to engage.” It is possible that audience members may see themselves in my character, and relate her experiences to their own. Thus the design process involves making a film that allows the audience to watch and apply their own stories, or experiences, in order for them to have a personal connection. For example, my dad mentioned that my character’s experience rang true to certain events in my grandma’s life, even though that wasn’t my direct intention. I leave this gap between the audience and the work by use of story construction and organization, as well as what I decide to include in each drawing. I expect audiences to come to their own conclusions because that is what I, as a viewer, have always done. I find value in researching what filmmakers have to say about their creations, but I also have a personal connection to the work that I feel is solely mine. I believe that this personal connection enhances the relationship between audience and author.

The degree to which work is open to interpretation may depend upon its degree of abstract vs. mimetic, or representational, content. There is a spectrum between these two degrees, encompassing all animation work. “The term ‘mimesis’ represents the desire to reproduce natural reality (more like live-action work) while the term ‘abstraction’ describes the use of pure form – a suggestion of a concept rather than an attempt to explicate it in real life terms (more like animation)” (Furniss 5). Although Furniss mentions mimesis in terms of live-action work, this spectrum can be applied to different styles of animation. Many commercial, mainstream Hollywood films would sit nearer to mimesis, while more subversive, independent and experimental films are more abstract (Furniss 30).
There is no doubt that animation can impact people’s lives. “The impact and influence of the animation industry as well as its principles and techniques pertaining to character portrayal and story conveyance today permeates every facet of our daily lives, at times in ways that many people least suspect” (Anthony 1). I found this to be true in my own personal experience, through both watching and making animation. Watching as a child drastically affected my life, in terms of how I connected and related to other people. My world was an internal one; I had a rich inner life, sometimes at the expense of my outside experiences. Since that time I have strived to maintain a better balance.

Watching has heavily influenced my artistic choices. My character design repertoire has consisted primarily of male, young-adult characters. More often than not, in the shows and films I chose to watch, these types of characters were the heroes of their stories while the female characters were relegated to the sidelines. I related to the male characters because they were written as fully developed human beings. My range has diversified since; in fact, once I became aware of the genius of Hayao Miyazaki, I was opened up to a whole new dimension of storytelling and animation. Also, mainstream American animation geared toward children, nowadays, has only become more creative and inclusive. Moving past preconceived notions, in terms of what we once thought children’s cartoons were capable of, has resulted in more intelligent, thought-provoking content, enjoyed by both children and adults.

There is no denying the influence that mainstream animation has had on me. Increasing my awareness of this has impacted my design choices. I branched out of my comfort zone with my previous film, “Limitless,” which features two female main characters. I believe gender should not impose limitations on animation design.
Becoming aware of this allowed me to diversify my design choices, while also creating characters and stories that appeal both to audiences and myself. “Limitless” also featured a story that was largely symbolic. My previous animation projects contain symbolic content, but I really pushed myself to explore visual concepts I had not worked with before. Building upon these filmmaking experiences has allowed me to branch out further from my comfort zone and create my thesis film.

Concept, Process and Resolution

In the animation process, the conceptual stage precedes the creating stage. I discuss this in depth in the Concept chapter. The inspiration, or in-depth ideas behind the artist’s vision, serves as the foundation of the project.

In my own experience, both the process of creating and the end result are rewarding. The Process chapter contains in-depth information about my creative decisions throughout the film. I discuss methods by which I shape conceptual ideas into finished work. It comprises all aspects of production, including animation, coloring, cleanup, editing, and sound. This section also contains my thoughts and observations during production.

In the “Conclusion” chapter, I sum up my experiences, as well as what I’ve learned from them. I discuss my next steps, and how my thesis can impact future work.

I ask myself: what makes my own work succeed, or fail, as animation? If I do not evaluate my own work with a certain degree of awareness, I will never learn from my mistakes nor grow as an animator. There are several different ways to assess this. One aspect to consider is whether the work I do is personally gratifying. This can be evaluated on various levels. One includes whether the initial vision, or idea, is something I feel
strongly about- and whether I can explore that idea, in greater depth, using animation.

The other is the actual process of making, or creating, the work based on that idea. In the following section, I explore a number of animated films that I feel are incredibly successful at communicating their themes. These also serve as inspiration for my work.
Background

Through the creation of story and animation, I am exploring the topic of self-discovery as related to awareness of one’s own abilities and potential. Self-discovery itself is not so much about the external circumstances that surround the experience, but the inner thought processes (Self-discovery 1). By examining my own experiences, I become engaged with the act of self-discovery and am working through animation and story to communicate this idea. A story becomes universal and relatable through honesty and authenticity.

There are numerous possibilities as to how the animator can visually portray these internal and external feelings that transform throughout the self-discovery process. This includes the use of symbolic imagery and metaphor. “…the symbol in animation can operate in its purest form, divorced from any relationship to the representation of the real world, finding its proper purchase in the realms of its primal source” (Wells 83). The visual possibilities inherent in animation are well suited for the portrayal of symbolic images.

Symbolism is defined as “the art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations: as a: artistic imitation or invention that is a method of revealing or suggesting immaterial, ideal, or otherwise intangible truth or states” (Symbolism 1). Animation is unique in that complex, multi-layered ideas can be
depicted through a single visual, conveying an idea in a matter of seconds. This abstraction of ideas is unique to animation. “Each movement and speech sound in animation is the (un)conscious reflection of the artist who has been interwoven within it whether s/he realizes or not. Out of repetitive inanimate lines, a visceral movement is achieved at the end” (Kim 1). In this sense, every aspect of animation is representational of both ideas and the self. By making short films, the animator has control over the entire world that he or she creates. The animator’s voice and hand are present in the work’s entirety.

In animated films, the inner workings of the mind and the imagination are not necessarily representations of a tangible, concrete actuality. The films I have chosen to review express this internal state and communicate ideas about self-discovery by use of symbolism and metaphor, visual abstractions, and universal ideas. Use of colors and the passage of time have the potential to be fluid; in my film, the main character’s inner experience does not necessarily take place in “real” time. The experience is given an otherworldly feeling by use of visual style, differing colors, and line work, all representing changing emotional states.

My main character’s situation, about dealing with intrusive thoughts, is a universally experienced one. Universal themes have the capacity to transcend cultural, regional and experiential differences. Universality isn’t only about telling stories audiences relate to. It also encompasses exploration of uncharted territory by bringing unfamiliar ideas to the forefront. Increased representation on a universal level can contribute to greater audience tolerance and acceptance. “In many ways, animation as a form presents events in a way in which both children and adults can address the familiar
as otherness and, conversely, difference and unfamiliarity as the mechanisms toward knowledge and understanding” (Wells 241). Some examples of universal themes include ideas about “accepting change, adjusting to a new life, coming of age, heroism” and many others (List of Universal Themes 1). Many of these examples relate to self-discovery. Every animated film that affects me, on a personal level, contains a universal element.

The animator expresses themes that are important to him or her; this, in turn, invites empathy and understanding from the audience. Universal stories are human stories and serve to bring us closer together as a society. Faith Hubley is an independent animator whose work directly illustrates this, by presenting stories that are relatable on a global scale. She believes “we need to be much more patient, much more forgiving and much more compassionate. My films do not provide solutions, but they do make people stop and feel” (Furniss 28).

As I developed my ideas and began work on my thesis project, I looked to other animators’ work for inspiration. I found three films that convey the idea of self-discovery in unique ways. Two of these are short independent animated films, which I discuss further in this chapter: “The Black Dog” (1987) by Alison de Vere and “Distance” (2012) by Todd Dejong. Independent animated films tend to cover subject matter that is personal to the filmmaker, as well as employing a number of different animation techniques.

Independent-, art- or personal animation avoids genres and are generally written, animated, directed and designed by a single artist. These films are usually self-contained and often use techniques rarely seen in mainstream animation (for
example, camerealess animation – which can involve scratching or painting on film, object animation, paint-on-glass, pixilation – and speeding up or manipulating live-action footage). These films are usually funded, owned and distributed entirely by the animator (Robinson 2).

Maureen Furniss discusses a number of reasons as to why independent films make use of these varied techniques. “Many independent animators have worked as fine artists in various media, often using the time-based medium of animation as a way to expand their explorations of movement and temporality in still paintings and drawings” (Furniss 32).

In addition to this, the use of experimental techniques can allow for the presence of the artist’s hand in the work. This is one of the reasons I chose to work in traditional animation.

Mainstream animation nowadays, unlike independent animation, most often employs 3D computer animation. This effectively hides the artist’s hand in its creation.

Henry Selick, director of “Coraline,” “The Nightmare Before Christmas,” and a number of other animated films, emphasizes the difference between 3D computer animation and the stop-motion technique: “CG can do anything, but it can't do easily what is inherent in stop-motion: give proof of the artist’s hand through the inescapable mistakes made and communicate to the audience that what they are watching really, truly exists” (Selick ix).

This inclusion of the artist’s hand in stop-motion, as well as other, non-mainstream animated techniques, serves to establish a sense of authorship, especially in short animated films.
Since individuals or small groups of people most often create short independent films, a level of intimacy between them and their work is enhanced by the inclusion of the artist's hand. These films’ stories are often introspective and personal. Unlike the work of big studios, the independent animator has complete control over how they visually portray subject matter. Visibility of the artist's hand is an aesthetic I strive for with my own work.

Traditional animation has always been my preferred medium. 2D animated films have always spoken to me, and as I mentioned earlier, I have always communicated thoughts, feelings and ideas through drawing. For my thesis film, I used the physical practice of drawing to portray the character’s internal transformation. In the Process chapter, I explain how I use specific colors, line quality and brushstrokes in order to reflect events in each shot. This allows me to leave my “artist's hand” in the work. By hand crafting each image, I aim to impart a personal connection to my work as well as communicate my ideas with the audience. Independent animators work in this way, communicating their ideas through their chosen techniques.

Currently, short independent animated films are often published through the Internet in order to reach a wide audience, as well as “in the context of animation festivals, which occur in many places throughout the world” (Furniss 31). The third film I discuss differentiates itself from this by being a well-known, long-form work that was exhibited in mainstream theaters. That film is "Spirited Away" (2001) by Hayao Miyazaki. There are important parallels between Miyazaki’s work and that of independent animators.
When “Spirited Away” was released, it became the “highest-grossing film in
Japanese history,” as well as the first Japanese animated film to win the Academy Award
for Best Animated Feature (Spirited Away 1). Unlike most current Hollywood animated
films, “Spirited Away” was produced using hand-drawn animation. Miyazaki’s use of
visuals allows visibility of the artist’s hand in not only “Spirited Away,” but all of his
work. “It could actually be argued that for Miyazaki, hand-drawn animation brings into
play not only the hand, but the animator's whole body. In doing so, it underscores the
corporeal nature not solely of the creative act per se, but also of human existence in
general” (Cavallaro 131). Miyazaki’s films effectively showcase the intimate relationship
between him and his artwork. “Being an excellent animator himself, Miyazaki’s
directing style requires him to personally check drawings by other animators and often
redraw them to make them closer to his image” (Mononoke Hime 1). Miyazaki’s personal
touch and style are present throughout his work, which I discuss further in this chapter.
The scope of this film encompasses an abundance of themes and ideas, so the ones I
choose to discuss involve self-discovery as related to inner strength.

An important part of the self-discovery process involves risk. Characters in the
three films I discuss are forced to step outside of their comfort zones in order to move
forward. In doing so, they recognize their own capability and display courage in the face
of adversity. This is a common, relatable theme, and one that is showcased in each film.
“Spirited Away” (2001) by Hayao Miyazaki: Inner Strength, Values-driven action, Universality and Conquering Obstacles

Hayao Miyazaki’s film, "Spirited Away" (2001), is a masterwork (Figure 1). There is no point of contention; the film is universally praised, receiving abounding reviews with similar sentiments: “above all of the achievements from that animation studio, Spirited Away truly stands out. If there could only be one film that Miyazaki was remembered for, it may just be this one” (Conrad 1). The praise and accolades are deserved for a number of reasons, many of which go beyond the scope of this paper. But the ones I will focus on relate to Miyazaki’s ability to tell a story that crosses cultural barriers and is universal in its themes, several of which explore memory, personal identity and inner strength.
Miyazaki states about his film: “it's not a story in which the characters grow up, but a story in which they draw on something already inside them, brought out by the particular circumstances... I wanted to tell such a story in this movie” (Miyazaki 1). The theme entails drawing upon one's own inner resources to face seemingly insurmountable obstacles, a universal theme I strive to convey in my own work.

The main character, Chihiro, faces a number of struggles in a short period of time. At first, she is presented as childish and somewhat spoiled (Hairston 104), based upon Miyazaki’s real life interaction with a friend’s ten-year old daughter. She and her friends inspired Miyazaki to make the film to show “every ten-year old, and everyone who ever was ten years old” that there is a passion and power within themselves (Hairston 103). Chihiro is thrown into a situation where she must survive. However, she does more than that: during the short time she spends in her new environment, she thrives. Her inner strength, bravery, caring, and character are present and developed, brought out by situation she finds herself in (Figure 2). Drawing upon these inner resources leads to personal growth. On a personal level, as I discuss in the Concept section, I related to this during my time in Israel.
In my film, the main character has the tools needed to accomplish her goals, whether she believes it or not. Like Chihiro, she eventually uses her existing abilities to succeed. She can meditate at this moment, without complete mastery over the technique, nor the ability to lower the volume of distracting thoughts. Sometimes people fall into a mindset that they must have a firm grasp of every conceptual aspect of an activity before even attempting it; this is a product of over-thinking, or perfectionism. Artists fall into this mindset as well. Recently, one of my students spent half of a class period staring at a blank page in a sketchbook. I spoke with her about why she wasn’t starting to sketch out some ideas, and she said it had to do with the fear of just starting. We talked a little and eventually she was able to get some ideas down. This has happened to me before. The feeling of not being able to produce something good can prevent one from producing anything. But the realization that you can jump in and start doing something even if it won’t be perfect is essentially giving oneself permission to create. What an artist creates is subject to feedback and criticism in order to improve; meditation techniques can be advanced upon with further study and guidance; and a girl like Chihiro will continue to
draw upon inner resources as she encounters further obstacles throughout life. The theme that ties all these situations together involves two parts: The first is in trusting one’s own inner strength and faculties, and then taking actions that are guided by values; the second is in taking that important risk while accepting the possibility of failure.

A rich and meaningful life is created through taking action. It happens through effective action, guided by your values. And in particular, it happens through committed action: action that you take again and again, no matter how many times you fail or go off track (Harris 33-34).

This idea is one that is applicable to anyone. In “Spirited Away,” a young girl plays the role of protagonist, but those at any age or gender can relate to this theme. The setting takes place in Japan and makes reference to a number of cultural traditions and folklore, but the universal themes in the film apply to any region in the world. The film's message will be just as relevant in 20 or 50 years, as it is now. I would be happy if my own films can convey messages that are timeless and universal. Miyazaki is masterful in expressing the theme of personal growth, one that is present in many of his films.

I first discovered “Spirited Away” at age 15. It was my first experience seeing an animated film so powerful in its emotional, visual and spiritual storytelling. Subsequently, I saw the other Studio Ghibli films; I am now 29. Watching a film at two drastically different ages can provide a new perspective. In re-watching “Spirited Away,” I found that my reaction to the film was not as different as I originally thought it would be. When I was younger, I felt compelled to analyze and learn about every aspect of this work, most notably theme and story. I had never seen anything like it before, nor had I
had such a strong reaction to a film. In watching it again, a lot of those memories came flooding back. They are still as relevant as they once were.

As I have gotten older, the themes I originally researched and learned so much about hold true to my own personal experience. If anything has changed, it would be all the little details I now notice and appreciate, adding new layers of depth to the story. I now have a deeper, though incomplete, understanding of the culture behind the film. “Spirited Away” has a vast wealth of symbolic imagery and cultural influences that could be (and have been) talked about at length. However, the core theme of the story—drawing upon one’s inner faculties to face life’s various challenges—remains the same, and is similarly affecting. Unique to Miyazaki’s style, the pacing and attention to detail truly engage us in the story.

Miyazaki’s use of light and shadow in these early scenes is amazing. He captures the fuzzy glow of a sunbeam filtered through a stain-glass window and dust motes floating in the air. The film uses a slow build of walking across landscapes. The deliberate pace puts the audience in a contemplative mood (London 1). The pacing is slow and hypnotic, drawing the audience in.

Miyazaki’s depiction of Chihiro helps engage us in the story as well; her initial struggle, dealing with moving to a new, unfamiliar place, is a relatable one.

In Spirited Away and Totoro, the girls are moving to a new place in the country, and the experiences they have ultimately make them feel better about it. But the fact that we can, at all times, relate to their loneliness, uncertainty, fear, and wonder keeps us engaged in plots that form their own dream logic” (Koski 1).
Because Miyazaki designed Chihiro with real children in mind, her story becomes more affecting (Figure 3).

I felt this country only offered such things as crushes and romance to 10-year-old girls, though, and looking at my young friends, I felt this was not what they held dear in their hearts, not what they wanted. And so I wondered if I could make a movie in which they could be heroines (Miyazaki 1).

He speaks of his design choices, and how these drive the story.

Until now, I made "I wish there was such a person" leading characters. This time, however, I created a heroine who is an ordinary girl, someone with whom the audience can sympathize, someone about whom they can say, "Yes, it's like that” (Miyazaki 1).

Figure 3. Chihiro, unhappy about moving to a new place. This is a relatable situation, relayed through a relatable character

Although I am no expert in Japanese traditional folklore or iconography, I still gain something profound from the experience. “When you strip away all the mythology
and cute/terrifying creatures, *Spirited Away* is an effective story about the journey from childhood into maturity” (Koski 1). That is the power of a universal theme.


![Figure 4. "The Black Dog." A set of images from beginning to end, illustrating de Vere's use of visual symbolism](image)

“The Black Dog” (1987) is a short 2-d animated film by British animator, Alison de Vere. She tells a story that seems strange and fantastical at first glance; upon further inspection, the universal theme of taking risks and stepping outside of a comfort zone applies to anyone at various stages in life. People grow and change, and it is normal to be thrown off course at certain points. It is also normal to want to stay in our comfort zones, especially when change is imminent (Rubenstein 1). Our own conscience, or inner guardian, can help us realize what we want out of life and to take that first step toward
new and unfamiliar territory. This is often a crucial step in the process of self-discovery, and de Vere tells the story beautifully (Figure 4).

The film’s subject matter addresses the universal concept of personal change, through self-discovery. Similar to my main character, the character in “The Black Dog” is hesitant in the beginning. She has no choice but to step forward once the walls around her literally collapse. These walls represent the life she leads; she is her own biggest barrier to change. Each obstacle she encounters throughout the film represents an inner struggle. Both de Vere’s main character and my character experience a form of inner struggle that manifests itself in the outside world.

![Figure 5. Each time the dog barks, the walls collapse](image)

Throughout de Vere’s film, the main character is led by a guardian, a black dog, to a place where she can acquire knowledge, wisdom, and a better understanding of herself and the world around her. She is reluctant to go on the journey in the beginning, but the dog is a catalyst in her making the first step (Figure 5). When she veers off the
path in the beginning, giving in to activities that do not promote her spiritual growth, the
dog remains there to be her conscience and guide. Specifically, one value the film
conveys is that one should avoid engaging in purely hedonistic activities in order to be
happy. The film doesn’t argue against people wanting to do better for themselves; there
is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to change how you dress or your hairstyle, two
actions the main character engages in. Its criticism is of excess, which is at the expense of
others, and the expense of oneself.

In “The Black Dog,” the main character makes choices in the beginning that may
not align with her current needs. By guiding her toward a more fulfilling path, the dog
appears as both the symbol of a guardian and a catalyst for change. The film successfully
represents the following universal theme: one ought to be mindful of what is important in
life, and refuse to let fear get in the way of a journey towards personal change. Alison de
Vere uses many different visual elements to get this meaning across. It is interesting to
note that symbolically, a “Black dog” is also a metaphor for depression.

"Black Dog" was (Winston) Churchill's name for his depression, and as is true
with all metaphors, it speaks volumes. The nickname implies both familiarity and
an attempt at mastery, because while that dog may sink his fangs into one's person
every now and then, he's still, after all, only a dog, and he can be cajoled
sometimes and locked up other times (Chance 1).

De Vere’s piece has an undertone of darkness throughout. The story could be seen
through a lense of self discovery while coming up from the depths of depression. If that is
the case, then the black dog symbol is turned on its head, actually preventing her from
succumbing to despair.
The story and symbolism of “The Black Dog” tie in together, as much of the story contains symbolism in the form of mythical creatures that appear throughout the film. “While her representation of human and animal characters is fairly realistic, she introduces fantastic landscapes and creatures to define the shifts between ‘real’ and ‘fantasy’ settings” (Law 59). These creatures test the main character repeatedly. Although she fails in the beginning, she is tested again later in the film. A skeleton tries to sell her miniature versions of these creatures (Figure 6). This can be interpreted as temptation to take a step backward, toward an easier, albeit less fulfilling path. She is able to avoid this with the help of her guardian; it also illustrates significant character development.

![Figure 6](image.png)

Figure 6. Although intimidated by the skeleton at first, she refuses his offer

In my film, the main character doesn’t have a constant guardian, but a main antagonist: the ribbons. However, like the black dog, these become a catalyst for her own realization. Once immobilized, the understanding that she can meditate in the presence of intrusive thoughts occurs. The ribbons are both her antagonist and a reflection of a part of
her psyche: those thoughts, feelings, and other mental distractions she’d rather not be focusing on. Once the struggle to eradicate them ends, she is able to succeed.

In “The Black Dog,” the environment around the character is not fixed in a specific physical location, nor grounded in reality. As both the story and character develop, the setting becomes appropriate. In my film, environmental fluidity is implemented to reflect the character’s state of mind; there are sections in which my classroom background fades into the “Dreamscape” background, and vice versa. Visual solutions such as these help communicate complex ideas to audiences without any need for dialogue.

In “The Black Dog,” the use of dialogue would detract from a film that uses such heavy symbolic imagery. De Vere’s choice to communicate specific ideas, from a purely visual standpoint, strengthens her narrative. “The Black Dog” makes use of the animation medium by implementing heavy symbolic imagery, much of it intended to make an immediate impact on the viewer. Similar to “The Black Dog,” and other independent animated films, my film contains no dialogue. I aim to successfully communicate my ideas through visuals. This forces me to devise creative visual solutions in order to express abstract and complex ideas in a way that is universally understood.
Transformation in animation involves abstraction of visuals in accordance with an engaging character study. Using compelling imagery, animators easily express the seemingly intangible thoughts and feelings that surround self-discovery experiences. Imagery and pacing engender dreamlike qualities, with the power to evoke an immediate, visceral reaction.

Animation provides this opportunity as Wood (2006: 133-134) argues that animation has an ability to portray an intense spatial experience and different types of transformation within the cinematic space. It is unique to animation practice (as opposed to live action films) to portray space in the process of change. Wood explains that the animated space is undergoing the process of reverberation: existing beyond the location of events, fluid and marked by heterogeneity, shifting between familiarity and uncertainty, and chaos (Dekel 37). Both de Vere’s and my main character have a significant realization, or transformation, by the end of the film. In “The Black Dog,” the character’s transformation is symbolically evident through a new physical form. After trekking across her last obstacle,
a high, narrow wall, she transforms into a young version of herself (Figure 7). I see this as her inner child emerging through her journey; a part of her that’s been lost has been regained. My character’s transformation is visually evident through her design, attitude and general demeanor, as discussed in the “Process” section.

The three elements that contribute most significantly to “The Black Dog’s” overall effect are the symbolism, universality of the message, and lack of dialogue. When a film lacks dialogue, the visuals must communicate the filmmaker’s ideas effectively. De Vere’s film contains strong symbolic visual solutions that negate the need for dialogue. The various ambient sounds and bits of music present in the film only serve to enhance the visuals, adding to the general feeling of each scene. All of these elements work together to successfully express the main, universal theme of the film: to stay true to oneself on a life-changing journey, and not to give in to easier, less-fulfilling paths.
At first glance, “Distance” (2012), by Todd Dejong, seems like a short film about a girl who is trying to talk to a boy. However, it is really about a largely internal experience. Confronting her fear of school and other students helps her move forward. The way in which she perceives these is incredibly daunting, reflected in their abstract appearances. In the end, she overcomes this fear and is able to start a conversation with a potential friend.

The main character’s faulty perceptions of those around her are fueled by fear. Fear is both a common and powerful motivator. In a high school setting, the feeling is amplified. In the beginning of “Distance,” the main character is not readily interacting with others. Her nervous glances and general body language indicate a lack of
confidence. In contrast with her, the other students are engaged in conversation. I personally related to the feeling of intimidation; more so around those I did not know well. As a whole, the experience can be scary. However, the belief that every aspect of high school is terrifying will inevitably lead to an unnerving experience. “There is no truth. There is only perception” (Flaubert 1). This means that someone’s perception of a situation will become his or her personal truth; the main characters in both “Distance” and my thesis experience this firsthand.

Regardless of their true nature, “Distance’s” main character sees both school and her fellow students as threatening. That becomes her personal truth, thereby heavily impacting her experience. Early in the film, while “reality” takes place, she shies away from a group of students on the bleachers; later, when the imagery reflects her inner fears, she sees rows of threatening faces that look at her judgmentally (Figure 9). The difference between these two experiences is that in the first situation, the students on the bleachers give no indication that they judge her in any way. This transformation from outer to inner worlds is enabled by use of animation. Colors, changing forms through abstraction, editing, and camera angles all affect the dramatic tone of the piece (Figure 10). “Distance” is a perfect example of animation’s capacity to portray abstract ideas. These are ideals that I strive toward in my own work.
My main character’s experience also involves internal perceptions, projected externally. Similar to “Distance,” the tonal shift during my character’s transition from Reality to the Fighting sequence is depicted by use of visual changes, both in the character and environment. Likewise, during the Transformation sequence, the visuals change again. Line and color changes are unique to animation. I chose to use the medium
to my advantage by pushing myself creatively and exploring visuals I had not done in previous projects.

My character lacks self-confidence, and this comes through early on in the film when she looks at both her teacher and classmates. They seem to have no difficulty meditating, and she comes to the conclusion that they must be worlds ahead of her. However, her knowledge of their lives and struggles is minimal. Everyone has their own personal struggles; when personal insecurity strikes, it is easy to be so inwardly focused that it becomes incredibly difficult to see hard situations with objectivity. This is a common mental obstacle. The majority of my thesis film takes place internally, with visual representations of these mental obstacles.

In “Distance,” symbolism is used to address the main character’s misconceptions, not only about fellow students, but about high school as a whole. At one point, “Distance” presents the high school building as a fanged monster, swallowing up the main character (Figure 11).

Figure 11. The school entrance with fangs
School can be nerve-racking, especially for those whose confidence is low. “Distance’s” main character ultimately makes the decision to jump in and navigate the scary world of high school. This relatable, universal experience is enhanced by the visuals; we are presented with a bombardment of imagery, presenting an exaggerated abstraction of the high school experience. My main character goes through a similar experience; however, there are key similarities and differences in each of their journeys.

In “Distance,” the main character must grapple with both internal and external circumstances. The school environment and students around her are all physically present; the difficulty lies in her perception. Her view of her classmates is entirely internalized, and therefore the obstacles she faces are internal. Her goal involves talking to a potential friend, and she ultimately decides to bridge that gap, or distance, between the two of them. At the end of the film, we see that the physical distance between them is very small, maybe a few feet in length (Figure 12). However, in her mind, this was a humongous hurdle.

![Figure 12. Internal vs. external distance between the characters](image)

This exemplifies animation’s potential for fluidity of time and space, as well as abstract imagery. In “Distance,” the work showcases the jumble of thoughts and insecurities
present in high school. The main character’s struggle involves pulling herself up from this environment of fear, and going on even though it is scary and uncomfortable. This involves a certain amount of anxiety; but making the choice, although uncomfortable, reaps a reward at the end.

In my film, the main character’s experience is almost entirely internal. While “Distance’s” character’s obstacles have a physical form in the real world, my characters’ do not. The inner obstacle, intrusive thoughts, becomes physically manifested as ribbons. Her lack of confidence mirrors the main character of “Distance.” Both characters face situations that force them out of their comfort zones. In the end, although the risks they take are different, their journeys are similar.

Using animation, I aim to invent new ways to portray my character’s perceptions, as well as investigate how visual imagery can be designed to represent thoughts and feelings. Likewise, I strive to explore how a single image or symbol, within animation, helps complex ideas or thought processes come across instantly. It was inspiring to see other filmmakers exploring this fundamentally universal idea, self-discovery, through animation. Creative expression of important ideas connects animators to both the audience, and to one another. In the following section, I explore those important themes and ideas that I hope to convey through my work.
Concept Development

Israel

The idea of stepping out of one's comfort zone, as a way of triggering self-discovery, is an idea that is personal to me. In December of 2013, I had the opportunity to travel to Israel. It was a self-discovery experience for me in which I faced both physical and intellectual challenges. The experience was a highly positive one; it was a confidence building exercise, to see difficult tasks through to the end. What makes it manageable is to take it one step at a time, breaking up one huge goal into a number of smaller goals. I employed Mindfulness strategies in my own experience. Through this experience, I became interested in creating an animated story about self-discovery through mindfulness.

One key insight from traveling to Israel was the realization that my abilities exceed my initial expectations. One experience in particular challenged both my mental and physical abilities, simultaneously. This was the trek from the Western Wall, in Jerusalem, back to our hotel.

The Western Wall (Ha-Kotel Ha-Ma'aravi) in Jerusalem is the holiest of Jewish sites, sacred because it is a remnant of the Herodian retaining wall that once enclosed and supported the Second Temple. It has also been called the "Wailing Wall" by European observers because for centuries Jews have gathered here to lament the loss of their temple (Sacred Destinations 1).
Because of its holy nature, people from all over the world come to pray and leave little notes in the cracks (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Notes of prayer left in the cracks of the Western Wall

My Birthright group was in Israel from December 9 – 20, 2013. For the first time in many years, it had *snowed*. All modes of transportation were unable to go anywhere. Our guide did not want us to miss out on seeing the Western Wall, so he proposed that we walk the 2.5 miles from our hotel to the destination. I secretly hoped it wouldn’t happen, that the buses would run - but no such luck. Everyone in our group prepared to make the trek. Nobody anticipated snow; therefore, nobody came prepared. Many put plastic bags inside their shoes. I have a pair that are (supposedly) waterproof, so I took my chances with those. The walk over was pleasant; the sun was out. The city was empty, save for a couple of snowball fights. Once we arrived within the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, we saw just how empty this area was. We were told that usually, this area is full of people. It is incredibly rare to see the city in this way; there was almost a
magical, ethereal quality about it. Once we passed through a small security screening to see the Wall, our guide told us that sometimes people have an incredibly emotional experience here; others think, “it’s just a wall.” When I went to the Wall, the confusion I felt about my faith rose to the surface; I wanted to stay longer so I could continue contemplating. The birthright schedule was tight, so we couldn’t stay all day. I put a small piece of paper with a message on it inside one of the cracks of the wall, and also one from my friend, who was unable to walk the distance in the snow. The time I spent there was confusing. Being at the Wall brought up deep questions I don’t have answers to and I was naively hoping something—like a beam of light, or a “message from God”—would just “come to me.” Nothing did, so I felt disappointed. I realize now that I am going to need more than five minutes to contemplate deep questions about faith. To expand upon that would take up another thesis. The walk back is where I was tested both physically and mentally.

It started to snow pretty heavily, and we started to return, after learning that not even the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) would send a vehicle out to retrieve us. The walk back was cold and windy, and I had a very difficult time. Because I had my coat over my face, my breath continually fogged up my glasses and I could hardly see anything. Fortunately, the staffers walked in the back with several other people so I wasn’t alone. I really pushed myself to make it back and there were several times I thought I wouldn’t be able to. Then I quickly thought about how that wasn’t an option. This made me think about how much I am truly capable of, not only physically, but mentally; if I had had a much different attitude out there, I might not have made it back halfway on my own.
There were other feats, such as hiking up a mountain, and walking down a long, winding path of another mountain, that tested me greatly. I needed a lot of help and support to do these things as I wasn’t as fast or physically fit as the other people in our group; but once you are halfway up or down a mountain, you can’t really change your mind about whether you’re going to climb it or not. I pushed myself to do things I didn’t think I was capable of. Once I returned home, I thought about how I could apply this mindset to other areas in my life, specifically animation. At that time I had been losing confidence in my ability to make something worthwhile. No idea I thought of was good enough and I was always putting myself down. With help, I’ve realized that while I can’t stop those types of thoughts from being present now and again, I can change how I react to them. A lot of people experience a loss of confidence at some time or another. This influenced me in creating a character-based story to address these ideas.

While in Israel, it was helpful to see each challenge as composed of multiple steps, rather than one overwhelming feat. Walking down the winding Snake Path of Mt. Masada looked insurmountable at first glance; granted, it wasn’t easy, but it was doable. This was due in part to taking it one step at a time. This approach is the only way to climb down successfully, and is also an effective goal-setting strategy: breaking up one big, long-term goal into a number of smaller goals, or steps on the way. Setting attainable goals is an integral part of moving forward in life; it is also an action deeply guided by values (Harris 192). I decided to apply that mindset toward other areas of my life, including my creative work. It is partly from this experience that I became interested in expressing self-discovery as a universal theme.
Self-discovery in my film is the mode of stillness and self-reflection that helps get one to a point of personal growth, or realization. Self-discovery entails “the act or process of gaining knowledge or understanding of your abilities, character, and feelings” (Self-discovery 1). Slowing down, taking a step back, and being present and aware are all precursors to the examined life. This can be a struggle in the fast-paced environment we inhabit. The antidote is Mindfulness: “the intentional, accepting and non-judgmental focus of one's attention on the emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment” (Mindfulness 1). It can be tempting to try and push away, or even fight, the things that make us uncomfortable. Responding to the unpleasant aspects of life by fighting or avoiding them only serves to make us more defensive, and interferes with our engagement with the present moment - the only time we are actually, physically living. By opening oneself up and making space for the uncomfortable aspects of life, especially those outside of our control and within ourselves (such as thoughts, attitudes, and emotions), we set the stage for personal growth. These are the core concepts of my thesis film.

Self Discovery and Mindfulness

My experience in Israel, and the concept of Mindfulness, both fall under the umbrella of Self-discovery. At first glance, these appear to be wholly different: one an experience of stepping out of the comfort zone to try new things, and the other a concept related to Eastern Philosophy, including tenets of Buddhism, meditation, and heightened awareness. Upon closer investigation, I’ve found that these are related in important ways. In my own experience, the realization that I was able to do things I previously had thought impossible was a real eye-opener for me. I recognize that by developing a
healthier perspective on present circumstances, the future looks differently. This can positively affect any facet of life. Self-awareness and reflection helped me come to this realization; the more I know about myself, the better I can cope with various challenges. I have also employed various Mindfulness strategies that have helped greatly. The utilization of certain Mindfulness aspects can be integral on the journey to self-discovery, and the concept is featured heavily in my thesis.

Mindfulness is a term with varied explanations. There is no one clear quintessential definition for the term, but there are certain aspects present in each description. These definitions are essential to understanding what mindfulness means in the context of human experience, and why it is related to self-discovery. “In research and clinical contexts, mindfulness is often defined as nonjudgmental attention to experiences in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990)” (Brown, Creswell, and Ryan 1). This non-judgmental attention to the present moment is encompassed by every definition of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is inherently a state of consciousness. Although awareness and attention to present events and experiences are given features of the human organism, these qualities can vary considerably, from heightened states of clarity and sensitivity to low levels, as in habitual, automatic, mindless, or blunted thought or action (Wallace, 1999)” (Brown and Ryan 824).

Mindfulness is not exclusive to meditation practices, which are demonstrated in my film, nor is it the only way to achieve self-discovery; nevertheless, mindfulness involves becoming receptive to the process by fostering openness to psychological flexibility and change. It is helpful to learn to let certain situations go and see them as they are, rather
than trying to manipulate and alter circumstances. This is especially apparent in situations that are out of our control.

If we are nondefensively and nonjudgmentally interested in what is occurring, then we have the opportunity to experience more fully the multidimensional universe of events around us. Akin to a process of relaxed interest (Deci & Ryan, 1985) or interest taking (Weinstein, Przybylski, et al., 2012), mindful states are about allowing information to flow and letting what is salient arise, free of the controls that accompany more dualistic, defensive, or judgmental forms of experience (Brown, Creswell, and Ryan 259).

Meditation is one of a number of ways to achieve this state, and can be defined as “private devotion or mental exercise encompassing various techniques of concentration, contemplation, and abstraction, regarded as conducive to heightened spiritual awareness or somatic calm” (Meditation: Mental Exercise 1). My thesis focuses on meditation as an embodiment of mindfulness and acceptance. The concept of mindfulness being a path to self-discovery is one I strive to express through animation.

My Film: Beginning, Struggle, Conflict, Transformation, and Resolution

I chose to express a story using animation for a number of reasons. Several of these include the visual possibilities inherent in animation, and my passion for storytelling, character animation and the medium as a whole. In my film, the main character uses meditation to find some kind of inner peace, or balance. Her efforts are continually derailed by distractions in the form of thoughts. These are representative of a universal, although frustrating, aspect of humanity: the tendency to get caught up in thoughts at the expense of experiencing the present moment. Meditation in my film is the
vehicle for mindfulness and self-reflection. The main idea of the film is the suggestion that there is no way to fully remove the presence of unwanted thoughts; however, it is possible to change one’s relationship with them. The main character’s focus on these disruptions impedes her ability to focus. She initially tries to remove them completely; eventually, she comes to the realization that her environment doesn’t have to be “perfect,” or totally free of mental noise, in order for her to succeed.

She achieves self-discovery by letting go of one mindset, being that she must eliminate ‘mental noise’ in order to meditate, and taking the risk of trying another: one that involves embracing the fact that mental distractions are a very real part of life, and letting go of the illusion that we have any control whatsoever over their presence. In a way, her initial refusal to change her attitude is another version of a comfort zone. If she doesn’t try a new method, then there is no risk of failure. It can be daunting to think about the possibility of failure, but the probable payoff is worth the risk.

The main character’s self-discovery experience is achieved in part due to mindfulness practice. As an animator, I can express this idea using a multitude of visual techniques. Through animation, the main character’s antagonist becomes a physical manifestation of mental distractions. By fighting such an obstacle, it only becomes larger and cumbersome. This story takes place in both the internal and external world, but the character’s internal projections take precedence. By use of animation, the environment allows for fluidity and change in design, depending on the character’s mental state. Employing animation techniques such as varying line work, color, coloring technique, and brush choice allows for such fluidity. Camera effects are manipulated as well. Quick vs. slow cuts, as well as fast, erratic movements, skewed depth perception, and angles
that feel off-balance all contribute to a chaotic environment. At a certain point, the character must stop and reflect on her strategy.

By reflecting, she makes an important decision: to try a new approach, despite the risk. She lets go of assumptions about the nature of meditation, of fear, and of openness and vulnerability. The character’s demeanor and body language, as well as the surrounding environmental design, contrast with earlier visuals. This indicates that an important transformation has taken place. The film’s ending bookends with the character in the same sitting meditation position as she was in the beginning. The external environment looks unchanged, but her internal world has been altered. Her goal is to meditate successfully, but this involves bigger ideas such as achieving a sense of inner peace, awareness of the present moment, and the ability to tolerate uncertainty.

Mindfulness and Meditation

Mindfulness encourages openness and receptiveness to new ideas, as well as fostering an environment of vulnerability rather than defensiveness. It enhances well-being, and encourages a mindset in which one is more committed to values and goals. This leads to greater willingness of taking necessary risks and trying new things, therefore leading to self-discovery.

Mindfulness facilitates autonomy or “true self” regulation by affording the individual fuller awareness that better informs choices and decisions regarding reactions and behaviors that might follow. In part, this is due to the lower defensiveness associated with mindfulness, and its nonselective, nonjudgmental mode (Brown, Creswell, and Ryan 261).
This is in line with the mindset of the character in my film. Hers becomes an attitude of quiet reflection, openness and observation. “Mindfulness is not itself a theory or psychological perspective but rather an open and receptive form of awareness. Thus, its meaning and practice can be related to any and all theories of self and experience, Eastern or Western” (Brown, Creswell, and Ryan 260). In this way, mindfulness is a universal concept, as well as one path to self-discovery.

Meditation practitioners suggest that during meditation, clients should aim to be “passive observers,” observing thoughts as they happen (Monslow 1). If focus is interrupted, one should gently bring the attention back to the breath. It is important to withhold negative personal judgment and practice self-compassion when this happens. The fact that distractions happen during meditation exercise is not a judgment of one’s ability; it is actually a typical occurrence (Smith 1). Practicing compassion towards oneself is a tenet of not only meditation, but also mindfulness as a whole.

In my film, an emphasis is placed on two points of meditative focus: the breath and the hands. Focusing on the breath is integral to many types of meditation and mindfulness exercises. It helps ground one and bring attention back to the present. The hands are also a point of focus, one that is showcased throughout my film. Different hand positions are called “mudras.” “Mudra, Sanskrit Mudrā, (“seal,” “mark,” or “gesture”), in Buddhism and Hinduism, a symbolic gesture of the hands and fingers used either in ceremonies and dance or in sculpture and painting” (Mudra 1). Although religious associations are present, the function of a meditative hand position is also practical. Moreover, a “mudra” is defined as “a gesture, usually done with the hands, that focuses and directs energy in a yoga pose or meditation” (Pizer 1).
Throughout the film, the significance of the character’s hand positions is apparent: when she is focused, her hands are joined. The specific position she uses is a common one in meditation, called a “cosmic mudra.” In spiritual terms, this represents the interconnectedness of all things in the universe (Paramananda 33). In practical terms, it is an indicator as to whether one is becoming too stressed or tired during meditation practice (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Cosmic Mudra. Different hand positions indicate the subject's level of focus

At times of stress, the hand positions convey the character’s ability to focus and meditate. When she feels unsure, she looks down at her hands multiple times; when she struggles, her hands are disconnected (Figure 15).
Figure 15. Disconnected hands during a meditation exercise

During the pivotal transformation sequence, she breathes steadily and her hands come together once more. This signifies a newfound ability to focus, achieved in part due to her personal reflection, as well as being the precursor to a more harmonious relationship with an occasionally perplexing inner world. The process of creating an animated portrayal of inner transformation required a great deal of time, patience, and trial and error. In order to clearly convey my concept, I utilized a number of different animation techniques, which I discuss in the Process chapter.
Process

The process of making animation involves the stages of pre-production, production, and post-production. Pre-production entails devising the initial idea, character and story design, storyboard production, and creation of an animatic. Production takes place next, in which all scenes are animated. Post-production includes editing scenes together in a video editing program, compositing, and sound design. The process of making “Awake” involved a multitude of artistic decisions in each of these stages in order to communicate my story. The production of the film took 18 months to complete, and there are many areas that could be discussed in a chapter about the process of making a film. For the scope of this thesis, I have chosen focus this writing on three significant aspects of the film, 1) animation design and technique comparisons for communicating differences in the Transformation and Fight Sequences, 2) influences in story production and 3) sound design from a director’s point of view. There are a number of comparisons between the Fight and Transformation sequences, which serve to highlight the character’s changing state of mind.

The Fight Sequence illustrates the conflict between the character and the ribbons. She engages with them in a physical, combative manner, the tension increasing as the conflict goes on. In contrast, the Transformation Sequence is designed to portray the universal theme of self-discovery, through the act of mindfulness. Taking a step back to look at the “big picture,” rather than getting caught up in details, is an important
precursor to self-discovery. In the story, the character comes to an important realization regarding both her attitude and abilities. This turning point involves inner reflection and heightened awareness of the experience. With this realization, or transformation, the character consequently approaches her difficulties in a new way.

To reveal and engage the audience in this transformation, I utilize a number of established animation techniques, including timing, contrast, gesture, pose, composition, and style, in order to portray her self-discovery experience and to contrast it with the Fight Sequence.

Timing

Traditional animation is measured through the number of frames, or drawings, per second. In film, that number is twenty-four. Going by that rule, twenty-four drawings would make up one second of animation. However, there is not necessarily a need for twenty-four drawings, unless the animator is aiming for substantial smoothness. Much traditional animation, seen in both films and television, is done on “twos:” one drawing for every two frames. Done this way, there are 12 drawings per second.

For example, the following walk animation, done by Richard Williams (Figure 16), takes one second to complete (Frame 25 is the same as frame 1). The poses featured are main, or key, poses. These are the storytelling drawings, or the ones that most clearly present the action of the character. Drawings done between these poses are called in-betweens. Adding in-betweens adds smoothness to the animation.
I worked to find a balance in both timing and number of keys and in-betweens used to create animation that conveys the character’s state of mind. The number of in-betweens helps determine how fast or slow the animation is, in addition to timing. In general, more drawings, shot on a lower frame rate, will slow the animation, while fewer drawings shot on a higher frame rate will accelerate it. More drawings shot at a higher frame rate will produce smoother action, and less drawings shot on a low frame rate will look choppy.

Some animation is done on threes or fours, resulting in a choppier style. “Filming on higher numbers produces a ‘stepped’ feeling of movement, which might be desirable to achieve a certain effect” (Furniss 136). These higher numbers equate to a lower frame rate, because capturing a frame three or four times results in less actual drawings per second. This method is used most often in limited animation, often in conjunction with styles that differ from the mainstream.

My film is timed differently throughout, based on what needs to be communicated for individual shots. Furniss’s observation about a ‘certain effect’ is exemplified in my
approach to timing in this Sequence and in contrast to the Fight Sequence, which precedes it. Some are done on twos, and one is even done on fives. The range varies. Timing on twos is good for faster actions, such as runs. There are several shots that are a combination of ones and twos, for abrupt, snappy actions.

That is not to say that twos could not work for slower actions. Slowing the action can be a matter of making more drawings, rather than stretching out the timing. In the case of “Awake,” the lower, varying frame rate benefitted my film by pushing the movement to a more abstracted style. “Generally, the higher the frame rate goes, the more realistic motion appears” (Blumeyer 1). In the design of my film, realism is not the goal. “Awake” has a narrative, but there are a number of abstract elements. These are expressed predominantly through the visual design, which I will discuss further in this section. Using a low frame rate helped support the visuals by achieving a sometimes disjointed, ethereal effect.

For instance, the character’s hair is timed on fives (Figure 17). This particular shot marks a transition from the outer to the inner world. I believe the timing of this shot helped emphasize the setting’s imminent atmosphere.
A run (Figure 18) during the Fight Sequence is animated on twos. The timing supports quick, snappy actions. This supports the communication of the action at this stage in the story, emphasizing increased tension and an uneven, disjointed feel. These runs are still abstracted in time, as most running animation is done on ones due to the amount of character poses per run. Animating on twos, using only key poses, helped me stay true to the choppier, abstract style sometimes found in limited animation while also accelerating the shot’s speed.
While this faster timing was employed throughout the Fight Sequence, the Transformation Sequence required a different approach. In the Transformation Sequence, the timing slows considerably. Most shots are animated in a lower frame rate, including a combination of threes, fours, and occasionally fives. Overall, I animated character movements as slow and flowing, to emphasize her peaceful demeanor. I aim for slowness by both increasing the number of drawings per second, and working in a low frame rate. Similar to Shot 19, this timing promotes an ethereal atmosphere through abstraction. Circular arcs of motion, excluding any sharp angles, support gentle, flowing movement. This is true of both the character and the ribbons (Figure 19). Drawings are constructed void of sharp, sudden actions. In contrast, the way she moves is both deliberate and yielding, in that she can move freely, but also allow the ribbons to flow seamlessly around her. The pacing in this Sequence is more even, meaning that there are fewer
variations in timing. Constant, slow, flowing movement is in direct contrast with the Fight Sequence’s frenetic feel.

A difference in drawn change from one pose to another is present in both Sequences. In the previously referenced run from the Fight Sequence, (Figure 18) each pose changes quickly from one to the next. Because the action is so fast, there is no need for many in-betweens. Most shots in the Fight Sequence are similar, in that they are animated as charged, quick and sometimes choppy actions. These are made up of a number of different poses, lacking in-betweens. Meanwhile, the timing of the Transformation Sequence requires a high number of drawings between poses. Additional drawings both smooth and reduce the speed of the transition from one pose to the next. This contributes to softer, smoother, and slower timing (Figure 19).
There are variations in timing, as this adds texture. Although slow, even timing supports the harmonious atmosphere, it is also repetitive, and therefore becomes boring to look at. In contrast, variations add life to animation and texture to the timing. For instance, variations in timing happen at specific points in the Transformation Sequence, when the character spins in the air with the ribbons. (Figure 19) There is acceleration in the timing, while still being gradual, rather than abrupt. In this way, both harmonious and quietly energetic feelings are attained.

Throughout the entire film, I employ another visual technique called traceback, which is also influenced by timing choices. Traceback involves tracing over a single drawing two or three times. This adds a wiggly line effect to character animation. Consequently, if the character is standing in place, it still looks “alive.” I apply this not
only in the character outlines, but also to color fills. Adding traceback to both of these elements added life to my animation.

There are a number of shots that emphasize stillness during the character’s attempts at meditating. By using traceback, those scenes in which the character is meditating still look animated, rather than like one still drawing. I also varied the timing of the traceback based on the character’s emotions. I usually employ traceback by shooting it on threes, and having three drawings repeat over and over. In Shot 12, the character has trouble with the meditation exercise and gets increasingly frustrated; as the shot progresses, the traceback is done on twos, using two drawings rather than three, resulting in a more erratic aesthetic. Using different timing techniques throughout my film enhanced the relationship between the character and the ribbons.

**Pose, Gesture and Silhouette**

In addition to timing, I employed the use of pose and gesture to express story action, as well as character thoughts and feelings. Pose and gesture are often referred to interchangeably in animation. A character’s pose comprises the specific stance, or position, that character is taking on; gesture refers to the idea behind it, caught by the artist and put onto paper. Animators often engage in gesture drawing exercises by attending life-drawing classes. A live model performs a number of poses in a specified amount of time, both short and long. Gesture drawings are often done quickly, loose and sketchy. This is helpful not only in improving drawing ability, but also in sharpening observation skills and capturing the essence of a pose in a short amount of time (Stanchfield 9). I have attended a number of life drawing sessions, throughout both my undergraduate and graduate career (Figure 20). Recently, I sat in on several tai-chi
classes, in order to both become acquainted with the movements and sketch people taking part in class. This mode of real-life observation provided me with reference material, and proved invaluable in making my film. Drawing from life has gradually helped me build up my drawing skills, allowing me to make stronger and more engaging poses for my character.

Figure 20. Examples of my life drawings, short poses (10-30 seconds) and long pose (1-2 hours)

Strengthening my character animation involved another element directly related to pose. Silhouette, or “the shape or outline of something” (Silhouette 1), is an important concept in character animation; the stronger the silhouette, the stronger the pose. A character silhouette involves the use of shape, as well as both positive and negative space. The most important aspect of a strong silhouette is the guarantee that the character’s pose will read clearly to the audience.
The silhouette’s importance lies not only in creating strong poses, but strong compositions as well. This is achieved by breaking down the elements of a shot to its most basic shapes. By simplifying both the character and environment, it becomes easier to arrange the elements in a shot without getting bogged down by details. Put simply, it is a helpful tool in taking a step back from your work seeing the big picture. This was something I considered especially when I composed my scenes with both the character and ribbons. I considered silhouette throughout the entirety of the animation process, which helped me create strong, readable poses (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Silhouette versions of my character during the Transformation Sequence

To explain the character’s inner experience in the Transformation Sequence, I have designed and drawn poses that emphasize open and receptive body language. Her stance is no longer inward and avoidant, as seen in beginning sections of the film; in contrast, her arms are open and inviting as she moves with the ribbons.
The act of moving in harmony with the ribbons symbolizes her changed perspective and approach; she is now able to let thoughts come and go. The drawn movements and gestures are inspired by Tai Chi, which some consider a form of “moving meditation” (Tai Chi 1). Tai Chi involves an emphasis on slow, rhythmic and flowing movements. Awareness of the present moment and a focus on the breath are both important. “Tai chi is an ancient Chinese tradition that, today, is practiced as a graceful form of exercise” (Mayo Clinic Staff 1). The peaceful motions of Tai Chi directly relate to the character’s inner transformation.

Performing Tai Chi inspired motions in an abstract, non-physical environment can pose a challenge, in terms of the character’s center of gravity. Since she is in midair, her center of gravity changes as she floats and swirls around; I shift her weight so she remains in balance as she moves. The environment is one in which she has control over where she moves, but is also able to float around weightlessly, so I took that into account while animating. The line of action in each pose is curved, rather than straight, which helps make both character poses and silhouettes dynamic and readable (Figure 22).
Although the motion slows, she never comes to a complete stop, which showcases the weightless environment she inhabits. These holds happen at important points, so her poses and facial expressions can be read clearly as confident and in control, as well as traditional tai-chi poses.

The drawings emphasize the character’s breathing, and the movement of the hands are gestures that signify a newfound attitude. Breathing is animated as deep and slow, supportive of meditation. For example, in Shot 40, the character begins to reflect upon her situation with drawings focusing in on her face for a fair amount of time. As she takes a breath, the drawings suggest a moving camera that pans down to focus on the hands, as they slowly come together. The pose, timing, and composition tell the viewer that a transformation is occurring. At this point, I animate the ribbons beginning to unravel around her. These motions, of breathing and bringing the hands together, are present throughout the film during her various attempts at meditation (Figure 23). The difference between this, and other instances, is that she allows herself to relax and not view distracting thoughts as the enemy.
Character expressions are communicated not only through full body poses, but also facial characteristics. Eye focus and implied look direction contributes to the pose by directing the viewer’s attention to where the character’s attention is focused. In the Fight Sequence, her attention is focused solely on the ribbons, as if she is wearing blinders to everything else. In the midst of fighting, all she can think of is defeating the obstacle. The Transformation Sequence is in stark contrast with this, as I draw the eyes looking in a number of different directions and through the environment. She engages with the ribbons with an attitude of nonjudgmental curiosity, fully accepting their presence. She also explores the space around her with new awareness, implied by her gaze. A newfound sense of peace and happiness are also communicated through her facial expressions. Her eyes and brows are no longer furrowed, but open; she smiles instead of frowning. I animate her hair flowing slowly, and drawn smoothly as she looks at the environment around her, reflecting a lack of tension.
In addition to pose, the style of the drawings helps convey meaning in each scene. The visual design of the Transformation differs from earlier sections, in that character lines are softer and lack hard edges; colors also have this quality, as well as being bright yet cool. During the Fight Sequence, the character is colored with sketchy, hard, disconnected brushstrokes. The color reflects this, as it is comprised of a number of disconnected, hard lines. The character is semi-transparent during the Fight Sequence, as opposed to the soft fills used in the Transformation. This was done in order to add contrast between the two Sequences, but it can also be a further indicator of her current state of mind. There are no soft “shades of gray” that fuse the lines of color together; like her emotions, these are in disarray and have not come together to form a cohesive whole. The transparency is a product of using hard lines, highlighting the disconnect between each visual element. The Transformation Sequence sees a much softer style, emphasizing connection and wholeness (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Direct contrast between visual styles of the Fight and Transformation Sequences
In terms of the colors themselves, the blues and purples in the Transformation Sequence contrast with the earlier reds and oranges. Warm colors are used to emphasize a charged, high-energy situation, while cool colors reflect a peaceful, relaxed atmosphere. The character still has energy during the Transformation Sequence, but it is no longer driven by anger and frustration. This quiet energy comes from someplace deeper: a result of letting go and moving in sync with, rather than in opposition to, the ribbons. Through drawing, this illustrates the fundamental concept of mindfulness.

Design: Ribbons

Although the design of the ribbons varies throughout the film, their color remains fairly consistent. I made this decision in order to highlight the fact that the ribbons, which represent thoughts, do not necessarily change in terms of content. Instead, the interactions and relationship between the character and ribbons are emphasized. This reinforces the symbolic nature of the ribbons: if the ribbons represent distracting thoughts, then people can address their relationship with them, rather than trying to cast them aside.

To portray a direct relationship between the character and the ribbons, both her attitude and actions affect the ribbons’ behavior. Earlier in the film, we see the ribbons’ previous form: literal animated words, swirling around like a swarm of bees. The ribbon becomes the tangible representation of those, amounting to the character’s external physical obstacle in an internal world. After she accepts that part of herself, the relationship between the two of them changes.

The design of the ribbons does not vary as much as the character, but there are differences between how they behave in the Fight and Transformation Sequences. Their shape, line quality and curves, movement, and composition are all significant. During a
particularly intense part of the fight Sequence, in which the character delivers a harsh blow to the ribbons, they react by becoming hard and angular (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Contrast of ribbon design in the Fight Sequence and Transformation Sequence

Their presence in the frame becomes overwhelming, as they threateningly approach and bind the character. In contrast, they are animated as smooth and flowing during the Transformation (Figure 25). Harsh angles and tension are replaced with rounded curves as the ribbons encircle the character. Lines are drawn less choppy and disconnected. The speed at which they move directly mirrors the character’s speed; their presence in the frame, in relation to the character, becomes balanced. Like the character, they move rhythmically, slowly and freely.

Compositing

The space the character inhabits symbolizes the vast expanse of her inner mind: a physical manifestation of her emotional state, and a somewhat unclearly defined space that is subject to change. The goal was to emphasize just how immense and interminable the space is, and how both the character and ribbons inhabit it.

I started experimenting with ribbon shapes and characters in 3D. Working this way allowed me to see a 3D physical model of my character in a workable space, as well
as 3D ribbons; I could manipulate both of these in real-time. By working in a 3D space, I realized the number of different ways the character and ribbons could interact with each other in deep space, and the role the camera could play in revealing this space in that process.

Tests included utilization of different camera movements and angles, while cutting together a video with each version. In creating these versions, I was searching for the best possible choreography for the scene, by combining different shots. By rendering the character and ribbons out as different layers, and taking advantage of video editing tools, I was eventually able to create many different versions (Figure 26). My goal was to create many tests quickly so I would have a multitude of material to work with. Through trial and error, and the combination of tests, the movement became much closer to what I originally envisioned.

![Figure 26. 3D animation of character and ribbons, shot at different angles](image)

**2D Camera**

In addition to using a 3D camera in virtual space, the utilization of the 2D “camera” is invaluable. Unlike in 3D programs, 2D animation has no virtual camera that
can be moved around in 3D space. Each element is drawn into the frame. Audiences see animated characters and environments from different angles, positions, and perspectives based on how these are drawn. 2D digital software allows further camera usage, as the animation can be imported on several layers and then manipulated. I employed this in my film, by importing character animation, ribbon animation, and backgrounds on three separate layers. This way, I could manipulate each part of the animation separately and edit easily.

Once the Transformation Sequence begins, I create a composition in which the ribbons take up less space in the frame. Because there is more space for the character to inhabit, she no longer appears to be suffocated and trapped. This contrasts with earlier scenes, in which she is completely immobilized by the ribbons. The camera moves slowly, and shots are generally longer than before. There are fewer cuts between shots, which slows the pacing considerably. Using a crossfade, (Figure 27) or having the first shot blend into the next, lengthens and softens each transition. I make use of this in each shot of the Transformation Sequence.

Figure 27. Example of a crossfade transition from one shot to another
All of these animation techniques have allowed me to explore the inner workings of the character’s mind through the external visuals.

Music

Music and sound design are important, in that they both reinforce and enhance the overall feeling of the animated film. I have a musical background, and functioned as role of director in working with a composer, Billy Cory. This experience afforded me insight into the process of composing a film. To collaborate, Billy and I began a conversation about the meaning of each Sequence, and how those could be reflected through music and sound effects. We began by defining the “magical moments” in the film.

There are a few 'magical moments'- the first is at around 01:07, during her first meditation attempt. At this point reality and the dream/’inside the head' portion show hints of becoming fluid- once it's colored the colors will change a little, and the words/letters that appear when she is fidgeting unbalance the floor and send her falling- until she 'wakes up back into reality (around 01:34).

When I gave Billy this note, I thought about music that would reflect the character’s increasing frustration until she falls off the edge of the screen. As the shot goes on, the music gradually builds in volume. Discordant notes and chords reflect the building tension. The music also becomes a little faster throughout the shot, mirroring the character’s restless actions as she is unable to sit still. In general, an ethereal feeling is present, and the music foreshadows the Fight Sequence. As the words fall onto the ground, little percussive sounds happen. This serves to increase the tension, as these gradually increase as more and more words appear. This is the first instance in which the
music shows hints of a real presence, rather than being a background element, because it is the first time inner thought elements appear.

The second ‘magic moment’ is at around 02:03, where the letters start 'swarming' around her head- this is when reality becomes more fluid/is the transition between showing reality and what's going on inside her head. The atmosphere changes here from the classroom to the spacious/black space we see a few shots later.

Music might be more subtle at this point/sfx would be some kind of wind/ethereal foreboding sound.

During this part, sound reflects the transition from an external to an internal environment. Once again, the melody is discordant, reflecting the character’s inner frustration. There is also one echoing chord that plays continually, which contributes to the ethereal feeling of the scene. Music is at the forefront, rather than being a background element. When words appear, their sound is reminiscent of a swarm of bees, but not so loud that it becomes distracting. As the words morph into the ribbons, they make hissing, whooshing sounds. The space of the internal environment is suggested through the various air and wind noises, signifying vastness and depth. Both the music and sound effects are foreboding.

The third ‘magic moment’ would be at around 03:10, when she breathes and the ribbons start to loosen around her. This is important because it signifies the change in her approach, and this leads into the Sequence of her moving in harmony with the ribbons.

During this section, the music transitions from the end of the Fight Sequence to the beginning of the Transformation Sequence. It starts out quietly, as if waiting for the character to fully commit to her decision about how she will interact with the ribbons.
Music is no longer discordant, but still has an unearthly, otherworldly feeling. Nearing the end of this scene, an Asian flute melody begins. This fits because the character performs tai-chi poses as she moves in harmony with the ribbons. Ribbon sounds are still airy and swish as they flow through the environment, but the sound is softer than before.

Discussing the meaning of each section added clarification to the music choices. Billy Cory developed a soundtrack that reinforced the film’s overall feel, as well as reflecting specific, important events. I believe that the composition enhanced the film’s overall quality.

Support: Story

In addition to music, I received help with other aspects of the film as well, one being the story. Having my intended meaning come across clearly through the story was incredibly important. I received helpful feedback from my advisor, peers and family. Filmmaking is such an engaging process that it can be difficult for me to evaluate whether the work is communicating my intent. A pair of fresh eyes can help enormously, and I received a number of helpful suggestions.

When Steve Martino (Blue Sky Studios) and Craig Schulz (son of Peanuts creator Charles Schulz) came to ACCAD in November 2015 to present “The Peanuts Movie,” I was able to show them my work in progress. They brought up a number of story points I could improve upon. One issue involved the crux of the story itself. Steve mentioned that the main character seemed like a rebel, and her conflict involved fighting against conformity. He saw this in this earlier version, in which I had animated the teacher walking up to and looking down upon her disapprovingly. She looks intimidated by both
him and the other students in the class. This led Steve to the conclusion that the fight against the ribbons was a fight against conformity.

Another problem involved the main character’s hesitance to meditate. In another early scene, I animated the character begrudgingly engage in a meditative pose after the teacher walks up to her. Steve and Craig both mentioned that this suggested the character is only meditating because she is required to. This was supposed to showcase a lack in confidence, but it only added to the conformity story. Although individualism vs. conformity is a significant theme, it was not the one I meant as the focus of the story and character’s intent.

The ribbons represent distracting, intrusive thoughts that disturb one’s sense of inner peace, most often occurring in situations that require focus and attention. The character’s conflict lies in trying to completely eradicate these thoughts, which is represented by her fight with the ribbons. Ultimately, she comes to the realization that she can achieve a state of harmony even if those thoughts are present. This is the main theme of the film. The conflict is an internal one, not meant to illustrate the character vs. others. The fact that it wasn’t coming across meant that the story needed clarification.

One solution to redirecting the intent to the original theme was to add clarity to the character’s incentive. Instead of being motivated by the teacher, or students, the desire to meditate should be self-directed. I created new storyboards in which the character clearly wants to meditate (Figure 28). The drawings illustrate her looking back and forth between the students and teacher. Afterwards, she looks discouraged, and then determined. This precedes her first meditation attempt. I cut scenes that depicted outward
interactions between the character and the teacher that may have influenced the story’s events.

Figure 28. New storyboards for both the Reality and Transformation Sequences

They do affect her, in that her insecurities rise to the surface when she looks back and forth between the teacher and students, but the conflict is entirely internal. The decision to meditate is hers alone. Showing the character’s intent through drawings helped add clarity. I changed the character’s body language and facial expressions to reflect her internal conflict. At several points she looks discouraged and frustrated, but I also draw her as determined and willful. Balancing these different characteristics helped in portraying the idea that the character’s lack of confidence is what holds her back, rather than external circumstances.

The process of making a film is a long one. Each stage of production requires hours of time and dedication. It is helpful to reflect on the process as a whole. A number of questions come to mind, including the question of whether or not I was successful in portraying self-discovery through animation. I also think about what my next steps will
be, and how I want to continue my career. I feel that if my work affects anyone in a positive way, I will have been successful.
Reflections

My work has to mean something to me. Through “Awake,” I was given the chance to make an animated film about subject matter I find important. I can really appreciate this, as it helped me realize that I enjoy the entire process. Working on an animated film, and seeing it through to the end, is fundamentally rewarding. For me, the process of creating work is about self-expression through visual means. It is also about communicating an idea so that it comes across clearly, making use of animation as its own unique medium for self-expression. I set out to create a film containing these qualities, as well as clearly conveying its idea to the audience.

The process of creating “Awake” was an incredible learning experience for me. I gained increased awareness and appreciation of each decision that goes into making an animated film. The process forced me to examine each of my artistic choices and really ask, “Why am I making this decision?” and “Do the choices I make support the fundamental idea of my film?” Analyzing my work in this way afforded me crucial insight to the filmmaking process, from start to finish. Making this project also helped me realize the potential of animation in relaying personal stories.

I remember struggling with the question, “why use animation to portray a particular subject?” Or, what makes it the medium of choice for expression in my work? I believe that the visual possibilities inherent in animation have the potential to be abstract and communicative in ways that other mediums may not necessarily reach. I’ve discussed
the power of the animated film, particularly short films, in that they can relay important ideas to large audiences in a relatively short amount of time. The difference between animation and live-action in that regard rests with the animator’s use of creative visuals.

In “Awake,” I carefully considered the visual impact and meaning of each scene. The visuals are meant to reflect the character’s inner thought processes, and they change accordingly. When the intended feeling of a scene is tense and fast paced, the lines and colors of the character and ribbons reflect that by being disjointed and bright; when the intended feeling is slow and relaxed, the lines and colors are connected and softened. Working on “Awake” was actually my second experience using this type of visual communication.

Working with these visuals was a learning experience in and of itself, building upon my previous film, “Limitless.” Creating “Limitless” was my first experience in both expressing a tenet of self-discovery, stepping out of one’s comfort zone, as well as really thinking about visuals and how they help represent subject matter. It was also my first time really pushing the visuals in terms of color. Where “Awake and “Limitless” differ is not only in the portrayal of a self-discovery experience, but also in the scope of the visuals. “Limitless” had a simpler visual style, and the depth of the environment was not heavily emphasized. In “Awake,” I pushed my visuals even further by employing different brushstrokes, methods of coloring, and a sense of environmental depth.

Working on “Awake’s” visuals meant that I really had to step outside my comfort zone and employ techniques I was unfamiliar with. I cleaned up and colored the animation in Photoshop because that program supported my intended aesthetic choices. I
was also able to employ paintbrush textures for the first time. As a result, “Awake” looks more painterly throughout and it is easier to see the “artist’s hand.”

I had a lot of support throughout the creation of my film. My sister, Shari Ross, is an extremely talented illustrator. Throughout my thesis, she has helped me on numerous occasions. As a result of this, my knowledge of Photoshop as a coloring tool has increased substantially. She contributed to the Reality section by providing backgrounds for the class setting, as well as coloring my cleaned up animation. She also helped me decide how best to clean up the animation in Photoshop, by choosing between different brushes and colors. My advisor, Maria Palazzi, as well as a number of friends and family, have also helped me enormously, which I expand upon in the Acknowledgements.

Cleaning up animation in Photoshop was not the only new experience throughout the process. During spring of 2016, I was offered the opportunity to teach animation at my alma mater, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. By taking the opportunity, I left OSU for the semester and finished my thesis work in summer of 2016, rather than spring. This was an incredibly valuable experience. Teaching afforded me yet another chance to push myself in trying something both new and intimidating. Several realizations occurred during my experience. I found that I really enjoy helping people on their journey to becoming animators. I learned that a good teacher exudes confidence, and that this quality comes in time. I realized that I do enjoy teaching, but for the time being, I am choosing to pursue a job in the industry. I feel that this part of my career will be valuable, and I won’t know how I truly feel about it until I really gain some experience. One thing that remains constant, whether or not I’m working in the industry or teaching, is that I want to continue making my own work.
Creating “Awake” reinforced my belief in animation’s power to be impactful. I think about animated films I’ve watched and how they affected and inspired me over the years. I want to create work that has an impact. The stories I am interested in telling are ones that are personal to me, and ones that can hopefully impart a feeling onto the audience. I learned about the importance of universal themes, and how these can reach and affect many. Through my own personal experience, animation has the power to inspire both introspection and powerful feelings. I want to continue making independent animated films, in the hope that they can affect others as animation has affected me.

Upon finishing my film, I reflect upon several questions.

1) How successful do you think you were in portraying self-discovery through animation?

It’s hard for me to say with certainty, but I believe that my film does a number of things well. I worked hard in creating a tangible story, as well as creating visuals that further support my ideas. Working on a film is such an intimate process that it becomes difficult to look at it objectively. So far, everyone I have shown the film to has reacted positively. They’ve grasped the meaning behind the film, and enjoyed watching it. I believe I will have a clearer answer to this question once I can show the film to more people. As of now, I do think that my film’s portrayal of a self-discovery experience comes across through the visuals.

2) What are some strengths and weaknesses of your film?

Several strengths of the film include the clarity by which my ideas come across, as well as my use of line and color. As mentioned previously, I really pushed myself in terms of the visuals. I also believe that the music does well in reflecting the surrounding
visuals. I think I’ve created an appealing character, whose emotions are readable through the body language and facial expressions.

One weakness I notice is that at certain points, the animation itself could be improved. There are several spots, notably shots 4 and 10, in which the animation looks a little stiff. Although I worked really hard on the visuals, I believe that with a greater knowledge of Photoshop and 2D animation software in general, I could push them even further. I realize that it can be difficult to know when a shot is fully finished, and when to move on to the next one.

3) What did you learn from this experience?
I learned that I am capable of making films that convey meaningful messages. I also realized that I am definitely more of a visual than a verbal thinker. Writing is not unbearably difficult for me, but I had to work really hard to find the right words in analyzing my filmmaking decisions. I learned, overall, to be more aware, reflective and analytical of my choices. Creating this film reinforced my beliefs about the power of animation in expressing important ideas. Realizing my capabilities also relates back to the theme of “Awake,” similar to my experience in Israel and my time teaching at Edinboro. The aspects I enjoyed most about this project were in designing the story and anything that involved the actual drawing of the character. I realize I still have a lot to learn, and am interested in improving myself as an animator.

4) What are your next steps?
My plan after graduation is to enter my film in animation festivals, and apply to studio positions. The ones I am most interested in are character design or storyboarding at studios that produce television cartoons, such as Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon. I
have been following the latest work of these studios, and their animation explores engaging, profound themes with an overwhelming amount of creativity. I plan on applying to jobs all over the country as well.

I also plan on building up my portfolio, which is in need of more pre-production work. Although I realized that working on story elements interests me most of all, I am still interested in animating. I will continue to produce independent animation, as well as adding new character designs and storyboards. I plan on becoming better acquainted with 2D software so I can continue to improve my visuals. I don’t have a specific idea for my next animated project, but I am excited to start thinking about it.

I believe that if I continue to be truly passionate about personal projects and create them with time, dedication, and care, I will be able to affect someone positively. Maybe even a number of people. Making animation work is about communicating an idea as much as it is about communicating a feeling, or experience. In the end, I wish to continue using animation as a vehicle for self-expression. I can only hope that it will be affecting to others, in the way that animation has affected me.
Works Cited


