

OVERDOSE:

Constructing Television from the Cracks in the Superhero Content Conglomerate

A Thesis

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Abstract

Overdose is a TV show about reacting to one's reality when ingrained expectations stray wildly from what we anticipate. However, if we are getting technical, it is about a twenty-year-old kid named Auggie who gets superpowers when under the influence of narcotics. Auggie, a morally straight and stubbornly innocent young man, faces a moral struggle between clinging to his virtues and helping those in need. On top of this, his world of superpowers is flipped on its head when other meta-humans surface with comically specific and useless powers.

Overdose takes inspiration from a wide variety of movies, shows, and comic books with the aim to subvert the superhero genre in a way that has not been done before. Using complex themes, new ideas, and a power dynamic of a superpowered world yet to be seen, *Overdose* takes aim at the preceding legacy of the superhero content conglomerate.

Introduction

Overdose represents much more than the development of filmmaking skills and capabilities over a four-year college career. From project to project, a creator learns, gains experience, and approaches each new idea with a more advanced point of view than before. In this way, I have studied, practiced, and obsessed over writing and directing for film and television for the past six years of my life. I have picked up a significant number of tricks, developed my craft, and revolutionized my approach to media as a whole. From tutorial to tutorial, I chose new aspects of my skillset to hone, tackled increasingly difficult projects, and gained remarkable experience that changed my outlook on writing and directing. It is easy to look at past works and compare them to this thesis to showcase growth in visual quality and technical acuity; however, I view *Overdose* not as a look into the past that symbolizes development of skills and editing software learned but rather a representation of the type of filmmaker I am, the work ethic I possess, and the creative voice I now bring to the table as a result of my time in the Honors Tutorial College and Ohio University.

Through all my scholastic endeavors, which usually took the shape of writing scripts and directing short films, my unique voice as a filmmaker continually developed. Of course, with each new project I gained skill in the technical aspects of filmmaking: operating different cameras, working in advanced editing software, learning VFX and CGI, color grading, etc. However, looking back at these projects, in one way or another, I find now that it was all leading towards developing my voice to write, produce, and direct *Overdose*, the piece of work most representative of who I am and what I do.

Subverting Genre

In today's climate of ever-increasing demand for media content, new voices are gaining opportunities at a rate never seen before in the television and film industry. With the rise of the streaming service, the rapid uptick in production houses, and the never-ending increase in YouTube channels comes a wealth of opportunity ripe for new writers, directors, cinematographers, and content creators. The call for content has truly never been as high, and it continues to grow drastically by the day. However, as demand increases, so too does competition between those producing new content. Netflix wants to have higher numbers than Amazon who wants to have higher numbers than Hulu and so on. This is where unique content has become an essentially priceless commodity. The problem, especially with writers and directors trying to make a name for themselves, is that the only way to get in on the action is to create *very* unique content. Students coming right out of film school often sample from the same pool of influences, as they worship at the cross of *Citizen Kane* and anything either in black in white or vaguely connected to Stanley Kubrick. It is natural to draw from one's favorite projects in their own work – in fact, you should.

However, at a certain point, a filmmaker trying to make a name for themselves must stray from those influences in one way or another. What I have found with my own work is that, privy to it or not, I always attempt to subvert genre to create something unique. A horror movie features a horrifying serial killer, but the actor playing him has no capacity for horror. A home invader attempts to navigate a house but is far-too consumed by the stellar interior design to accomplish the task at hand. Two wizards face off in an epic duel, but as neither have arms, they hold their wands between their toes.

This trait of subverting genre has always found its way into my filmography, but it displays itself most prominently in the foundation of *Overdose*.

Living in a post-*Avengers: Endgame* (2019) world, we are a culture drowning in superhero content. As Marvel Studios has proven, people will pay top dollar for movies and television that fall underneath the superhero umbrella. However, as an increasing number of studios greenlight superhero projects, a good amount of the public grows increasingly tired of them: “I think we’re all a little overwhelmed. We love our comic book heroes and really do want to enjoy these films, but it’s become quite clear that they’re being made for money and to satisfy audiences outside the U.S.” (Ulanoff, 2015). The market for superhero content that in one way, shape, or form subverts the genre is at an all-time high. This is where shows like Amazon Prime’s *The Boys* (2018-) have found success. As ScreenRant’s Craig Elvy writes, “There’s plenty to enjoy about mainstream superhero productions, but the saturation of the market has created a demand for alternatives” (Elvy, 2020). *The Boys* seemingly parodies the standard archetypal model of superheroes established by Marvel and DC by viewing these heroes through a power-hungry corporate system that breeds arrogant, self-obsessed superhumans that do not hesitate to do anything for their own sake.

Similarly, this is where *Overdose* establishes itself. As an avid fan of superheroes since childhood, I always wanted to create something in that world. Over time, I became more partial to darker stories of my favorite heroes like *Kraven’s Last Hunt* (DeMatteis & Zeck, 1987) and *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* (Claremont, 1982). These stories took fan favorite characters accustomed to bright, highly saturated costumes and family-friendly morals and introduced them to worlds and situations that introduced themes that

felt deeper and more grounded in realism. The bridge between the world of superheroes and our own reality, in a strange way, became shorter in these stories. In a similar way, shows like Amazon's *Invincible* (2021-) have found success given their dark realism: "There is no plot armor: superheroes die and are regularly hospitalized" (Sanchez, 2021). This darker sensibility is what heavily influenced *Overdose* in its conception. Well, that and my writing partner's and my usual ridiculous, goofy ideas.

We wanted to find any excuse to make a superhero film, and given my writing partner Casey Antonides' acting skills, we wanted to base the story around what kind of hero he would be: a horrible one. One night in the Fall of 2018, we joked that he would be the type of hero to play video games instead of patrol the streets, the type to get arrested for drug use and end up on the wrong side of the law more times than not.

Maybe he even got his powers from doing something illegal. The idea seemed to write

itself as we continued to joke back and forth about this terrible superhero. What if his powers were from smoking marijuana? What if different drugs gave him different powers? What if other superheroes in his world had useless abilities like starting cars with their mind or levitating only an inch off the ground?

However, what started off as a comedy about a superhero parents use to show their children what not to be quickly changed

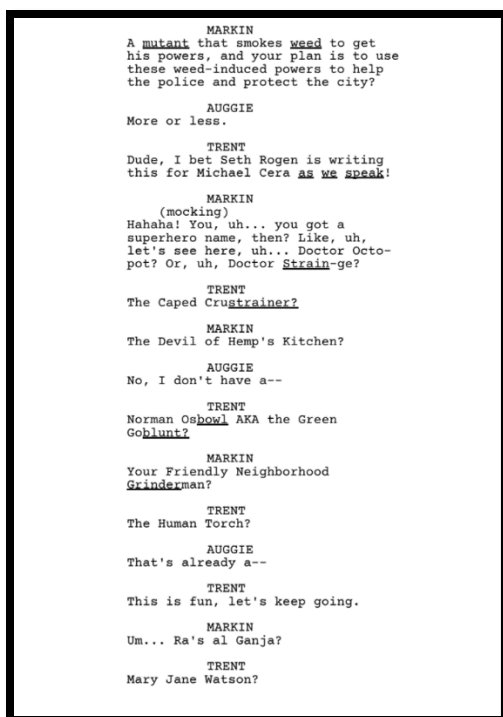


Figure 1: Excerpt from first page written.

shape. That Spring, I decided to write a scene of this show (Figure 1). The scene showed our main character in the back of a police cruiser as he attempted to convince two police officers that he was a superhero who gets powers from smoking marijuana. The two officers, not believing him, begin to rattle off superhero names with narcotic-inspired twists to them while the main character gets frustrated. Casey and I continued to workshop the idea between ourselves throughout that semester.

During this time, I realized that we were sitting on a phenomenally deep and thematically complex story yet treating it like a Seth Rogen stoner comedy. As someone who has never done drugs before, I started to imagine myself as Auggie, our main character. What would *I* do if I had his powers? Would I start doing drugs? What would that do to my psyche? Suddenly, the story opened up. Moral quandaries popped up at every corner of the show's concept. If Auggie, like me, is morally against drug use, is he doing a disservice to those he could help by accessing superhuman abilities? What if Auggie also has a strong virtue rooted in helping others - a "with great power comes great responsibility" virtue? How does a superhero like this present himself to the world?

This was the show. Rather than focus on a hero who gets high every day and embodies the opposite of your dutiful Spider-Man and Captain America archetypes, it was to follow someone who wanted to be like those heroes but was given circumstances that worked against that motivation. It subverted genre, spoke to me on a personal level, and seemingly wrote itself as new ideas bred new storylines, themes, and character arcs. Not only did the main concept of the show become significantly more interesting with that one decision, but the world around it followed suit. With Casey's and I's bias towards grounded superhero content, I pitched that other superpowered individuals in this

world have grounded abilities. However, I did not mean grounded compared to that of Marvel and DC heroes; I meant as grounded as possible.

I always took note of the ignorance audiences show toward superpowers and the leaps in logic that we as viewers mindlessly take before accepting the world and characters we are introduced to. Spider-Man was bitten by a radioactive spider and gained heightened senses, physical prowess, and the ability to stick to walls. For some reason, though, I have always thought it was all too convenient that he would just be sticky on his fingertips and toes: the only areas you would want that ability to be present. What if he was also sticky on his sides? What if he was *only* sticky on his sides and had to roll up walls? This kind of thinking applies to every mainstream hero, and so I pitched to Casey that the power system of the meta-humans in *Overdose* take this idea to heart. In the X-Men franchise, the heroes are called mutants as their powers originate from mutated genes. While I appreciate the scientific explanation for this group of superpowered beings, the scientist in me cannot help but focus on the gap in logic that originates from the fact that genetic mutation is an occurrence filled from top to bottom with randomness. A genetic mutation can quite literally result in anything, so it bothers me that the X-Men always gain very powerful and useful powers from a process so prone to random deviation.

That would not be the case for our show. We wanted to establish genetic mutation as the cause of our characters' powers given its foundation in a real biological occurrence, but unlike the X-Men, this would not result in useful abilities. On the contrary, we established the thinking that, if genetic mutation caused the existence of super-powered individuals, 99.9% of those individuals would gain abilities either

incredibly inconvenient or completely useless. Examples of this can be seen in an excerpt from the series show bible (Figure 2).

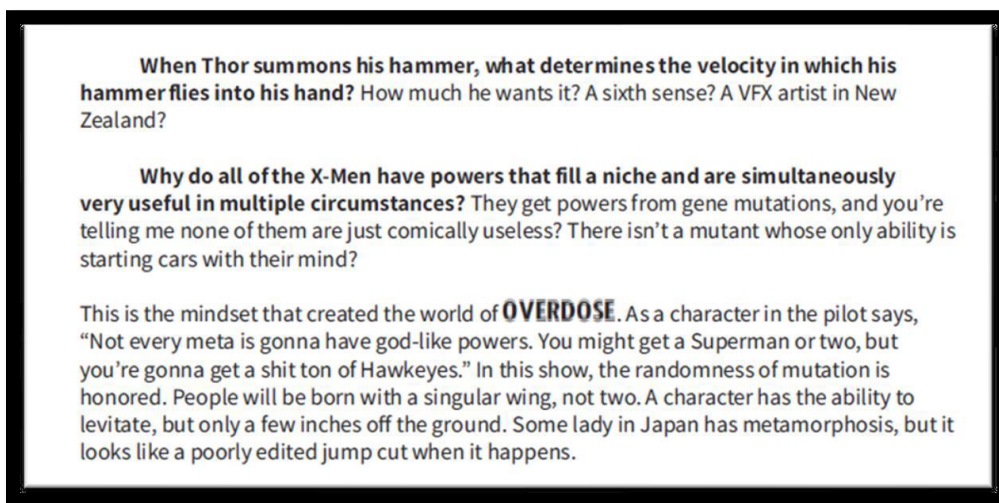


Figure 2: Excerpt from *Overdose Show Bible*

And, with that, we found the unique quality that sets *Overdose* in the same conversation as *The Boys*, *Deadpool*, and *Invincible* as pieces of media with unique angles that subvert the superhero genre. No other superhero stories deal with an entire world of comically useless heroes. Casey and I have never seen that story told, and while it is a funny concept, it would be take on an incredibly unique complexion when told through the lens of our complex protagonist. With those two big ideas, I knew that this show encapsulated everything I looked for in a project and more. Not only would this be a fun story to write and direct, but something about it felt special.

and our world in this visceral, unromantic setting to add to the realism of the story elements that align with similarly dark, realistic shows like *The Boys* and *Invincible*.

After a few weeks of in depth discussion about the tone, style, characters, and inspirations for the show, Casey and I had a wall covered top to bottom in post-it notes and index cards with character backstories, random ideas, future plans, reminders, and everything in between (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Wall with final story outline.

After studying the story beats of our main structural inspiration for the series, *Marvel's Daredevil*, Casey and I broke the episode. This means we figured out each story beat with the main details regarding each scene and what we had to accomplish within them. The plot of the episode was to follow Auggie and his best friend Stewart as they try to get the local police force to acknowledge Auggie as a vigilante helpful to the city. This does not go according to plan, and Auggie is forced to confront the limitations and

quandaries that come with his power while also adjusting his mindset to his reality upon meeting another meta-human with the ability to start cars with his mind. Along the way, the audience learns a bit about Auggie's backstory, shedding light on why he is so morally set in his ways as well as his true motivation. Our strong influences in the episode included:

- ***Arrested Development*** (2003-2019); we utilized their tendency to use wordplay and miscommunications to drive the conflict. "Misunderstanding, of course, is basic comedy, and the essential ingredient to farce, which, for all its heady intricacy, is essentially how to classify *Arrested Development*" (Berry, 2013). Many have noted over the years how the structure, plot, and story of *Arrested Development* is all built upon basic miscommunications. Similarly, I utilized this technique to drive the plot of the pilot when Auggie and Stewart hear the dispatch claim that the assailants are wearing all black before a coughing fit interrupts the call. Shortly after Auggie and Stewart leave, however, the dispatch comes back on to finish their sentence, which was supposed to say that the assailants are wearing all black *masks*. This not only drives the plot in that Auggie gets into a fight with the wrong people while thinking he is being a hero, but it also reinforces the side of Auggie that is wildly underprepared for being a vigilante.
- ***Barry*** (2018-); this show is one of the few that balances a good amount of comedy with a more dramatic overarching tone. As Washington Post's Hank Stuever writes, "*Barry* is rich in all things – crime, violence, Hollywood satire –

and its story moves swiftly along with a nail-biting degree of tension, sort of a *Breaking Bad* with 15 items or less” (Stuever, 2018). In the same way, we wanted to market *Overdose* as a comedy while still including very prominent elements of drama and tension.

- ***Deadpool*** (2016); this movie subverted the superhero genre with a largely comedic protagonist who references other world of superheroes. “There are jokes about failed would-be superhero franchise *The Green Lantern* – in which Ryan Reynolds, our antihero in *Deadpool*, starred – and there are jokes about Hugh Jackman, as well as jokes about the X-Men” (Newbury Today, 2016). The self-aware jabs at the production and cast was a refreshing take on the genre that I love and wanted to implement in various ways. For instance, in the late second act of *Overdose*, I reference the true identity of what the show currently is by having a character, who is believed to be insane, explain that this is all just a college student’s TV show. We also refer to a series of other culturally-iconic superheroes not only for well-known examples to aid our exposition but to poke fun at the ridiculousness of those heroes’ core concepts.

- ***The Dark Knight*** (2008); we utilized Christopher Nolan’s method of crosscutting for a key sequence late in the episode. As Meg Shields phrases it in her article on Christopher Nolan’s crosscutting technique, the method allows a filmmaker to juggle “disparate plots without losing the thread” (Shields, 2020). In the same way, I wanted to get the audience ready for the final set piece, visit our police

officers, and mostly, I needed to lay out the three big plot twists of the pilot all within the same sequence. By utilizing the crosscutting form of storytelling, the scene was not only successful in laying out these plot points and story beats, but it does so in a way that crescendos into the final set piece all in a time effective manner.

- ***Marvel's Daredevil*** (2015-2018); both a tonal and structural template for *Overdose*, this show was the main influence for all but the comedic style. From the cinematography to the way fight scenes gave characters lasting injuries, this was the key inspiration for the series. Even after Auggie's big fight scene, I made it a point to have his makeup reflect serious, slow-healing injuries on his face to reinforce the realism of his world much like they do in *Marvel's Daredevil*.
- ***Rick and Morty*** (2013-); several jokes were written in the style of this animated comedy. Often, creators Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland will name their characters with what could be perceived as the laziest, most cliched names possible for their genre or circumstance; however, that is the joke. Casey implemented this style of comedy in several moments of the dialogue, such as naming Trent and Markin's younger, better-looking counterparts Skent and Blarkin.

Over the next few months I penned the script for the episode with Professor Williams' guidance and Casey's notes on each draft. After cutting the initial draft from

forty-six pages down to thirty-two, we had a script that Casey, Professor Williams, and I were all incredibly proud of. The script went through a few more light revisions the following semester as I worked on other projects, but preparations to shoot the pilot script had begun.

Producing Overdose

Early Approval

Before the Spring semester ended, I was already drawing early storyboards and taking director's notes on the script knowing that I would shoot it for my thesis. Through a connection of mine, I was able to get the script in the hands of a few production companies, even getting attention from Netflix. I prepared the show bible, touched up the script, and started to get a full pitch ready before COVID-19 forced the country into quarantine. Everything came to a halt, but I continued storyboarding. Knowing that the concept and script were high enough quality to get the attention of the best production companies, my goal quickly shifted from showcasing how I had grown as a filmmaker over my college career to producing *Overdose* in the hopes of selling the show (or the script) and either becoming a showrunner or being hired for my work on the project. As important as completing my thesis was, the project became more significant than even that. From that point on, I worked nonstop.

I created a director's reel to showcase the best of my past work. I began storyboarding every day, taking notes on the script as if I was not the writer, shooting demo scenes to feel out sequences, revising lines and scenes in the script, and planning my entire year so I could focus on this project. As soon as I returned to campus, I started

assembling my crew with friends and colleagues I had worked with before and trusted. I purchased my very first camera (a Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Camera 4k). I started acquiring more and more equipment and took paid commercial jobs wherever I could to put more money toward the show. I was working almost around the clock to produce the pilot while editing several projects simultaneously. Productivity was at an all-time high, and sleep was at an all-time low.

The first few months of Fall 2020 were filled with charts comprised of prop lists, set decoration, crew lists, and character lists. I had constant zoom meetings with my assistant director and unit production manager to get everything in order as I started casting and fundraising. Slowly, I started to get a better picture of each aspect of the production: how much props would cost, how many actors I needed, where we could film given scenes, etc.

Holding Auditions During a Pandemic

In early September, I finally put out a casting call for *Overdose* on Backstage.com. As this was my first time casting legitimate actors, I did not know what to expect. In fact, looking back at the budget I had at that point in time, I was incredibly over-ambitious trying to cast as many actors as I was. The morning after putting out the casting call, I had eleven emails from actors interested in various roles. I was thrilled. Eleven responses overnight was more than I could have hoped for. Then, I logged on to the website.

It turns out that Backstage only emails casting managers for a small portion of the responses a casting call receives. Once I logged in to check the casting call that morning,

I found not eleven but over one-hundred-and-forty responses to the project overnight. After the first week, that number had grown to around two-hundred-and-fifty. Almost immediately, Casey and I began scheduling our version of auditions with actors. Because of the loose tone I like to strike on my sets, Casey and I elected to treat our auditions like casual conversations with the actors about the script, read some pages with them in a more nonchalant manner, and get to know the actors and actresses as much as we could. I found this to be more comfortable than more formal auditions, especially given the fact that all of our auditions had to take place over video conference because of the pandemic. According to those we met with, this is incredibly unorthodox, but I fully believe this form of auditioning actors was imperative to the chemistry and cohesiveness we ended up with in the cast.

I wrote the roles of Auggie and Stewart based on my relationship with Casey, and I wrote Stewart specifically for Casey. This became incredibly useful during auditions and read-throughs since Casey could read with actors to see if they work well together. If he and another actor clicked over video calls, it meant there was something really good there. We saw around fifteen different actors for Auggie given it was the most important role, and it was absolutely imperative that the actor got along with and could act well against Casey's Stewart. After narrowing our search down to two finalists, we had the actors read with Casey as well as the two actors we ended up casting as officers Trent and Markin in the police cruiser scene (that somehow made it into the final draft of the script). It was clear to us after that read-through that Sean Akyildiz was our Auggie, TJ Karam our Markin, and Lejon Woods our Trent (Figure 5). We had another month of auditions where we cast Mrs. Adams, Irishmen 1-4, Officer Hoy, three child actors, and a

handful of smaller roles.

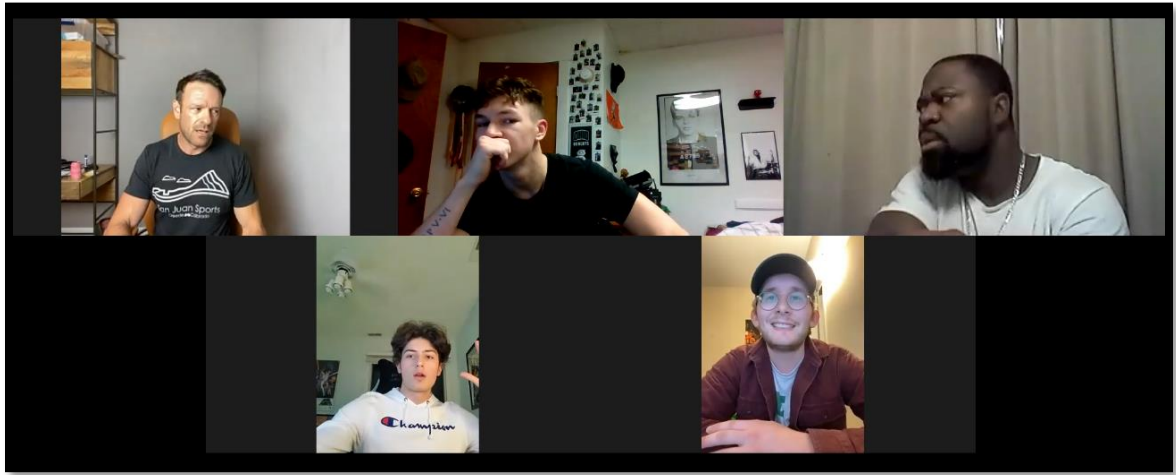


Figure 5: Final Zoom audition for Sean.

The casting process, while long and at times arduous, was incredibly interesting given the remarkable lack of experience Casey and I had working with real actors to this point. Talking with professionals across the country and hearing them praise our script, the show, and our previous work was reassuring that we had something good on our hands. Never before had I seen something of mine come to life like I did on some of those Zoom calls (and never before had I seen it done so horribly on others), and once we had our main cast it was surreal seeing my characters portrayed by people who knew what they were doing and had their own love for the characters.

Once we assembled our main cast, we had a massive table read with everyone except for the very small parts (Figure 6). That was the first time I had heard multiple people read through the script at once, and while there were parts I noted as needing work or some kind of revisions, the read through gave me another sense of reassurance that

what we were making had the legs to be great.

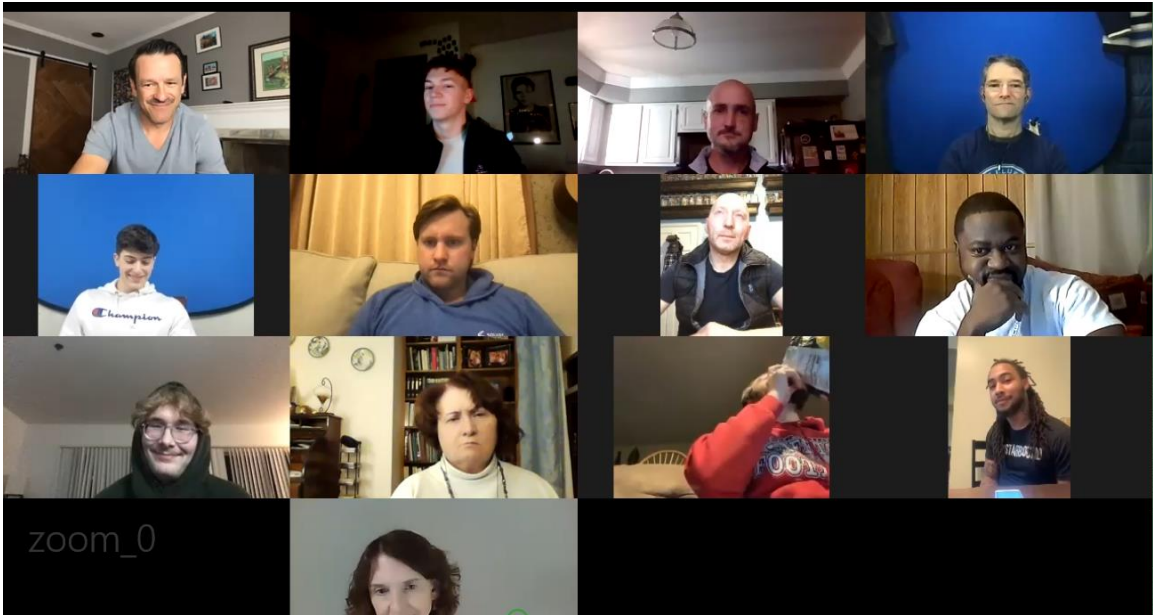


Figure 6: Screenshot of cast read-through.

A Remarkable Budget

Professor Williams, upon hearing that I planned to shoot *Overdose* for my thesis estimated that I would need upwards of \$15,000 to shoot the entire thing. In my head that translated to thinking I needed roughly \$11,000. Regardless, I started raising money any way I could. It was not until I had cast everybody that I realized how much I would truly need to shoot this pilot. With the actors I had cast, most needed hotels, travel, and acting wages. Even with somewhat low acting wages, the seventeen paid actors would set me back \$5,550 plus an additional \$2,910 for travel and lodging given some actors were coming from as far as Texas, Chicago, and Los Angeles. By the time we got to production the budget was the following:

\$5,550 – Acting Wages

\$2,910 – Actor Travel + Lodging

\$2,000 – Equipment Cost

\$1,000 - Food

\$900 – Wardrobe

\$700 – Production Design

\$500 – Props

Total: **\$13,560**

Thankfully, I was the recipient of the David J. Clarke Memorial Scholarship through the Ohio Valley Emmy's worth \$5,000. I also received a \$1,000 grant through the Honors Tutorial College, a \$1,500 grant through the Provost Undergraduate Research Fund, and a \$3,000 grant from Bobcat Seed Fund. On top of this, I put in \$4,500 of my own income made from producing a handful of commercials. My budget became \$15,000 for the pilot which covered our production costs as well as extraneous costs that arose during and after production (e.g. new hard drive, crew travel, and film composer). Never doubt Professor Eric Williams.

The Process

Scripts & Storyboards

One of the most valuable things that I have learned in the last four years is how I best prepare for a shoot and the process that I am most comfortable with. After completing the script as the writer, I give it a few weeks before revisiting the script as the

director. Instead of thinking of the script as a piece of writing, I start to envision everything I read, analyze the characters, plot, themes, sequences, and overall story as if I am giving someone else notes on the script. I usually find pieces of symbolism embedded in the script that I did not intentionally write into the story. It is an incredibly useful system that brings everything out of the script and allows me to find what still needs some revisions.

After this, and, if I get excited, usually a little before, I begin storyboarding. I draw out every single shot of every single page before creating my shot list and shooting. For *Overdose*, I used a software called *Storyboarder* which allows me to create

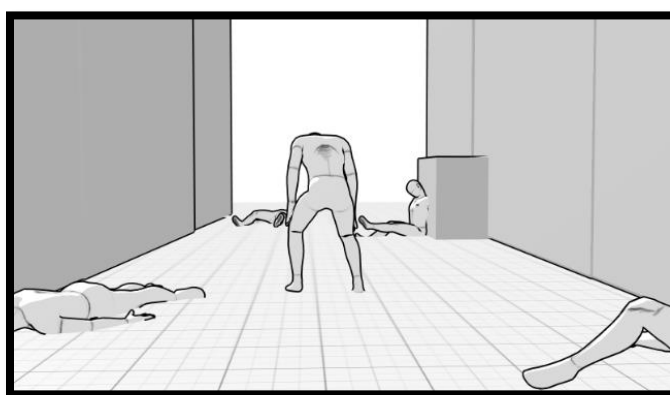


Figure 7: Storyboard of the first shot.

objects and settings in a 3-dimensional space with realistic 3D cameras so I can experiment with blocking, focal lengths, camera moves, and shot angles (Figure 7). Then, I will animate those storyboards and edit them together with audio taken from table reads (or for *Overdose*, I used audio from video calls) to create an animatic. This is essentially a 2-dimensional animated version of the episode that helps me see what sequences work best, shots that need changed, and it occasionally gives me ideas for new lines, moments, or shots, as well. Showing the animatic to cast and crew is also a phenomenal way to translate my vision as the director to everyone that is going to have a hand in making that vision come to life as they can see an accurate representation how I want the episode to flow, look, and feel. I have found that actors will even pick up on the timing and beats

that I have in mind for specific scenes and/or lines that they may have been questioning in rehearsals and read-throughs. With a total of twenty-five scenes in *Overdose* and an average of two hundred storyboards in each, I created approximately 5,000 storyboards that form the animatic.

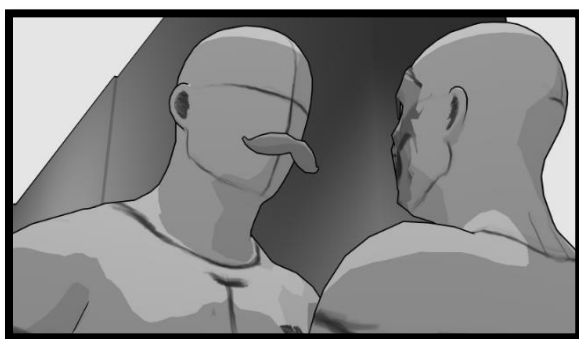


Figure 8: Still image of the first shot.

Usually, in the director's notes I take of the script, I will draw early storyboards up and down the margins for the shots that seem most obvious to me as I read through the lines. Those are always the

first shots that I create digitally as they make

for good keyframes to fill in the shots between moments (as long as I feel confident those “keyframes” are the right shots for the scene). The beauty of *Storyboarder*, though, is that I am able to explore the settings that I model after our true locations as if I am on set with a camera in my hands. That way, if I am unsure about what shots should come next, I can experiment with several, cut them together in the animatic, and find out if it works all before actually shooting anything.



Figure 9: Storyboard of Irishman 1 and Auggie.

Arguably the most significant advantage of this process, in my experience, is how it translates to set. As a director, I am the lead creative decision maker on set. However, the biggest part of the job is thinking quickly when problems arise, shots don't work, or some kind of obstacle is in the way. Most Hollywood productions will pay to have an editor on set to help in these scenarios as they can lend advice on how things might cut together in the edit. However,

Overdose did not have that privilege given that we did not have Hollywood amounts of money and because I am also the editor. That is where the animatic comes into play. After making the



Figure 10: Still image of *Irishman 1* and Auggie

animatic, I have effectively edited the episode together once already, albeit a 2D version of it. If we are running behind on set or a shot is not working, I know exactly where the shot was supposed to end up in the edit, its function, and the shots that fall around it, so I can think quickly and solve the problem without skipping a beat or missing an essential shot for the scene.

The Shoot

Production for *Overdose* began on Thursday, February 18, 2021 in Athens, Ohio. We shot in Athens for five days total. Day one consisted of an interior apartment scene between Stewart and Auggie as well as an interior car scene between the same characters.

There were only a few hiccups mainly surrounding audio equipment not working, but otherwise the day went smoothly. However, our bar location scheduled for the next morning cancelled on us around midnight of day one, only about ten hours before we were supposed to shoot there. My producers went into panic mode, coming up with plans A through E of how we would circumvent this issue. I decided to walk down to The Smiling Skull, a local tavern across from where I park my car, and try my luck. I walked in, talked to the manager, explained what we wanted to do, and we got everything arranged for the next morning. The bar looked beautiful on film, too.

Day two began with the bar scene before transitioning back to the apartment from day one. This was the first scene for Anthony Brazzel, who plays “Jumpstart,” the only other metahuman we encounter in episode one. The most prominent comic relief character, Jumpstart’s entire ability is starting cars with his mind. The joke is that he can only start cars. He cannot turn them off, drive them, or even unlock them. However, he and Casey’s character instantly click with one another and everyone thinks his powers are incredibly awesome, much to Auggie’s chagrin. He is a symbol of the underwhelming reality that Auggie finds himself in. I let Anthony and Casey improvise most of their scene given the natural chemistry between the two and the chaotic dynamic I wanted to establish between their characters.

Later that day was our first experience in the dreaded alleyway set. The plot of episode one begins with a teaser in a sketchy alley using a literary ellipsis that is revisited at the midpoint, giving the audience the full story the second time we see the scene. This means that the alleyway shoot contained elements from scenes at the beginning and middle of the story, so we had a significant amount to shoot. The entire

shoot was broken into two parts to be shot on Friday and Saturday nights from 6:00pm-2:00am on both nights. We were already facing some adversity as an ice storm hit the city of Athens earlier that week, leaving the chosen alleyway completely iced over. Since road salt had been in such high demand around the city, every store ran out of the product, so I spent two hours a night shoveling the alley with a plastic snow shovel, only making enough progress to motivate myself to keep shoveling. Thankfully, the morning of the alleyway shoot, my producer Steph Schille was able to get her hands on some road salt which, in partnership with the work I had put into the alleyway the nights prior, got the brick to a state just safe enough to shoot our big action set piece.

However, the struggle with the alleyway did not stop there. On top of the fifteen-degree weather we faced, technology was not our friend that first night as the follow focus cut in and out. Just when we started to pick up the pace and find our groove, a large, loud food supply truck parked at the top of the alleyway. We could no longer



Figure 11: 2nd AC Devyn Latture and Director Tony Pape filming in the alleyway.

shoot anything in the direction of the truck, and we could no longer shoot anything with usable audio. The morale of the crew was depleted as people began to hide out inside to stay warm. At several points, I had to call out for crew members to join me in the alleyway so we could get any shots possible. Eventually, I grabbed the camera and two crew members, went into the alleyway, and began getting whatever shots I could remember from the animatic (Figure 11). At the end

of the night, I was tired, depleted, I could not feel my extremities, and I knew there was even more work to do the following night in the same alley.

The following morning, I held a meeting with my assistant director and director of photography. Something had to change given the pace we were moving, so we decided to move certain members of the crew to different positions. The time for being overly forgiving was over, and we needed to get efficient. We decided that our director of photography would pull focus from inside while giving lighting cues to our gaffer and grips. Our first assistant camera, usually responsible for pulling focus, would be in charge of switching lenses and charging all batteries. Instead of focusing solely on directing, I would also operate camera from this point on given my experience with a steadicam. After looking through the shot list, my assistant director and I calculated a total of over eighty shots to get between 6:00pm and 2:00am – an overwhelming amount. Our system, while now more efficient, could never be *that* efficient, so I cut around ten-to-fifteen shots (which was much more feasible given the animatic process), and I came up with a system to combine several short sequences into highly efficient, long-running shots to save time. Instead of separating multiple shots in close proximity, I grabbed the camera and filmed all of them in the same take. Ordinarily, this would be an editor's nightmare, but since I am the editor, there was no problem.

That second night in the alley was astronomically smoother and more efficient than the previous because of these adjustments. Morale rose drastically, shots were in focus almost every take (a commodity we had not experienced up to this point), and everyone was operating at a much higher clip. The night was also heightened by the arrival of officers Trent and Markin, played by TJ Karam and Lejon Woods (Figure 12). Two of the main supporting cast, officers Trent and Markin are the police that Auggie encounters in the pilot. After being overlooked time and time again, watching younger cops being promoted over them each year, Trent and Markin are motivated by the depressing careers they are leading. At first, they do not believe Auggie when he tells them about his abilities, even arresting him at the conclusion of the alleyway scene. However, once



Figure 12: Lejon Woods and TJ Karam on set of *Overdose*.

Auggie finds how to prove himself, they see the situation as their opportunity to get promoted. TJ and Lejon were always the two actors everyone was most excited to work with as they had natural chemistry with one another and brought a

hilarious, child-like charm to their characters. Their energy was immediately infectious on set; they kept the mood light, brought a great level of professionalism, and lended fantastic advice to cast and crew when appropriate. We wrapped the night with a handful of shots between TJ, Lejon, and Sean (playing Auggie) that also comprised the first scene we shot with officers Trent and Markin. We wrapped the night around 2:30am.

From this point forward, each day grew increasingly efficient as the crew became comfortable in our workflow, the cast found their voice in their characters, and everyone was having fun working alongside one another. After wrapping our Athens shoot, it was time to travel to Cincinnati for the final three days. Crew positions shifted slightly as some stayed in Athens, but there was no dropoff in efficiency. In fact, the Cincinnati shoot went remarkably smooth compared to that of Athens. Over the course of our three-day shoot in Athens, we shot mainly inside my childhood home. We also shot in a police precinct, a small apartment, a parking garage, and finally a hardware store.

The beginning of our Cincinnati shoot saw the introduction of Auggie's mother played by Mary K. Riestenberg. My thesis advisor Professor Brian Plow and I had long conversations prior to production regarding the character of Mrs. Adams. The truth of Auggie's past that sheds light on his true motivation is very much rooted in Mrs. Adams' character, and when she finds her son talking with two off-duty officers in her living room, her reaction was imperative toward hinting at and shaping Auggie's past and her role in it. In order to accomplish the suspicious uneasiness, I employed a directorial method inspired by the film *American Psycho* (2000). In a particular scene, the director of the film told actor Willem Dafoe to play the scene three times. On the first take, he was told to play the scene as if he had no suspicion of the main character. On the second take, he was to play the scene as if he was suspicious of the main character. On the third take, he played the scene as if he knew of the main character's evil. Then, in the edit, they spliced those three takes together to provide a wildly ambiguous perception of what Dafoe's character knew and felt.

In the same way, I directed Mary K. to play the scene in three ways: one where she was overly jubilant and kind, one where she was slightly uneasy about the officers' presence, and one where she had been listening to the conversation prior to entering. This way, if cut together, my hope was that the audience would be suspicious of Auggie's relationship with his mother as well as her feelings toward police. The result was overall successful, but it turned out more awkward than I imagined. However, there is still a sense of uneasiness between Auggie and his mother that I have found raises questions in the audience just as I intended

(Figure 13). The scene serves its purpose as it is mainly an expositional scene used to explain the relationship between the cops and Auggie going forward, but the



Figure 13: Still image from Overdose's house scene.

inclusion of Mary K's Mrs. Adams not only adds an extra element to the scene, but it is imperative for the backstory we see later in the pilot. On second viewing, the hope is that the clues we reveal with her character take on a new complexion given the information the audience is given with our key plot twists.

For the sake of convenience, we shot a few small scenes just outside of this house the next day. We also went to Forest Park Police Department, my father's workplace, to film a pair of scenes involving Trent, Markin, and Jumpstart as they put him in a holding cell. However, what I did not expect from that set was the fully improvised scenes we ended up shooting while waiting on actors and makeup. I have always encouraged great volumes of improvisation in my work as I find that the best scenes are at times made up

on the spot. That was certainly the case with TJ and Lejon when we found ourselves in an empty firing range (Figure 14). What was supposed to just be a one-line scene in an office suddenly became an improvised scene in a firing range where Markin hits a target everywhere but where he is supposed to but takes great pride in it. The scene is hilarious and turned out to be the perfect intro and outro to one of our most intense, dramatic scenes, essentially bringing the audience back into the lighter world that fills most of *Overdose*.



Figure 14: Still image of Officer Markin.

During the first few days in Cincinnati and into the second day of shooting in the Queen City, I was still hunting for the location of our climactic set piece that concludes our episode. In the script, the scene was written to take place in a Target where our main character works as a security guard. Months prior to filming, I traveled around Cincinnati to various Targets after gaining approval from their media relations at corporate to try

and set up the shoot. After a handful of locations were encouraging, a particular manager was very nervous about the situation and had corporate reverse their decision.

I began cold calling stores across Cincinnati asking if I could film our final scene in the store. After no less than twenty stores, I finally found our location at Woods Hardware. The manager was incredibly receptive to the idea and was highly enthusiastic about the project. He was so enthusiastic, in fact, that once the store closed on the Saturday that we were filming, he handed me the keys and gave us no regulations. That night, I experienced the best set on which I have ever been. We filmed from 5:30pm until 3:00am, covering the first and last scene of the episode. We encountered almost no obstacles apart from one of our child actors dropping out last minute; however, I was able to find another child actor minutes later who was fantastic to work with. The night began with what is, chronologically, the first scene of the plot. We had around twenty extras to fill the store, and we completed the two-page scene in under two hours. The location was key in that we had full reign of the store, and the lighting was so great already that we only had a handful of lighting set ups (Figure 15).

The latter portion of the night, however, was comprised of the finale. Auggie finds himself in a fight with a robber who just happens to have also been in the alleyway fight



Figure 15: Still image from the final scene of *Overdose*.

from earlier. However, this time Auggie is forced into a particularly sticky situation

where he is forced to make a critical decision between his morality and his devotion toward helping others – in particular, those that remind Auggie of his younger, more innocent self. Throughout the script, there are a few running jokes that characters bring up independent of one another. These jokes, though, end up coming true in almost every scenario, a form of irony Casey and I found uniquely funny. This final situation that Auggie finds himself in is the best example of this. I always knew the episode had to end this way, and so it culminates with the entire main cast in the same room. We wrapped everyone in back-to-back shots, and an hour later, we wrapped on our final shot of the pilot.

Conclusion

When I wrote *Overdose*, my goal was to create something that I would be able to point to and say “This is what I do. This is what a Tony Pape TV series looks like.” It has taken a long slew of projects, but over time, as I experimented with preproduction processes, visual styles, shooting styles, workflows, directorial styles, and every method for making films, eventually I found the style in which I work best. When that combined with the voice I discovered during my time with Professor Eric Williams, *Overdose* was the result. I do not view *Overdose* as a representation of development. I view *Overdose* as a representation of who I am as a writer, as a director, and as a man. I read *Overdose* and feel confident that the script is a representation of who I am as a writer. I watch the current cut of the episode and feel confident that the style is one that I have come to sign my name to as a director. I think of the project as a whole and feel confident that I am not only reflected in the creative choices made from start to finish, but also in the work that

went into such a large-scale project. I operated on an average of four-to-five hours of sleep each night of production because I was up the night before shot listing, making last second adjustments, shoveling iced-over alleyways, and putting out fires. A project this big does not occur on its own, and that is where I think I am most proud of what *Overdose* is.

I hope that audiences watch this pilot and not only laugh, become enthralled in the world, and feel moved by the story, but that they see the devotion of an entire team of people that came together during a pandemic to help support one person's vision and voice. I believe that *Overdose* has the potential to cement itself amongst the new wave of media content aimed at subverting genres in unique and complex ways. It is a project truly constructed in the cracks of the superhero content conglomerate, and I believe the market for this show is rising rapidly. My next steps include getting the finished episode to executives, writers, directors, producers, and anyone that will watch it in the hopes of finding a production house that will take on the project. Because of this, and because I see so much of myself in every iota of this project, I poured my blood, sweat, and tears into this, but there is still so much more of this story to be told. While I can sit here and hope that I get the chance to tell it, I know now, having done all this for the pilot, that I am more than capable of working hard enough to make sure of it.

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