



loading...

an autobiographical visual novel

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Introduction



The question “where are you from?” is loaded with meaning. It can come from a genuine curiosity to get to know somebody or from a genuine desire to make small talk, but when it is directed towards an immigrant, there is the connotation that the speaker views you as an outsider. Whenever someone asks me this question and won’t take my current city of residence as an answer, I cheerfully launch into my tedious backstory:

“I’m from New Jersey.

Oh, where did I live before that? Michigan.

Before that? Pennsylvania.

Before that? Georgia,

then Pennsylvania again,

Connecticut,

and, ah, yes, this is what you were looking for, Korea!”

(And, if they absolutely must ask which Korea:

“South. Also, stop talking to me.”)

I’ve had the honor of moving so many times because my dad is a pastor. My family moved from Korea to the United States in the first place for my father to study at divinity school. Every subsequent move has been for his relocation to another church, which has complicated my feelings towards religion since I was old enough to comprehend and think critically about what was happening. My family has moved eight times in the past twenty years, each time an average of 1,200 miles in whatever direction. Migrating across the globe right off the bat significantly skewed the data, so if I only count the moves within the U.S. it was 394 miles every round, which is about a six-hour drive. We moved almost every three years, which was tolerable when I was young and didn’t really understand what was happening, but became painful once I reached adolescence.

My family’s eighth move this past summer rekindled my lifelong geographic dysphoria. This reminder of my mixed feelings on moving inspired me to create a narrative game detailing the experience of relocating many times during my childhood, constantly struggling to find a sense of belonging in a culture or place, and finally resorting to emotional detachment.

Due to my identity as an Asian-American immigrant and a pastor's kid, the audience of my work will learn about my experience and consequently some of the common experiences of my demographics. In a wider context, this project is part of my commitment to creating more diverse and representational stories that are not centered around overly represented straight, cis, white men and, to a lesser extent, straight, cis, white women. To inform my work, I researched relocation and its effects on mental health, visual memoirs in the form of graphic novels, autobiographic writing strategies, and narratively-focused video games.



Contextual Discussion

Video Games

Visual Inspirations

Autobiographical Writing Strategies

The Psychology of Moving

In order to create an autobiographical game about moving, I thought I only needed to draw upon my own memories, but I also wanted to understand the psychological effects of relocation. For starters, I found a study on older adults in Toronto anticipating a move over a period of time anywhere from one month to five years¹ that gathered responses to how the subjects' defined home and whether they had strong attachments to their concept of home. Many of the respondents had definitions including "comfort, independence, familiarity, security and ownership" and felt that home represented a place where they could exercise their "independence and individuality". 67% of the responses included "personal control over the environment." Most respondents placed importance and meaning on home, but 11% reported that "home meant 'nothing', or meant nothing anymore".

The authors, Deborah Rutman and Jonathan Freedman, hypothesized that health would be negatively impacted over time due to prolonged increased stress and anxiety caused by "fear of the unknown in the relocation environment, a fear of loss of personal control, and a fear of social isolation" but instead found that there were actually no significant differences in health and subjects that moved at the end of the study actually experienced a significant satisfaction after moving. The 11% that reported to have no attachment to their homes, however, reported that they were in poorer health and had lower morale. To be frank, I was surprised by the results of the paper, as my experience with moving had me inclined to agree with Rutman and Freedman's hypothesis, but I believe that the satisfaction of moving was related to the subjects' age.

Adolescents and Relocation

Unlike the older respondents in the Toronto study, children and adolescents are not in control of where they move and therefore have a different experience while dealing with relocation, as I could personally attest. Adolescents tend to think that they have to accept

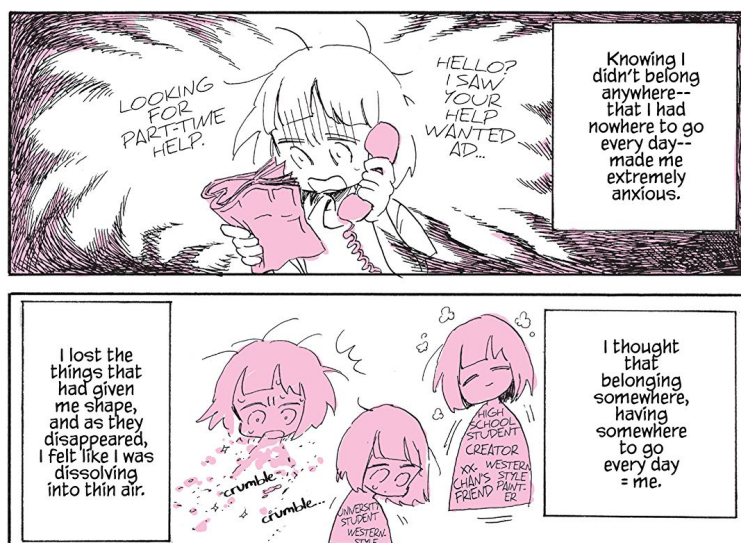
1 Deborah Rutman and Jonathan Freedman, 'Waiting to Move: Stress, Coping, and the Meaning of Home in Anticipation of Relocation', in Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society. (Washington, DC: University of Toronto, 1987), 3-10.

stressful situations rather than viewing them as something that can be changed² which is only natural because with their young age comes “limited ability to exert control over their surroundings”. In fact, moving may make them feel “anonymity and powerlessness”. Studies show that moving multiple causes a “survivor effect” that enables adolescents to handle these frequent transitions. It was also found that those who move frequently at a young age may begin to do poorly in school and struggle socially. It was found that there was “less peer contact” and “less intimacy in closest friendships for over half a year following a move”.

Graphic Literary Nonfiction

My instructor helped me realize that I could use other sources from literary nonfiction, or memoirs, to better convey my own autobiographical story. Since my work was going to be equally visual and textual, I specifically sought out graphic novels.

My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness by Kabi Nagata utilizes simplified depictions of people while still carrying a lot of emotions. It tends towards depicting more abstract concepts and feelings, giving visualizations to Nagata’s internal monologues. The graphic novel is an intensely personal story about exploring her sexuality, navigating mental illness, and her relationship with her parents. I think that she first does the writing and then draws the visuals, which amplifies her message. It is a much more reflective piece, with the text more of Nagata’s reminiscing of her past and how that affects her now. It is a lot like a diary that reflects on the author’s emotional state at a period of her life. I found it very inspirational in that I could be more reflective in my narration.



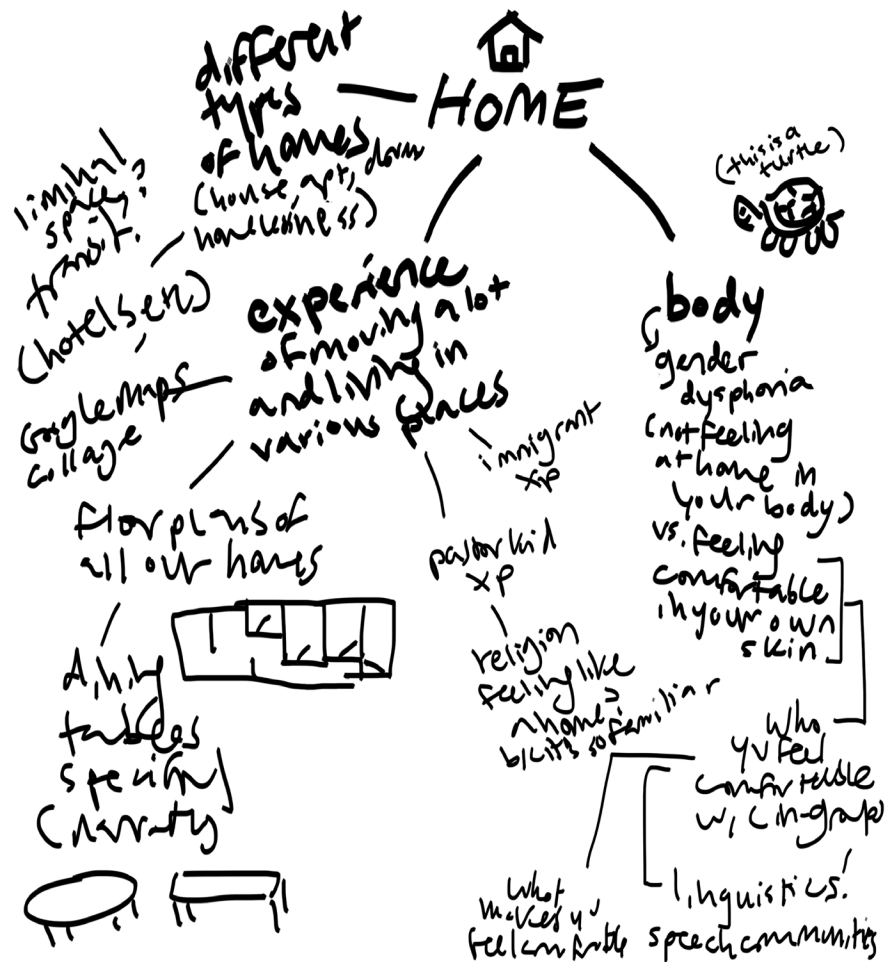
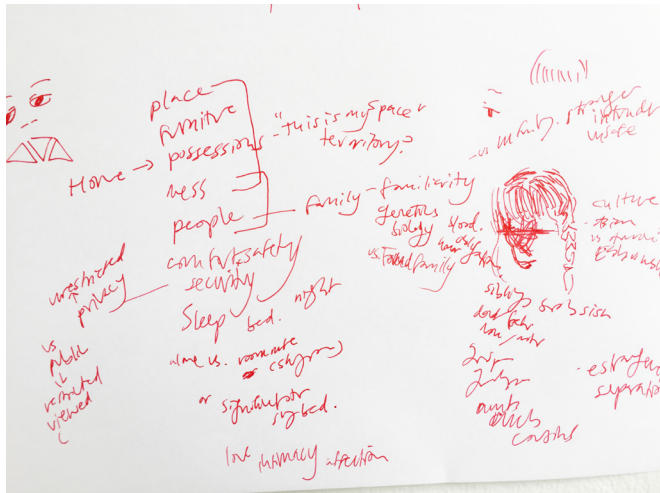
2 Laurina Pond, “Stress and Coping in Adolescent ‘Pastors’ Kids” (Calgary, Alberta: The University of Calgary, 2000), 10-22.

My instructors also suggested reading on autobiographical writing strategies in order to better write my own autobiography. Over winter break, I read Mary Karr's *The Art of Memoir* and Phillip Lopate's *To Show and To Tell*.

Karr advises to not keep the entire thing one note and instead create a more nuanced picture. To create a sad story, there needs to be points in which the character is happy to give a sense of hope. Consequently, I intentionally set up my game to be very colorful, engaging, and lively in the beginning, and had less and less prompts for the player and gradually shifted the tone into something reflecting my depression in middle and high school, leading into college.

Karr also emphasizes the importance of voice, which inspired me to create a very strong voice for my game.

Methodology



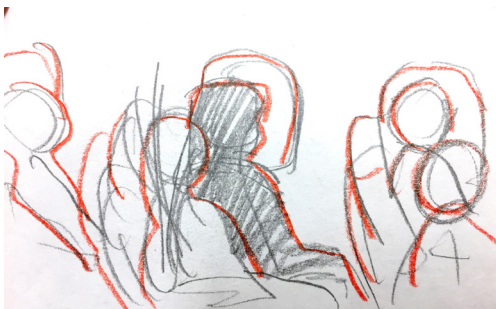
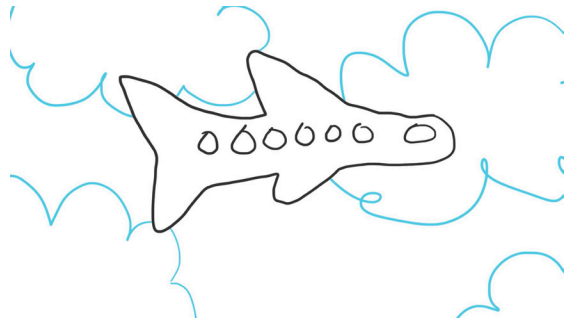
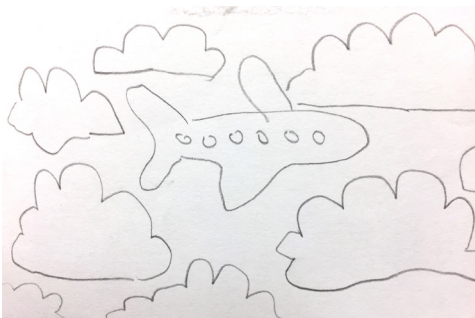
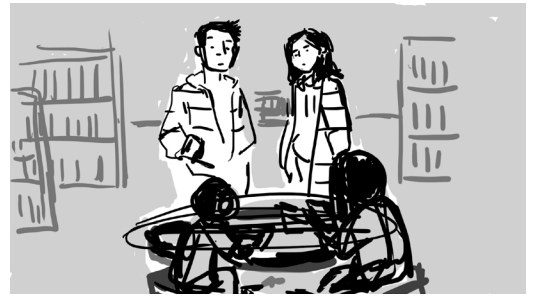
My process started when I began mind mapping the idea of home. The obvious answer to “What is home?” is a location, or more specifically, where I live. I came to realize that I had multiple homes and that what I considered to be my home constantly shifted throughout my life.

During the studio marathon, I created floor plans of places I had lived and experimented with some mediums I haven’t worked with before by making three-dimensional models of the floor plans as well. I found, however, that the floor plans felt empty and didn’t truly represent my idea of home. They were devoid of meaning without the people that occupied the space, as well as my own memories of our experiences living in these spaces. If I presented any of the floor plans to any other person, they would not necessarily experience that image as a home.

I engaged in dialogues with others about home and discovered multiple homes and selfhood shifted. I determined that home was complicated and individual to each person. when talking with other people, common responses were those popular phrases, “home is where the heart is” and “home is where you hang your hat”, which is essentially either a place or person.

My fifty iterations could be divided into two categories: focusing on the physicality of a living space, or focusing on the occupants of the space, i.e. my family or friends. I made some family trees, as well as a diagram delineating who I met at what point in my life and to what point we remained in contact, entitled, “How long have you known me”.

I used freewriting and storyboarding to discover my own narrative about home. By the first semester midterm critique, the nature of my material explorations and conceptual



ideating led me to animation. I chose animation specifically because during my freewriting and outlining, I found that I referred to each place that I had lived as a stage in my progression of life. I made a mental connection of the words stage, or level, connected to video games, and had the idea of stylizing my animation after video games both visually and sonically, with a pixelated typeface and 8-bit music and sound effects. I realized that making this “game” an animation completely wrenched power away from the viewer, since games usually rely on a player’s input, and an animation requires only an audience’s attention. This loss of power mirrored the way I felt when I had to move, so I felt that animation was the appropriate medium for this project.

I gave my project the name loading... on a whim, to further reference the game aesthetic, but then realized that it was fitting because moving so frequently caused each place I lived to feel as though it were temporary and unimportant, the way that a loading bar is just a placeholder screen until the actual game is ready for the player.

One bit of feedback I got during the midterm critique was to turn the project into an actual game. I was hesitant to make this transition because the player would only be pushing a button to progress through the story, and I felt that would not be entertaining or engaging, but after much deliberating, I decided that this would still send the message of lack of control that I wanted to convey through the piece.

Making the transition from animation to game required some major changes. I decided to keep some animation elements in the form of loading screens, but to make a game, I had to learn programming, which I had never done before. I initially planned on using Unity, which has 2-D and 3-D capabilities, but ended up using Ren’py, a visual novel engine. It took a lot of ideating to come up with the game’s genre and objective. With the transition of a game-themed animation to an actual game also came the transition from presenting the player with no choice to allowing them some choice.

My research involved going through old Facebook messages, emails, and texts, as well as old photos, videos, and yearbooks. The ones that ended up in the game were selected with intentionality to further the narrative.

Creative Work

Start
Load
Preferences
About
Help
Quit

loading...

an autobiographical visual novel

PRESS START

loading... is an autobiographical experimental visual novel that borrows from the video game, film, and animation genres. As with a typical visual novel, the player clicks through to progress through the story, the same way that they would turn a page in a book. It has select visual and auditory aesthetics of a video game, but is not necessarily a real game in the sense that the player has autonomy over their avatar in the game, or has a controllable character at all. It also does not present the player with a goal that they must accomplish in order to progress through the narrative or win or lose the game. Like other visual novels, *loading...* uses both text and image to convey a narrative and will present the player with options to progress through the game on the story path that they choose. What differentiates *loading...* from other visual novels is that choosing certain options will often cause the game to derail. The piece addresses issues such as constant displacement, relocation, and how that affects emotional attachment and intimacy.

The game immediately wrenches control away from the player and establishes early on that their only role is to click to progress through the story. The player is then asked to input their name, giving the illusion of some player autonomy, but it is quickly challenged and then replaced with my name.

If the player chooses “no,” they are not content with being assigned this name that is not theirs, the response is that regardless of their feelings on the matter, they are now a different person. On the other hand, if the player indicates that “yes,” they are content with the name, the game establishes that it didn’t matter if they consented to the name change.

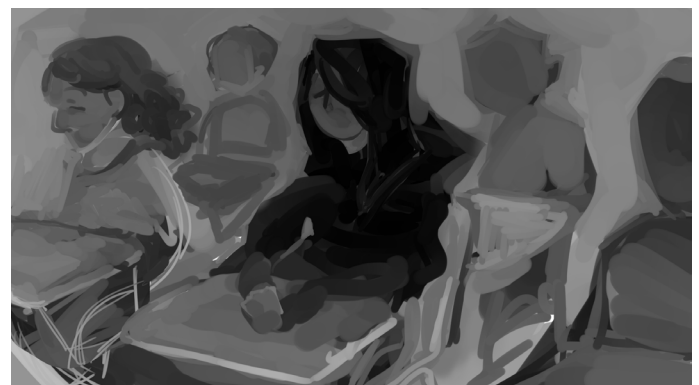
The game proceeds with a short introduction to the player’s assigned character supplemented with photographs of photographs, which gives the impression of the player flipping through a photo album.

The game continues to use second-person pronouns to refer to both the player as well as myself, or rather, replacing the player with my persona.

After the introduction, the game turns to a more digitally hand drawn style. The visuals utilize bright colors, indistinct shapes, and storybook-like styles to represent childhood memories, and much less vibrant colors or a lack of color altogether to represent the gloomier, more adult memories. Found footage, both photographs and videos, are interspersed throughout the piece to confirm that this is a true story coming from a real person. A dry and irreverent sense of humor is a major component of the narrative voice. The game is inspired by real life experiences and scenarios yet there are clear choices that did not occur, as they are highly unrealistic and improbable events, to emphasize that it is in fact a game.

More care and attention was given to the visuals of the beginning of the game to represent the greater importance I placed in my connections at the time. There are also more

options presented to the player, resulting in higher interactivity at the beginning of the story, to indicate a child's endless possibilities at the beginning of their life. As the game progresses, there are much less options for the player and much more videos that the player can only watch and not start or stop. Meanwhile, some lack of images altogether so that there is only a white screen paired with narration to show that I, and consequently the player, am being given less opportunities to make choices and therefore begin to show less initiative. The player's decreased activity and engagement mirrors that of my own.



Conclusion

Overall the integrative project was a rewarding learning experience. I learned how to code for the first time and acquainted myself with a new program which I plan on using more in the future to create more visual novels. Creating this game also taught me firsthand how much work goes into creating games and I now understand why there are entire teams dedicated to each aspect of it. I would like to further explore what I could do with this game format. I learned that there was a lot more I could explore thematically even within this singular topic. While reflecting on my life experiences and writing for the game, I kept being drawn to perception of self and growth that is physical, emotional, and mental. I wanted to include this concept as well as experiences with developing my gender identity in the game but thought it wasn't as relevant as those that spoke on race, ethnicity, and religion, which were much more directly related to the reasons my family moved and my experience of moving multiple times.

Several people have commented that they enjoy the voice of my game. It reminded me that I enjoy creating things that other people enjoy and particularly like making things that make people laugh. I would definitely like to continue working on this project and complete it on my own time. I believe I may create more visual novels such as this one in the future.