In the Closet
(The process behind the Film)
Trey Pritchard

BFA
University of Michigan
Winter 2022

Table of contents

Artist Statment

In the Closet is an animated short film that dives into the internal struggle of coming out of the closet by focusing on the mental hurdles of finding social and self-acceptance. It may seem like something simple, but when you try taking those steps, something always gets in the way making it more difficult. I wanted to highlight that within this project. The film is a personal narrative that focuses on my own memories/experiences when trying to come out. My intent with creating this film was to create something others in the community can relate to on a personal level, along with showing others not a part of the community the dilemma we face.

I've always had a passion for animation. The idea for this project has been in development ever since my senior year of high school. With cartoons over the past couple of years taking huge steps in showcasing LGBTQ+ representation within their own shows, such as Steven Universe with it's heartfelt and dream-like aesthetic, it really inspired me to create something of my own and share my own experiences so that I could inspire others just like the artists I looked up to did to me.

Contextualization/Research

With the idea in mind of what I wanted to do, this is where I began my research process. At this point I've never really done a ton of research based projects, so this was the first major project where I had to do something like this. Since my project deals with animation and themes centered around the LGBTQ+ community, that gave me a central idea of where to focus on. For more interdisciplinary research I focused a lot more on information focused on the LGBTQ+ community. My main reasoning for this was because I myself don't have that much knowledge on the history of the community. I was never taught about it in grade school so I thought it would be smart to look into the history along with sources that are more based in the present to see what has changed.

One of my first major sources that I used was History of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender social movements by Bonnie Morris. This article goes through a brief history of LGBTQ+ social movements and where it all started, from discussing the earliest known movements, where these events took place, and the impact those movements had for the future of the community. While it definitely isn't every possible piece of information of LGBTQ+ history, the article goes through a somewhat of a rough timeline on the major dates along with what took place on those days. My entire project is based on connecting with others who are also a part of the community along with trying to educate others on the issues and struggles someone of the community goes through and faces, so knowing the history behind my community, how we started, and how we got to where we are today is very much so important and I couldn't ignore that.

Along with this source I also found a book called Growing Up Queer: Kids and the Remaking of LGBTQ Identity by Mary Robertson. This book is focuses on the stories and voices of LGBTQ+ youth and discusses the exciting yet complicated terrain of queer adolescence. I chose this because this book dives into the identities of many members of the LGBTQ+ community and allows me to dive deeper in learning more of others' experiences and the development of gender and sexual identities in the 21st century. As discussed prior, my overall project is very personal. The entire story is focused on my experiences and how I felt during the times I was dealing with my sexuality and coming out. Even though it is a story that is focused more on my experiences, I want others that were in the same situation as mine or are in to relate to it along with educating others in the process. Getting to learn and hear about other's stories and different experiences was helpful in figuring out how I approach certain topics and visualizing them. Everyone doesn't have the same experiences I had so I felt it was good to read and listen about those differences because you can learn something from it. When discussing with others apart of the of the LGBTQ+ community or even reading about others experiences with being closeted there's always this

discussion of feeling like they had to shut away these certain feelings and emotions and becoming overwhelmed with these feelings and emotions. With my film I wanted to dive into that emotion by utilizing imagery. As we go through the animation there are certain aspects where I implemented that. The entrance is in the form of a closet door, these feelings and emotions are separated and locked away. These feelings and emotions are being pushed away and it becomes overwhelming trying to connect with that other self that you've pushed away for so long. I tried creating something that would have a universal response on whoever was viewing it.

Along with the more interdisciplinary pieces of research, I also looked into more art related pieces to help gain more insight in my project. One of the first pieces I looked towards for inspiration and reference was the animated short film In a Heartbeat by Beth David and Esteban Bravo. I believe this is the first piece that actually inspired the idea for my project. This animated short is about a boy who has a crush on another boy. The way the short is formatted is that this boy's heart comes out of his chest and this heart is trying to reach the boy he has a crush on. The whole message of "the heart wants what the wants" is heavily implied throughout the short. What I really loved about this short is that it showcases these

Screenshot from In a Heartbeat by Beth David and Estean Bravo

certain feelings and emotions that members of the community tend to go through in a very understandable way. The feeling of having to hide your feelings because you don't know how others would react, the feeling of being looked down on, the fear of being outed. This short showcases all of that within only 4 minutes. It was one of the major elements from the short that inspired me to implement this theme of trying to connect with this other part of yourself and sort of fighting with these certain feelings.

Another piece of media I referenced a lot was the manga Our Dreams at Dusk by Yuhki Kamatani. Just like In a Heartbeat, this series is a coming of age story of someone navigating their sexuality, finding self acceptance, and an understanding of the LGBTQ+ community. Along the story, the author does an amazing job with illustrating these certain feelings and emotions in a way that was really beautiful and very symbolic. When I first read this series it impacted me emotionally. It was the first time in a while where a story has left such an emotional impact on me and it was truly inspiring. The artwork is what I referenced countless times. How is the artist depicting certain feelings and emotions, how are they getting points across without the use of dialogue, how are

they making certain scenes so impactful? The way they utilized imagery to their advantage is what I wanted to showcase in my project, so after many iterations of the story itself, I think I was able to come to a happy conclusion.

Illustration from Our Dreams at dusk by Yuhki Kamatani

Creative Process

As I discussed prior, I had the concept for this project since I was still in high school. Since then it's undergone many changes. The very first iteration utilized the concept of these two characters trying to connect with each other along with having obstacles get in their way. With this version there were more literal obstacles getting in the way of the character opposed to more mental obstacles as seen in the final. It gave off an Indiana Jones vibe where the character was trying to avoid traps set up around the

Storyboard from first draft.

area. The setting was also very minimalistic just as the final, but the setting took the form of a long bridge. The other version of the character also didn't have much of an impact until the end of the story, they were also show-cased as less of a threat opposed to the final. While the story was there for the first iteration, it definitely needed some reworking.

When trying to figure out how to rewrite the story and create something more understandable to viewers, I sat down with faculty and peers to discuss my idea and would receive feedback and suggestions on what they thought would be an interesting approach and what might not be working. This was very important informa-tion to gain because with animation you want to make sure whatever you're creating is understandable to the audience. If you make something too confusing you may


Storyboard from second draft.

lose the viewer and the viewer may miss the important message. With the feedback I got at the time I went back to reworking the story. The initial storyboard was already over 2 minutes long and I didn't want to go over that given the amount of time we had to make the project. This was where I hit this sort of roadblock with the story and where I was having trouble coming up with new concepts. I had the idea of the character going through this labyrinth setting and overcoming many different obstacles, but it was becoming confusing. Everything that I was jotting down wasn't working and it was becoming overly complicated. If I had continued going the direction I

was going, there would have been so many plot points that I would've had to fulfill and with a 2 minute limit that was going to be almost impossible. After all these issues I decided to scrap that concept and start over once again.

My third iteration is where I figured out how I wanted to approach the story and I was able to incorpo-rate past ideas from the past iterations that were scrapped. The concepts that stayed were the more minimalistic set-ting, the two characters trying to connect with each other, and the idea of obstacles getting in the way of our main character. The major changes were the look of the setting, instead of a bridge it's a never end-ing room, the other self plays a bigger role
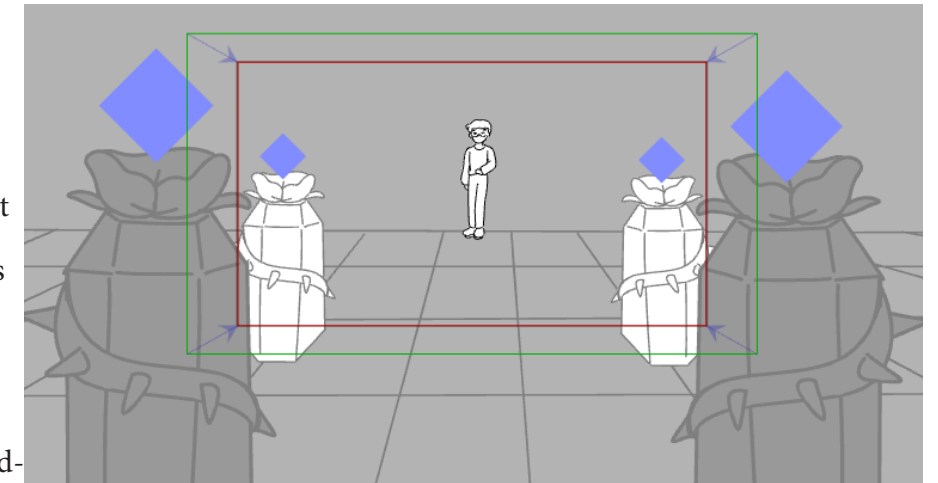

Storyboard from final draft.

than the previous iterations, and the obstacles become more mental than physical. This ended up being the final direction I went with the storyboard and what I used when animating the project.

The final iteration of the storyboard got pretty positive feedback. The main pieces of critique reflected on how everything was presented in the story. To some it was confusing in certain scenarios and there wasn't a ton of clarity for certain parts. I took this to heart and went back to edit the storyboard one last time to fix those issues. Once I finished making those edits I posted online for others to review along with showing it to peers and asking for their feedback. Upon their responses many stated that it was more understandable and with that I began the animation process.

I began animating in the beginning of January. Animation is a very time consuming process and I had three months to complete everything. The storyboard came to be around two minutes and thirty seconds long and I usually take a month to animate a minute worth of something. Using my storyboard I exported it into my animation program and animated directly on top of the storyboard. With the storyboard I was able to animate and time everything accordingly. The storyboard is most important in this instance because without it every-thing would've been timed very weirdly.

During the months of animating I was also drawing backgrounds for the entire animation. I would draw a certain amount of backgrounds and then animate to the amount of backgrounds I drew and then repeated the process. Backgrounds are not my strong suit so I knew I was going to find the process very annoying. When creating the backgrounds I looked to the show Steven Universe for inspiration. The cartoon has very dream-like
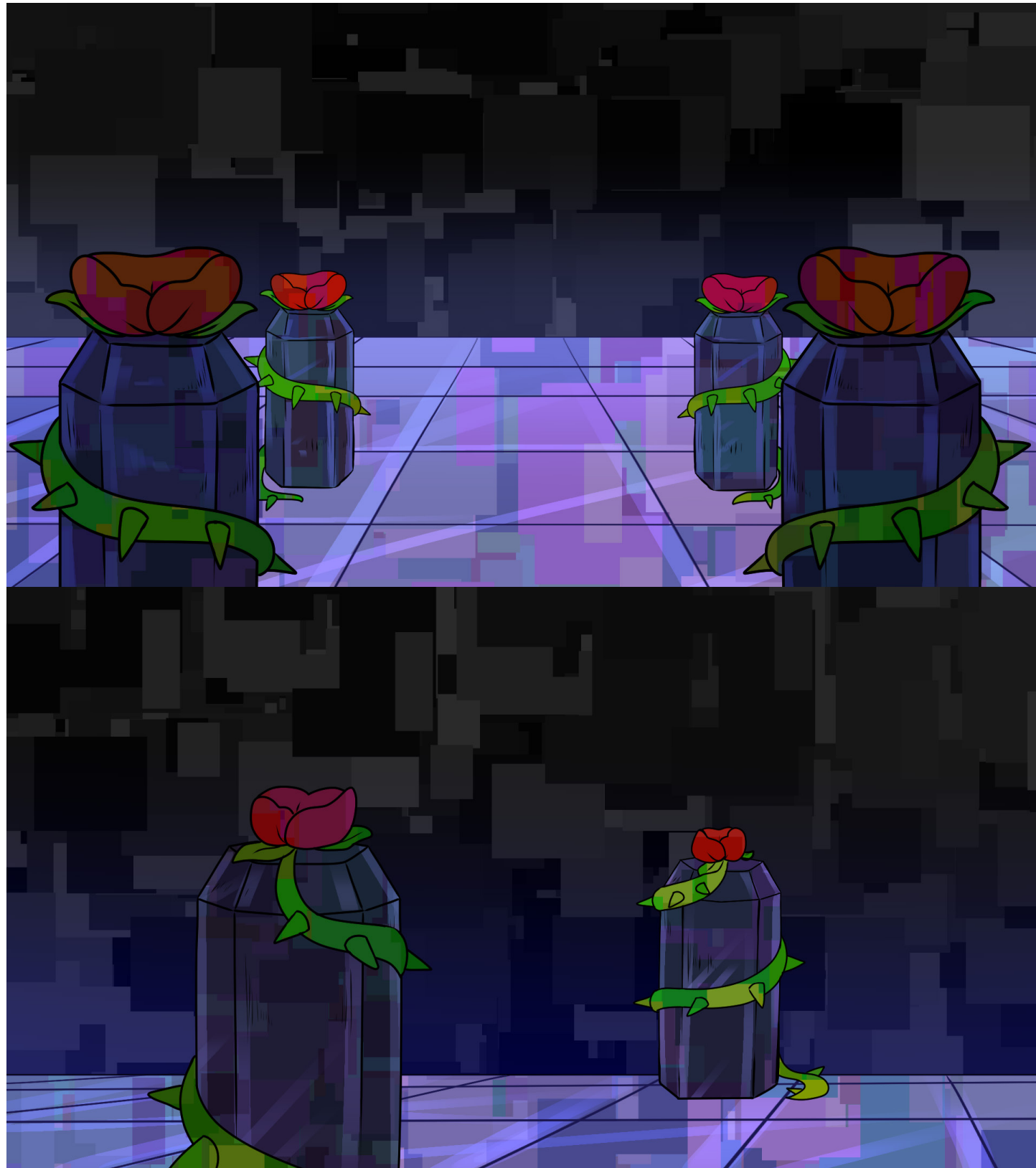
Backgrounds featured in final project.

backgrounds and I wanted to implement that feeling into my own art. They used bright and vibrant colors and glowy effects within their own backgrounds and I brought that along in my own pieces. Opposed to doing a more painterly look, I went with a more geometric style where there's a variety of color blocks overlapping each other. This aspect was inspired by the anime film Promare where they incorporated geometric shapes within their lighting effects and overall scenery. This ended up making the drawing process go much faster and I was able to create multiple backgrounds within thirty minutes. I ended up creating over thirty five different backgrounds all together and I was able to reuse many backgrounds in many different scenes which ended up saving me more time.

I ended up finishing the main animation in mid-March and the remainder of the month focused on post-edits. Post-edits consisted of additional effects to add to the overall animation, mainly lighting. This is where I also dealt with music and sound effects. For lighting effects, I took inspira-

Screenshot of post-edit workspace.

tion from Steven Universe once again because the show had a very specific lighting effect that I enjoyed which was this diamond sparkle effect you'd see in the backgrounds. For this project I ended up animating a similar effect that can be seen throughout the animation. I don't have much experience in After Effects so I mostly messed with lighting and nothing more.

The last task I had was sound and music. Finding sound effects was the easy part, but finding music was where I ran into many issues. I'm not a musical person so creating the music on my own was out of the question. I had a very specific idea for the music and I couldn't find anything. I did find pieces I liked but that would've required me to spend almost two hundred dollars to get the licensing and merge the sounds together. During the final weeks of production my friend who graduated from the music school offered to help and compose a piece for me. During this process I sent him a variety of songs that had the vibe I was looking for and it helped him get an idea of what to focus on. I chose a variety of songs from series such as Steven Universe and Bee and Puppycat. He was able to compose something in three days and I was able to finish everything project wise.

For my exhibition I had a very straightforward idea for how I would present everything. I wanted to

showcase the development side of my project along with showcasing the overall animation. In my space I ended up having the right side of the space show a variety of the storyboards from the first act, second act, and final act. On the left side of the space I showcased more of the development work and concept art. The middle of the space showcased the final animation on a loop and I had free takeaway prints left out for any visitors. I didn't want to go over the top with my space because I didn't want anything to take away the attention of the animation itself.

Photos from final exhibition space.

Conclusion

This was my most ambitious animated project that I've done during my time at STAMPS. Previous projects were never this time consuming so I learned a lot during this process. I think I became more comfortable with creating work centered around myself. In the beginning I was never keen on making work about myself, but after spending time on this, I think it changed my views on that. I think what I took away from this entire process were the research elements. Up to this point I've never really created work that also incorporated research within it. Because of this I feel I was able to do so much more with my project, gain more insight on how I approach something, along with overall gaining more knowledge on certain topics. This course really brought that out for me during this process. I'm not the type of person to really do tons of research when it comes to creating new projects so I like that this got me out of my comfort zone.

I came into the course already with a love for animation but I also believe this entire project gave me a better appreciation of animation as a whole because of how extensive the process was. Animation typically takes teams to create something and even then it's still a lot of work. I'm only one person so I had to deal with many different aspects that are usually split up. It definitely gave me some first hand experience on what it takes to make an animated project. I believe I can utilize a lot of the knowledge I gained from this project in the future for any potential jobs in the animation industry from brainstorming, to pitching ideas, to storyboarding, to animating, and post production. It was a ton of work and if I'm being honest it did take a lot out of me, but in the end I'm really proud of myself and the project I made and I can't wait to do more in the future.