

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

ABSTRACT.....2

INSPIRATION AND PURPOSE.....2

SUMMARY.....4

PROCESS:6

 RESEARCH.....6

 DESIGN.....7

 STORYBOARD.....7

 ANIMATIC.....8

 REFERENCE FOOTAGE.....9

 ANIMATION.....9

 EDITING.....12

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS.....12

APPENDICES:

 APPENDIX A: PERMISSIONS.....14

 APPENDIX B: TRANSCRIPT.....16

 APPENDIX C: INITIAL DESIGN.....18

 APPENDIX D: THUMBNAILS.....19

 APPENDIX E: STORYBOARD.....20

 APPENDIX F: COMPARISON STILLs.....23

WORKS CITED.....24

ABSTRACT:

This creative project is a traditionally drawn animation based on audio from Andrew Solomon's Ted Talk, "Depression, the secret we share." The animation is both meant to explain the effects of depression from the viewpoint of a person that has experienced it and also to showcase the animation skills I have gained over the course of this project.

INSPIRATION AND PURPOSE:

In our culture today, depression is widely known but hardly understood by people who have never felt its effects. Depression, as defined by the American Psychiatric Association, is "a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think, and how you act ("What is Depression?"). Biologically, depression has been described as a chemical imbalance in the brain. It affects multiple parts of the brain including the amygdala, which is activated by emotionally charged memories, the thalamus, which receives sensory information and relays it to the cerebral cortex, and the hippocampus, which has a central role in processing long-term memory ("What causes depression?").

However, even with a full explanation of depression and its psychological effects on those who suffer from it, it is still difficult to understand from the perspective of someone who has never felt it. Facts are often not enough to explain feelings, and so the most effective way, I think, to explain depression to someone who does not know what it

is like is through the account of someone who does.

There have been many efforts made to help educate people about the legitimacy of depression and the effects it has on the people who suffer from it. Included amongst these efforts are animated shorts. Some of these shorts present statistics on depression, some explain the biological and psychological aspects of the disorder, and others inform their audience about depression with a firsthand account. The animated shorts that I found to be most effective in expressing subjective views of mental disorders were those created by Animated Minds. Animated Minds created a series of videos, each based on a different mental illness. The audio of each video features the interview answers of a person who has that mental illness describing its effects. I found that these shorts were so much more emotionally striking than a regular interview or objective description of a disorder because they were animated. Through animation, a viewer is able to visualize concepts that cannot be replicated as effectively in a realistic environment. This gave both a purpose to the animation and offered a clearer message through the audio. I was inspired by the concept that Animated Minds had created, so I decided to make something similar.

When I began my creative project, my original goal was to create an animation about depression so that people could better understand the disorder and its effects on the people who suffer from it. What I found out as I was creating this project was that making an animation was incredibly difficult. Traditional hand-drawn animation especially, in my opinion, takes more patience and dedication than any other art form. I realized this more and more as I went through the process of completing this creative

project. I decided, in the midst of this difficult process, that I did not only want to inform an audience about depression; I also wanted to inform them about animation. Rather than simply use animation as a tool to send a message, I decided to let it play a major part in my creative project.

SUMMARY

My final animation is based on a clip from Andrew Solomon's Ted Talk, "Depression, the secret we share." In my animation, my character begins to feel the effects of his depression as he is walking home. When he gets home, he knows that his friends have left him messages to try to contact him, but he feels unable to muster the energy to answer any of them and immediately crawls into bed. As he lies in bed, he considers what it might be like to go through his normal daily activities, like making lunch. Because of his depression, he finds them all to be too exhausting to accomplish and stays in bed. The longer he lies in bed, the more he becomes frustrated with himself and his inability to accomplish simple tasks. By the end of the narration, he falls asleep.

My original storyboard included a dream sequence in which the character found himself in a bare dreamscape. He morphs into a child and then disappears from view as the viewer listens to Andrew Solomon remark on how unfortunate it is that depression is used to describe both normal sadness, like that which a child feels when it rains on his birthday, and clinical depression that may ultimately result in suicide. When he reappears, the viewer is inserted into his point of view as he looks down at his hands and then looks up to see a door in the dreamscape. As he opens the door, the viewer reverts back to third person and watches him walk outside of his house. As he walks outside, he

notices a spot of rust that has appeared on his fence and attempts to rub it off. Time begins to lapse quickly through one hundred years as the character stands there in disbelief. The rust spot grows to cover the entire fence and eventually disintegrates it. The character falls to his knees and watches the rust slip through his fingers. As he watches the rust fall, time reverses and all of the events up to his initial disappearance from view are seen in reverse. He wakes with a start and sits up in bed, concerned.

The rust on the fence, as explained through Andrew Solomon's audio, is a symbol of depression affecting the mind and life of a person. If it is treated as soon as it is recognized, everything can be fine. If it goes unchecked and is allowed to spread to the rest of the "fence," it corrodes its host until there is nothing left but the "rust" itself.

Unfortunately, I was not able to complete the latter portion of my original storyboard, but I would like to pick it back up in my own time.

PROCESS

RESEARCH

The first step of my process was to find the audio that would accompany the animation. My original intention was to personally interview individuals and use the audio I collected from the interviews to edit into a sound clip that the animation would follow. After I fully understood all the extra steps this particular process would involve (obtaining IRB approval, scheduling interviews, editing hours of footage), I decided to change my idea slightly by using a clip that had already been broadcasted. Coincidentally, the clip I chose had also helped to inspire me to make the animation in the first place. Rather than wait for weeks to obtain approval and then spend even more time collecting and editing footage, I was able to quickly obtain permission from the speaker, Andrew Solomon, and the foundation that he held a talk for, TED, in order to use a short clip from his TED Talk, “Depression, the secret we share.”

After I had finally picked my audio, I had to choose the section of the TED Talk that I wanted to animate. I chose a short clip near the beginning of this talk that describes his experience with depression as he first began to be affected by it. The purpose of this animation was to convey to the viewer what depression is like from the subjective viewpoint of a person who suffers from it, and I felt like Andrew Solomon’s description was the most understandable and concise one I could find.

To add as a disclaimer, not everyone with depression expresses symptoms in the exact same way. Some people who have experienced depression may not agree that the disorder keeps them from being productive in their daily life. However, I chose to show

Andrew Solomon's depiction of depression as an immobilizing mental illness because it is the most stigmatized version of the disorder. In our society, we place a lot of value on productivity. When people are unproductive, those who do not fully understand depression or more likely to view those who suffer from it negatively than they would a person with depression who continues to function as they did before. Because the purpose of my animation was to help others understand depression and take it seriously as a disorder, I wanted to highlight the stigmatized aspect of it. I believe that is what others need to understand most in order to erase some of that stigma.

DESIGN

The next step of the process was to decide on what the overall style of my animation would look like. I started by sketching out rough character designs and ultimately decided on a "blank slate" sort of character. A simple, undetailed main character would allow a viewer to focus more on the animation and actions of the person rather than on their appearance.

STORYBOARD

Once my initial design was decided, I was able to begin planning out the progression of my story. I began by drawing out my desired shots in thumbnails, which are small, simplified sketches. I then sketched out these thumbnails in a larger, more detailed form for the final storyboard. This step was much more complicated than I expected it to be and ultimately became the most helpful in completing my final project. Each shot had to be planned out in this stage with consideration for multiple factors. The

obvious use of a storyboard is to plan and compose each shot in an aesthetically pleasing manner. It is also important for practical reasons, like avoiding continuity errors from one shot to another. More specifically for animation, it helps an animator avoid animating a shot that may be more complicated than it needs to be. Because animation is such a slow and arduous process, carefully planning out each shot and movement beforehand was essential and likely saved me hours of work.

To create my storyboard, I simply used 4x6 inch index cards to sketch out my frames, and then cleaned up those frames by inking them and erasing the leftover pencil lines.

ANIMATIC

After the storyboard, the animatic is the second most important step in planning an animation. To create an animatic, an animator takes the storyboard frames that were created in the previous step and arranges them in sequence to the audio that will be intended for the final clip. The animatic is essential for working out the timing of shots and transitions. Though animatics are important for all kinds of visual, time-based media, they are especially important for animators. Knowing the exact amount of time available for each shot allows an animator to correctly plan out the motion of the animation in the amount of frames in the time available.

To assemble my animatic, I scanned in my storyboard frames and arranged them in Adobe Premiere Pro CC 2015.

REFERENCE FOOTAGE

Animating, especially hand-drawn animation, involves a thorough understanding of movement. In order to accurately replicate the illusion of movement from frame to frame, reference footage is often necessary. To create reference footage, animators either recruit actors or film themselves and replicate the movements that were timed out in the animatic. Reference footage is only meant to assist an animator in understanding the movement of a character or object, so it does not have to be perfectly shot. As long as the subject's movement is accurately acted and timed to the animatic, the film works effectively as reference footage.

I filmed my reference footage on a Canon T3i DSLR camera in my apartment complex. My boyfriend, Caleb Morris, acted as my reference. After I filmed my reference footage, I assembled my shots again in Adobe Premiere Pro CC 2015.

ANIMATION

After I had laid out my plan for my animation and gathered my reference footage, the next step was to begin animating. As I began to sketch out frames for the main animation, I found that the unrefined frames of the animation suited my project better than the original cleaned up design of the storyboard, and decided to keep my animation in a sketched form. I felt a rough style of animation would suit my project for three reasons.

The first reason was that it worked stylistically with the theme of a character with depression. The sketchy, somewhat shaky appearance of unrefined drawings contributed

to the character's general unease and confusion about his condition. If each frame had been precisely lined and brightly colored, a viewer may not have felt the character's emotions as accurately.

The second reason that I decided to keep the animation as sketched frames was so that viewers could better observe the animation process. Personally, I believe that "unfinished" animations allow me to better appreciate the work that is put into them. Without touching up frames and erasing guidelines, you can see the animator's full intentions with their piece. Basic shapes that create the character are still visible, which gives the audience a better sense of the space that the character occupies along with an understanding of how the animator moves these shapes together in order to give the character motion. Guidelines that follow the contours of the character over these shapes give the viewer a better sense of both the character's direction and volume in space.

The third reason I decided to keep my animation in an "unfinished" style was almost strictly for myself. I wanted to see my mistakes. I have only taken one animation class that covers traditional, two-dimensional animation work, and MTSU does not offer any others. If I want to continue to improve my drawn, two-dimensional animation skills while I attend MTSU, I will have to teach myself. Keeping this animation in a rough, sketched form will allow me to better observe mistakes I have made and know to fix them in the future.

Though the ideal frame rate for animation is twenty-four frames per second, I cut my main animations down to twelve frames per second for two reasons. The first and most obvious reason was that it would save time and effort. The second reason was that I thought a slightly choppy frame rate would match with the sketchy style of the hand-

drawn frames. Every part of my animation, including the frame rate, had a rough, unpolished feel to it. I felt this matched the emotion I was trying to evoke much more than a perfectly smooth animation would.

While the main animation consisted of roughly drawn frames animated at twelve frames per second, the minor animations of the character's former, functioning, self were animated at about three frames per second, inked, and cleaned. I chose to do this because I wanted to separate the main character from his former self. I also cleaned up the former self's frames and gave him a simpler animation so that he would reflect everything that the main character did not. While the main character seemed rough and his movements were much more complex, the ideal, happy character seemed more polished and showed less effort in everything he did. I also decided to give him a simple smile rather than a full face. I felt a smile would be enough to imply that the main character's former self was happy. I also felt that a full face might have encouraged the viewer to relate more to the former self, so I only included a smile so that the viewer's connection might stay with the main character.

To draw out my frames, I used 11x16 three-hole punched paper. I used a Crayola tracing light board to keep my frames consistent. Because my overall knowledge of animation was limited in the creation of this project, I got a lot of help from watching various tutorials. Those made by Aaron Blaise, a former Disney animator, were incredibly helpful in understanding the workflow and frequently overlooked details of the animation process.

EDITING

To put together my piece, I first had to scan each frame I had drawn so that I could assemble them digitally. Hundreds of frames had to be scanned one by one with the scanners provided in the library. Scanning alone took me roughly 6 hours to complete. After every frame of every scene had been scanned in, I was able to import the frame sequences into Adobe After Effects CC 2015 and assemble them there into my final animation.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Overall, I am pleased with the final result of my animation. Though I did not create the inked and colored piece that I had imagined in the beginning, I was able to create a piece that conveyed my message effectively and helped me improve skills that I plan to use for the remainder of my education and throughout my career. Through this project, I was able to learn how to complete the full process of creating an animation. I learned how to create an effective storyboard and the importance of reference footage. I gained a better understanding of how to use certain equipment and software that are important to animation, such as After Effects, Premiere Pro, and light boards. Most importantly, I learned that animation is more intense and time consuming than anyone but other animators will ever know.

Though I am satisfied with my final animation, there are some things that I wish I had done differently for this project. For one, I wish that I had not been so afraid to begin it in the first place. Because of the nature of the thesis tutorial course, I was very

confused about what was expected of me for this project. Instead of asking my thesis advisor or my professor about any of my concerns, I wasted a lot of time avoiding the thesis out of anxiety and held myself behind. I also wish that I had spent more time beforehand familiarizing myself with the software and equipment that I used or could have used for the final product. Attempting to learn how to use software while trying to complete a highly important project with the same software can be stressful to say the least.

My advice for anyone planning to finish an animated creative project for their senior thesis would be to keep it as simple as possible and ensure that a massive amount of time is available to dedicate to it. Each of my frames took an average of four to five minutes to sketch, and I sketched hundreds of frames. Overall, well over seventy hours was spent on drawing frames alone. Before animation could even begin, weeks were spent on design, storyboards, reference footage, and plenty of other pre-production steps that are easily overlooked.

The advice to keep it simple and spend lots of time on the project also applies to those who plan on creating a digital, 3-D animation. Though 3-D software makes the actual process of animating characters fairly simple in comparison to traditional animation, hours of time must be dedicated to modeling, rigging, texturing, lighting, and many other steps. Animation can be enjoyable, but it is not an easy process and should not be taken lightly.

APPENDIX A: PERMISSIONS

1/11/2016

Re: I would like to use your audio in a project - rachelhuttinger@gmail.com - Gmail



Re: I would like to use your audio in a project Inbox x



Mr. Andrew Solomon <andrew@andrewsolomon.com>

to me

Dear Rachel,

Yes, that would be fine—and I'd love to see it when you're done!

Good luck with the project.

Best,

Andrew

> On Jan 7, 2016, at 5:56 PM, Rachel Huttinger <rachelhuttinger@gmail.com> wrote:

>

> From: Rachel Huttinger <rachelhuttinger@gmail.com>

> Subject: I would like to use your audio in a project

>

> Message Body:

> I am a student at Middle Tennessee State University and I am working on a thesis. I would like to use your audio "Depression?"

> I want to take some of the audio from this clip and create an animation around it.

> I have already emailed the copyright office at NPR as well. Would it be okay with you if I used this?



Rachel Huttinger <rachelhuttinger@gmail.com>

to Andrew

Thank you so much!



Click here to [Reply](#) or [Forward](#)

 **Olivier Sherman** olivier@ted.com [via](#) mail51.us4.mandrillapp.com Jan 25 ↕
to me ▾

Hi Rachel,

Thanks for reaching out to TED. Could pass along Andrew's email giving you permission?

Once we hear from the speaker, I am confident we can authorize your request.

Thanks,

Olivier

 **Rachel Huttinger** [<rachelhuttinger@gmail.com>](mailto:rachelhuttinger@gmail.com) Jan 25 ↕
to olivier ▾

Here's the email! Thank you so much for responding!

...

 **Olivier Sherman** [<olivier@ted.com>](mailto:olivier@ted.com) Jan 26 ↕
to me ▾

Great! You're authorized.

Thanks,

Olivier

APPENDIX B: TRANSCRIPT

Andrew Solomon:

I found myself losing interest in almost everything. I didn't want to do any of the things I had previously wanted to do, and I didn't know why. The opposite of depression is not happiness, but vitality. And it was vitality that seemed to seep away from me in that moment. Everything there was to do seemed like too much work. I would come home and I would see the red light flashing on my answering machine, and instead of being thrilled to hear from my friends, I would think, "What a lot of people that is to have to call back." Or I would decide I should have lunch, and then I would think, but I'd have to get the food out and put it on a plate and cut it up and chew it and swallow it, and it felt to me like the Stations of the Cross.

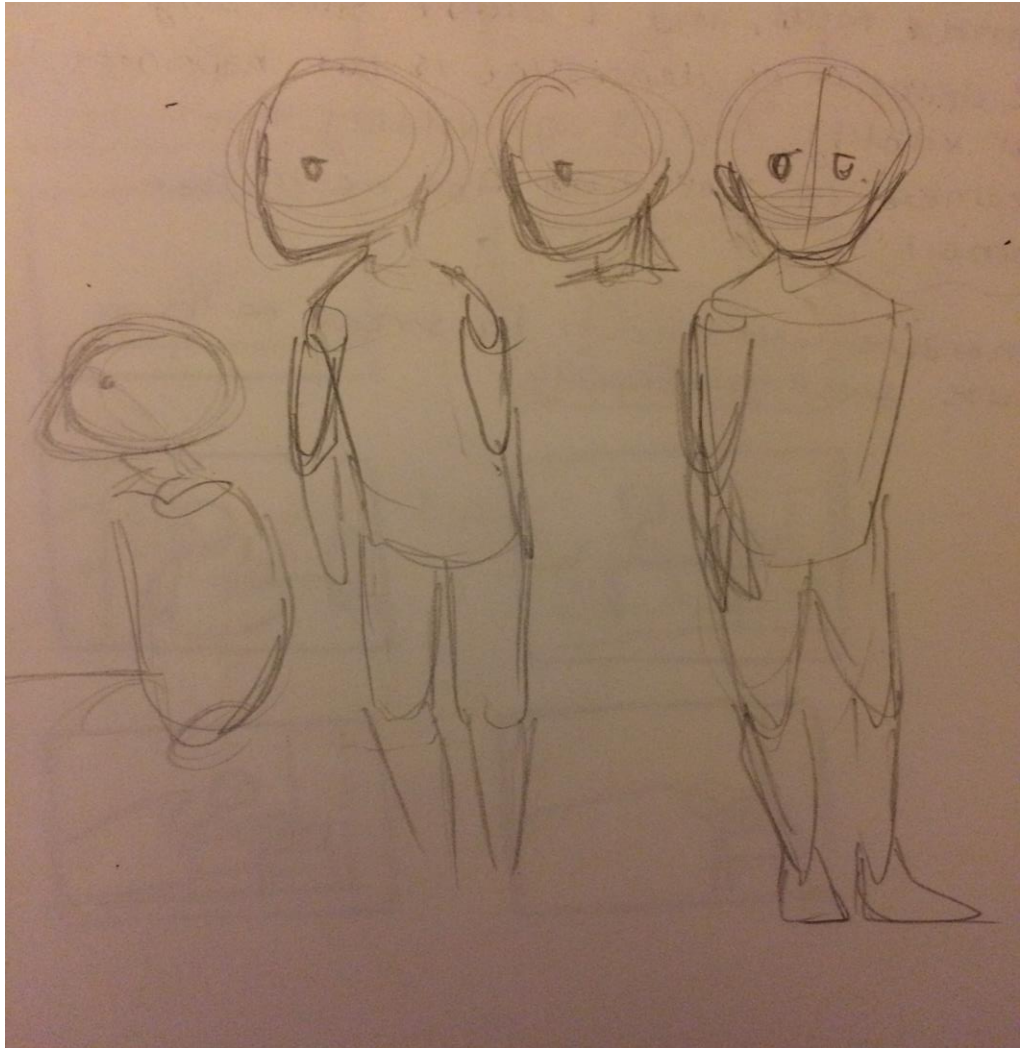
And one of the things that often gets lost in discussions of depression is that you know it's ridiculous. You know it's ridiculous while you're experiencing it. You know that most people manage to listen to their messages and eat lunch and organize themselves to go out the front door and that it's not a big deal, and yet you are nonetheless in its grip and you are unable to figure out any way around it. And so I began to feel myself doing less and thinking less and feeling less. It was a kind of nullity.

(The following audio was originally intended to be included but was excluded because of lack of time.)

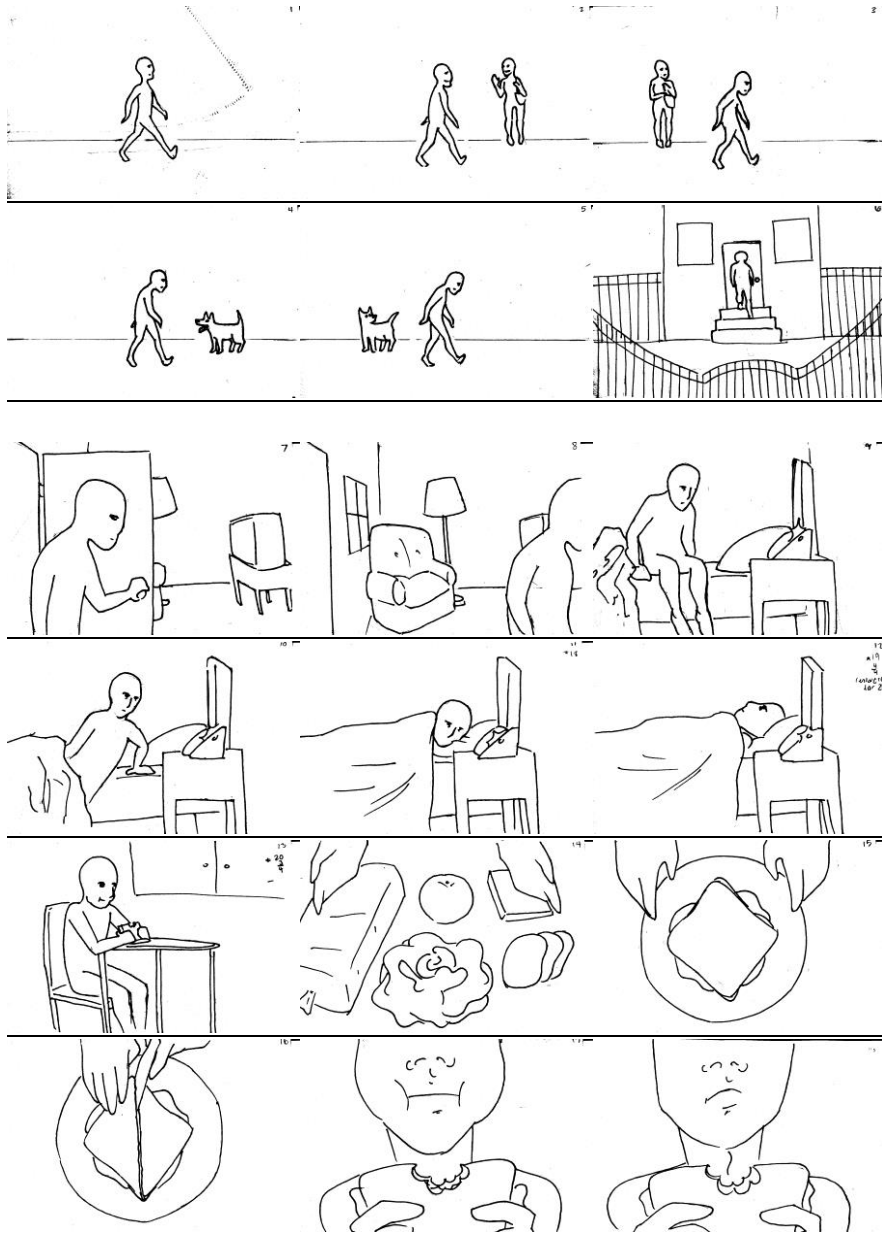
It's a strange poverty of the English language, and indeed of many other languages, that we use this same word, depression, to describe how a kid feels when it rains on his birthday, and to describe how somebody feels the minute before they commit suicide.

People say to me, "Well is it continuous with normal sadness?" And I say, in a way it's continuous with normal sadness. There is a certain amount of continuity, but it's the same way there's continuity between having an iron fence outside your house that gets a little rust spot that you have to sand off and do a little repainting, and what happens if you leave the house for 100 years and it rusts through until it's only a pile of orange dust. And it's that orange dust spot, that orange dust problem, that's the one we're setting out to address.

APPENDIX C: INITIAL DESIGNS

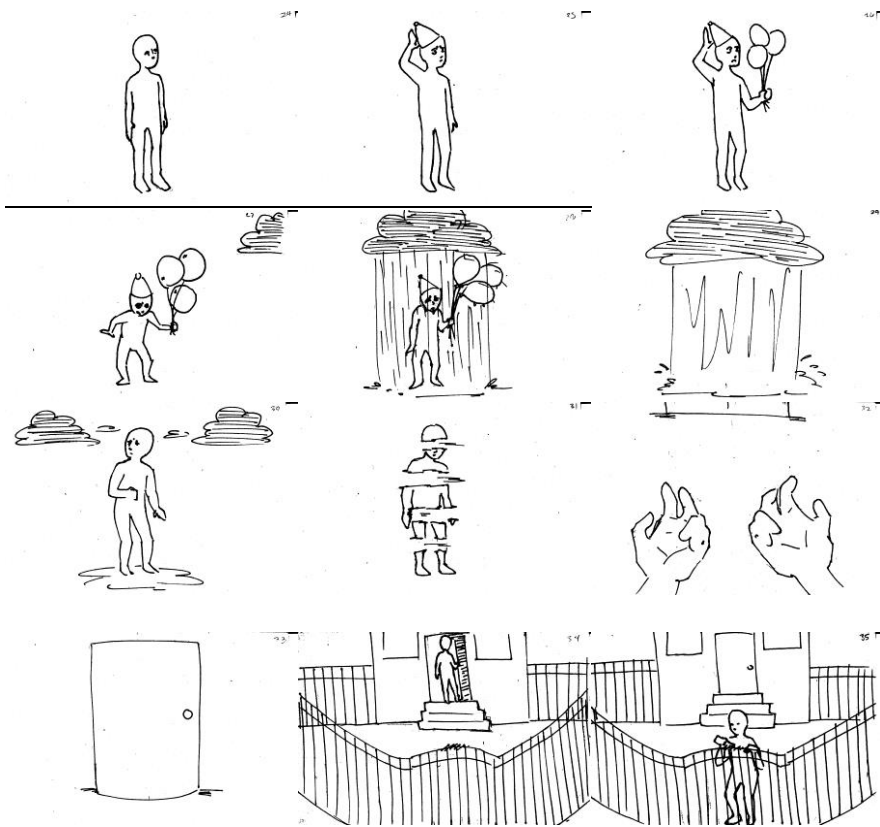


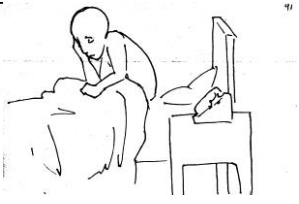
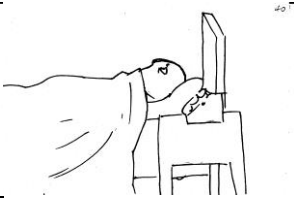
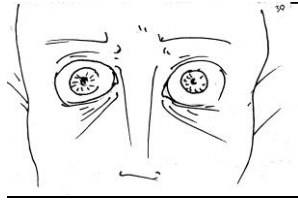
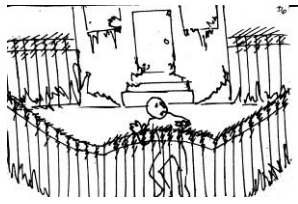
APPENDIX E: STORYBOARD



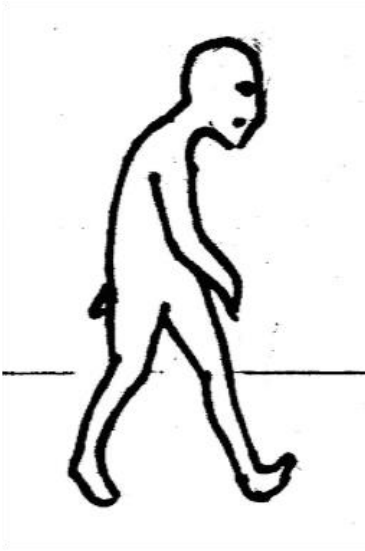


(The section of the storyboard seen below was not used for the final animation.)





APPENDIX F: COMPARISON STILLS



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