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INSPIRATION: THE COGS OF OUR WORLD

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Studio Art)

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ABSTRACT

This creative thesis consists of a 5-minute animation created with digital drawings, in-between animation, traditional, and procedural animation to analyze and visualize the significance of inspiration. Inspiration drives people to discover and create, and strong feelings of hope can cause it. The psychology of inspiration is the foundation for this short film; the final result intends to inspire other people with its visual storytelling and sound design. Additionally, the animation utilizes Muse mythology and animal symbology to universalize and symbolize the connection between an artist and their source of inspiration.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was little, inspiration was a word people would use to describe the artistic process. It was part of a cluster of larger words like creativity and talent; it brought to mind the stereotypical image of a painter painting a grand piece of art. But, when I decided to major in art, I realized that the word held much more meaning than I thought. I recalled all the times I decided to stay up past my bedtime to get my ideas down on paper; the nights I felt inspired were the best nights of my life.

Plus, inspiration got me through my classes. Everything I did relied on the word; it gave my work its quality. It was not until the fall of 2021 that I realized its full impact. That semester, I took my first animation class. I had always been interested in animation, but I found the program we used, After Effects, was accessible and efficient and created smooth, fluid movements in a fraction of the time it would take to draw each frame out by hand. The program's opportunities inspired me to push myself into this new territory I had never anticipated pursuing.

One year later, in the fall of 2022, I began my final project in the Honors College. The Honors thesis was nothing short of intimidating; it is a project that defines your last year as an undergraduate and is expected to take an entire year to complete. But, the scariest part of this process was the very beginning. How was I supposed to make something big without a prompt to guide me? Every art class I have taken had parameters or requirements for their projects; there was always a guideline to follow. But, for the first time, there was nothing I could not do; I was stumped.

I spent some time reflecting on what I had done and what I wanted others to get out of my art. I wanted to make a digital animation, but that was all I knew. As I followed my thought process through the initial development of this project, I realized that I was looking too much at

what I wanted to show to others and not what I wanted to show myself. In other words, I was solely looking outwards. Only after I looked at myself and reflected on my own journey did I finally see what I wanted to do. I internalized my experiences as an artist, and inspiration presented itself in many moments as a college student and artist.

Inspiration has always been important to me and is the basis on which I do all my work. But what about others around me? Now that I had looked internally, I needed to find a bridge to connect me to the greater concept; how do other artists use their inspiration? How could I visualize that? With those questions asked, I found myself at the beginning of my thesis journey. Inspiration, something that had held such personal value to me, became the focal point.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

While primarily analyzing and visualizing the impact of inspiration, this thesis also explores the animation pipeline. It encompasses everything from song choice to character design to the background art. Each part must create a fluid, clean, organized story that viewers can follow and understand without strain. My creative thesis is a means to refine my foundations in character design, 2D animation, and the animation pipeline from concept art to final effects. This animation will expand my breadth of knowledge and teach me how to utilize After Effects programs to create movements that work both in their aesthetic and ergonomic in their setup and execution. The final result will exemplify an exploration of the production process and use the research of inspiration, mythology, and animal symbology to create a piece of inspirational media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My literature review has three facets: the first is the research of inspiration, the second is music psychology, and the third is Muse mythology and animal symbology. All three elements needed to work together to orchestrate a successful animated short film and express what I have learned through thesis research. While inspiration comes differently to the individual, several characteristics of inspiring media can simultaneously trigger inspiration in many people. The research presented in this section is the information that shaped the story and sound design of the film, as well as the knowledge that deepened my understanding of psychology and cultural mythology.

The Science of Inspiration

First and foremost, what is the definition of inspiration? I needed to understand what inspiration scientifically meant, so I could better strengthen the story and engage my audience with the project. Chang does exactly that in her research on media psychology:

Inspiration refers to a situation in which “the individual apprehends something ordinarily beyond his or her capacities (i.e., transcendence), because of an influence from beyond the self (i.e., evocation), and he or she is moved to communicate or implement that which is newly apprehended (i.e., motivation).” (Chang)

In other words, inspiration is an external source that presents itself in a way initially unimagined by a person. Its uniqueness shows the individual a new path that engages them and lets them imagine new ideas. Inspiration does not come in one form, which is important when studying the phenomenon's effects. In Chang’s research, she creates a model that explains the

order of events that will initiate inspiration (Figure 1). In the model, three possible branches lead to the inspiration state: moved feelings, hopeful feelings, and feelings of vitality. In turn, each affective stage leads to either thought-provoking perceptions, self-expansion, or motivation to emulate the characters within the media. The response varies depending on the initial feelings someone has when exposed to “Inspiring media content.” Several deviations stem from the absorption of content, but all result in a state of inspiration. So, if my animation initiates any three of the feelings described in Chang’s model, ideally, it will succeed.

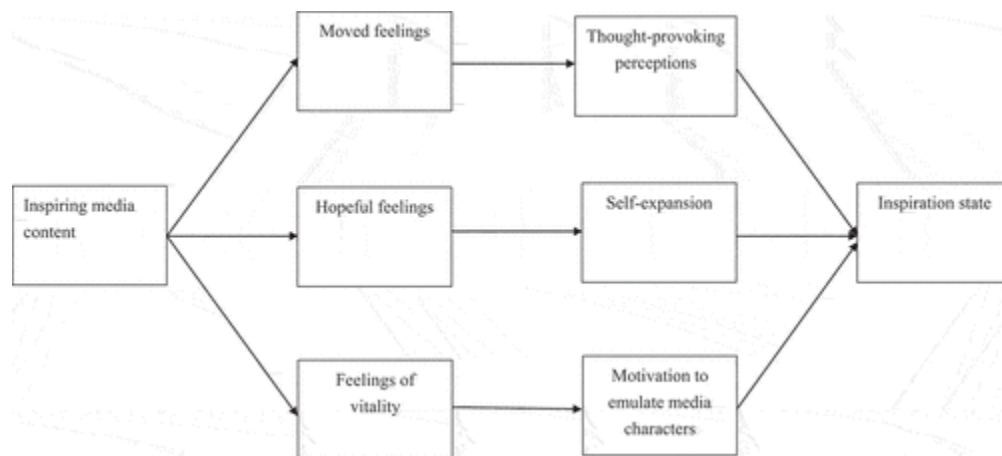


Figure 1. *Proposed model: Evocation, transcendent, and motivation processes (Chang)*

This film is supposed to be a shared experience. But, after reading Chang’s research, I realized that inspiration is unique to the individual; something that I might find inspiring might not have the same effect on a viewer watching the animation. For this short film to do its job, I needed to find a universal source of inspiration; I needed an approach that would relay similar effects to everyone that watched it.

In the first volume of *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, the authors discuss the importance of The Strengths, which are “six moral virtues that emerge consensually across cultures and throughout time” (Peterson 28). One of the six Strengths is transcendence, which is touched upon in Arthur Raney's research on self-transcendent Media:

...transcendence refers to the disposition to forge connections with the larger universe and to strive for meaning and purpose that is greater than one's self. [...] individuals can develop it by performing specific behaviors: expressing gratitude, demonstrating an appreciation for (moral) beauty and excellence, expressing hope, and enacting religiousness and spirituality. (Raney)

The film, to achieve transcendence, would have to exhibit at least one of the traits Raney discusses. If transcendence is reached, then the inspiration process can begin. The most crucial criterion that molded the plot of the animation was expressing hope. The Muse's role in the story shows the artists that creation is possible; her role is to insight hope in the characters to help them reach the state of inspiration they are trying to achieve. Inspiration is not a single instance but rather a buildup of emotion that stems from connecting with the world around us.

Strong, positive feelings can trigger inspiration. But, more specifically, strong feelings of connection and reaching out beyond what one already knows. The film needed to touch upon the thrill of the unknown to create feelings of hope, vitality, and movement to be inspirational; it needed to transcend.

The Impact of Music

To find the media that was most inspiring to people, a research team sent out a national survey asking what kind of media had the strongest emotional effect on individuals. They found that most felt “moved, touched, or inspired” when listening to music, with 90.5% of respondents stating that they were moved while listening to music (Raney). And knowing that one of the main triggers for inspiration comes from positive feelings such as hope, I decided that there would be no script for the film but rather a song that set the pace for the animation. While the research for this specific project was only conducted within the United States, music is a universal language like math and art; it can span across cultures and make many different people the same way. This argument strengthened the decision to use a song rather than devising a script.

When a particular song or moment elicits strong emotion, it can also be the cause of a physical reaction that is known as “chills”. In Grewe’s study of music psychology, chills are described as “a subtle nervous tremor caused by intense emotion” (Grewe 297). When one thinks of chills, one usually imagines getting them while listening to a beautiful song or looking at a beautiful landscape. Whatever the case might be, it stems from a strong psychological reaction. We also know that- according to Chang- strong emotions can trigger inspiration and that many people -according to Raney- are moved by music. So, if a song gives someone the chills, there is also the chance that the experience of “chills,” or a strong emotional response, will trigger a state of inspiration.

In Grewe’s experiment, she had subjects listen to a set of songs and analyzed the presence of chills by having them press a button when they felt them while listening as well as having them fill out a post-experiment survey that asked them about their “musical experience,

preference, memories connected to music, and so on” (Grewe 299). The songs were then broken down into their elements to try and source the main causation of chills. After Grewe asked subjects what elements were most pleasurable, she found that the majority found all individual elements important within a song that gave them the chills; the beginning, the entry voice, the volume (or changes of), the melody, the tempo, contrast of two voices, and the harmony. But, the two most significant individual elements in songs that gave people chills were the entry voice and the volume of the piece (See Figure 2).

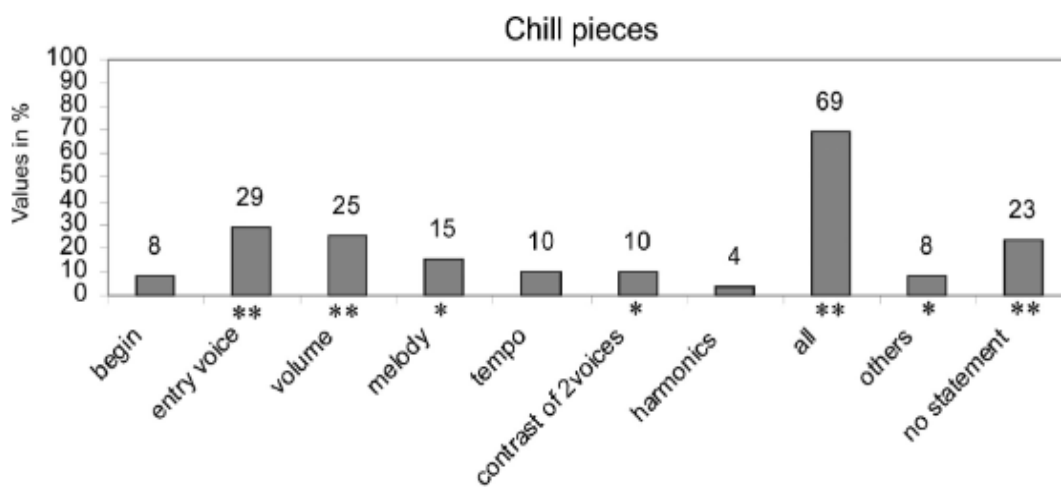


Figure 2. Participant descriptions of Perceived Pleasantness for Chills (Grewe et. al)

Even though chills are powerful, they are not common, and Grewe mentions that in the final part of her research: “Summarizing our findings, it can be stated that chills are relatively rare peak experiences. Not all people perceive chills in response to music, and responders and nonresponders can be characterized by [different factors]” (Grewe 309). But knowing what can cause chills is important because if someone does not experience chills from a song, it does not

mean they cannot be emotionally engaged to some degree. If the music cannot give everyone the chills, it should, at the very least, provoke some emotional response. At least, it should elicit positive thoughts or a general sense of goodness.

Based on Grewe's findings, the song had to have a noticeable change in volume and entry voice to have a more powerful impact on its listeners. If I could find a song that primarily emphasized those two elements, then the film would better inspire people watching it. The most obvious choice was classical, a musical genre that relies heavily on crescendos and diminuendos to evoke feelings and movement. However, I also wanted to ensure it was not too slow. And, if the song did have lyrics, I wanted to make sure they were relevant to the story; I wanted the song to speak of joy and hope.

Athlete's song, "The Unknown," was the perfect contender for my animation. It has several changes in volume and effectively uses vocals to transition between different parts of the song. In the opening lines, the vocals are calm and quiet, but as the chorus approaches, the vocals become more prominent and excited. In the chorus, the lyrics are uplifting and encourage the listener to believe in themselves: "Lift your head up / Untie the knot / My little sunshine / Hope is never light-years away" (Athlete). The song is dedicated to conquering one's fears and understanding potential. Of all the songs I listened to, "The Unknown" lyrics were the strongest and most hopeful. Knowing that strong feelings of hope can trigger inspiration, I decided this song would be the most qualified contender for the story and the animation.

Muse Mythology and Animal Symbology

For the storytelling of this short film, I knew I wanted to depict inspiration in a magical way to contrast with the realistic setting. And, what better way to add a magical element than to

add the presence of a deity that resides over inspiration? While I knew that the Muses in Greek Mythology were the goddesses of the arts, but otherwise, I had no knowledge of specific stories or Greek lore that described them in any greater detail. I first looked for a solid definition of their roles. Tomasz Mojsik described them best:

In Greek mythology, the Muses are a sisterhood of goddesses, their number set at nine by Classical and Hellenistic times, who embody the arts and inspire the creation process with their graces through remembered and improvised song and stage, writing, traditional music, and dance. According to Hesiod's *Theogony* (VII century BC), they are the daughters of Zeus, king of the gods, and Mnemosyne, goddess of memory. (Mojsik 67)

Interestingly, the Muse's lore varies in many stories and within Greek mythology. In most cases, when people think of the Muses, they think of the description Mojsik provides, nine sisters that preside over a specific form of artwork. But, in some instances, that is not the case. One particular case that expresses the fluid interpretation of the Muses comes in Homer's work, where in the stories he tells, he switches between addressing the muses as multiple deities and as one, as well as describing them as both leading "both as a chorus of nine and in the seemingly abstract similar" (*A Companion* 13-14). Not only that, it seems that, as a whole, Greek mythology fails to give the Muses in-depth personalities or characteristics.

Since the Muses' lore are not as in-depth as other deities in Greek Mythology, I could take my own interpretation of them and alter their appearance and behaviors to fit better the rhythm, pace, and aesthetic of the story I was developing. The most important part was finding a source of common ground that spanned across cultures; this project is meant to embody the spirit of local artists and people worldwide. I wanted to provide more about the Muse, how she appeared to different people, and how those people reacted to her presence. Keeping her in a

human form for the entire film would have disengaged the audience, and the story would lack interest. So, I delved into cultural studies of different animals and their significance in other cultures.

Before making any final decisions on animals, I researched them. I made sure they made sense in the context of the artist's medium and their significance in cultures worldwide. For instance, I anticipated having the Muse appear as a deer for the performer. After further investigation, I discovered that deer, while revered for their "swiftness, grace, and beauty," were also seen as a symbol for hunting and sacrifice and are closely associated with the Greek Goddess Artemis (Werness 127-128). As beautiful as deer are, they did not fit into the narrative correctly. The animal's roots were deeper in hunting symbolism rather than dancing and performance. I looked next to the lore of tigers and discovered the story behind Shiva and the tiger skin:

Shiva and Vishnu went to the wise rishis to teach them the truths of the universe. The sages cursed them and attempted to turn them away, and when they could not, they unleashed a monstrous tiger on the two. Shiva subdued the beast, removed its skin with his little fingernail, and flung it around his neck [...] Finally, Shiva subdued the ugly dwarf Mayalaka by stepping on his back where the god began to dance the dance that set time and the universe in motion. (Werness 404)

In Hinduism, the cultural significance of dance is embedded within the image of the tiger; the god donned its skin as he started the flow of time through a victorious dance. This, paired

with the art of performance, led to a powerful connection between the performer and muse while incorporating the lore of another prominent culture.

In the animation, the Muse enters the writer's room as a spider. According to Werness, the spider appears globally. Still, some cultures similarly exemplify spiders' significance: "In many world cultures, spiders are connected with weaving and weavers, a natural association, given the complex and magical properties of their webs" (Werness 385). In India, the spider was said to have woven at night with the assistance of the full moon (Werness 385). Of course, one cannot forget the story of Arachnid in Greek mythology, the weaver who was changed into a spider after challenging the likes of the Greek goddess Athena. The spider's symbolism fits well with a writer's workings; while the art of writing literature does not involve literal weaving or direct work with textiles, it does hold a more metaphorical connection with the word "weaving." Writers are responsible for "weaving" words to create a story; they "weave" their ideas together and create a quilt of words. The Muse is there to help the writer weave her story together.

The first two animal assignments were far easier than the latter two. Animal symbology is found in all cultures, so it was a matter of finding their significance in the context of Greek mythology and other cultures' lore. The mouse was another animal with strong symbology in Greek mythology: "the Greek God Apollo was sometimes called Apollo Smintheus, Mouse Apollo, after one of the god's embodiments," and deities Demeter and Kore's crops were always disturbed by the small rodents (Werness 284). In Tibet culture, the mouse is a vehicle of a deity named Ganesha, representing tenacity and strong intellect (Werness 285-286). These meanings worked well in the context of the astronomer; the mouse is a reference to earth, sky, and intelligence. Astronomy, the study of space, involves both the physicality of planet Earth and the sky above: the stars, planets, and planets. And, of course, astronomy is an intellectual pursuit,

strengthening the connection between the astronomer and the mouse. With celestial ties and the symbology of intelligence within the mouse.

Finally, in many cultures, the butterfly represents the human soul, both alive and dead; the Haida peoples, the Aborigines, and Greek culture all see them as symbolism for the cycle of life and death (Werness 64-65). Painting, a well-known medium in the fine arts, has often been used to express the inner emotions and concepts of the human soul and address higher concepts, and such high concepts can be found in art movements throughout history.

ART REVIEW

Art is beautiful because it comes in many different forms. Animation is a complex medium where, even with the simplest shapes and movements, one can create an absolute masterpiece. What was important in this project was utilizing digital art in a way that could be both aesthetically pleasing, but also efficient in design. The most important aspect to remember is the more detail a character has, the more time it will take to animate it. And, if a background is more detailed, it will take longer to make. That is why television shows and long-running animations tend to err on simplicity; creators and animators must maximize designs with rudimentary shapes and colors versus tiny details. Those tiny details cost studios more money, but more importantly, they cost more time. If a project has more particular aspects, a team works together to complete it.

Many short films have taken years to create with a large crew. Meanwhile, the creative thesis is a year-long project that students pursue independently. There is only so much I can do as a single human. For this reason, I took a deep dive into successful projects that use efficient strategies that utilize time restraints and create a beautiful, fluid story with its visuals.

Character Design

Character design can make or break animated media; characters must be unique enough to be differentiated and memorable. Certain restrictions make it harder to achieve such goals depending on the stylistic choices an animation team makes. One of the most important techniques is minimal design to convey uniqueness. Mastering this skill is essential when working with characters that will be repeatedly drawn or duplicated over a long period of time. If

a designer fails to make each character unique, it creates a flat, uninteresting lineup that can push audiences away. One of character designers' many issues is Same Face Syndrome. Same Face Syndrome occurs when several characters in a lineup or series have facial features that are too similar in appearance. Many argue this is a recurring issue in Disney's 3D animation, especially with female characters. Disney has been a pioneer in animation for several decades, but many have come to criticize their female character designs, as many of the female protagonists have similar, if not the same, facial construction: small noses, large eyes, and a pointed jaw such as Rapunzel from the movie *Tangled* and Anna and Elsa from the movie *Frozen*.

One show that successfully utilizes efficient character design is the reboot of *She-Ra: Princess of Power*. In the original 1985 television series, the cast has a mix of both human and non-human characters, all with diverse hair colors, outfits, and hairstyles. The design falls short in its lack of diversity within the human part of the cast, especially the females; many of the main female protagonists have the same facial features and skinny, hourglass body types. They would not be distinguishable if one only saw their faces (Figure 3).

However, in the 2018 reboot of the series, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, created by ND Stevenson, there is a drastic difference in character design. The characters maintain diverse outfits but are also completely different in their body shape and facial structures (Figure 4). These distinct characteristics are achieved through simple shapes, colors, and patterns to make them more accessible to animators. The reboot was a trailblazer because its storyline and visuals were unique, inclusive, and appealing to all audiences.



Figure 3. Still from *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (Wetzler 1985-1987).



Figure 4. Still from *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (Stevenson 2018-2020).

Good character design enforces the character's personality through their clothes. For example, the leftmost character depicted in Figure 4 is Mermista, who can manipulate water at will and lives in a kingdom that controls the ocean. Her outfit capitalizes on aquatic colors such as teal and sea-foam green accents. The scale and wave-like shapes further accentuate this on her belt and hair. More importantly, her build is unique; she has a wider waist, thicker arms, and a darker complexion. Her face is rounded, and her eyebrows and eye shape are unique. In comparison, the center character, Frosta, can manipulate snow and ice, which is made clear by her cool color scheme and winter clothing. And, to create more diversity within the cast, she is portrayed as a child in the reboot instead of as an adult in the original. Strong character design can tell a story without words; it can indicate the origins and abilities of a character with appearance.

Another great example of character design comes from another recent cartoon *Adventure Time*. This series has the simplest template for its character designs but utilizes shape and color extremely well (Figure 5). While all the characters have the same face, it is a staple of the show's aesthetic; it uses simple face design to allow for more wacky movement and silly motions that would not look appealing if the characters looked more realistic, perhaps in the style of *She-Ra*. This rule has many exceptions within *Adventure Time*, but with valid reasons. When characters in the show are given more distinct features like detailed eyes, noses, or lips, it accentuates them. It makes the characters more unique and expressive. For example, Earl of Lemongrab, the far right character in Figure 5, is an uptight, whiny character known for yelling with a shrill voice when things do not go his way. Unlike many in the main cast, he has eye whites, pupils, and a long, narrow nose; his stark contrast against the other characters accentuates his quirks and makes his freakouts more expressive and comical.



Figure 5. *Adventure Time* promotional Art (Cartoon Network).

Background Art

After carefully analyzing the characters and subjects of cartoon media, I considered the environment for the film. While the landscape of the environment is not the focal point in all the scenes, it is important because it creates a universe in which characters exist. Since the locations in the story are real locations on the University of Maine campus, I did not need to concern myself with geographical design. I could focus more on the pure appearance of the backgrounds. I had to consider budgeting time; the more time I spent on backgrounds, the less I could spend on character animation. Some of the locations in the story have more detail than others, so I had to pick and choose what to include and what to omit to utilize both my time and the project's design. Several series have unique approaches to the background art, and those series helped me envision what my backgrounds would look like.

One television show that immediately stood out to me was *Steven Universe*, which revolves around magical gem creatures that came to Earth from outer space. *Steven Universe*

takes beautiful background art to create an environment that is gorgeous and interactive.

Background art can convey emotions that the plot or characters might not explicitly state; it does so with composition, color, and lighting. For instance, take the home of the protagonists'; the Crystal Temple. The massive monument is shown countless times during the show, and even so, it remains unchanged throughout the series. Even though the same angle might be recycled in several episodes, the artists make a point to use varying colors and angles to change the mood of the Temple and what is happening around it.

In Figure 6, the Temple is presented simply; the palette is a soft mix of pastels, and the monument stands flat on a straight, horizontal horizon line. The mood is quiet and reflective, and soft overlays of light and diamond shapes make the landscape feel gentler. Figure 7 shows the same monument but at a far more drastic angle with more saturated colors. The emotion is more intense, and the high contrast between the dark rocks of the temple and the bright red sky implies a sense of doom. The clouds are not as soft, and the tilted horizon line sets the shot up for a drastic event. This image is a buildup to a giant spaceship crashing from the skies above, smashing against the hill in a violent explosion.



Figure 6. Still from *Steven Universe* (Sugar 2013-2019).



Figure 7. Second still from *Steven Universe* (Sugar 2013-2019).

METHODOLOGY

Countless animation processes are utilized today. Since the dawn of animation, many new techniques and technologies have emerged to help streamline the animation process. Now, there are countless different ways to create moving pictures. When I began studying animation at the University of Maine, I was trained to use Adobe After Effects, an animation and film post-production program. It is also used for motion graphics and can create animations with images, shapes, and text. With my background strongest in this program, I used it as the primary program to animate my artwork.

Before I started the animation, I had to create the character designs, backgrounds, and frames. All the concept art, character designs, frames, and background paintings used in *Inspiration: The Cogs of Our World* were created digitally on Procreate.

I used a mix of digital cut-out, tweening, traditional, and procedural animation to bring the art to life. Cut-out animation has been around since the 1700s and was primarily used for shadow theaters (Bob). This form of animation involves making a character and drawing different poses, whether facial expressions, hand gestures, or the blink of their eyes. Then, each layer is placed strategically in a sequence to make it move. This is not to be mistaken for traditional animation, also used in this project. Traditional animation involves individually drawing each frame; this technique was used during the Disney Renaissance in the 1980s and 90s. While it yields beautiful results that feel more lifelike and emotive, it is extremely time-consuming. I still wanted to incorporate it into my film, so it is used sporadically throughout the film, primarily in shots that involve great changes in movement in a short period of time, such as the Muse's initial transformation between her human form and her butterfly form.

Additionally, I used procedural animation. This animation was used for many of the effects and more subtle movements involved in the animation. Using keyframes and changing values, I was able to do things such as adjust the Muse's glow but, more importantly, I was able to posterize the time the animation played back. I aimed for a choppy, uneven feel for the characters. But, with the computer tweening software alone, I could not achieve it. Tweening involves computer-generated movement between two or more keyframes, hence its name. But, with a default frame rate of 24 frames per second, the tweened animation was far too smooth compared to the handmade traditional frames. So, I used time posterization to alter the frame rate of specific shots and character rigs to make the art style more cohesive and improve its flow.

I would have made more traditional drawings to increase the frame rate and overall smoothness of the characters in the animation if I had more time and manpower. Again, the issue with traditional animation is its time-consuming and exhausting nature. It takes a lot of patience to animate, regardless of its duration. If I were to make this entire 5-minute animation by traditional means, it would take far longer than this school year; the time frame would be unrealistic for what I was trying to achieve. This is why it was so important to incorporate procedural, tweening, and cutout animation into this project; they are more efficient and can achieve a similar effect without all the extra time and work.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

This animation, while using physical and literal connections to create a story that is universalized, is also a reflection inwards of an artist's journey through creation, and that is expressed in both the process of this project and in its final execution. Each artist interacts with the Muse differently, representing people's responses to inspiration and following Chang's inspiration pipeline.

In the first scene, the Muse presents herself and approaches the painter independently. The painter is trying to paint, but they cannot garner the nerve to let their paintbrush leave a mark on the empty canvas. As an artist, I can confidently say nothing is more intimidating than a fresh, empty canvas. Perfectionism and fear of failure make it difficult to start a project; the painter wants to begin, but they are worried that they do not have the skills or vision to create the painting they are trying to envision in their head. When the Muse comes to them, she flutters behind the easel and projects color through the canvas, giving the painter a physical vision to help them start their journey of creation. The Muse inspires the artist with the hope that leads to self-expansion and creation, as Chang discussed in her proposed model in the literary analysis (Figure 1).

The Muse's interaction with the writer is similar, but where the two interactions diverge has to do with the stage of progression. While the painter was about to start a new project, the writer was already in the planning stages of their work, hence the binder, the crumpled paper, and the pages of notes across her desk. She finds the inspiring media later in the creation process but still experiences feelings of hope and self-expansion as the painter did. She knew exactly what she wanted to do. Instead of being stuck in a loop of apprehension like the painter, she was frustrated that she could not express her ideas how she wanted to. At that moment, the Muse

settles as a spider on one of the books on her bookshelf, directing the writer's attention away from her work to draw inspiration from other sources. The book she picks up and reads becomes a touchstone for how she wants to write her own story. Many people do not realize that some of the most defining artworks and media pieces take inspiration from their predecessors.

The astronomer, while also different in that it involves more science than art, depicts fear. Fear of what is to come of a potential idea. Trying something new can be equally scary and exciting; that is how I felt when I started this project. The astronomer freaks out when she notices the Muse as a mouse on the floor. She sprints out of the observatory, but, once noticing an oddity in the skies above, her fear changes to vitality as she realizes she finds she has found a subject of her studies; then goes on to conquer her fears and present her findings to obtain an internship, which is what is depicted in her last scene. This process also affects the performer, as the tiger encourages her to pursue her passion for performance. She also expresses feelings of vitality by sprinting onto the stage and claiming her space there.

The only animal not assigned a character is the bird that appears between the second chorus and the song's bridge. The Muse takes flight as a bird not only to travel from the observatory to the Collin's Center for the Arts, but also to have an intimate moment with the audience; there is no character because, in that interval, the audience is the character. The flying sequence is meant to leave the viewers with a sense of awe and trigger thought-provoking perceptions, the third possibility in Chang's model.

I wanted to ensure the style was consistent for character design but included a range of characters with representative visuals to individualize them. Again, the importance of colors and shapes was crucial to the integrity of their designs, so I gave each character specific shapes and colors that would dominate their appearance. The painter follows a salmon hue with a bulky,

square-like build. The writer adorns green and has a longer, lankier appearance. The astronomer has a fuller figure and wears blue clothing, and the performer has an hourglass shape, wearing purples and small accents of pink. On a more personal level, I wanted to take inspiration from significant individuals I have met and use their appearances as foundations for my characters. By doing so, I could take what I learned about character design and accentuate the characteristics of real people to create more realistic and relatable fictional characters.



Figure 8. *Inspiration: The Cogs of Our World Character Concept Art* (Libuda 2023).

The Muse's design is majorly based on personal preferences. The lore of the Muses is fluid, and I think, more than anything, the open interpretation of the Muses makes their presence all the more powerful in an artistic context; it allows them to take the form that best suits the creativity of the artist. When I incorporated the Muses into my thesis, I wanted to use one female

figure; that form meant the most to me. Her appearance and outfit are based on the movie *Xanadu*, a 1980 film that follows a struggling artist, Sonny Malone, and Kira, one of the nine Muses sent to earth to inspire him. Kira is played by actress Olivia Newton-John and is depicted in loose-fitting dresses that are layered with ribbons and frills. *Xanadu* is a movie that has held great personal significance in my life; I have found its visual storytelling compelling since I was a child. I wanted to nod to the movie by dressing the muse similarly to how Kira dresses in the film. Her blue color matches the color palette of the environment, and it is also my favorite color.



Figure 9. Kira from *Xanadu* (Greenwald 1980).

I wanted to give the environment a painterly feel, so I used backgrounds from shows such as *Steven Universe* to inspire the aesthetic I was going for. The color schemes for everything up to the bridge of the song are dark and analogous, pushing the emphasis more on the presence of

the Muse and making her presence more ethereal in the context of the location, which is a real university. Once the final chorus hits, the backgrounds lighten. This change in light represents how each character found their inspiration, and by doing so, the world around them became more visible and open to possibility.



Figure 10. Still from *Inspiration: The Cogs of Our World* (Libuda 2023).

SUMMARY

This project was the most difficult out of my college curriculum; it required me to think of long-term plans and expectations I had to set for myself. Ultimately, the original schedule I had planned was completely changed due to burnout. I had high hopes and was thrilled to start this project as early as possible, but a mix of perfectionism, executive dysfunction, and anxiety prevented me from starting early. I lost a lot of time on this project, but I also learned that I work better with tight deadlines.

I learned why animation projects involve a team rather than one individual. While it is possible to create an animated film from start to finish on your own, it takes a ton of time and effort. I had to consider every little detail: what the characters would look like, where the story would take place, how long the film would be, what song would be most appropriate, and so much more. As mentioned in the introduction, I thrived on structure and hard deadlines. But, the expectations this project had were new territory for me, and it was quite frightening.

Continuing on, I realized the importance of collaboration on a smaller level. Not only do we inspire ourselves, but we also help others to reach that inspiration. When searching for a song for my Thesis, I struggled to find a piece that resonated enough with me. I found several songs that fit the parameters based on my research, but I needed more time to delve into a rabbit hole of potential songs. I realized I had extra help in the music tastes of those close to me. I could only discover so many songs in the time frame that I had, so I asked my friends for recommendations, and with the help of my close friend and roommate Natalie, I found Athlete's song "The Unknown" and discovered that it was a perfect setup for the story I was trying to tell.

This project is a rite of passage. It challenges students to charge into an infinite world of knowledge and art only to pick one subject they care about deeply. For seemingly the first time

in my academic career, this project asked me what I wanted to take out of it. It was not a matter of proving a point to fulfill the needs of a specific subject or research project; it was to prove to myself that I could create great things with the help of others. Whether it be classmates, professors, friends, or family, I learned that this project encapsulates all I have become here at the University of Maine. At the very end of it all, I learned that this project is for me and that I should be proud of all the progress I've made as a human and those who helped build me into the person I am today. I learned that inspiration is not only the cogs of our world but also the cogs that move our souls.

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APPENDIX

The creative work, *Inspiration: The Cogs of Our World* is the artistic aspect of this creative honors thesis and accompanies the written disquisition. The story follows a Muse that comes to earth and takes the form of different animals to inspire struggling artists. The work uses a collection of digital paintings, digital drawings, and animation to create a story for Athlete's song titled *The Unknown*. The full film is attached to the link in the citation.

Inspiration: The Cogs of Our World, Casey Libuda, 2023. <https://youtu.be/ywNUL8b2-3E>.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Casey Libuda was born in Framingham, Massachusetts, in 2000. They spent the first 18 years in Framingham, finding their passion in art at a young age. They started with pens, pencils, and crayons until they discovered the wonders of digital art, and since middle school, they have specialized in digital art. After graduating high school, they relocated to Lake Winnepesaukee, New Hampshire, with their father. Libuda attended the University of Maine and pursued a Bachelor's in Fine Arts with a concentration in Digital Art and a minor in Art History and Marketing. They were also members of the Art and Design Collective and the Wilde Stein Queer Straight Alliance and served as an officer in both clubs. After graduation, they want to enter the art and animation industry and create more stories to share.