

## Oral Presentation (Defense Speech)

### **I. Introduction / 5 minutes**

Hello and Good Evening! My name is Relic Michelle Puente, and thank you for taking the time today to attend my thesis defense of “Panadería.” I am both very excited and nervous to show you the work I have done over the past months in shaping my project!

This project began from a desire to combine both personal interest and my own identity to produce something that can be seen as both a celebration of queerness and my heritage. Before delving head-first into my project, I’ll take some time to talk a bit about my heritage and familial background, as well as my identity throughout out years. I was born to Immigrant Parents, who have flown in for my presentation today! They were born in Mexico, my mom is from Michoacan, having come to the US in 1991, and my dad is from El Ciudad the Mexico, entering the US in 1989. They married in 1994, and in 2003, I was born to three older brothers and eventually one younger brother in the city of El Monte, California! I would move and grow up in different areas of Southern California that are mostly Hispanic communities, such as Ontario and the San Bernardino-Colton areas.

Around middle school is where I would pinpoint the years when I began to question not only my romantic attraction but also that of my gender identity. I always had mixed feelings about my femininity as I never saw myself fitting the mold of what those around me would see as a “girl”, it also didn’t help that I’d never cared too much about my appearance. Graphic t-shirts of whatever I was into at the time, hoodies, and jeans were what made up most of my wardrobe. Even my shoes, most time than not were bought from the men's section because I could never find any within the women's section that went up to a size that would fit me. Hell, even when it came to planning my quinceañera, which, if you’re unfamiliar, is a girl’s 15th birthday celebration within Mexican and Hispanic culture to celebrate a passage of childhood into young adulthood, I couldn't decide if I even wanted one held for myself at all. This was purely because I didn't like the idea of wearing that giant dress, I even remember telling friends at the time that I'd wanted to wear a tuxedo instead.

Coming to PNCA became a time of finding a comfortable style of expression for myself. Where I am today, I can tell you that labels are hard. I still don't feel like I've entirely found what I align with, and perhaps I never will. I don't see this as a negative thing, though. For simplicity's sake, I say I'm

non-binary as no matter how I decide day to day whether I feel like presenting more femininely or more masculinely, I know I don't lean enough to either to confidently say that I am one or the other.

## **II. Overview / 10 minutes**

All of this has become the foundation for the creation of "Panadería". It is a visual development project for what I intend to be a finished visual novel-style dating sim. Visually, there is a prioritization on utilizing character costuming and repeating motifs throughout each character design that are significant to both their playable storylines and individual backstories, which players would progress through and learn about as they complete respective routes. Their costuming designs were created with the intention of forming an open space of discussion throughout the game. I'll do that through context of personal identity, sectioning aspects and memories from myself as a Mexican-American Queer individual, and utilizing it as a jumping point for the development of each character. In fact, each character was developed through a lens of either cultural heritage, religious ideologies, gender, and sexual identity, and how their outlook would come together to influence their outlet of self-expression.

Although we live in a time where the acceptance of LGBTQ identities has become rather progressive, unfortunately, with our new presidency, there has been an overwhelming conservative view rolled into power. Many of you may know of the multiple executive orders signed on January 20th by Trump, some of which have targeted transgender people. From the federal government only recognizing two sexes, to rolling back coverage for medical care of transition surgeries, and even the return of the military ban despite its rollback during the Biden administration. Their attempts to enact erasure of transgender identities will only continue to instill fear into both those affected as well as frighten the youth who witness its effects and begin to worry for their own future without easier access to these services. Being barred from opportunities just because of their identity. These executive orders not only become an issue with transgender identities being targeted, but also extend to the targeting of Mexican immigrants with ICE deportations, as well as the conservative ideologies of Project 2025.

I hope that I'm able to build a space for my future audience that play my game the chance to connect and build a community, to generate of message of perseverance despite what forces stand against you in the current moment. Make personal connections not only to the content of the game through their own experiences, but also to other players of the game, exchanges of helpful resources between one another.

Dressed in bows, frills, and heels, get ready for the feels! Panadería is set

in a modern-day California, where we play as Soloria, volunteering to aid our friends Aneli, Ismena, and Octavia in running a catering tent with the gimmick of selling comically large-sized pan dulces at a busy anime convention over the weekend! The game is structured into roughly three sections, the first acting as an introduction to our cast in the days that precede working at the convention's stall. This way, we can get a feel for dynamics and personalities not only as the lead interacting with the rest of the cast, but also how the rest of the cast acts towards each other. It is also a time to get the player thinking about which character route they may want to start leaning in favor of! The second section takes place as the three-day convention gets underway. When on your break time, Soloria and one other member from the cast of your choice go about exploring the convention's exhibitors' hall as a pair. Dialogue interactions taking place during these sequences are the most vital, as you will either earn or lose points in favor of pursuing one character's storyline. There are three options for responses: a positive, neutral, or negative choice with a matching outcome. Do not be disheartened if you fail in any of these interactions, as these points can also be accumulated by gifting purchased items from your time exploring the exhibitor's hall! The final third section would be your finale, the route you earned the most points in favor of!

I'd like to draw some attention to just what exactly went into each character, going more into depth individually with the whole cast!

Octavia Quiñones is a 22-year-old embodiment of confusion and anxiety. She is a fellow volunteer at the booth in charge of serving or acting as the booth's cashier. Overly nervous about how she is perceived by those around her and aloof at moments when someone acknowledges her presence. Her story is that of a struggle in finding her identity and how she chooses to go about expressing femininity. She tries to find a comfortable place within her vast sea of uncertainty and in remaining unlabeled. She comes from a big family, in seeing those around her grow to have their unique styles, she questions herself about how she wants to go about standing apart from them. Her confusion is expressed through mismatched articles of clothing, which should have the player questioning the design itself.

Actually, when I was first developing Octavia's place within the game, I didn't have the slightest clue what I wanted to do with her story for the longest time. My other three characters were pretty much set in stone from when I began forming my narrative. I was stubborn to a fault, because even though I would constantly wrack my brain about what themes her story would follow, I could never land on something that would stick. Even so, I refused to scrap her from my story. Somewhere leading up to my midterm is where her story finally started to slowly click into place for me. If she was going to cause me the most confusion and feeling lost within my narrative, then I'll just make her the embodiment of

confusion. The result is where she is at now, tying her with topics of uncertainty within expression, Identity, and sexuality.

A 20-year-old, tough-softie this is Ismena, she comes off as blunt and impulsive, yet a sloth when it comes to upholding her responsibilities. She willingly makes up any excuse that she thinks could get her out of doing any work. Although this tactic no longer works on Aneli, she continues it purely for her own amusement. The others within the group, however, fail to see through her act. An open book, her expressions become a dead giveaway of her feelings. Her Storyline covers discussion of gender identity exploration & familial unacceptance. Ismena was allowed to transition at an early age, with approval from her father but disapproval from her mother. Her mother would retain her stance and, through the years, refused to accept Ismena's transition, which led to many arguments at home, ultimately resulting in the separation between her parents. During this time, Ismena thought she could turn to her older brother for his support and possibly get her mother to shift her stance. She feels a sense of betrayal upon learning that her brother also shared a similar view to his mother's. In the end, Ismena would choose to move in with her father while leaving on bad terms with her mother & brother, having seen neither in over a year.

That is, until she has the unfortunate encounter of running into her brother, who'd coincidentally also been working at that same convention on the exhibitor's floor. Ismena, leading up to this event, had been hesitant to attend, as she had a feeling her brother might be in attendance and didn't want to face him as a possible customer at their stall. Despite this, she wanted to be there to support Aneli, and practically forgot about running into him since she had no way to confirm his attendance. This scene depicts this exact moment, Ismena had intended to just accompany Soloria in purchasing something from the booth and leave without acknowledging each other, until she hears him give her a snarky remark as she wraps up her purchase.

Ismena's Designs involve clothing upcycling and patchwork, The idea stemmed from trying to come up with solution to wanting feminine-presenting clothing but being denied access to such. So why not alter what you already own? Ismena would steal her mother's sewing kit and tear apart her clothing, altering it to something more feminine-presenting. Attachments of lace, cutting out hearts, creating her layered bellbottoms from recycled fabrics, she would only work with what she had available. The more patched together her clothing, the fonder she grows to them. A Proof of her resilience, craft, and not letting people around her dictate what she should look like.

Ismena's childhood friend and polar opposite, here we have Aneli! A 24-year-old meticulous organizer and the manager of the group's food stall. She tries her utmost to stay organized and level-headed under pressure, but also has a habit of acting like an overly worrisome mother to those around her, prioritizing the needs of others above her own. Aneli's story is one that is rooted in conservative catholic beliefs; she struggles to separate her wants from the expectations she grew up with. Before moving away from her home, Aneli would find herself enthralled with Lolitta fashion, rapidly accumulating a personal collection when she began earning her own income. There was a time when she did make an effort to wear the fashion in public, but would be shut down quickly by people around her for dressing so "weirdly and unfamiliar". Over time, this would diminish her confidence in donning the clothing outside. Yet, it could never diminish her desire for buying and wearing the clothing within the safe space of her bedroom, eventually taking it to convention spaces. Although she lives alone now, she still hasn't fully regained the confidence to openly wear these outfits outside of these safe spaces. That is, unless she's accompanied by someone else donning something similar, which most often than not is Ismena being used as a dress-up mannequin. Not that Ismena minds it, despite her consistent protests.

When it comes time to explore the convention floor with Soloria. Aneli's attention is grabbed by a booth selling handmade Lolitta accessories, which she excitedly pulls Soloria over to. The topic of discussion between the two shifts to how Aneli first found interest in lolita fashion, all while she scans the booth to pick out a new accessory. Her attention is caught by a frilly headband with blue bows and lamb ears. Aneli's expression noticeably changes as she looks down at the headband with a bittersweet expression. The mirror beside her reflects that of a past version of herself, staring disapprovingly back at her choices.

Incorporating the inclusion of religious symbols and ideologies in clothing theming for both her casual wear and the lolita dress was an interesting process to me. Through her casual wear, I made sure to keep the locket with a cross attached to it the closest to the face to draw attention to it, that way it is one of the first things you see within her design. Something else I kept in mind as I created variations for her casual wear was to go for a more modest and covered-up look throughout each outfit. Some of the clothing even going a bit more retro-period influenced, as I thought the gender expectations for a woman during those times fit with Aneli's struggles with expectations for herself.

The design of her lolita dress runs a bit more leaning to gothic lolita, closely resembling that of a nun's attire and keeping the cross motif, but also including the olive branch design in the collar, something typically carried by a dove, meant to be another religious symbol that of the Holy Spirit. In her monochrome scene, I purposefully chose for the headband to be a call back to the lamb, as the pure white of a lamb within a religious context is representative of innocence and purity.

Last but not least, we step into the shoes of our lead character, Soloria Cervantes. Soloria is a bubbly and sociable 23-year-old; however is a rather gullible person. She prefers to see the good in people, so many of Isemena's antics will almost always go over her head.. Dynamic with Aneli and Octavia. An immigrant from Mexico, she often faces challenges in language barriers she is quite unfamiliar with anime convention events, and has difficulty keeping up in conversation when it turns to these topics. She agrees to lend a hand with Aneli's catering tent over the weekend while also using it as an opportunity to learn more about each other's interests, out of curiosity and at the suggestion of Octavia.

Soloria's development throughout her costuming was to focus on the portrayal of Mexican fashion and embroidery motifs. I centered on the incorporation of traditional Mexican embroidery and Folk art jewelry known as Arte Wixicana, Huichol Jewelry. If you recall, earlier I'd mentioned that throughout the game, there will be a gift-giving dynamic. As you explore around the convention floor with each character, you will have to option to purchase items from booths that can be gifted later. Depending on the reception of the gift, it will either earn points in favor of the recipient or deduct points if gifted to the wrong character. Opportunity will be presented throughout each day, possibly even have Soloria "examine" the item that you can purchase, which would give you a hint towards which character that specific gift would earn you affinity points toward.

### **III. Project Description + Process of Making / 15 minutes**

Panadería began with just my characters, who'd initially been created for a sticker sheet that anthropomorphized Pan Dulce into three characters wearing clothing inspired by the fashion-subculture of Japanese lolita dresses. The story's narrative had developed through my first semester of thesis development,

which centered on reshaping a story of personal experience with anxiety on public transit into a short comic zine. A main point of feedback from my proposal that had the biggest impact on my work from then to now was to push for a more diversified cast of different Latino and Hispanic cultures. Which I will admit, I was hesitant to commit to as my character's designs were already preexisting, and I'd wanted to focus on the incorporation of Mexican culture as well as the development of assets used for the game itself. What would end up giving me that push to commit to redesigning my cast was a conversation I had during that focus week that revolved around the perception of not "looking Mexican enough".

OCTAVIA EX. Fitting into the expectation of what others believe we're supposed to look or act like, but not conforming to fit within those expectations, makes us feel outcast. In choosing to go forward with redesigning my cast, it would shift the look and mood of my project overall. I would go from a more stylized figure into that of a photographic realistic look, attempting to find a balance between the lighthearted antics of a dating sim with the heavier narrative shift that the project has now taken on, as many topics through the course of my project have now evolved to bring forward an increasingly difficult discussion that needs to be had. While I've made projects that have revolved around my personal internal struggles with identity, this is by far the one that has gone so much into depth, making it way more meaningful and important to me.

As I redesigned my cast, I made sure to keep all starting concepting and posing to traditional materials, only allowing myself to work within a 9-inch x 12-inch sketchbook to keep myself from hyperfocusing on small details, as I have a habit of zooming in to focus on detail when working digitally. With this, the process throughout creating new designs saw its successes and failures. The first week was attempts at working with a silhouetting process, which I find that I work better with when developing parts separately, rather than starting with the whole figure. It was extremely helpful when creating the initial pages of variations for each character, making faces and hairstyles from just a blob of highlighter.

This technique would also make it into the development of their costuming on body templates. These body templates were drawn traditionally, then refined digitally, and set up in rows on standard 11 by 8.5-inch paper. They were then printed and drawn over with alcohol markers, focusing on only blocking out shapes which would be drawn over with liner pens and pencil for a more legible look. I would once again move back to digital to be cleaned up, where I would choose at least three favorite variations to Frankenstein together into a new row of designs.. Once I've made my decision out of the favorites, I would take my final favorite three favorites for each and move into a more

finished, detailed, and lined state.

When developing the full illustrated scenes, they began with 3 to 4 rather vague thumbnails that would lay out the composition and positioning of characters throughout the piece. My first completed full-color scene was this full-cast portrait that, within the context of the game, acts as a second cast introduction. Here is where the player would be seeing the characters' convention attire for the first time. In a similar process to that of when I had been drawing the continuity sheets of each character, this scene included the use of graphite line art. Leading up to my thesis, I'd been exploring different methods of achieving a lineweight and style of line art I was happy with, because around this time was when I'd learned that the version of the Apple Pencil I owned was one of the only two compatible with my tablet that did not have pressure sensitivity. As I mentioned before, however, making myself work with graphite lineart saved me from spending too much time giving unnecessary detail to sections of the piece that would not only be pushed into the back, but would require me to be super zoomed into my canvas.

Admittedly, following my midterm meeting, I have gone back to working just digitally once again, having shifted over to a different method of rendering. This new method of rendering I'm referring to became more of a painterly look, and is most apparent in the title screen and the second colored scene illustration. It started to take hold after my midterm meeting, where a member of my panel, Sydney Kattine, had suggested simply painting over any new revisions that needed to be made to the state of my continuity sheets at the time. It would aid me in simply drawing over something that already existed rather than going in to redraw the section that needed revisions from scratch.

With all that being covered, if you didn't get the chance to view the demo on my iPad I will be going through the Vertical Slice of what gameplay through one of the scenes would look like!

[SCENE NARRATION] The group gathers together to try on different dresses for tomorrow's stall. Ismena and Aneli learning that Soloria was Unfamiliar with lolita fashion as well as learning that Octavia wasn't confident in wearing heels, have brought over some dresses and shoes for them to try on and get a feel for the day before.

Octavia: Seriously, when Aneli told me the idea for what we'd be wearing, I was open to trying out something new!

Octavia: How the hell do any of you walk in these for so damn long?! I feel like I'll snap my ankle in half if I even try taking a step forward!

[SCENE NARRATION] The dresser slightly shakes as Octavia fights to maintain her balance standing up, letting out a frustrated grunt her struggle is drowned out by the sound of loud laughter behind her.

Scowling as she looks to find the source of the noise is none other than Ismena, who's made herself quite comfortable on Soloria's bed.

[Here you are presented with your three options. For this scene, we'll be choosing to laugh alongside Ismena. ]

- Soloria Line (3 options towards points)
  - +1 Ismena: [Laugh with Ismena] Your attempt to contain your laughter is unsuccessful, your facade breaking as you join Ismena.
  - "Camina como un penguinino." You say through your laughing fit
    - Ismena: Verdad?! Dude, this can't be the first time you've worn heels, right?! I swear, even I didn't struggle this hard.
  - +1 Aneli: +1 [Scold Ismena]
  - +1 Octavia: [Check on Octavia]
  
- Aneli: No andés de mentirosa. Since you're so proud about it, you wouldn't mind if I showed Tavi the videos of when you were first walking in heels, right?
  
- [Ismena's face turns to one of surprise] ...!
- Oyé, no manches! You told me you deleted those!
  
- Now you've got me curious, you've gotta to show me these right now!

[Octavia quickly steps out of the heels, scooping them up from the floor and racing out of the room with Aneli following behind. Just like that, the two escaped the room before Ismena could even attempt to chase after them. She sighs in defeat, sitting back onto the bed, continuing to work on an unfinished patchwork project in the dim light of the bedroom.]

- Soloria eyes the cloth. Ismena is currently sewing a new patch onto it as she moves to the other side of the bed, occupying the space beside Ismena

Soloria points to the current piece she's working away at. "Y eso? Is that for your costume tomorrow?"

Ismena shakes her head, "..for myself, I guess." Despite these words, her furrowed brows and tone say something otherwise.

You answer with a "hm" in acknowledgement, a yawn escapes you as you feel the weariness of today weighing down your eyes..

Soloria:

[Ask about it]

**[Don't tell me]** "...You don't have to tell me anything you don't feel comfortable sharing." You gesture towards the patchwork with a nod of your head. "Do you mind if I watch you work though?"

Ismena gives a shrug in response, quietly complying as she turns herself slightly so that Soloria would have a better view as she works. Losing herself to her focus and mixed thoughts of trying to think of a proper response to Soloria, before she can say anything aloud she feels a soft thump against her back.

Soloria had fallen asleep.

#### IV. Influences / 5 minutes

If it wasn't already evident from how much costuming plays a role throughout this project, clothing was a huge influence throughout its development, specifically the fashion subculture of Japanese lolita dresses. Clothing upcycling, embroidery, and stitching, specifically that of traditional Mexican embroidery and folk art jewelry. My choice of using Arte Wixicana was mainly influenced by a trip to México over the summer to Zacatacas. While walking around a market there, I saw someone making and selling this beaded jewelry. At the time, it piqued my interest when, later returning to the table, the vendor wasn't there. So, unfortunately, I didn't pick up any during my time there. Returning in the fall and beginning thesis development when I'd been thinking about what aspects of Mexican culture I'd wanted to represent in my

project, I'd noticed my friend Laura had been wearing earrings in the same style of beaded jewelry which pushed me to ask about what the name of the craft was called so I could look into to be incorporated within my project.

In advance, content warning for topics of self-harm and suicide. A major game influence for both storytelling and visuals came from Team Salvato's Doki Doki Literature Club, DDLC for short. DDLC, for those unfamiliar, though a bit of a spoiler, DDLC is a visual novel psychological horror game that disguises itself at first as a cute dating sim. The second act of the game takes place after we discover our childhood friend, Sayori, dead in her room by suicide. The game completely restarts from the beginning, rewriting itself as if she'd never existed to begin with. Things are no longer normal as the game progressively descends into more chaos, as more and more disturbing and unusual glitches affect your game. The mix of cheerful visuals with its shift into the dark reality on depression, self-harm and suicide by putting these events directly in the player's face in a way that draws them out so that they're difficult to skip past. Powerful, a call for your attention in an uncomfortable situation.

#### V. The Project in Culture / 5 minutes

The pieces created throughout my thesis give a strong expansion to my portfolio in areas that I felt were lacking prior. The addition of full illustrative scenes that prioritized character interaction, a noticeable push in style from my previous work, set it apart from my previous works.

But, what's in store for the Future of Panadería? Where do I plan to take this project? Something that was brought to my attention during my midterm meeting was to quote, "Make this a game for Relic." Going into the future, as I finish out illustrations and sprites to assemble the final game, I will begin to move the vertical slice over to Ren'Py, a free visual novel software that is open source and free for commercial use, to act as a template to build on.

Instead of trying to shape this into something that tries to appeal to a larger game studio, I intend to keep it a personal project that, when published, can become something that garners a loyal audience that resonates closely with the topics brought to light through its story. Additionally was suggested that I consider starting a Kickstarter for other developmental areas that I may not be confident in developing on my own, which is the route I aim to take. Funding raised by the Kickstarter would go towards hiring for sprite animations, possibly a short soundtrack. Additionally, a portion of the proceeds raised by the would be donated to GLAAD, a charity for media advocacy of fair and accurate portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community <https://glaad.org/about/>

#### VI. Conclusion / Closing Remarks / 5 minutes

Identity is quite a lot to unpack, and most of the time, confusing to try

and understand. From the incorporation of my own heritage and gender identity being grounds for malicious political targeting, this project serves as a celebration of Identity during this dark time.

Once again to everyone & panel here for attending today, thanks to mentor Chuck not only for your guidance through my project but also for your nitpicks on my pieces because, I genuinely do appreciate them but also want to apologize for having to deal with my crunch in the last couple of days trying to piece everything together for today. Thank you to Mom and Dad, for allowing the opportunity of attending PNCA, even pursuing art for that matter, And finally to my friends back home, who've been rooting for me throughout the years, Leilani, Ace, Emma, Alexa, Atley and Yoselin.