

### Skipper Oral Defence Speech

Hello I'm Sara Vitale, A multimedia artist who is desperately trying to stay in touch with her childhood as long as possible. Art (and Animation in particular) is genuinely my lifeblood. I just love drawing and creating stories all in hopes to brighten up someone's day and it has always been a dream of mine to play a part in shaping the next generation's childhood in the way of making and or working on the cartoons they grow up with.

My artistic journey all started on one singular Saturday morning back when I was but a wee tot. Most of my childhood is filled with memories of cartoons and animated movies. Every weekend my dad and I would watch the entire block of Saturday morning cartoons. Well, one day my dad fell asleep while we were watching cartoons.... which meant I could get as close to the TV as I wanted without getting nagged at. It turns out that just that second I put my undivided attention onto the tv the cartoon block ended and a behind the scenes documentary started on the creation of Looney Tunes.

At that moment little, tiny me learned that all the cartoon characters I dreamed of one day meeting weren't real. Now, unlike a normal child I didn't cry learning that all my idols were fake... instead I grabbed a pen and paper and started drawing. I told my little self that this drawing was going to take me days- *NO MONTHS*- to finish! It wouldn't be hung on my fridge

but in a museum!

...I finished the drawing in five minutes and then stared at it with a blank expression wondering why it didn't move. But now thanks to my time here at PNCA I know that all that was missing was just a few extra frames. Being here in art school has been a lifelong dream of mine and I can't believe my time here is almost over. Being here and honing my skills has been such a fulfilling experience and it's just an added plus that now I can reap the benefits of being the quote unquote "weird girl" my entire school career by making my fun little films And speaking of films, let's get to the real reason we're all here... Shall we?

In essence my thesis, Skipper, is a film about an anxious 20 something year old finding herself within the realm of her own overactive imagination. And what could go wrong? Everything. *Everything could go wrong*. My goal with this film is to go out and depict anxiety and panic through the lens of what it actually *feels* like to experience it. Sometimes you think you're going to have a bad day, and other times you genuinely think the world is going to end. There are rarely in between.

The Story of Skipper was directly inspired by something that happened to me back in high school. It happened when I went to my first ever DIY punk show held in just... Some random guy's front yard here in Portland. It was exactly the kind of scene I wanted to break into but the thing is... I didn't look at it. Like at all. I literally had my hair in pigtails. I looked like a lost kindergartener surrounded by red solo cups and platform boots. I couldn't help but feel like everyone knew just how out of place I felt and it was right in the middle of the mosh pit where

my anxiety took to an all time high.

I was drowning in bodies trying to catch my breath when all of a sudden the small band on stage started playing a song I SWORE I heard before. But I know I hadn't. There's no way I could. I've never even heard of this band before. But somehow I knew every beat and every lyric as if I was anticipating it. The song playing was like an anchor point for me holding me between worlds. One world where I knew I belonged and that I was in my own body, and another where I was someone I never met before wearing skin that was just one size too small. It was one of the weirdest panic attacks I had ever experienced. And it *stuck* with me.

It stuck with me to the point that I wanted to tell its story. I wanted to share its *experience*. So I sat down and I started ideating. Was it going to be a comic? A short film? A solo illustration? It was in this stage of creating where I found the bounds of this story to be *limitless*. And I found it an idea worthy enough of being my thesis. The story followed the titular character, Skipper, on a not so happy journey of self into depths of her own mind. Skipper's most notable qualities are being small, meek, and utterly anxious at every turn. And while that's normally a hindrance in other stories, in this one it's the leading cause.

[Talk about how they lived in my head and I just drew them into being]

In the original story it was pivotal for Skipper to be pushed out of her comfort zone; So I started designing the person who would do just that— Skipper's best friend. Skipper's friend, who was later named Kate, was made to be everything Skipper wasn't. While Skipper wore her hair

up; Kate wore theirs *down*. While Skipper wore loose and baggy clothing; Kate wore more edgy and revealing outfits. Kate's design came pretty together pretty quickly, only needing a few extra passes before being finalized. But our next character... Was not that easy to create.

Much like Skipper, the villain of this story lived freely in my mind, but this time it was a *pain* to try and translate her into a tangible design. I knew that I wanted the villain to be a symbolic representation of Skipper's brain so I started her design by imagining what kind of creature *could* live inside someone's head. I quickly got inspiration from all different kinds of strange aquatic animals, Sea slugs, water bears, and polychaetes specifically spiked my interest within her design. So in the end of a mad dash of research I finally finalized her design... and her name.

*Amygdala*. Now, I will openly admit I only chose to name her off part of the brain, the Amygdala, because it was just the one that sounded the best. (Hippocampus doesn't really roll off the tongue and Medula felt a little too on the nose for such a snake-like creature.) But imagine my delight when during my research I found out that the Amygdala is the part of the brain that is responsible for anxiety response! It was perfect. Almost scarily so...And well, so was she! I personally absolutely love her design.

In the original story for Skipper there were 3 distinct acts that all explored just how expansive Skippers' minds could be. Each act was going to be separated by a change in genre and art style, a decision made in testament to just how expansive imagination can be (especially in times of high anxiety) but also out of pure love for the medium of animation itself. Animation

is a medium where anything is plausible and everything is possible. After all, thanks to Animation roadrunners can run through painted tunnels and Wile E. Coyote can defy gravity *just* long enough to realize he fell off a cliff. We *know* these things are impossible in the real world but something about animation lets us accept the impossible as fact. It's magic!

Act One of Skipper had her and her friend Kate go to a local bar to watch a singer perform; more or less mirroring the true events that happened to me. In the second act skipper *skips* into a dimension where they and Kate are knights fighting a giant mucus dragon and when Skipper sees Kate die in front of her she *skips* into another dimension where the two of them were space marines in the middle of a war on an alien planet. Then it all wraps up in the third act Skipper finally meets Amygdala in her brain and somehow finds a way back out to her real world. When all of these acts were put together the entire story of Skipper wound up to be 6 minutes long. Which... isn't good. And these six minutes had gone through CONSTANT changes and revisions.

Then while the animatic was being tweaked I made a trailer based off of my thesis film for my proposal; this involved animating key snippets of the plot to form an engaging hook without giving too much away. And in order to make this trailer I needed to create character sheets for both Skipper and Kate. In the end a trailer *was* made but all of the scenes chosen/depicted in it were cut from the final version of the story we will be seeing here today... But some aspects and ideas still managed to shine through.

*This* version of Skipper, the one you'll be seeing today, takes place entirely within

Skipper's head where the real *meat* of the story begins. Now that it was time to start development on the actual film itself a few more character sheets were made, this time to show the strengths and limitations of Skipper's design in movement so it can be best utilized by me and my future team working on the film. These new reference sheets covered everything from how skipper's clothing lands to even her iconic hairstyle.

[Talk about making Skipper's silhouette and how it pushed her running animation]

...And Skipper's hair was important too because it adds to. Not only because it adds to her iconic silhouette but it adds a fun secondary action that is used as another vessel to act with and push a scene. This was when Amygdala finally needed a finalized design as well, *especially* since she was playing a much larger role in this new version of the story. It was a balancing act to keep her between something unimaginable but still tangible. And I think I hit the nail on the head because even though Amygdala appears to be beautiful and put together... She's still the terrifying villain I wanted her to be.

This film takes place in Skipper's head, so I designed the backgrounds to look like a brain. Lush, pink valleys and hills with small floating islands that defy all expectation and thought. While I wanted the scenery in this film to be vast, I never wanted it to feel like Skipper and Amygdala were the only people living here; this space was going to act as an ecosystem; so I made a small supporting friend to help fill the fields with life.

This friend in question was designed to be a representative of an entire species of

horse-like animals that lived in Skipper's head and lived amongst the wide open fields. I designed them to resemble horses as a call back to Skippers earlier adventures as a Knight. Afterall Amygdala is basically a dragon. And what *knight* can defeat a dragon without a trusty steed?

[Explain why the colors are changing on screen; testing hues.]

[Amy, Skipper, and the environment all rely heavily on warm tones so I wanted to try and vary cool tones with the creature]

Making this creature was so much fun. While Amygdala and her surrounding environment represents the brain and all its functions, I wanted this creature to represent the ties between the brain and the nervous system, one sending the other thoughts to be turned into actions. Amygdala was the thought and this horse was the action. In the finalization of the creature's design they came to resemble what they were based off of: the nervous system. And then came their name: the Nervusai. A small portmanteau of nervous and pegasus. The Nervusai also came to resemble the Chinese mythos of the Kirin, a horse-like creature who appears only in times of peace and tranquility, something Skipper desperately needs... So now with all the *characters* finished, it was time to schedule out the film.

So to start scheduling I first needed to know *who* to schedule. I asked around for some *handy helpers* and five of my friends agreed to help! Within *this* film's animation pipeline there were four distinct jobs; Rough Animators who plan out the shots and how everything moves, the

Clean Up Artists who make sure everything looks nice and on model, and the colorists who make sure everything gets all nice and pretty! And then of course there's the secret fourth job which is the Director...! Who gets to do all of that and *then* some! In fact, 47% more. Now this isn't to shame my help— they were PIVOTAL in this process! None of the stuff I'm going to show you today would have ever been done. This is to show you just how CRAZY I am!

And sadly this *crazy* came back to bite me in the rear. At the beginning of this semester when animation could finally get started my mentor, Za, came to me and said that my project was still just *too* long and that with such a small team I wouldn't be able to complete Skipper's entire 2 minute run time. So instead of animating the entire thing we would keep the beginning and the end of the film in their animatic form and only animate the middle part (*my favorite part*). This roughly translated to only HALF of the film being fully animated like I originally hoped. But honestly? I'm kind of excited to show the project in this form! At best it's still a testament to animation; each and every part of it! And at worst it's.... It's still the love letter I always wanted it to be.

Now, before we watch the film... I just want to mention that I also got a little help from a small band called Dog Cult...the band who was performing when I got the inspiration for Skipper. To my absolute delight the band gave their *enthusiastic* consent for their song that inspired Skipper to play in my film. When I got this news I absolutely BAWLED. This was easily the biggest win during the entire production of Skipper. So we ALL promise to go home and stream Dog Cult on all of our preferred listening platforms— RIGHT? And finally.... With all of that out of the way... Are we ready to watch the film?

[Film plays]

As you can see where my thesis ended up exactly where we planned, a small little animatic-animation sandwich! But personally... I want to see this film completed to the fullest extent of the word. No more sandwich. I want the *full* film! ...And maybe more?

I have had a lot of friends express to me their utter love for this project and these characters and all of that excitement has pushed me to thinking *beyond* this 2 minute film. And even past the 6 minute animatic this project started as. Recently I've been trying to answer more and more questions about this world and concept to the point where I've been debating turning it into a pitch bible. And whether this is something I pass around to studios or keep it forever locked in my portfolio that doesn't matter.

This entire project has taught me so much about loving and accepting my own small wins and accomplishments, something that has always been a problem for me. And I want to take the time here to thank not only my crew but all of you in this room. From friends, to family, to teachers, and strangers, all of you have affected me and my work in the most positive way just by being here. Thank you. From the bottom of my heart, seriously. It means so much to see you all here supporting me and encouraging my work.

But... There is one person who I want to thank one. more. time. For everything they've done for this project. Piper Haswell. The GOAT. The MVP.

At the very beginning of this project I came up to Piper with a hyperspecific ask,

“Can you do some stop motion animation for Skipper?”

I don't know if you guys noticed it at all but Skipper was *not* a stop motion film. I asked Piper just to do this for all the love in their heart. Just. for. *Me*. It was the most selfish ask I have ever made in my life and they DID IT! You might have even seen these puppets displayed outside.

After all the cutting and rewriting I felt that the original spark of the story inspired by my love of animation was gone so I gave Piper the important job of making an ode to The Horse in Motion, one of the first stepping stones in invention to animated films. Piper absolutely *KNOCKED* this out of the park. And they're not even here to reap their benefits! So Piper... If you can hear this at all... THANK YOU.

[Open to Panel and Q&A]