

A stylized illustration of a snowy forest. The scene is dominated by tall, thin, grey tree trunks that rise from a ground covered in white snow. The background is a dark, muted grey, suggesting a night or overcast sky. Several bright blue, fish-like shapes are scattered throughout the scene. One large fish-like shape is in the upper right, another large one is in the lower left, and a smaller one is in the center. There are also smaller, star-like blue shapes in the upper left. The overall style is simple and graphic, with a limited color palette of greys, whites, and blues.

Nowhere Special

Soren Spina Thesis 2025

Artist statement

Soren Spina is a writer/illustrator from San Francisco, California where he has two beautiful pet cats. His work often incorporates themes of queer identity, with a more lighthearted and silly tone.

He's always looking for a way to spread positivity and whimsy through his work, whether that be through making silly stickers, fanart, storytelling, drawing his original characters, Soren hopes that his work will be able to impact others the way that art and stories have impacted him.



Thesis Journal





SKETCHES MAYMAPS?







Oral presentation

Hello everyone! And welcome to my thesis defense presentation. For those of you who don't know me, hi! I'm Soren, I'm an illustration major and creative writing minor here at PNCA and for my thesis project I created a pitch bible for an animated series I'm calling, *Nowhere Special*.

Have you ever woken up in the middle of a mysterious forest to a strange man telling you you're dead? Have you ever lost all your memories? Do you ever see fish in places they shouldn't be? Well if you do, then you might be a resident of Nowhere, or you should probably see a doctor. Definitely one of those two things, though!!

Nowhere Special follows Eric Addicott, a formerly alive teacher who after getting drowned by one of his students, now finds himself in the middle of Nowhere (lol) without his memories.

He is very quickly introduced to Malcolm, who guides him through the strange world of Nowhere and informs him that he is, in fact, dead. Eric however cannot accept this, thus he and Malcolm set out on an adventure to find a way to cheat death. The pair form an unlikely bond while encountering the inhabitants of Nowhere and helping them move on. When they come across an ominous cult that reveals that Malcolm is slowly changing into a lost soul (a fishy), the pair must find their way out of Nowhere before they become permanent residents...

Nowhere Special is an episodic "monster of the week" type show. Each episode will feature a different soul within Nowhere that has an issue binding them to the afterlife. Eric and Malcolm find it is their duty to solve these problems and assist them in moving on as the relationship between them slowly builds. As the show continues, the central and more pressing conflict will begin to reveal itself.

For my thesis project, I wrote a pilot script for *Nowhere Special* and created a series of backgrounds, prop designs, character turnarounds for both characters, illustrations of key scenes, and continuity sheets.

In the pilot episode that I scripted, the viewers are introduced to the **world** through Eric, the newest resident of Nowhere. Here, he finds that he has lost his memories from life. He acts as a



Oral presentation

point of view character, meaning that as he learns new things about the world he finds himself in, so does the viewer. Eric is discovered by Malcolm, who explains to him that they're both dead.

Eric takes the news poorly, but realizes Malcolm is his only chance to get out of his current situation and figures that together they can find a way to escape the afterlife.

While exploring Nowhere, the pair get caught in a bad rain storm and discover a cabin where they can take shelter. Inside, they meet a kind old woman named Claire and her fish friend Milton.

Claire acts as the grounded character in the pilot, she's less pragmatic and more informed than Malcolm. She acts as the wise man character who warns Malcolm of the fate that comes to all souls that stay in Nowhere for too long.

She explains that those who avoid facing their issues will slowly succumb to a transformation into nothing but a mindless fish. A second death. Once Malcolm realizes his feelings for Eric, he decides to defy his fate and fight to stay with him.

The pilot is a pretty straightforward episode compared to the rest of the series. Since both the viewer and Eric are still adjusting to this new world, I didn't want to plunge them into the deep end of cults and body horror immediately. Instead the pilot features a really simple fetch and retrieve quest, but still establishes the stakes of the series.

I tend to have a pretty loose artistic process, but a longer project like this requires structure to stay on track. So, I began by making a checklist of all the things I wanted to get done over the course of the semester. Each week, I would pick what I wanted to prioritize, and then usually just put something on in the background while I worked. (thank you Jeff Probst I couldn't have gotten through this without you) I usually began by doing warm-up drawings in my sketchbook before moving on to my thesis sketches in Procreate.

From there, I'd enter the torturous process of line art. I can be very particular when it comes to lining my work, so I always do at least 2 passes before I let myself move on to coloring.

Coloring and rendering are my favorite parts of my process. I used many moodboards to help me create my color palettes to support my vision. (talk about process)

I came up with the idea for Nowhere Special last summer, although it has evolved significantly since then.

My original concept was a visual novel/point and click style video game titled "*You Are Dead*", which later became the title of the pilot. In the game, you play as Eric, and you have to travel through Nowhere meeting various strangers and collecting pieces of a broken artifact to get back home.

Clearly something changed.

In my thesis development class, my project began to lean away from the video game concept and more towards a television series instead. I knew that I wanted Malcolm as an important character, but I couldn't incorporate him the way I wanted to in video game format. So, I decided to make that change official and *You Are Dead* became *Nowhere Special*.

But why this project for my thesis?

I chose this project for a very personal reason... When the COVID lockdowns happened, I was in high school. I already had social anxiety which made talking to people really hard and being locked in a room for two years certainly didn't help.

When I got to college, I began to notice the ways that isolation had stunted everyone's social skills and I felt that there's a lack of community amongst people now.

Nowhere Special is meant to encapsulate a time when connecting with people was easier. While the world of Nowhere feels empty, there are still strong bonds between the strangers that inhabit it. In the pilot, the first people that Eric meets are open and welcoming to him, despite barely knowing him. Throughout the rest of the series, Eric



Oral presentation

and Malcolm, who are two pretty different people, decide to get involved in their community to make it a better place by helping those around them.

But this wouldn't be a project by Soren if the characters weren't at least a *little bit gay*. (spoiler alert they're actually a lot bit gay).

Being queer, I didn't really grow up seeing myself represented in media, and when I did it was usually as a shitty punchline to a joke that hasn't aged well. And while things have gotten a bit better as I've aged, I still feel that lack of representation in the media I consume. There aren't many depictions in media where characters can just *happen* to be queer, without it encapsulating their entire character. I think introducing more casual queer representation within things like film and television is really important for overall normalization and growth.

My biggest inspirations for *Nowhere Special* were series like *Infinity Train* (2019), *Torchwood* (2006), and the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012). There are so many different aspects of these works that I admire.

Infinity Train is an animated show that covers heavier topics in a very realistic way that I hadn't seen before in a lot of media targeted towards younger audiences. In the series, the characters are trapped in a series of bizarre train cars until they're able to face the issues that they've been avoiding. It also heavily features a liminal space aesthetic, which has inspired the world of *Nowhere*.

Torchwood was one of the first heartfelt examples of queer representation that I was exposed to. It follows a fun "monster of the week" formula, but doesn't leave its characters stagnant and unchanging like many other episodic series at the time would. I also have a strong appreciation for its very lived-in designs, which I feel a lot of modern day media is missing and has inspired my own work.

And *Welcome to Night Vale* is a podcast that captures a really excellent balance of comedy and horror. It's the sort of writing that has influenced my own writing and humor. It's also another early example of a healthy, queer relationship within a piece of media. These were all things I wanted to incorporate within *Nowhere Special*.



When I first started conceptualizing my characters, I had to figure out Eric and Malcolm's names, their personalities, and their purpose within the story. I wanted to make them distinct and yet compliment one another.

When he died, Eric was a 32 year old high school English teacher. He enjoyed reading, bird watching, and quiet evenings in with his cat. He never really realized how lonely he was when he was alive, he had gotten so stuck in his work and routine that he never allowed himself to enjoy life or have fun. When he gets to *Nowhere*, he's a way more anxious person than he was in life, but as he gets his memories back he shifts more to the put together adult, he normally is. But with the addition of Malcolm in his afterlife, he finds that he's able to relax and enjoy the little things more frequently.

Malcolm died, like Eric, at age 32. He was a writer, who enjoyed horror books/movies, and lived a very isolated life, but unlike Eric, this was by choice. Malcolm found inspiration in his solitude, but after his death he realized that his isolation had cost him all his close relationships. In *Nowhere*, Malcolm is far more social and outgoing than he was in life. His outlook is way more positive and comedic and he seems to really enjoy living in *Nowhere*.

The world of *Nowhere* was heavily influenced by the idea of liminal spaces. I wanted it to feel like it could be a real place on Earth, but there are things there that make you aware that it isn't the real world. It's meant to be empty, cold, and evoke the feelings we associate with death. I also wanted to incorporate a stark contrast between the inhabitants of *Nowhere* and the environments that they travel through.

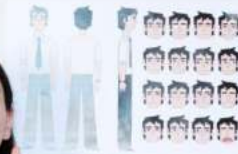
Nowhere Special was created as a pitch bible intended for a more adult audience. The ideal home for the show would be the animation network, Adult Swim. It's accessible to audiences across multiple platforms and the series could fit into their already extensive library of shows. *Nowhere Special* will also be featured on my website/portfolio as an example of my professional work for producers and hiring agents to view. Alternatively, I could independently produce *Nowhere Special* and release it on a site like YouTube for anyone to enjoy :) *Nowhere Special* will appeal to horror comedy fans in their late teens to early twenties whose sense of humor is on the more lighthearted side.





Documentation







TO DO:
☐ Wash dishes
☐ Clean counter
☐ Wipe stove
☐ Vacuum floor
☐ Wash windows





