



OFF THE BIT

A thesis project by Albany Case

www.tumblr.com/thekeytomyh-art

www.tumblr.com/offthebitproject

Abstract

Through creating a pitch bible for an animated feature film including character designs, backgrounds, and supplemental illustrations, I used the characters of anthropomorphized racehorses to explore themes of male relationships, their nuances, the dynamic shift that defines a romantic or platonic relationship, and to make an authentic and accessible narrative of male-male love. Targeted at general audiences, *Off the Bit* seeks to bring queer stories to a broader demographic and to remove the stigma of queer stories being only for adults. Following the story of the characters Sterling Silver, Lord Desmond, and Little Red, this work's focus themes are self-acceptance, finding your own peace, found family, and adjusting to major life changes and how those changes affect the relationships a person has.

Artist Statement



Albany Case is a Portland-based artist, illustrator, and character designer. He focuses his brand around “works of heart”, treasuring his passion for his craft and channeling childlike wonder and whimsy into his characters as the ultimate form of healing self-expression.

Albany earned his BFA in Illustration at PNCA in 2025.

Written Proposal

Thesis Statement

Through creating a pitch bible for an animated feature film, I will use the characters of anthropomorphized racehorses to explore themes of male relationships, their nuances, the dynamic shift that defines a romantic or platonic relationship, and to make an authentic and accessible narrative of male-male love.

Inspiration

There is a wide variety of media that has influenced my art throughout my life, but this project's primary inspiration is a recent discovery for me. The concept and themes are most heavily inspired by *Red Dead Redemption II*, created and published by Rockstar games. The game and its well-researched, accurate portrayal of horsemanship created an interest in horses for me earlier this year when I first gave the game a chance. Seeing the horses move in the game on top of an unrelated desire to find a new way to push myself in my art inspired me to pursue drawing horses. The narrative of the game is complex but one minor undercurrent that caught my attention was the theme of found family, which was especially stand out viewing the game through a queer lens as I did.

The spin-off series of the *Pokemon* franchise, *Pokemon Mystery Dungeon*, is not a direct influence regarding content, but it has been a constant companion throughout my life and its tonality is something I would like to incorporate into my work. The stories of the *Mystery Dungeon* games are very character and relationship centric, known for their strong emotional moments and the stories themselves shaped my perspective of friendship and interpersonal connections from a young age.

Disney is another inspiration of mine, namely in the way of family-friendly adventure films with bright, colorful art styles. I have always respected the art of Disney, but to this day even as there is more and more representation in this highly mainstream form of media, queer characters and relationships are heavily sidelined while onscreen male platonic friendships have much more of a suitable couple's dynamic such as Lumiere and Cogsworth in *Beauty and the Beast* or Alberto and Luca in *Luca*.

Written Proposal, Cont.

Context

My aim is to see more mainstream, family-friendly media treating gay relationships with the same level of importance as straight ones. Additionally, as a transgender and gay man myself, I have spent much of my life examining masculinity and its expression. I have noticed that in most explicit queer representation, the dynamic of queer relationships is treated identically to straight ones. For the most part, this is a net positive, but I feel like this form of representation has a key weakness in that it promotes a lack of research and understanding of queer relationships. I find that men have special dichotomies not addressed in most media, not to mention the history of discrimination is hard to ignore, and my goal here is to create a product featuring a male-male relationship where it truly feels like a researched queer experience, not a relationship where a woman could be easily substituted where a man is. Furthermore, due to stigma, gay relationships can be very hard to get into, so in my examination of what causes a platonic relationship to turn romantic, I'd like to display several parallels to real-life historical cases of male life partners often erased as just friends, and how major life changes can often trigger awakenings of feelings neither party were aware of.

My goal with this project is, ultimately, to make the nuances of queer relationships—even the smallest ones—accessible to a broader audience outside of the LGBTQ+ community while telling an entertaining story with engaging characters.

Creative Direction

This is a narrative project following a main character duo on both a physical and emotional journey. The story follows racehorses Sterling Silver and Lord Desmond, who flee their stables after years of successful racing leads them to realize the dark underbelly of the horse racing industry, tension which culminates when Sterling Silver finds a minor injury he sustained is quickly becoming more serious with every race he runs. Fearing euthanasia, Sterling Silver flees the track, shortly pursued by his racing rival Lord Desmond within a few days. Together, the mischievous horses live free and dedicate their lives to disrupting the industry that they had been unwittingly abused by for so long. Years later, they devise the ultimate protest act: to steal a foal from a stud farm, bred by another former rival of theirs, and train it to become the first riderless racehorse to win a major derby. Along the way of this plan, however, they run into some hiccups, including realizing they are no better than the humans who mistreated them with their plan when both of them begin to develop feelings of paternal attachment to the foal and, in their efforts to co-parent, realize their feelings for one another are more than just platonic. The story will be heavily focused on the relationships between characters and geared towards a general audience, with a diverse mix of emotional highs and lows, and a cartoony art style which will remain slightly informed, but not governed by, realism. Colors will be bright, but not overly saturated, as true to reality in colors of things like the horse characters, other animals and flora. Its tone will be rather mixed, with comedic highs and emotional lows, though emotions will be the primary focus and comedy the undercurrent. This is in service to a family-friendly film aesthetic, and contributing to my own tonal preferences in the work I create.

Written Proposal, Cont.

Technical Plan

This project will be a pitch bible, and the amount of deliverables will be flexible, but ideally it will include:

- Three full character turnarounds for the main characters
- Scenery and environment design
- Props, if applicable
- Character studies and explorations
- Illustrated scenes
- (Time dependent) A script snippet
- Miscellaneous concept art
- "Merchandise" in the form of stickers available for free/payment optional at the defense

All work will be created digitally in Procreate and printed out. Ideally, I would like to display the work in a gallery setting, printing out the various pages of the pitch bible and putting them up on the walls. The print-outs will be 11 x 17 for things like scenery or less-central-character concept development, as well as pieces of my thesis journal, while the three main character turnarounds will be 13 x 19.

My Work

This is a narrative project following a main character duo on both a physical and emotional journey. The story follows racehorses Sterling Silver and Lord Desmond, who flee their stables after years of successful racing leads them to realize the dark underbelly of the horse racing industry, tension which culminates when Sterling Silver finds a minor injury he sustained is quickly becoming more serious with every race he runs. Fearing euthanasia, Sterling Silver flees the track, shortly pursued by his racing rival Lord Desmond within a few days. Together, the mischievous horses live free and dedicate their lives to disrupting the industry that they had been unwittingly abused by for so long. Years later, they devise the ultimate protest act: to steal a foal from a stud farm, bred by another former rival of theirs, and train it to become the first riderless racehorse to win a major derby. Along the way of this plan, however, they run into some hiccups, including realizing they are no better than the humans who mistreated them with their plan when both of them begin to develop feelings of paternal attachment to the foal and, in their efforts to co-parent, realize their feelings for one another are more than just platonic. The story will be heavily focused on the relationships between characters and geared towards a general audience, with a diverse mix of emotional highs and lows, and a cartoony art style which will remain slightly informed, but not governed by, realism. Colors will be bright, but not overly saturated, as true to reality in colors of things like the horse characters, other animals and flora. Its tone will be rather mixed, with comedic highs and emotional lows, though emotions will be the primary focus and comedy the undercurrent. This is in service to a family-friendly film aesthetic, and contributing to my own tonal preferences in the work I create.

Written Proposal, Cont.

Conclusion

I am very eager to bring the story of Sterling Silver and Lord Desmond to life. I look forward to the project and think it will have something for everyone to enjoy, be it colorful characters, a queer narrative, well-informed positions on horsemanship and lovingly personal writing. But even more importantly, I think their story will have something to teach everyone, be it about the nuances of male relationships, the progression of queer relationships in a society where most queer relationships cannot be formed as romantic initially, or even accurate information on horses and the racing industry.



Oral

Hello everyone! I'm so happy to have you all here to celebrate the completion of my thesis project, *Off the Bit*.

So, to start us off, I wanted to review my thesis statement:

“Through creating a pitch bible for an animated feature film, I will use the characters of anthropomorphized racehorses to explore themes of male relationships, their nuances, the dynamic shift that defines a romantic or platonic relationship, and to make an authentic and accessible narrative of male-male love.”

So what does that all mean? Well, I'm a queer man who has had a lot of time to consider masculinity, my own masculinity, and my attraction to others' masculinity. I'm always searching for representation out there, but there's very slim pickings out there, and in a lot of media I consume, queer relationships feel very bare-bones and oftentimes interchangeable with straight ones. In media, queer relationships need to be marketable, but marketable is not authentic, and I wanted to take something akin to a Disney movie—something with a fun story full of heart and emotion for a general audience—and give it an authentic queer narrative written by a queer person. Not only that, but I wanted to take queer relationships out of an adult space. Gay relationships are often treated as “adult” subject matter and only mature content can really freely explore them. But after growing up with so many movies that had male characters with much more chemistry as couples than the female characters they are actually coupled with, I essentially grew up with many gay couples in my children's media already. So now, I want to remove all pretense and bring gay relationships to a family-friendly adventure film. Because we are here, we are queer, and we don't need to be hidden away in adult media where we're portrayed as the ever-desirable toxic, doomed gays who will die or all out in the end for the audience's thrills. There were lots of ways I could tell my story with queerness, and in the end, I didn't want to write a story about the misery in my life and all the sad endings. To quote one of my favorite family shows, *Bluey*: “This story has a happy ending, because life will give us enough sad ones”. And that's especially true of queer people.

Oral, Cont.

I am from the country, which is where you think my love for horses would start. Not quite—I did love a lot of the livestock that lived around my childhood home, got to pet lots of cows, some sheep and goats, even the occasional pig, but horses remained untouchable. They'd run away from the fence line, stand as far away as possible, my only real interaction with one was a horse I "rode" (by rode, I mean sat on while someone led it) at a friend's birthday party when I was seven or so. So no attachment to horses, I was no "horse girl" growing up. I was actually more insufferable, I was a "wolf girl". And look where that got me. Wolf girl to horse boy. My interest in horses started late 2023, I was incredibly bored and burnt out of my favorite hobby, video games. I needed something new to play. So browsing Steam I came across Red Dead Redemption 2 for sale—I'd heard a lot of good things.

(show RDR2 slide, pause)

Um, it was pretty good.

But needless to say, this game really caused me to re-evaluate my views and feelings on horses. Touted as one of the most realistic horse games by many audiences, including actual equestrians, I got the closest to a real horse experience in my life thanks to this game and a newfound appreciation for them. Horses are powerful, they're fast, they're graceful, in many cultures they can represent things like bravery, strength, beauty, and freedom. Even in this game, the horse is your reliable companion that carries you all around the beautiful in-game world and away from the trouble you get into. Frankly, I think horse girls kind of have a point. This is a beautiful, powerful animal you can ride like the wind and form an incredible bond with like any dog or cat. Until the invention of the car, these were humanity's perfect companion. I became obsessed with collecting and riding the horses in the game, I literally neglected a very beautiful story for these digital horses. So with a horse fixation in my mind, one night, I was daydreaming while listening to a song from an objectively terrible modern Disney movie that I didn't even like and I got this image in my head. A tired white stallion sitting with a foal, singing a protective lullaby to it as it dozes. Another stallion enters—the two know each other, they're old friends. The second stallion softens upon seeing the first singing, he watches him for a moment, awed by the tenderness his lifelong friend is showing to this child. Slowly, he joins in the lullaby until the foal has long since fallen asleep and the two are left singing only to each other, as what was once a lullaby turns into a tender love ballad as they express their amazement at realizing just how incredible the other has always been all this time. It was a daydream to music, I had them a lot. But this one stuck with me, I couldn't get it out of my head. Off the Bit was born in its earliest form, just this one scene with two doting father figures realizing their feelings for each other as they admire their abilities to care for their charge.

Oral, Cont.

The scope of the project was altered slightly from its conception. Originally, I was planning to do three character sheets, three backgrounds, a script snippet, and five supplemental illustrations. Due to wrestling with burnout and the other demands of school, this sadly didn't get done, but I instead turned my focus to developing the characters as extensively as I could. They're the heart of the work, and they need it the most, so while I am sad time and other demands didn't permit me to see the supplemental pieces to their full potential, I find the work here is still very complete and there's plenty to see still.

So, what about the story now that it's done? Well, set in Horseshoe Bend, Idaho in the mid to late 1920s, two famous racehorses, Sterling Silver and Lord Desmond, have run concurrent careers on the racetrack for their entire lives. But when Sterling realizes an old sustained racing injury is getting worse as he ages, he begins to grow fearful of being euthanized when his injury begins to impact his performance. In a bid to escape this fate, he flees the track in the middle of a race and escapes into the wilds. However, unfulfilled by racing without his rival, Lord Desmond follows within a few days and manages to track down Sterling. The two discuss the mistreatment they hadn't even known they were conditioned to accept and both are incensed, Desmond particularly. The pair then go on to cause mischief around the racetrack as the escaped racehorses who will never be recaptured for several years, until Desmond hatches the ultimate plan to get back at the racing industry: raise a foal to become the first riderless racehorse to win a major derby. When they steal away a foal from a stud farm, Sterling remains only halfheartedly committed to the plan, tired from all the years of mischief while Desmond is still angry at the maltreatment his friend risked suffering. As the two tackle the task of raising this foal, though, they began to feel a real attachment to him and, in turn, begin to reevaluate their feelings towards each other as they see the other interacting with and raising this foal, eventually realizing that their feelings for one another are more than platonic.

Oral, Cont.

Horses were a challenge for me as I had seldom drawn them before, but I was determined to make this project work, so I needed to create a streamlined style. Throughout the course of this project's early days, I kept repeating like a mantra that the look of this project was "informed, but not governed by realism". Spirit: Stallion of the Cimmaron was one of my main inspirations. The horses are very realistic looking, but have these wonderful anthropomorphized features that let them make human expressions, but the figure of the horse itself is never pushed too much. That's what I liked—these realistic horses that were still distinctly alive and emotive. After Spirit gave me the framework, I consulted the work of some individual artists to get an idea of the stylization I wanted to make these horses as lively as I wanted. These four artists were who I referenced as I created my style. Deviantart user faithandfreedom and animal artist Erica Worthylake were who largely governed the style I inevitably created, and character designer Deanna Hewitt and independent artist Laura Jennings gave me the tools to reliably build horses with consistency in anatomy. There was a lot of fluctuation when it came to the heads, specifically. For me as an artist, the head and face is the center of my work, and in my process, it is always my starting point, so when the head came together, the rest of it fell into place. This piece here interrupted my style building in a way, but it was a rendered piece of concept art that was meant to do two things: create the vague idea of character silhouettes, presence, and how they looked together, and get a general sense of the environments they might exist in.

While important in the building of the project, this came about before my style was fully nailed, and one of the two characters hadn't even been ideated at the time. But shortly after, I landed somewhere I wanted and created these two guides. One illustrated the various planes of a horse's face—well, maybe not all of them, but definitely the ones I thought were the most important and helped me reliably build the heads of the characters which gave way to the rest of the body much easier. I found the curve of the jaw particularly hard to master, but also extremely helpful, as this very round shape was ultimately what helped me define the horse head shape and keep it away from any other kind of animal I've drawn before. The second image was a guide to the character Lord Desmond, breaking down his head into various construction shapes. As I plan to address later, he had a distinctly different head shape from the rest of the cast and required some additional figuring out.

Oral, Cont.

But now that my style was ready, it was time to properly move on to the heart of this project—the characters. First, a general look at the three character sheets of the main cast. Originally, this was intended to be a set of turnarounds, but these were changed into character sheets which gave a more general overview, which while less optimal for animation, I find I like this style more as it informs the viewer more to who the character is. Should I take the project further, I would move to make full turnarounds, but these serve as what I find to be effective “introduction” sheets. My formula for these was one full character render, the character name, role and personality, one grayscale expression, the primary palette, a height comparison, and a showcase of the character’s coat patterns.

Now, the characters individually. Sterling Silver is Off the Bit’s central protagonist, a jaded and tired old (but not actually that old) racehorse who just wants some peace and to forget about his racing injury’s fast progression. He might hate the racing industry, but he’s grown apathetic to it in a way and just wants to move on, but doesn’t really know where to go from there. Throughout the story, Sterling grows by finding something to care about again as he falls for Lord Desmond and slowly starts to care about their charge, Little Red. He’s clever, wise, and most of the time knows what he’s doing, but his biggest challenge is finding something to care about. Sterling was designed to be a beautiful and showboaty stallion, and while that’s still an aspect of his personality, it’s something that only really appears at the story’s beginning before everything goes off kilter for him. He’s an Akhal-teke stallion, otherwise known as a “golden horse”. It’s a rarer breed, and Sterling is fully aware of how beautiful and special he is. When his competitive streak fires up, he’s a show off. He’s all that and he knows it. And being all that, it makes it all the scarier to him when his injury threatens to take that all away from him.

Oral, Cont.

Sterling was the first of the characters I began designing and he took the longest to create. While each horse took about a month to create and conceptualize, Sterling himself took nearly four. He was being created at the same time as the artstyle itself was. But from the beginning, as you can see, he always had that coiff. Is it realistic horse hair, especially for a racehorse? No, but I'll take some liberties here, because it defined his silhouette from the get-go and really does scream "show-off stunner". The Akhal-teke itself is a rather willowy, dainty breed, so I wanted to focus that look on Sterling. Thin, a bit knobby legs, scooped face, sharp edges, his design has the most hard and straight lines. It was just a matter of figuring out how hard and how straight. Creating his colors and patterns, I always had a very clear idea of what I wanted Sterling to look like. A white horse, just like my daydream, not much patterning. But for the sake of visual interest, I added some gray on his lower legs, a light gray dorsal stripe, and gray on his muzzle. I tried to stay close to the realistic look of an Akhal-teke to keep that glamor and majesty of the breed alive in him and really make Sterling *shine*. This was his original turnaround, and while I don't hate it, I wanted to retool the design to make stronger shapes as he felt too smooth and generic looking. This was also the point in which I decided to move away from proper turnarounds. So here you can see the character being built for the sheet itself. I was very pleased with the design and the vision I had for Sterling really came to life exactly how I saw it here. He became much sharper, much more willowy, much more distinct. To close off his section, here are some supplemental illustrations, showing him in his racing tack—blue had always been his color. As well as some expressions. Sterling almost always has some serious eyebrow action going on. In my mind, I can picture him wagging them a lot. With a sly, clever personality like his, I imagine his expressions are the most variable and exaggerated.

On to his rival and future boyfriend, Lord Desmond. Desmond is loud and proud, large and in charge. He's excitable, he's bold, and *big*. He charges forward into everything with a head of steam and cares immensely about everything, even when it's not his problem to care about. Is he a bit of a blockhead? Sure, but he is an exceptionally driven and strong blockhead. No one gets things done like him. And like how Sterling knows how striking and beautiful he is, Desmond knows just how strong and driven he is and is never afraid to take the lead. His character arc is all about slowing down, seeing the world for what it is, especially when it comes to Sterling and Little Red, who he realizes he doesn't listen to or understand properly regardless of how much he cares about them. There are some problems he can't solve or obstacles he can't just charge through and that's what he needs to learn. Desmond's process was more streamlined as the style guide existed by this point, so I had a clearer vision of what I was doing. But when it comes to Desmond's design, his breed informs it even more than Sterling's did. Desmond is a shire horse, a truly massive English draft breed. Shires are definitely not something you'd see on the racetrack often, and when they are there, it's typically in specialized races, but I decided to sacrifice realism here as I prefer the visual contrast between the two extremes of horse varieties—dainty, thin and built for speed and pure bulk and muscle mass.

Oral, Cont.

Being a draft horse also means he's very visually distinct. No scooped face, thick, heavy legs... thick and heavy everything, really. Horses in general are pure muscle but draft breeds dial it up to eleven and with Desmond I wanted to accentuate that. While Sterling is sharp edges and harsh lines, Desmond has a few harder edges but had more of a focus on rounded shapes. Here was Desmond's original design, which I very nearly stuck with, but something didn't feel right with him. He didn't have enough bulk to me, he needed more. So I retooled the design to give him that bulk, and now you can see here the experimenting with colors and patterns. Desmond has always been a tobiano stallion, tobiano being a color pattern in pinto horses which results in these large white spots, usually on the horse's topside or back, especially by the shoulders. All of the pattern ideas here were in pretty good competition with one another, but I ultimately decided on the last colored one in the bottom right. These slides show the creation of his final silhouette and the his character sheet, which I'll hold on a moment. Finally, here are the supplemental illustrations which all fell pretty quickly into place after Desmond was created. His racing color was red to contrast Sterling's blue and when it comes to his expressions, his face is always a bit more flat but definitely needed lots of cocky, self-assured expressions.

Finally, we have Little Red. Though Little Red is an important character, he has less content because the focus of the project is much more on Sterling and Desmond. Though he is a character in his own right, Little Red also serves the double purpose of a tool to help the central two characters grow. Little Red is a typical young, starry eyed kid. He admires his adoptive father figures a lot, he loves to run and race with them and he trusts everything they say, so he spends a lot of time in the story especially listening to Desmond and believing he's destined for greatness on the racetrack. Little Red's unending optimism and naivete as such a young child is this powerful outlet for change in Desmond and Sterling, seeing this child who loves them so much despite their flaws and their bad intentions for him initially, and inspires them to be better to be the people—or, well, horses—that Little Red sees them as. Innocence was Little Red's focus. Foals of any breed are gangly, their proportions are odd, their eyes are big, their tails aren't even fully grown with hair yet, this was the look I was striving to capture with Little Red, this mix of cuteness and awkwardness. Of course, I'd been drawing only adult horses thus far, so there was some figuring out I needed to do with body proportions to truly capture that awkwardness. I wanted the audience to look at Little Red and go "aww, look at those knobby little legs, those big bright eyes, that's just an innocent little baby!" I want everyone to see him and feel exactly what Sterling and Desmond feel about him, that he's just a kid who doesn't even know how much has already been pre-decided for him and he deserves better, he deserves that love and care.

Oral, Cont.

I had a lot to think about, all things considered, but I was getting progressively more confident with my horses and could push and pull the shapes to create the perfect lanky figure I wanted. Here you see the timelapses of the final render and reference sheet being created, which are a bit choppier as I had to lower the framerate of the GIF. This is because the process of creating this character when it came to actually drawing the render was the longest with Little Red, even if ideation went the longest with Sterling. I also went for a less than realistic hair choice, deciding to make Little Red's mane and tail curly. Definitely not something you'd ever see on a real horse, but through struggling to decide a distinct mane/tail style I fell in love with the idea of these little ginger curls. There was something so innocent about it, just a little messy, but still tidy enough to not take away from those big eyes, which I wanted to use his spots and speckles to really accentuate. His patterning is messy, between spots, socks and white patches, like a disorganized kid who just tried dressing themselves for the first time. Ultimately, designing him was surprisingly straightforward, the hangups were brief and resolved quickly, and it came together to form what might be my favorite design of the bunch in this awkward-adorable little foal.

With the characters designed, then came the backgrounds. And that's where some of the real trouble began. I identify myself as a character designer and backgrounds are not something I do often. It was backgrounds that set me into this spiral of art block in the latter half of the project that almost halted production entirely and is largely responsible for the altering of the project scope. So, where did this downward spiral start? I looked at things both feasible for me to create and also looks I liked. Being a cartoonist, simplicity is my sort of standard. Originally, the vision was just for the hand-painted backgrounds of old Disney films, particularly Snow White. I was fixated on the focus on form first, rather than detail, focusing on a strong silhouette of the background's prominent fixtures. But while working with my mentor, he mentioned Studio Ghibili, another artstyle I'm very fond of, and the bright colors and shapes that are honestly even more distinct and simple than Disney's early backgrounds helped me re-evaluate how I wanted to approach my backgrounds. I chose to use a gouache brush, keeping the shapes soft but still distinct, as I wanted the characters to really jump out from the backgrounds they inhabit.

Oral, Cont.

As for the location itself, Horseshoe Bend, Idaho, the nice thing about Idaho is it is a very diverse landscape. Though Idaho is mostly classified as a desert, being just on the edge of the Pacific Northwest, Idaho has a very temperate climate, treated to the full spectrum of seasons. While a lot of Idaho is valleys and open space, it also boasts pretty impressive mountain ranges, some mesas, forests, rivers, lakes, there are very few environments—save for coastal ones—that Idaho doesn't have at least a corner or two of. There's also a lot of room for open, natural space, perfect for these horse characters to run around and engage with nature. I wanted it as far removed from the beginning of the story, which takes place in an actual racetrack and paddock surrounded by human made structures, as possible. Even in the modern day, Idaho has a lot of open space and nature, with our cities very tightly packed together or rural areas having buildings extremely spread out. And that's to say nothing of what Idaho looked like in the 20s, when the thesis takes place. I actually asked my lovely father, who is in the audience, to tell me a bit about Horseshoe Bend and what's there so I could get a better idea of what to depict in my thesis. And he scoffed and said "nothing". He's said the same thing he's said about a lot of places in Idaho, actually.

As you can see, there were definitely some struggles with the early versions of the backgrounds. Dimensions, angles, hard shapes, you name it, I was having trouble with it. I actually had to move on and leave these pieces in their early draft phases for a while, but my struggles here bled into everything else. I lost my ability to draw horses shortly after on top of floundering around unfamiliar territory. I was so unbelievably stuck and so, so unbelievably frustrated. It took time, and a lot of tears, but my mentor gave me some very good advice. I was so focused on my character design mindset, where I needed the ability to create every facet of what I was drawing from the ground up and keep my references there, but very distant from my final product. Zach, my mentor, taught me not to be so scared of committing to working with a reference, he gave me resources to access good ones, and helped me figure out photobashing to create the image I had in my head from real references I could access. And that created the final backgrounds, which were something I could really be pleased with.

Oral, Cont.

The first depicts the beginning of the story. It's the starting gate of a racing track, which was a shape I definitely struggled with. I wanted the grass here to be especially vibrant. It's well-manicured, it's very *human*. That was the goal of this background in particular. Something that has a level of natural beauty in this healthy green grass, but has definitely been shaped by humans. I noticed a lot of white and green in horse racing, actually. Most of the racing gates I've seen are green, some are white, and a lot of signage and scoreboards were green too. That was something I also went on to incorporate into the logo when I colored it.

This next image is from a point at the hypothetical end of the story, when the three characters are looking back on the paddock and stud farm Little Red came from and they have to risk it all to get him back from. So the barn and paddock itself is there, but a very small part of it. The shape is meant to be vague and unimportant, just an almost blemish of sorts sticking out on these rolling hills, this tall, untamed and yellowing grass, and the sun setting below it all. This was the first piece I really had success with the photobashing strategy, and it really got the ball rolling and pushed me to retool the other backgrounds.

This final one is the first I started on. It takes place somewhere in the earlier parts of the middle of the story, where Desmond and Sterling meet again after both escaping the racetrack. This image was sort of constructed off a memory I have, which you can see various aspects in the illustration. It was a small brook in a mostly dry area, this local hiking spot I went to with a high school friend. The area was dry, but there were a few trees there, more like a forested patch than an actual forest, and all of them were sort of clinging to the sides of this stream. We made leaf boats and floated them on the water. Originally there were more trees, but Zach took out some in the paint-over and I ended up preferring the look of the rolling hills in the background. There's a lot of those in Idaho, no matter where you are. It definitely matched my memory and relating to that memory really gives this scene a theme of connection between two people, or horses in this case.

Oral, Cont.

So now that all the illustrations have been gone over, what about the project itself? Well, in all honesty, I'm rather lukewarm. It's hard to think about right now as, despite my love for the project, I'm very burnt out on it. So to begin, I want to let this thing simmer, rekindle my love for it. It sits right now as just a portfolio piece, but if I could feasibly take it forward, I might look into it in the future.

I think this is a story audiences need to see. It's a gay love story, a story of found family, and a story of finding yourself, and it's not hidden behind a mature content rating. It's a general audience film meant to occupy the same space as Disney films, Dreamworks films, things designed for every audience member to find something in. Queer people and our existence is not just for adults, and if this project can go out into the world some day and tell audiences of all ages that we as queer people exist, we have stories to tell and they're not something deviant or perverse—if it can help stop the cries of “think of the children” that have kept the existence of queer people away from young eyes for years on years—I'd die a very happy man indeed. Not to mention if I could contribute to these stories being told by actual queer voices, I'd be even happier. We're not something you need to hide your children from, we're not something that destroys the value of a family. We deserve these happy stories, and I want to share the nuances of queer relationships with people, too, especially in this day and age. This is a story for everyone.

It'd be a real dream to give this project to someone like Disney or Dreamworks, but staying realistic, if it ever did leave the form of a pitch bible I'd like to see it done by an independent studio or at the very least a place that would keep the animation 2D as the vision was originally. My biggest and best shot, I think, is pitching a more developed version of this current pitch bible, with turnarounds, more background studies, and other forms of supplemental visual development to Titmouse. But until then, I want to make my way as a character designer and have this act as my strongest portfolio piece yet. Within four or so years of professional experience, and time spent in the industry, I want to come back to this project with what I've learned and just maybe Off the Bit might become a real film some day. But until then...

Oral, Cont.

Thank you all so much for your time, your attention, and your care. And I'd like to extend a special thank you to my parents for helping me attend college here and supporting my identity as a man in an environment where many of my peers' parents would have tossed them right out, let alone loved them and paid for their college education still. I'd like to thank my mentor, Zach, for guiding my process with honest and fair critique, for his paint-overs helping me know exactly where to go, and for his feedback helping me realize my potential and the growth I've already achieved. Not to mention his dog, Lola, for just being a dog and present during our meetings which definitely helped my stress. I'd like to thank my dear friends who have been here for me, some all four of these years and others one or two, all of you are so important to me, helping me see my best self and grab my confidence in a way I never could have imagined before I came here. And an extra special thanks to my roommates Mya and Sean, my important friends who have seen me at my best and my worst and supported me throughout. I couldn't ask for better roommates and I thank you both so much for everything you've done for me. And with that, I thank you all again for coming, and turn this over to the panel for questions.



Creative Brief

Project Vision

This pitch bible tells the story of Lord Desmond and Sterling Silver, a pair of racehorses who suddenly retire from the racetrack after realizing they've been mistreated by the racing industry. They go on to cause mischief and mayhem as revenge for their mistreatment until, one day, Lord Desmond comes up with the ultimate disruption: raise the first riderless racehorse to win a major derby. But as they go forward with the plan and acquire a foal to raise, their feelings for the foal transform to great parental affection and, in turn, they re-evaluate their relationship to each other realizing their strong bond had always been more than friendship.

Audience

Off the Bit is media targeted to a general audience. It is written as a family-friendly film, intended to be consumed by the same audiences who watch Disney and Dreamworks films, having something for every age demographic to enjoy.

Creative Brief, Cont.

Methods and Materials

As a pitch bible, this project will be focused on illustrations that primarily depict the characters. The art will all be done digitally and printed physically to hang in a gallery space for its final form. I will be utilizing a cartoonish style which is informed, but not governed by realism, with semi-realistic looking horses with cartoon stylization, as well as watercolor-styled backgrounds reminiscent of old Disney films.

Comparative Media

Off the Bit can be compared to many Disney films, as they fill the same space for audiences, but its strongest comparison is *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, another horse-centric 2D animated film which has an artstyle that greatly informed this project's more than any other media.

Creative Brief, Cont.

Marketplace Application

While unsure if I will continue this project in the future, depending on where my career goes, Off the Bit is intended to be a pitch bible for an animated film. While pitching it to Disney or Dreamworks would be a dream, I would also like to retain some creative control over the project, so I am inclined towards independent studios. My primary candidate for who to pitch this film to would be Titmouse Studios, as I believe this project has a reasonable chance to be picked up there.



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McIlwraith, C. Wayne, and Bernard E. Rollin. *Equine Welfare*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

In a subsection of the book *Equine Welfare*, section 11: *Human Uses and Abuses - Welfare Issues*, the horse racing industry as well as other forms of human entertainment involving horses are primarily in the spotlight. This subsection covers a wide variety of issues and data sets, beginning with a general overview of data on injuries and fatalities sustained by racing horses. It highlights the California necropsy program, specifically, and its efforts to zero in on the primary causes of death on racetracks. Ultimately, the studies revealed many of the fatalities in the industry were not caused by track injuries directly, but rather untreated health conditions or minor injuries sustained during training, though some definitely did occur on the tracks themselves. The book then delves into the human aspect of it all and the various controversial practices for equestrian sports, such as the use of whips and general over-exertion of a horse in derbies. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of horse slaughter and how horse racing is by far the biggest horse-exploiting industry in the limelight, but actually has very little reason to contribute to horse slaughter.

Of my questions brought on by this passage, one is this—is it possible to write a report like this, regarding the ethics of a certain industry, without any conflict of interest? Is there any truly unbiased take on such a hot-button issue of animal welfare? The section on whips also covers compromises being made, such as additional regulations for how high a jockey may raise his whipping arm, and newly mandated padded whips which cause less damage to the animal. If these are the compromises we are making, is there no compromise for something that does not harm the animal at all? What changes would need to be made, in that case, for whipping horses to be abolished entirely? Furthermore, the passage covers jockeys whose horses have suffered fatal injuries on the track—is there no consequence or repercussion for these incidents?

The jockeys mentioned in the article sound incredibly decorated, but how is it that killing an animal does not taint their record? The death of an animal is an incredibly big deal, it's nothing like the destruction of a racecar. Is there any truly reasonable way someone could go on to be celebrated with the blood of an animal—perhaps more than one—on their hands, one they practically tortured and pushed to their limit, something far more sinister than slaughtering for a meal?

Of the listed sources in the bibliography, I find myself most interested in the cited reports from the California Horse Racing Board. I'd be curious to see how these welfare issues are viewed, even to the minute details of how they're written about, within the industry itself. I feel I have a good direction to proceed from here, using the CHRB as a jumping off point to go from the perspective of an outsider questioning ethics of the industry to a look directly from insiders and obtain their oftentimes controversial perspectives. I still remain uncertain about finding any form of unbiased information, but I remain hopeful that if I can't find them, I may be able to extrapolate a reasonable conclusion from the already acquired data.

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Dyson, S. “The Ridden Horse Pain Ethogram.” *Equine Veterinary Education* 34, no. 7 (March 15, 2021): 372–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eve.13468>.

Found in *Equine Veterinary Education Volume 34, Issue 7*, the “ridden horse pain ethogram” is a new way of examining the welfare of riding horses. The journal article itself is an introduction to the tool and examples of its practical application. The ideal application of the RHpE is to catch injuries and discomfort early before it can evolve into more complex health issues and life-threatening lameness, and therefore give veterinarians more time to intervene. The RHpE is a behavioral analysis system with a repository of 24 key behaviors that have been observed as indicators of pain. The tool was developed for the use of both veterinarians and riders themselves to point out direct behavioral red flags that would warrant potential medical intervention. The development of the RHpE began with analyzing facial expressions and video recordings of lame and non-lame horses, recognizing differences in gait or how a certain limb is moved or held. The system has been validated through practice and application and has been reported to have substantial accuracy, perhaps not to diagnose a problem specifically, but to identify that there is a problem present. It is advised to receive proper training in application of the RHpE, and the article also cites several factors that may influence the results including rider skill, terrain conditions, horse mood, equipment like saddles, bridles or bits, or any medication that the animal may be on. The article in itself serves as less of an analysis of the tool and more of an introduction to it and an explanation of its use.

Given that this was more of a practical introduction to a veterinary tool than much of an ethical quandary, many of my questions hinge on its hypothetical application. For instance, where is the distinction made between a horse either having a brief attitude issue or a legitimate medical concern? They are emotive animals with their own personalities, is there a process of verifying that the concerning results are not just a one-off fluke? Furthermore, this is a relatively new practice. The oldest articles citing this scale are all within this decade. So in that case, is this just a theory, or a widespread application? What about racing, such a controversial practice as it is—is it seeing the use of the RHpE or is this still considered an experimental practice? Regarding the need to fully understand the system to properly diagnose, what are those prerequisites? Is it veterinary knowledge, certification, a simple course, experience, or something else entirely? What defines “qualified” to use this scale? It seems that the practice has been widely adopted judging by the increasing amount of articles and studies utilizing it, but is it verified by equine specialists, or is it a popular theory at most?

In the resources provided, I would very much like to explore one cited source, a study by a K. Descovich regarding the analysis of horse facial expressions and their ability to emotive as a way of gauging animal welfare and comfort. To add to my own research, I'd also be fascinated to see what the RHpE looks like in action combining the information in the other article mentioned above. Could this be the hail mary in proving what race horses truly feel on the track? Is it an accurate enough indicator to decide if the animals are truly being properly cared for? I feel like having this tool under my belt will guide research much more concisely.

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**Keaveney, Susan M. “Equines and Their Human Companions.” *Journal of Business Research* 61, no. 5 (May 2008): 444–54.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2007.07.017>.**

Found in *Journal of Business Research Volume 61, Issue 5*, this article covers the horse-human relationship dynamic, along with the capacity to which we as humans anthropomorphize horses—along with other animals—and what horses can truly feel. Following its basic overview, the article first explores the nuances separating horses from other domestic pets like cats and dogs and strongly asserts horses are not, in fact, equal to these animals. A variety of information is listed illustrating these clear differences between domestic pets and horses, such as a lack of the “cute factor” dogs and cats possess, though some undoubtedly find horses beautiful and even cute. The author also notes a distinct separation horses have between humans and other horses, noting that while dogs will accept a human as the “alpha” of their “pack”, humans cannot become a member of a horse herd in a similar vein. The author goes on to outline a survey conducted to measure the feelings being around horses equestrians experience, being prompted to complete the sentence “when I’m with my horse...”. The general consensus separating horses from household pets seemed to be the difference between conditional and unconditional love, and that many equestrians recognized their relationship with their horses compared to their other animals was purely conditional on the part of the horse, where other pets show affection in a capacity domestic equines simply do not. The author then identifies similar themes found in horse interactions, including play styles, friendship, emotional support and awareness, and affection.

Altogether, the common thread throughout is the fact that unlike cats and dogs, who have lived their lives around humans and have therefore developed a strong “pack bond” with humans as well as they can other species, horses recognize humans but could easily continue their lives without them. The author also goes on to explore the bond between horse and rider in sport with a total of seven common themes found in what humans seek through horseback riding: physicality, partnership, spirituality, trial by ordeal, shared flow, community, and life lessons.

A prevalent theme throughout this work is the anthropomorphization of animals, imposing human values and emotions on an animal that does not understand them. Many reported equestrians in this survey showed a shocking amount of self-awareness in that their horses’ love for them is conditional, but this sentiment does not seem to be a commonplace one. While the article itself talked about the things that draw humans to horses in the first place regarding horsemanship, I was a bit more curious about the emotional aspect from the horse’s perspective which is covered in the introductory portion of the article. How do horses *feel* about sport? It is stimulation in some ways, but they lack any understanding of competition, why they are running, what they are running toward, it makes me wonder if beyond stimulation, is the activity stressful? Resources are continually skewed to one extreme or the other. I would also have liked to explore a brief section on horse cognition, as I think that is prevalent to horse bonds and connections with their human companions. For example, can a horse pick out its owner in a lineup if the owner and several other people are all offering treats?

When it comes to exploring other resources, I do not have any particular cited sources in this article I have an inclination for. Rather, this article has made me realize experimentation is something I would very much like to explore with this project, to get firsthand experience interacting with horses and their handlers alike. I feel that I have, in many ways, exhausted what academia can do for me and I find I want to explore firsthand accounts.

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Little Red

Thoroughbred Colt
Tritagonist

naive, trusting,
excitable, energetic,
chipper, competitive



Chestnut Ticked Coat



Lord Desmond

Shire Stallion
Deuteragonist

confident, bullheaded,
boisterous, loyal,
brash, competitive,
outspoken, impulsive



Palette



Tobiano Coat



Sterling Silver

Akhal-Teke Stallion
Protagonist

sly, charismatic,
pragmatic, jaded,
observant, wise,
independent, standoffish



Palette



Petino Coat



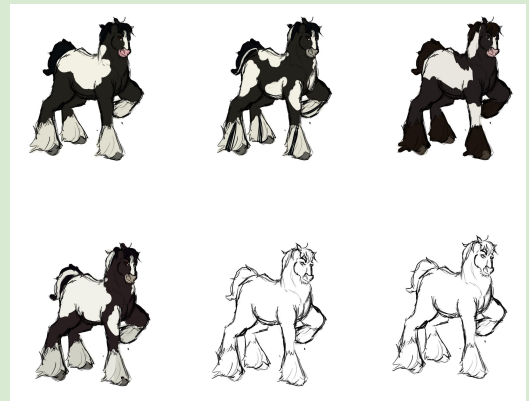
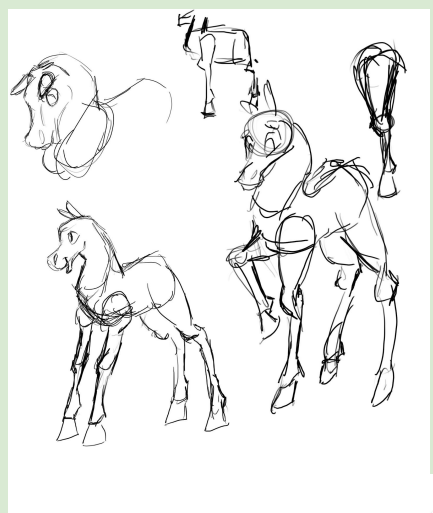
Sterling Silver
Face Conceptualization
9/18/24

Sterling Silver Movement + body studies
9/22/24

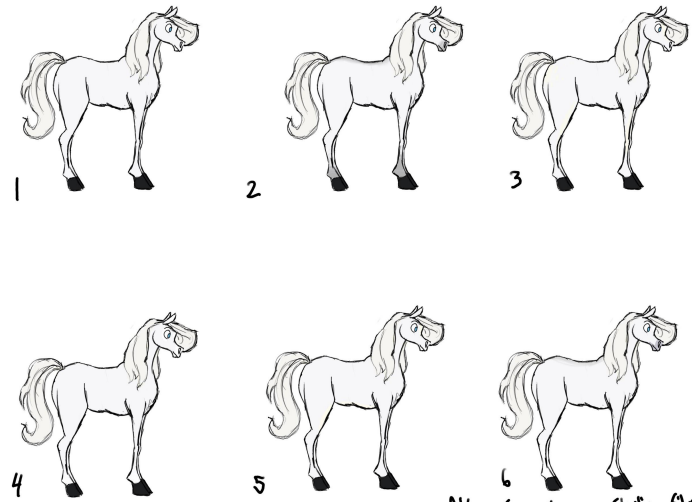




Lord Desmond Head
Walt 1/15/25



Lord Desmond Head + Hair
1/15/25



Albany Case Thesis - Sterling Silver
Pattern Concepts