

Hello! My name is KD Cowie. I am a story artist in the animation major. In both my personal life and my art I try to work towards being vulnerable and authentic, because I think that sincerity resonates with other people in a way that encourages them to do the same. I have an affinity for creations that come from a place of unabashed indulgent sincerity. I also use my art and writing as a way to work through things I'm grappling with - I knew that for my thesis I wanted to create something that I would personally be a fan of - and I'm so excited to be sharing how I did that with all of you.

I'd like to touch on something to break the ice and bring us together with a little audience participation. First, some definitions for the uninitiated:

- Situationship; queer relationship dynamics are something that are touched on a lot in my thesis and my presentation, so it's important to me to define what I personally mean when using that word, and WHY I'm using it. In our western culture, the language we have to define intimacy is incredibly rigid - relationships are strictly defined as "platonic", "romantic" "familial" "sexual" - all labels with strict boundaries that do not allow for fluidity. There's nothing wrong with relationships that are defined by stability - but English culture and language is severely lacking in its ability to identify relationships that shift between or operate outside of these labels.

I think the term 'situationship' really speaks to how our lack of language and shared emotional awareness of non-normative intimacy can lead to feelings of shame and isolation.

I spoke earlier about being vulnerable to encourage vulnerability in others, so I will practice that now: I have gone through falling in love with my best friend > confessing to them, being rejected by them > they still want to be friends and then continue to be ambiguously homoerotic/romantic?? with me > we have a falling out > not on speaking terms not one, but TWO TIMES in my life. with TWO SEPARATE PEOPLE. once in middle school, the other right out of high school and at the beginning of college. Two times in my life! Fool me once, shame on you... fool me twice... NO shame on me

because being young is hard and we all need to unlearn shame!! That's what I'm trying to do here!

Ok I've done my public humiliation ritual, it's your turn now - I really want to highlight how prevalent this phenomenon is. It's a common joke, especially in queer spaces, and ESPECIALLY in lesbian spaces - that this sort of homoerotic friendship and subsequent heartbreak is an inevitable event. Please raise your hand if you've ever "had the formative experience of falling in love with your best friend and/or had a hauntingly ambiguous homoerotic friendship?" - straight people can participate too. It's ok. Love is love. Pride.

ok second question "have you - without doing any extra work to read into subtext - ever seen that experience intentionally portrayed in animated media?"

(if anyone is still raising their hand i can play it off by being like - see me after this i wanna know what youre watching)

- that disparity was my main motivation in turning this from a personal vent comic to something more! I wanted to create the story I wish I had when I was growing up. My wording for this question was very intentional - I want to call attention to the phrase "without doing extra work to read into subtext" because that plays into another major component in my thesis. The homages to the early internet and "cringe" in my thesis is me speaking to the phenomenon of young queers using online fandom spaces as a way to safely explore their identities and ideas they are unfamiliar with or afraid of. Because of our lack of representation, we have to do a lot of heavy lifting with analysis and personal reinterpretations of our favorite media for them to resonate with our lived experiences. These internet fandoms are notorious for being "cringe" - aka shameful, embarrassing, uncomfortable - something that should be ridiculed and eradicated for the crime of expressing itself authentically. Which I feel goes hand in hand with the isolating shame that latches onto queer love in our society.

Part of how I dealt with these homoerotic situationships was through art and making a vent comic through which to express myself. That vent comic was the bones of what would eventually become HOLOSEA, an animatic short film about two young queers navigating the complexity of their developing identities and relationship, all set in a city under the sea with 2000s-2010s aesthetics! I say “animatic short film” and not “animatic FOR a short film” very intentionally; while I’m not opposed to this one day being fully animated, that was not the purpose of this animatic, and many changes would have to be made to make this serve as the blueprint for a full animation. Like I said previously, this was originally a vent comic. The reason why I adapted it to be an animatic was for two reasons:

1. I’m more familiar with this medium and believed the strongest way I could tell this story with my current knowledge would be through an animatic
2. I wanted this to be an opportunity to develop my skill as a story artist to prepare me for future professional projects.

Now that you know who I am and what my project is, let me explain what my role in the work was: FREAKING EVERYTHING!!! Writer, director, boarder, character designer, voice director, editor. It was A LOT to juggle, and towards the end of this semester I did recruit my friends to help me. This also gave me the experience of delegating tasks and problem solving with a team of people.

Doing all these jobs on a project this big and personal was a beast, so let me walk you through what the work process looked like over the last couple of months.

First I had to adapt the characters from their real world counterparts; i.e., me and the two situationships I had. I wanted to change Marin’s design to be a different body type to mine, and I found myself gravitating towards making her plus sized. I knew this was the right decision when my friends who are plus sized were excited about the change and were able to resonate more with the character. I want Marin to speak to other fat queer kids and young adults out there.

As for cove - Cove was very difficult to adapt for a long time, because I wanted her to be her own 3 dimensional character and not just a stand-in for someone in my life. It was

very important to me that I not only spoke to people who have been in Marin's position, but also those who have been in Cove's position. I absolutely didn't want this to be a one sided vindictive portrayal. In a funny way, moving away from this being a personal vent comic to an unbiased narrative did still help me work through some lingering turmoil I had over my real experience. I worked very hard to try to see things from Cove's point of view, and that gave me more empathy and understanding for the person Cove was based on, as well as helped me find closure for myself.

When it came time to build the plot, I essentially just had the bullet points of what I wanted for each act. There were moments in this story that I knew I wanted from day one, and you can see one of those moments travel across iterations here.

You will notice that this story is broken up into 4 Acts rather than 3. This is because of my personal preference for a 4 Act structure, which can be found in many of the stories that inspire my work. These works tend to have a “rug pull” moment - a twist that occurs in the 3rd act that takes the protagonist out of the world they previously knew, and leaves them to grapple with it in Act 4. The “rug pull” I wanted in my thesis was the expectation of Marin and Cove getting together; I wanted the audience to be thrown off and have a sort of “what now?” feeling alongside Marin.

I brought these ideas to Jack at the beginning of the fall semester, and from there the mission was to flesh this out as much as possible. I struggle to make definitive decisions and to my horror... the rumors were true... writing is just decision making. So anytime I was stumped I tried to write down WHAT was I trying to communicate in this scene? What's the most effective way to communicate that? I created loose concept sketches for me to better visualize the vibe I was going for with the bigger scenes. Eventually we took these story beats and made a text edit - which is a video containing short descriptions of what was happening in each shot (for example, cove and marin kissing here). I would put any visuals that inspired me or drawings I had made alongside the text for reference. The purpose of the text edit was just to see in a temporal way, how does everything flow? And start to guess, how long is this gonna end up being? Which, at the time we're were like, 12 minutes easy, but there were so many things that were not in the original outline - something that was definitely a huge hiccup is I realized that there were scenes that I wanted that were in my mind that I just thought were a given and then I realized I didn't put it in there, it was always in my head. That made me realize there were so many

missing scenes in there, and so I needed to make something that was even more in depth.

I needed a giant whiteboard of sorts to visualize my thoughts, which I did using Canva's whiteboard feature. This timeline had, absolutely EVERYTHING. As detailed as I could possibly make it - I wrote what the purpose of each scene was, what Marin and Cove were internally thinking and their motivations for each scene, the location of the scene, whether the scene happened chronologically or had a timeskip. This was EVERYTHING. From there it was time to break it down into rough boards. The rough boards were supposed to be the easiest, peasiest, rough boards in the world. You can see where Jack noted 'whoa KD, if you're gonna get through all this, you need to be going way faster because it shouldn't be this cleaned up yet.'

This was mannequin mode, where I was just supposed to show where they were on the screen. And this is the most bare bones version of it. I didn't always do things chronologically, I would do the things that I knew what they looked like in my head first and then come back to other parts later. You can actually see when I got better at boards, I've become a way better boarder, because something snapped in me, I used to spend way too long on a board and then at a certain point, my dear friend Lex started to come and sit next to me and we would set 5 minute timers for each board, and when it would go off, she would get close and start growling and stomping her foot and say 'next next board'. So now when I'm doing boards, I'm just like, okay done next.

This is also where I wrote the script - I do not remember the last time I wrote dialogue - this was my first time since maybe writing Warrior cat fan fiction in elementary school. Something that took the longest to write was the confession scene and the argument. The reason why is because I wanted to pull directly from both a confession letter that I never sent, as well as some diary entries from the time me and my friend had our falling out. This was incredibly emotionally taxing and actually probably one of the reasons why I fell a bit behind.

Throughout this whole process I kept a daily journal, and it was a lot of trial-and-error because I would spend too long on things every single day. I was like, okay, that didn't

work. We need to try this again. How can I make this faster? So every day it was helpful to write, what did I do good today, what can I improve on?

I think there's this quote I really like where, like creating something is like jumping off a cliff and making your wings on the way down. That's what this has been for me, figuring out how to make a project this size because it was me figuring out how to write dialogue, how to edit all of this, it was so much to keep track of and there were definitely big roadblocks. I would also get burnt out, or I would procrastinate, or just be struggling with perfectionism. What do I do when I'm stumped, what do I do when a drawing is taking too long - I got better at being aware of myself in the moment and being like what is working? Am I on track? and just trying to be very aware of what was going on.

The original goal for my thesis was to make and complete a project on time that I could be proud of. As the project got bigger and ran into a lot of roadblocks, it became less about the finished project and more about developing myself as an artist. I know it was an impractical choice for my thesis, but I didn't care. I wanted to see how far I could push things. I wanted to tell this story in full. I feel like if I didn't try to bite off more than I could chew now, I'd do it later.

There are so many things that I couldn't do before that I can do now! I can board way faster, I had no idea how to use the program toon boom harmony at the beginning of this, but now I can fully animate in there if I wanted to! I got practice voice directing, directing others on editing and compositing - I know how I work as an artist, how to account for emotional pitfalls and art block. I tend to underestimate how long a project will take - so doing all of this gave me a fantastic first hand experience for all of that.

The most invaluable thing at this time has been my support system. I don't want to call people out, but I'm kind of calling people out. My friends in the crowd, can you please identify yourself? If you're shy, you don't have to stand up, but you know who you are. I would have not gotten through this without things like people who have brought me food, people have just been there for emotional support. My best friends drove all the way to see me just for this one day. My mom who has been my consistent cheerleader, who would always pick up the phone no matter what ungodly hour I called her at. And

everyone I've made friends with here - thank you, so, so much. And I do want to give the biggest shout out and my sincerest gratitude to my mentor, Jack Ellis. I had a very negative person in my life from an early age that made me believe I was never going to be good enough. Jack not only supported and educated me on technical skills, but was consistently supportive and continued believing in me throughout all of this. Through every roadblock and setback, he helped me problem solve and push through. I would not have the project I have here today without his guidance. I was very lucky to have a mentor to support me through my thesis, and that's support that every student in this school deserves to have. This school should do everything in its power to continue fostering such a critical connection for its students.

As for where this thesis is going - I'm ABSOLUTELY finishing this thing!! There's still so much work to be done, so much clarity to make it something I could put in a portfolio. A lot of it has been building towards this one-time screening during Focus Week, but eventually I'd like to spend time coding a website mimicking 2000s-2010s personal sites to house the animatic alongside development art, scans of my journal, etc., to really honor the internet culture that I draw a lot of inspiration from.

As for what's next for me as an artist... I'll repeat what Jack told me in one of our last meetings. I'd like to try to tell a story in about 4 minutes or less. **AND KEEP IT THAT LENGTH.**