

Food Nostalgia in Animation

Bringing Individuality and Diversity to Narrative

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Animation Department

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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at

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Atlanta, GA

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Food Nostalgia plays a vital role in how storytellers can communicate their experiences or feelings in the field of animation. When triggered, food nostalgia can console and comfort individuals by bridging the past to the present. But if the same food nostalgia goes overboard, it can bring about unhealthy effects. Through very deliberate decisions in art direction and narrative, storytellers can use food nostalgia to enhance the narrative by adding individuality and diversity to the field of animation.

Keywords: storytelling, food, nostalgia, food nostalgia, individuality, diversity, animation

STUDENT BIO



Tehniyat is an animator from India, pursuing her Master of Fine Arts in Animation at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), Atlanta. At a very young age, she found a passion for animation as she grew up watching, learning, and experimenting with art. Through the support of her family, she started chasing animation as a career, starting her journey from PAI International (now PAI college of Visual Effects Design and Art) in India and then made it to SCAD in 2016.

Though her focus has been on 3D animation, she thrives on experimenting and learning new tools, beyond any one facet of mediums. She has worked on 2D, 3D, Hybrid and Virtual Reality short films during her graduate years at SCAD. She recently interned with StoryCorps at their StoryBooth in Atlanta, where she learned various aspects of this non-profit national media organization while being submerged in autobiographical and nostalgic stories of the everyday individuals who want to preserve their memories in audio conversations.

“Nostalgic memories of food as a source of storytelling can enhance the narrative by adding individuality and diversity to the field of animation.”

PROJECT INTRODUCTION

“The good old days”, “the long-lost love”, “the warm childhood”, these sayings are often used in our day to day lives. This aching for the past, is especially for a happier time either related to a lost loved one, a materialistic possession, or for a situational time and place that is no longer perceivable. This feeling of ‘longing for something past’ is called Nostalgia.¹ When an individual’s nostalgia is triggered, the reminiscence and wistfulness for the past is evoked, boasting a sense of meaning in their life. Dr. Constantine Sedikides - a Professor of Social and Personality Psychology at the University of Southampton in 1999 believes that because of nostalgia, people feel optimistic, inspired, motivated, and creative.² Nostalgia functions as a bridge between the memories and present existence, kindling positivity in the present situation. There are several stories and narratives we see in films and animation that are in some way autobiographical or are stories of a moment that one has experienced in the past and are reliving fictionally. But what triggers nostalgia?

Our sensory organs evoke nostalgic memories. A specific scent, a type of music or sound, a taste of certain food or even a texture or color can activate a part of our brain that links us to our memories.³ All of these nostalgic memories are important because they bring forth the moments from our lives that characterize and define us. Taking a closer look at food, it has a skillful way of triggering nostalgia since it engages all five of our senses, sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing, simultaneously to link us to our memories. It takes us back to a moment in the past when we were younger and where the situation was simpler, usually pertaining to the same food item. This makes food nostalgia a very powerful instrument that can be used to make the audience feel all those positive emotions and help them connect with the story as if it was their own. Nostalgic memories of food as a source of storytelling can enhance the narrative by adding individuality and diversity to the field of animation.

1. ‘Nostalgia - Dictionary Definition,’ Vocabulary.com, accessed May 23, 2019.

2. Constantine Sedikides et al. ‘Nostalgia Past, Present, and Future’, 5th ed., vol. 17 (Association for Psychological Science), PDF.

3. Savannah Wilson, ‘Nostalgia and How It Is Triggered by the Five Senses,’ MONQ, April 9, 2019.

RESEARCH PROCESS AND FINDINGS

How does Food Nostalgia work?

Food Nostalgia is powerful because both nostalgia and food are two different elements that individually can be sources of comfort that when they work together, it only magnifies that sense of comfort. The term "Comfort food" is used when consuming certain food items that offer comfort, consolation, and bring up vivid, emotional memories of loved ones and the situations from our past.⁴ The ability to self-motivate is important to cheer ourselves up when we feel depressed or isolated and consuming comfort food is one effective way to do this. According to a July 2015 study by the assistant professor of psychology at Sawanee, The University of the South, Jordan Troisi, when people feel isolated socially they prefer the taste of comfort food to make themselves feel better.⁵ Since nostalgia is usually based around personal events, comfort food varies from person to person, according to their own experiences and individuals they care about. Hence, the term 'Food nostalgia' is described as "Memories made from food."⁶ The childhood memories of Sunday home-made breakfasts together or picnics in the nearby garden or having street food at a carnival in town are examples of memories that have a way of offering sustenance while consuming the same food in a later stage of life. Nostalgic emotions provide a foundation or a background for one's identity and helps people feel less isolated in their transitional stages of life.

4. John Tierney, 'What Is Nostalgia Good For? Quite a Bit, Research Shows,' The New York Times, July 8, 2013.

5. Alexandra Sifferlin, 'The Science of Food Nostalgia,' Time (Time, July 29, 2015.)

6. FoodPr Administrator, 'Food Nostalgia – The Memories Made From Food,' FoodPR and Communications, September 25, 2015, accessed May 22, 2019.

Individuality

Individuality is defined as "the particular character, or aggregate of qualities, that distinguishes one person or thing from others; sole and personal nature."⁷ Every individual has their unique and personal memories and it depends on how they perceive the world around them. No two people, no matter where they're from, feel or experience the same things in the same way. Even if the characteristics like upbringing, culture or beliefs are the same, the way they see and feel things is what defines them. Their nostalgia triggered through different things, creates the distinctiveness of the individual. Hence, perhaps nostalgia is arguably one of the primary things that gives the person their individuality.

Using individuality in art and specially in animation can be a significant tool to enhance the variety of narratives in this growing field. In the same way that an individual is not defined by one thing but rather, the coming together of multiple characteristics, animation in the same way is the combination of many different elements. Animation by nature is a medium that contains within it several other mediums including music, dance, performance art and acting. And through the merging of multiple mediums, a truly rich and special individual expression can be achieved. Like Martha Graham, the late American modern dancer, choreographer and a pioneer of American dance form, said "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost."⁸ This motivational quote applies even in animation where unique narratives can bring significant variety to the field of animation.

7. 'Individuality,' Dictionary.com, accessed May 23, 2019.

8. Agnes De Mille, Martha: 'The Life and Work of Martha Graham' (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

Culture and Diversity

Culture is defined as “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.”⁹ Accepting and including individuals with their unique characteristics in a group is what forms culture. If there was no culture, every individual would be so unique that it would be difficult to connect with or relate to anything. Culture is an important factor that connects individuals to others and gives them a sense of belonging. Diversity on the other hand, is defined as “the inclusion of individuals representing more than one national origin, color, religion, socio-economic stratum, sexual orientation.”¹⁰ As previously discussed, the uniqueness of characteristics and experiences is what define us on an individual level, but on the cultural level diversity is defined by the similar characteristics and shared experiences among a large group of people. Through these distinctions between cultures, diversity is born.

Food is a vital component that helps define every culture. It plays a role in worship, celebrations, agriculture, rituals, trade and many other facets of life. Bringing this concept into the field of animation and using the storyteller's food nostalgia to bring light to their distinctive cultural food in their narratives can make the field of animation more diverse.

9. ‘Culture,’ Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed November 4, 2019.

10. ‘Diversity,’ Dictionary.com, accessed May 23, 2019.

FILM ANALYSIS

Through analyzing animated films that have used food in distinctive ways will help us to study this concept further.

A. *Grave of Fireflies* (1988) by Isao Takahata

Figure.1



Figure.2



Grave of the Fireflies is a Japanese animated war film directed by Isao Takahata which is based on a semi-autobiographical short story by Akiyuki Nosaka.¹¹

In this film, food is used as a vehicle for memories of nostalgia. This narrative revolves around Sieta, a teenage boy and his younger sister Setsuko, where they struggle to stay alive and be fed after being separated from their parents during World War II. There are several moments in this film where these siblings are homeless, struggling for food and are reminiscent about the times before the war, when they were at home with their parents with home cooked food.¹²

In the beginning of the film, a tin can of 'Sakuma drops', a Japanese candy is introduced as a symbol of joy and togetherness of these siblings. In this scene Sieta is homeless, on the verge of dying, holding on to an empty, dirty can of this candy and an officer throws it out. The director portrayed this scene using washed out blues and greens depicting a very sad mood. But this scene is then followed by Sieta and Setsuko happy together and Sieta picks up this can of candy and gives it to his younger sister. The art direction switches from a sad cool mode to a rich warm mode. The dirty empty can of candy, when picked up from the ground, becomes new and full. The character design in comparison to the previous scene are fuller with life, with fresh clothes and rosy cheeks. We see a vivid change in the colors from dark washed out greens and blues to warm reds and orange.

With this drastic shift in the visuals and by putting these two scenes together, we discover that this can of candy is something greater than just candy, it becomes a vehicle to bridge the present to the past. Seeing the current situation being very gloomy but then travelling to a time where these siblings are together and full of joy, it symbolizes the joy they had when they didn't have to worry about where their next meal would be, a time when life was simpler. There are several moments in this film where Setsuko is crying because she's hungry and when her older brother gives her a piece of candy, she stops crying. In those little moments of the film, their lives have been flipped upside down because of the war and losing their parents but this candy has been a constant. No matter how bad life has gotten, this candy is still the same. It is still as sweet and crunchy as it was, and that level of stability and reassurance is what she needed to be okay in that moment.

Finding that candy evoked a form of food nostalgia that gave them a feeling of hope and stability. It made them feel safe and reminiscent of earlier time. That food nostalgia was enough to sustain them in the very difficult time in their life.

B. *Ratatouille* (2007) by Brad Bird

Figure.3



Figure.4



The Pixar animated film *Ratatouille* directed by Brad Bird, is about Remy – a rat who dreams of becoming a chef. A scene in this film is a perfect example to show the feeling of food nostalgia.¹³ In this climactic scene of the movie, where Anton Ego who is like the grim reaper of restaurants and a very strict food critic, tries Remy's cooking of ratatouille. With just one taste, he is brought back to his childhood memory of being 5 years old with a scraped knee being comforted by his mom giving him a plate of ratatouille that she cooked, to make him feel better.¹⁴

Similarly, we again see food used as a vehicle to bridge the past and the present in this scene. In the present situation, Anton Ego is a well-known food critique who has lost his love for food as this became just a job for him. There is no longer any joy or spirit in it for him that used to inspire the other chefs and

Remy himself. Hence his character design also depicts that visually, everything about him looks unhappy, his eyes have sunken in, his skin is pale, and the clothes he's wearing are dark and blue. The colors that the director used in this scene are similarly, dark and desaturated. This scene then being followed by a scene of him taking a bite of the ratatouille tells us precisely what that bite made him feel.

As soon as Anton Ego takes the bite of Remy's ratatouille, he is hit with a rush of nostalgia and he literally travels back in time where he's a little boy full of life. His character design in this scene is also full of life, his face is fuller, his cheeks are rosy, the clothes he is wearing are light. The colors that the director used in this scene are rich, warm and saturated to depict the warmth of home, the comfort of the home cooked food and the mother's love that he had as a 5-year-old boy. This bite of this ratatouille fills him up with warmth and vitality which at some point of his life he lost. That depicts the importance of food nostalgia evoked through this dish that triggered his wistfulness of the past situation so strongly. From that one scene, it is clear how strong the sense of taste is to overflow food nostalgic memories.

11. *Grave of the Fireflies*, IMDb, April 16, 1988, accessed May 22, 2019.

12. *Grave of the Fireflies*, dir. Isao Takahata (Japan: Studio Ghibli, 1988), DVD.

13. *Ratatouille*, IMDb, June 28, 2007, accessed May 22, 2019.

14. *Ratatouille*, dir. Brad Bird and Jan Pinkava (USA: Buena Vista, 2007), DVD.

While up to this point food nostalgia has been presented as a way to find sustainability, happiness, and comfort, it can also have negative effects if not taken in moderation. Although we can find peace in the nostalgic memories, an over obsession of these memories can limit our ability to operate healthily in present situations. The next film considered looks at food nostalgia and comfort food from a different angle.

C. *Spirited Away* (2001) by Hayao Miyazaki and Kirk Wise

The well-known Japanese animation studio called Studio Ghibli which is famous for the portrayal of mouthwatering food in their films.¹⁵ *Spirited Away* by Hayao Miyazaki and Kirk Wise have several food moments.¹⁶ In this film, Chihiro is a 10 year-old girl who stumbles upon a strange world with her parents where they turn into literal pigs and she must now work there to free them. There are two moments in this film that we will look at.

Figure.5



Figure.6



Firstly, there is one moment when Chihiro is lost and scared looking for her parents and Haku, who is the native to that world, gives her a rice ball to comfort her.¹⁷ In this moment we see how the simple action of receiving a rice ball from a stranger becomes a source of comfort for Chihiro. By giving her that rice ball, Haku gave her the feeling of safety and showed her that he is a friend. That rice ball comforted her with hope and a familiarity in this strange and unfamiliar world. Even though the art direction in this scene didn't change like the previous film examples, we can see in Chihiro's expressions that this little rice ball released some stress off her shoulders.

Secondly, let's talk about the scene in the beginning of the film where Chihiro's parents turn into literal pigs because they cannot stop eating. Because of this scene, we can see that over indulging in comfort food and dwelling too much on food nostalgia can be unhealthy and can lead to obesity and gluttony.

This scene was also a commentary made by the directors about the greed that took place during the Japanese recession of the 1980s.¹⁸ They used food nostalgia for portraying what they had experienced in their region in the past, very creatively, via the means of transforming the two human characters into pigs. While food nostalgia is often used as a positive means to reflect a sense of comfort and warmth of past experiences, here we see that it can also be used as a reflection of the storyteller's memories of the greed and corruption of a societies culture.

15. Ashley Burnett, '10 Iconic Studio Ghibli Meals', Pastemagazine.com, January 6, 2017.

16. *Spirited Away*, IMDb, July 20, 2001, accessed May 22, 2019.

17. *Spirited Away*, by Hayao Miyazaki (Japan: Studio Ghibli, 2001), DVD.

18. James Gould-Bourn, "Studio Ghibli Finally Explained Why Chihiro's Parents Turned Into Pigs," Bored Panda (Bored Panda, July 18, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Food nostalgia functions as a bridge between memories and present existence. When one's food nostalgia is triggered, the reminiscence and wistfulness for past situations is evoked, boasting a sense of positive meaning in their life. But the same food nostalgia, if not managed properly, can bring about unhealthy effects. Through very deliberate decisions in art direction and narrative, animation is a unique medium that can engage audiences and effectively communicate the individualism of the storyteller's perspective. Whether to find comfort in warm experiences in the past or to make socio-political commentary of a time, the storyteller can use nostalgic memories of food as a source of storytelling and can enhance the narrative by adding individuality and diversity to the field of animation.

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

Inspirations

Sanjay's Super Team: Figure.7



Sanjay's Super Team by Sanjay Patel, a Pixar animated short film is based on the director's childhood.¹⁹ This film sparked inspiration in the author's mind to depict the storyteller's background in animation. The author related to this story and the art direction as it portrayed the Indian culture very accurately where the author grew up in. The art direction and the color

choices from this short encouraged the author to find a direction and apply it in their film.

StoryCorps: Figure.8



Another major inspiration was StoryCorps animations like *Danny and Annie* and *Sundays at Rocco's* directed by the Rauch Brothers.²⁰ These were the real worldly conversations of individuals who wanted their memories preserved. The mission of this organization "to preserve and share humanity's stories in order to

build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world."²² made the idea of this project stronger. The stories of people's memories being preserved and giving them a platform to share got the author's attention and inspired them to take the opportunity to add their story to the field of animation.

19. *Sanjay's Super Team*, IMDb, November 25, 2015, accessed May 24, 2019.

20. StoryCorps, *Danny and Annie* from StoryCorps, August 13, 2010, *Sundays at Rocco's* from StoryCorps, November 14, 2012, accessed May 22, 2019.

21. "About StoryCorps," StoryCorps, accessed May 22, 2019.

'Until Next Bite'

The visual component that constitutes this thesis, entitled *Until Next Bite* (2019), is an autobiographical narrative of the nostalgic moments I felt in my first few months of living in the US away from home, India. It depicts the transition from an environment where "family always sits together for meals" to one where sitting alone to eat while missing home. *'Until Next Bite'* is a 3D animated short film about a 22-year-old Indian student - Tani, who moved away from home for the first time and is new to Atlanta, US. In this short, we will find out what happens when Tani gets nostalgic about home-cooked food and must recreate that flavor as a beginner in cooking. The final film is produced in Autodesk Maya 18 with 2D textures painted in Adobe Photoshop and rendered out using Arnold renderer in HD1080p format.

Synopsis

Tani is a 22-year-old Indian student who has moved away from home for the first time. The short starts in her daydream of a spread of home cooked food on a long dining table and she is all excited at the head of the table with enough food for twenty. At the peak of her excitement, we suddenly realize that she is not there but in her tiny apartment, alone with an empty plate in front of her. Her stomach grumbles and she is sad about the vivid daydream and therefore she breaks into tears.

After taking a moment, she looks up and in the pile of her study books, finds a note from her mother. Motivated by that note, she rushes to the refrigerator and the pantry and scavenges out a few vegetables to cook. She struggles as she has never cooked before but does not give up and ends up making a simple Indian dish called 'Pulav.' Nervous but excited by her achievement, she is happily satisfied by her attempt.

MOOD BOARDS

Flash Back:



Present:



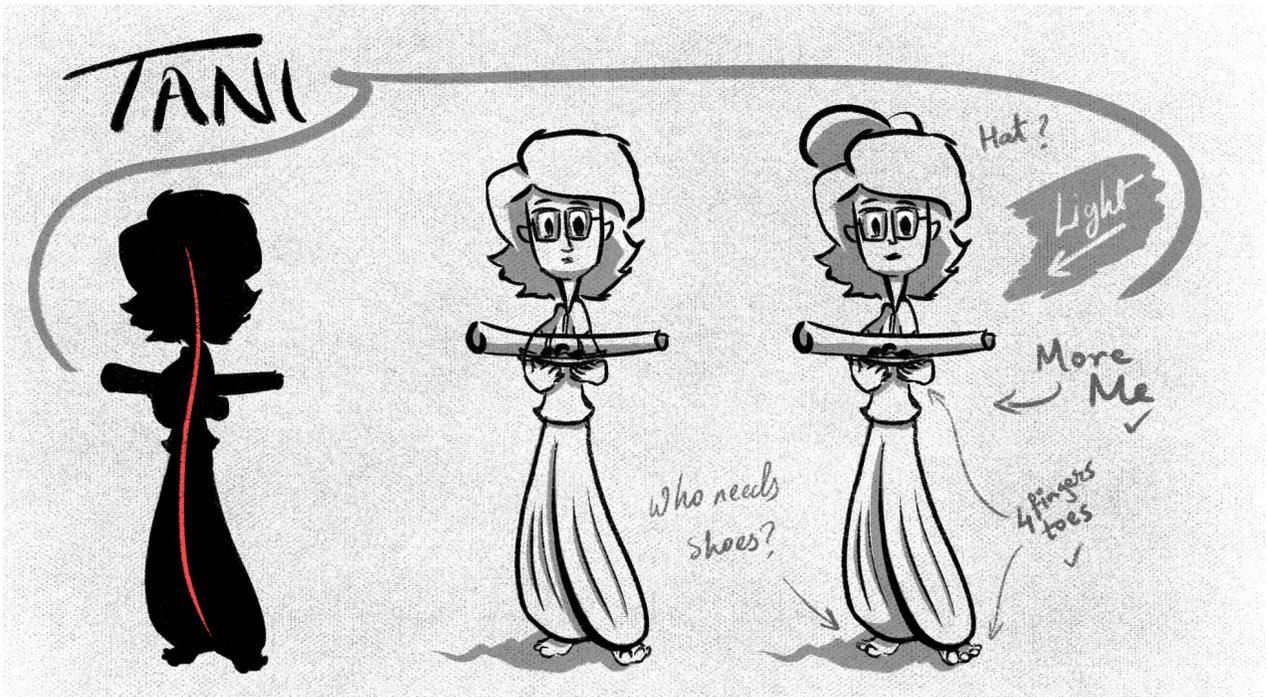
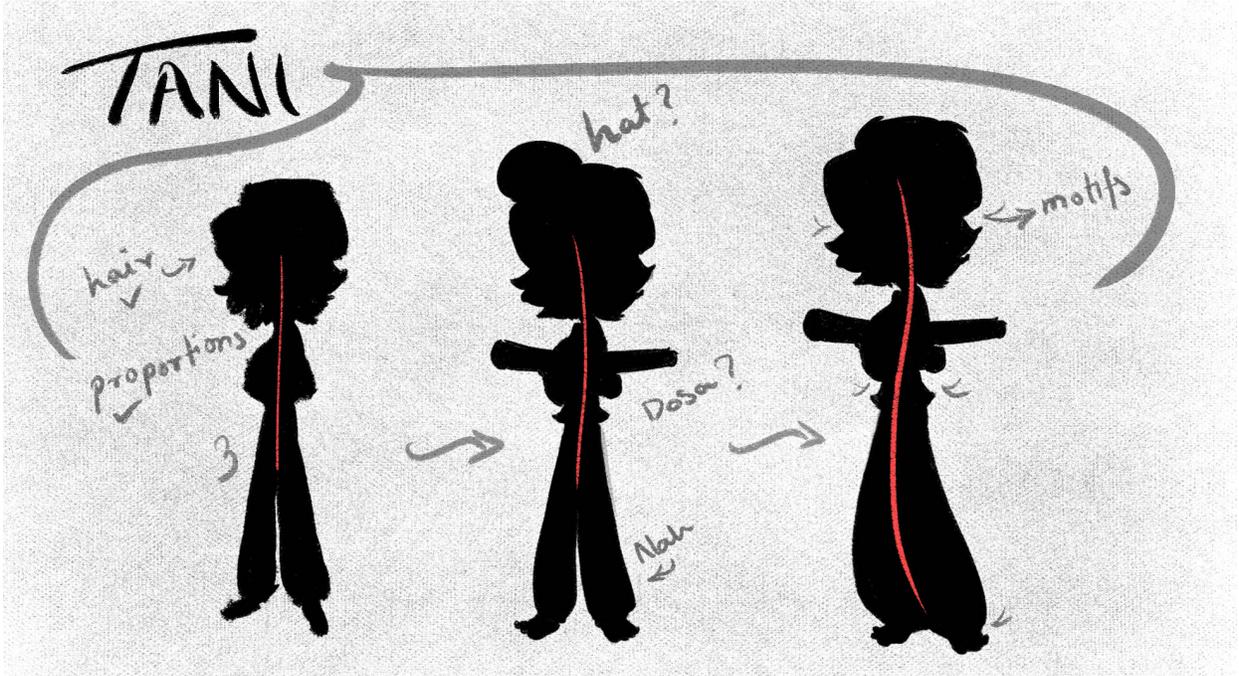
The above mood-boards represent the goals for style choices that were decided in the pre-production stages of the film. Starting from the colors in the different stages of the film to the look and feel of the character in those stages. The flashbacks are designed around the idea of reminiscing in the nostalgia of home. As the mood board for the flashbacks shows, the colors are vibrant. There are dominant reds and blues with an accent of magenta. The colors of royal blue, warm vibrant reds and orange and an accent of magenta and pink depict the festiveness of most Indian celebrations. They represent the warmth, togetherness and the celebrations that I have experienced in my years of growing up in India.

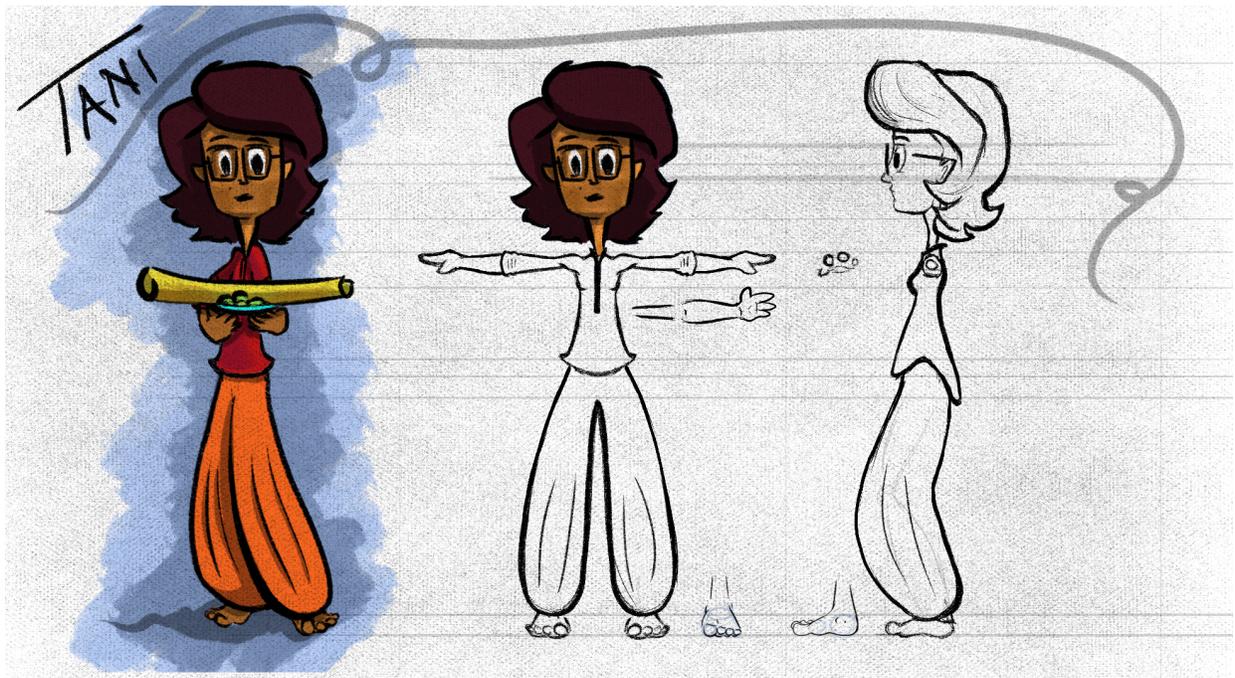
Whereas the 'Present' mood-board shows a clear difference in mood, color and saturation. These pale and desaturated colors depict the loneliness and isolation I felt in the first few months of moving. These colors gradually shift to the vibrant mode again as the character gets closer to success towards the end of the short.

Character Development:

The same color choices have been used for the main character's clothes to infer that they are from India. Tani is wearing pink and red, traditional Indian wear called 'Salwar Kameez' to make it clearer that these clothes are from India. The idea was that she is wearing these clothes because it makes her feel closer to home while feeling homesick.

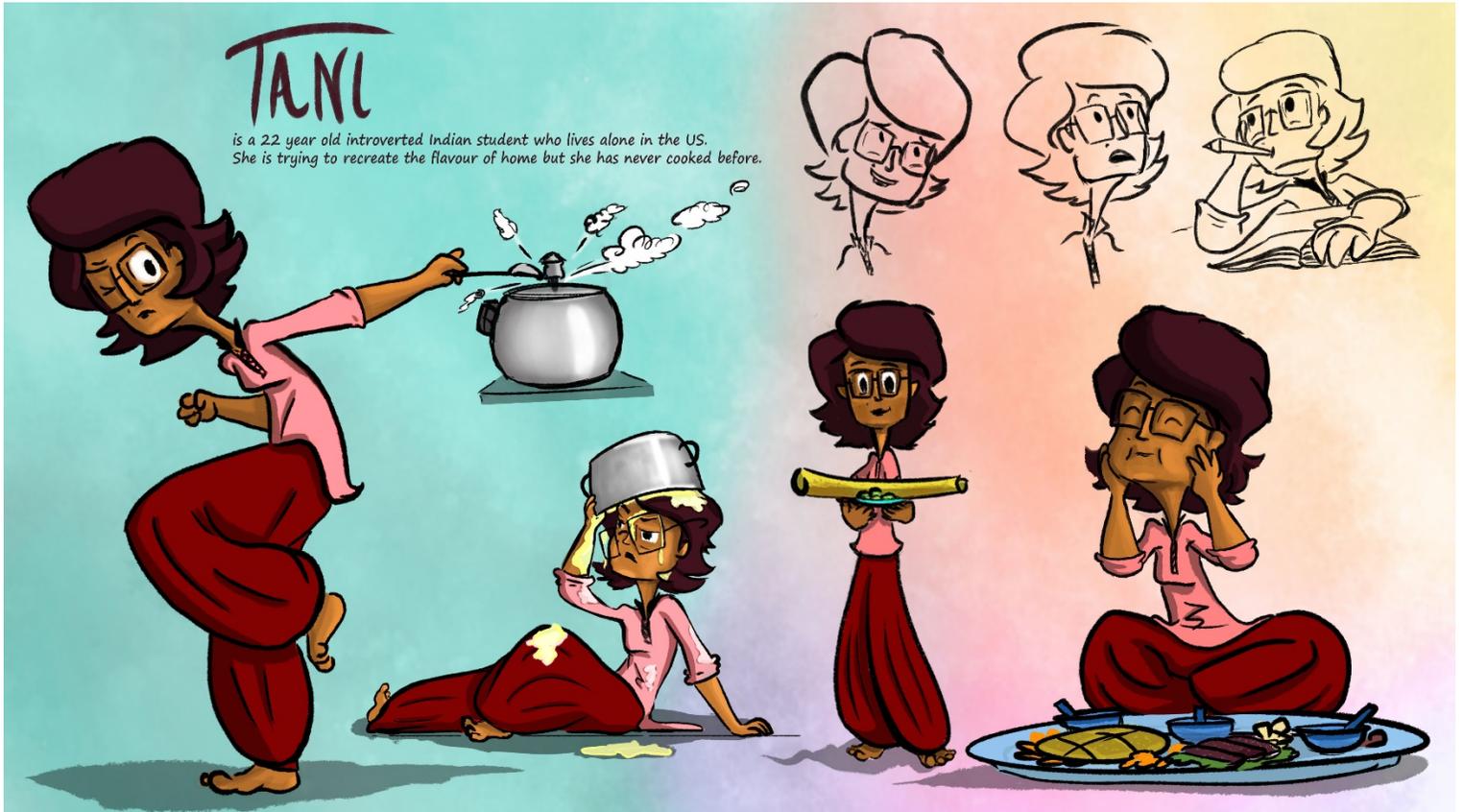
The following series of images shows other thought process including character silhouette, motifs, props, costume, proportions, and style, during preproduction and the earlier stages of character design.





FINAL CONCEPTS

Final Character Sheet



The final character sheet shows the contrasting backgrounds with the character in the two different stages of the film with blues in the present and vibrant pinks in the daydream.

2D Styleframe: Flashback



2D Styleframe: Present

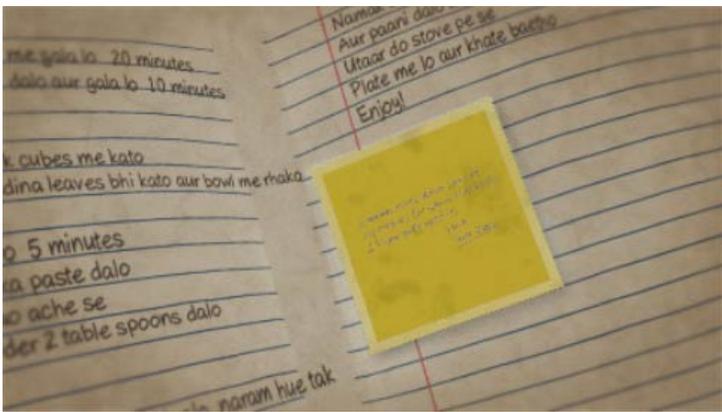


3D Styleframe



3D styleframe of her daydream.

Stills from the final film



ARTIST'S STATEMENT

It is not surprising that the idea for this project sparked in the author's mind while she was eating.

In the production process and after a lot of stomach grumbles, the idea emerged to have a deeper meaning. This thesis became less about the act of eating and more about the author's nostalgia for home and their struggle to find a home in the new environment of this country. The written component is developed as more of a reflection of the author's nostalgic feelings and finding individuality and the depth in the importance of it.

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THESIS COMMITTEE BIOS & HEAD SHOTS



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"Roll Yer Own 2010," ASIFA, Atlanta, Georgia; First Silver Salt Animation Festival 2010, Pune, India; International Digital Cinema Festival and Entertainment Technology Expo, Macau, China; Madiz-Alter-Native International Short Film Festival 2009, Gheorghe Doja, Romania; Kinofest 2009, Bucharest, Romania; [Aniwow!2009] Fourth China International Student Animation Festival, Beijing, China; Sixth China International Animation and Digital Arts Festival, Beijing, China; Anifest India 2009, Mumbai, India; BitFilm 3D Award Festival 2009, Hamburg, Germany; The Heritage Film Festival 2009, Largo, Maryland; 13th edition of Cartoons on the Bay, International Television and Multimedia Animation Festival, Roma, Italy.



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Publications and Presentations

Presentations/performances

- "Conspiracy Coda Joy," live video performance at the New Media Caucus, Live Cinema Summit at the 98th College Art Association Conference, Columbia College, Chicago, 2010.
- "Going (Now) here," installation and live video performance at Muse: Art and Technology Week, Jepson Center for the Arts, Savannah, Georgia, 2010.
- "Shifting Ground and Desert Storm," live video performance installation, Art Basel Miami 09: "Sculpt Miami and Art Rouge" group exhibition, Miami, Florida, 2009.
- "VJ Praxis: Media Re-Mixing, Copyright and Expropriating the Spectacle," a VJ performance for the panel VJ Jam: Collaborations in Live Audio/Video Performance, SECAC, Mobile, Alabama, 2009.
- "Mis-Performance - Media Mediums," live media performance with the Medeology Collective at the Performance Studies International Conference in Zagreb, Croatia, 2009.
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Publications

- "Media Remix: Copyright, Expropriation and Representation," in Journal FRAKCIJA, No. 50, 2009.
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- "The Dialogics of Chocolate," Global and Local Art Histories, edited by Celina Jeffreys and Gregory Minissale. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2007).



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- M.F.A., animation, Savannah College of Art and Design, 2004

Credentials

Maloney directed a film that premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009. He also has worked on projects that screened on five continents and exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. He has worked on freelance projects in stop motion and 3D digital animation, game design, motion graphics, special effects, and live-event production. He has been involved with screenings at festivals including the London International Animation Festival, the Melbourne International Animation Festival, Black Maria, the Hearts and Minds Documentary Film Festival and Cannes. In addition, he co-produced the touch-table game and Indiecade finalist "Black Bottom Parade."

Awards, recognitions and honors

MT Maloney Custom Jewelry listed in counter-culture press as one of the top five skull ring designers in the world.

Publications and Presentations

- "Creative Synthesis: The Anchorite and the Noble Failure," Mezmer, 2010.
- "Digital Diegesis," Webvisions Barcelona
- "Adventures in Game Design," Webvisions Portland