

Process Book

Final assignment

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Table of contents

Abstract.....	3
Purpose.....	4
Technical objective.....	5
Sound.....	6
Aesthetic choices.....	7
Animation details.....	8
Characters.....	9-10
Line as a tool.....	11
Symbolism.....	12
Production development.....	13
Post-production process.....	14
Hardships and resolutions.....	15
Critical reflection.....	16
What have I gained from this course and project?.....	17
Conclusion.....	18
Declaration.....	19

Abstract

The project “Sympathetic Knife” is a metaphorical depiction of World War II represented through the lens of bullying culture. Poland, a secluded and alienated student, gets targeted by two popular girls, Germany and Russia, whose desires for power end up carrying deadly consequences. The animation explores crucial themes of the Second World War by applying visual symbolism, as well as implementing additional contextual elements such as teenage angst and jealousy to not only amplify the wretched bond between the characters, but also help the audience identify with the protagonist by depicting her suffering from a mentally exhausted high schooler’s point of view.

Purpose

The main point I was trying to get across while creating this project is that through anthropomorphism, an artist is able to ignite a sense of emotional connection between the viewer and the character. It's easier for the observer to register the pain of another human being rather than something abstract/deprived of human emotion, like a piece of land, a plant or an object. A sense of empathy grows stronger within our own species, which is precisely the reason why I decided to represent the main character and the antagonists as people instead of walking map fragments.

Technical objective

What I focused on from a technical standpoint was developing a frame by frame animation which would eventually last around 60 seconds. Most of all, I prioritised precision; if I noticed that something wasn't concise or didn't go well together, I'd either redraw the frames entirely or delete them and replace them with another concept, which I had previously created. My ultimate goal was to learn how to manage my characters' movements, mostly by testing several drawing techniques and analysing how the real human body behaves, since I always had trouble with drawing human features (hands, legs, face expressions).

Sound

In the context of sound, I chose to base the animation on the song: “Sympathy is a knife” by Charli XCX and placed the track on the timeline so that I could work with sound and image simultaneously. The song choice proved useful, since the lyrics corresponded directly with the potential plot. I had visualized my entire project while thoroughly focusing on each line. The music also helped with constructing a somewhat grotesque atmosphere due to its hyper pop genre, which ultimately served as a stylistic device, especially since the grievous topic of my project redefined its lyrics completely.

Aesthetic choices

Close-ups:

As I mentioned prior, I decided to focus on face expressionism amongst other aspects, which is why I chose to include multiple close-up shots of faces in an attempt to capture emotions in a raw manner.

Backgrounds:

Due to a lack of time, I opted for neutral backgrounds. I composed them in After Effects using solids and applying the “gradient” effect onto them.

Color grading:

One of the final steps was dedicating my time to colorgrade the project. I thought that a striking, highly saturated color palette of the characters would contrast nicely with the rather greyish tones of the backgrounds. This also helped with amplifying the characters’ significant role in the project, as their vivid colors direct the observer’s attention towards them.

Animation details

For my animation style, I picked the frame-by-frame technique. It included drawing approximately 1200 frames in an application called FlipaClip and analyzing each one in the context of scale, proportions, timing and coloring. This technique was completely new to me, since I've only ever animated in After Effects prior to that, however despite its difficulty, it taught me persistence and discipline.

Characters

- Poland: The protagonist. An introverted, shy and socially awkward girl at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Her presence could never equate to Germany and Russia's, which makes her fear the both of them, as well as being in a constant state of inferiority and forming a cryptic adoration for them.



- Germany: The first antagonist. Her smarts and wicked nature aren't perceived only as a danger to others, but also a powerful tool that most individuals can't possess. She's reckless and manipulative, which lands her at the very top of the food chain.



- Russia: The second antagonist. A beautiful, cat-like girl whose identity largely relies on how she's perceived by Germany. She strives to be independent whilst being overshadowed by her friend's influence.



Line as a tool

The use of lines played a crucial role during the animation process. I contemplated for a long period of time which line method I wanted, since FlipaClip offers multiple brush sizes. I eventually ended up working with the regular brush tool and decided on size 8. This gave the effect of semi-noticeable edges, therefore making the characters' outlines precise, but subtle at the same time. Besides that, the lines also served a significant part in the context of movement and anatomy, because I already had a basis of how the flow should be arranged in order to create a smooth pattern recognition system.

Symbolism

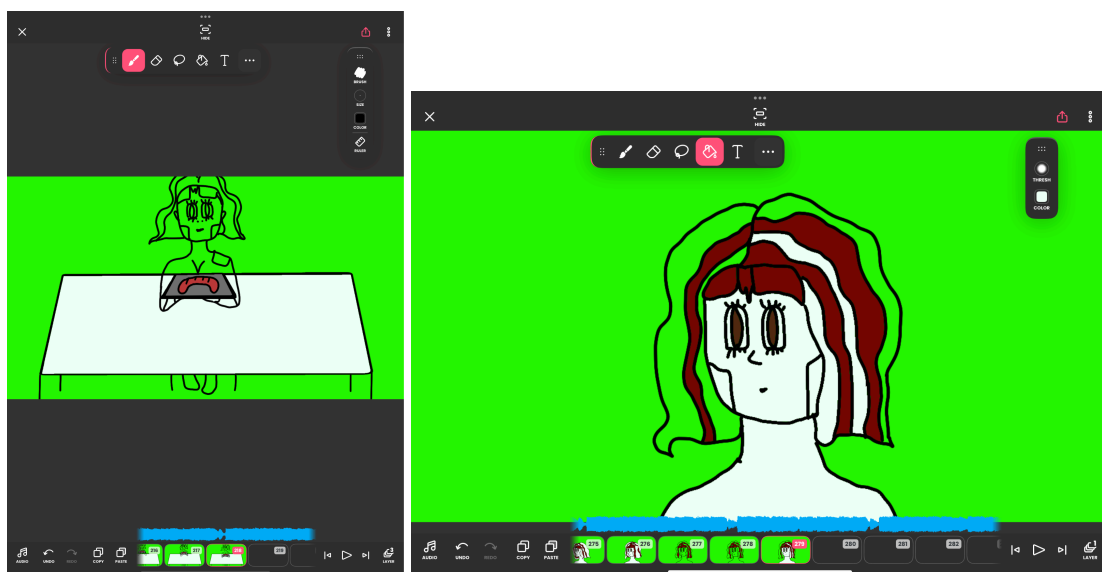
From a symbolic point of view, my project required thorough planning. Since the topic was based on the atrocities of World War II, I wanted to preserve some of the most prominent aspects of the historical scene at the time. In order to do that, I had to implement symbols such as:

- Russia's USSR necklace
- Germany's shoes and stockings (representative of the Swastica)
- Poland's hair color and pattern (correlating to its flag)
- Splitting the word "Warsaw" and letting the word "war" linger until the scene was over
- Capital cities engraved on the girls' chests



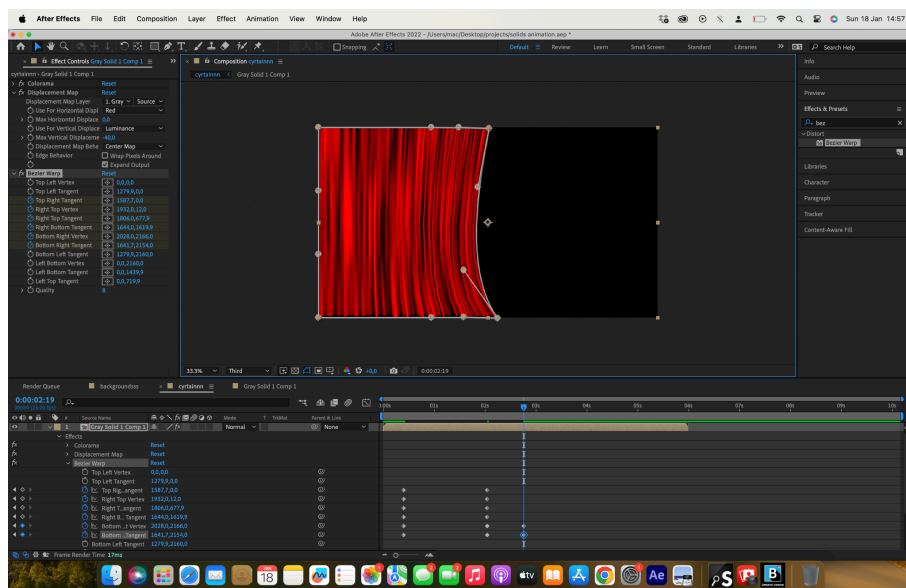
Production development

As mentioned previously, I opted to do my project in the FlipaClip app. I've never used that programme before, but due to its effortlessness, it wasn't difficult to manage and became rather easy as time went on. One of the first steps was character design, which I decided to do in the app directly and worked only with amateur sketches from my notebook. After that, I focused on layer continuity; I used the onion skin option which allowed me to draw over each frame directly. I worked with my song in the track below, which was an advantage, because I could time every particular scene as I went along with the process. At some point, I actually began creating separate scenes based on which shot I wanted to direct my attention towards and decided to not do it chronologically. Even though it created a misalignment within the composition, each line was timed prior, so I was able to handle the lack of order during post-production. The last important element of the production itself was working without backgrounds and drawing the scenes on top of a green solid, which made my work easier and made it possible to play around with space and the sizes of the characters.



Post-production process

For my post-production, I decided that After Effects would be the most viable option for me, especially since I've been familiar with it since 2019. After I was done animating, I imported my footage into a 25 fps composition. I then downloaded the song file to ensure that the sound quality was as high as possible. The process consisted mostly of cutting the scenes in the correct time slots and rearranging them according to my notes. After I was done with that part, I invented 5 solid layers, added a gradient effect to each of them and rendered them as a PNG sequence. Once that was done, I imported my solids into the timeline, keyed out the green color from the main footage and matched each one with the scenes with the correct backgrounds. The final step of the post-production was rendering everything and uploading it to the teams folder. What's more, I added some additional elements in After Effects as well, for instance a red curtain at the beginning.



Hardships and resolutions

Hardships:

- Time management: I underestimated how much time I would need for this project and ended up rushing the final steps
- Working with multiple layers: since I wasn't used to frame by frame animation, having a large amount of layers often felt exhausting and hectic
- Continuity: even though it was a crucial element of my final work, having to redraw multiple scenes a lot of times to make them look concise became repetitive

Resolutions:

- Time management: in order to manage everything, I spent several hours on the project itself without allowing myself to get distracted
- Working with multiple layers: to create a more approachable method, I named each layer so that I could be more well-oriented
- Continuity: I was able to manage the continuous process of drawing by timing each line, updating the color palette for each character and working hard to not leave a scene unfinished once it had already been started on the same day

Critical reflection

The project ended up meeting most of the criteria voiced to me by the professor.

Additionally, it turned out well in the context of its flow, smoothness and a somewhat edgy imagery. The highly saturated colors and loud, hyper pop music created an environment of uncertainty and chaos. The chronology within the project was easy to follow. From the plot standpoint, it captured the difficulties faced not only by the country of Poland, but also the personified version of her, which was the ultimate goal I had in mind while creating this piece of media.

What have I gained from this course and project?

This class taught me to start managing my time more efficiently and to never take its shortage for granted. While I was creating the first steps, which included character design, music choice, taking notes and drawing a storyboard, I really couldn't have predicted the amount of effort and time this would take up. Other than that, I also became more familiar with improv work, because I never thought being spontaneous while creating an animation would pay off, but surprisingly, some of my favourite shots were made with little to no previous planning. Additionally, I learned the skill of animating the human body, as well as working with the frame by frame animation technique, which isn't something I ever thought I'd do. Lastly, it allowed me to challenge myself and gave me a creative field where I could make all the significant changes and manage each step individually. Overall, this experience made me more cautious of the low standards I sometimes tend to set for myself and reshape them into more ambitious goals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found this opportunity varied notably from most arts courses I've ever been a part of. It was a tough, long and unpredictable process, but ultimately, it granted me the skills that I probably wouldn't have earned if I chose another path for this semester. I am grateful for the challenges I faced, since they made me more aware of my limitations. I am also thankful for being able to express my vision through the form of animation I picked and not a form that was given to me up front. To summarize, this project will stay with me for a long time and it will mark the beginning of my journey with mediums other than regular film.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this project and the accompanying process documentation are my own original work. All sources of inspiration, references, and third-party materials have been appropriately acknowledged. This work has not been submitted previously for assessment in any other course or institution.

Signature: _____Neda Parczewska_____

Date: _____31/01/2026_____