Stuck

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STUCK

By Whitney Walters

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REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IMAGING ARTS/COMPUTER ANIMATION SCHOOL OF FILM AND
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ABSTRACT:

Stuck is six-minutes and five seconds in duration. The film starts in an artist’s studio, a blob creature gingerly applies paint to a canvas. The goopy creature is exhausted and slumps onto their canvas. It rests its head there, but is startled by an alarm and remembers something. The blob panics and seizes its portfolio before rushing off.

The blob sits in an office while a bored man flips through the portfolio and hands back the book. Rejected, the blob melts and flows out the door into a hallway of parody movie posters and a display case of ‘mockquettes.’ The blob manages to anger a busy employee, a walking sticky note pad who spits miniature sticky notes before stomping off. The blob melts to a bus stop where two other characters wait, a robot-looking woman pressing glowing screens and a little girl scribbling in her sketchbook. The little girl notices the portfolio tucked under the blob’s arm. She attempts to show the distraught blob her own drawing, but surprises the blob into dropping her portfolio. The blob dives after the
pages before they blow away. In the struggle, the blob gets frustrated and starts ripping its portfolio pages. The disappointed girl transforms to a little blob and leaves with the robot woman. The blob grabs a crinkled piece of paper stuck to its side, unfurls the paper and is struck with realization. The blob catches up before they board the bus. The bigger blob shows she understands the drawing and morphs into a young woman. She turns the page revealing a crayon drawing interpretation of the woman the blob is. The little girl, no longer a small blob, gives the drawing to the woman. Once the little girl and robot-mom leave, the woman goes back to the bench with restored optimism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I must take the time to acknowledge the massive amount of appreciation and gratitude I have for the people who helped me through this animated project.

First, Mari Jaye Blanchard is the fantastic and enthusiastic professor at RIT who has given me a ton of clear, and effective advice on how to get the messages I wanted to express to resonate with an audience. I had the
opportunity to meet with her on a close to weekly basis and she never disappointed with her critique and feedback. I also had the opportunity to work as her teaching assistant for the Principles of Animation class and was impressed by her methods of running a course. She is inspiring and knowledgeable in her field as I wish to be as a professor someday.

I got to meet far fewer times during production with my other Thesis Committee members, Atia Newman and Tom Gasek, but when I did they were always good for bouncing ideas and solutions to problems off each other. The team worked well together.

I also need to thank Max Berlin and Shoghi Hayes for contributing their time in composing a score of fine quality for my film. Their harmonious collaboration has proved positively effective in the project. I especially need to thank them for keeping their composure with me after delivering picture lock so late in the Spring semester of 2017.

Later additions, but no less appreciated for their contribution to the film, was Benjamin Strack for his sound design. As well as Carl Gustafson’s assistance for the special effects for the two transformation
shots. They were both considerate about taking direction and made the process of the final finessing of the film manageable.

I’ve met many skilled, wonderful professors and students at RIT. They have helped me through times of doubt, fear and darkness which ultimately got myself back to positive focuses. They are among the best people I’ve had the pleasure of meeting in my life so far. I hope they achieve their dreams as I believe they all deserve.

COMING UP WITH THE STORY:

My film was intended to hint at a few important messages. One is the stressful process of finding a worthwhile and satisfying job. Not just a job, but a career, the kind one can find some sort of accomplishment pertaining to and in the field they majored in. Personally, a big deal because most of my job experience has been factory based. I have worked in three different factories located in my hometown, the first was a steel company where I did large-area yard work, inventory of steel pieces, and various maintenance and cleaning across the entire shop. Not a
particularly hard job, but I would have rather spent my time tidying up files for creative projects.

At Corry Manufacturing I put small to medium-sized pieces into fixtures to tack weld them together. One of my least favorite pieces was like playing a particularly annoying version of the board game *Operation*. If unfamiliar with the game, it’s where you take these tweezer-like tools to grab small plastic pieces out of narrow holes in the board decorated with a red-nosed cartoon man. Except in this case, the employee balances tiny metal pieces in a fixture to tack weld with an electric-volt heat gun to bigger pieces. In the board game, if you touched the side of the hole with the tool it would buzz and maybe startle you. If the worker touched the metal fixture with the volt gun this would explode the tiny metal piece sending out a loud noise and tiny sparks that could possibly blind a person or sear flesh. If I’m going to risk blindness, I would prefer doing so by staring at an animation program for too long. The process of making “Stuck” was meticulous with cleaning up lines which needed to be precise for successful, digital paint fills, but I didn’t have to worry about the Wacom pen exploding.
Vikings Plastics was about assembling pieces in a systematic way, it was less stressful, but monotonous. There was one step which posed a hazard when the assembled piece was scanned for accuracy in its completed stage. The scanner had a metal plate compress onto the piece to test if the pieces moved as they should. Once, this plate came down fast and hard while I was sticking a piece in the scanner. I moved my hands away just in time, but I refused to ever do this part of the process again. I need my hands for the job I desire in an artistic field. If I’m going to risk injuring my hand for a while or permanently, I better have been doing something artistically creative. In animation, I’ve injured my wrist in mass frame clean-up, hurt my spine from sitting for too long, but still from this masochistic process comes the gratifying outcome of seeing something finished. Hopefully an outcome which is expressive enough to connect with an audience.

In animation there is always a challenge, something to be solved and thought through. I always want to grow, I don’t want to be taught how to assemble five different pieces and never question the process again. I have done repetitious work even in animation. For example coloring a shot
digitally, which varies on method, but is standardly done with a few clicks over many frames. Often the process means going back through the frames with a few brush touch-ups here and there. While the task of coloring a shot may seem dull, at least those colors have brought a little extra polish, and if done with the right palette, life into the animation.

When assembling the same piece in a factory, there is no gain, no growth. Only a product made for and from a machine to make a large corporation money. An employee in line-assembly waits to be done as their hands move in the familiar, rhythmic pattern.

Around my late undergraduate years, I had to balance being a summer resident assistant while taking on a remote freelance internship working for a smaller studio in LA called S4 Studios. I helped storyboard and animate a nutrition-promoting character for kids named Vitamin Bee. He is still buzzing around the internet with his own site and as a Youtube channel. I’m in the credits with the rest of the small team I worked with, we called ourselves, Catch 22 FX. The experience had its pros and cons. The internship was fulltime, at least 40 hours a week, and ate up most of
the summer. I didn’t like coffee before the internship, but I learned to as well as many other technical skills in the Lightwave animation process. The internship wasn’t paid, but awarded with college credits. The client was critical and difficult to please with our constant outpour of work, but some good things to come out the projects were; increased skill level, experience with working with a team for a client and some animation clips decent enough for a reel. The reel I used to get into grad school at RIT.

Only at RIT was I able to finally start a job as a Teaching Assistant in handling the labs for the Animation Survey class. I had finally found something I enjoyed and felt appreciated in as a paying job. The experience proved I wanted a career in my specific field and only my field as a long-term career. I still had to work jobs outside my field in-between my educational semesters and will likely have to again before finding something. Still, knowing full-well that my heart belongs in the artistic field is a big drive. However, I don’t need to work for a big-name animation studio. I could fit in with a smaller studio. My film contains many posters parodying popular animated films to satirize the mentality of only feeling good about yourself if you work for a feature film animation company. It’s
funny how many times I have to hear the question, “So are you going to work at Disney? At Pixar?” Well, these places are extremely competitive. Not impossible, but often improbable. What seems to be the trend, is the creative has to work their way up to that level or at least have the right connections. Make no mistake, given the opportunity I would take such a career path in less than a second. I just believe there are as many or more animated TV shows which present strong and significant messages. Even if I was unable to find a career in any significant studio, I have the capability of making images which represent an idea and the resources to present an idea to an audience easily with the use of social media or crowd-funding sites such as Kickstarter. Whether I am working for a studio or not, I know I will be generating ideas through visuals, perhaps taking the time to develop concepts through bigger projects with comics and/or independent films depending on how much time and energy I have working through at least one salaried job. I know I can’t stop completely, no matter what, it’s a huge part of my identity.

The point is the protagonist blob in “Stuck” seems to derive all their self-worth out of landing this big-name career. Since this is a personal film,
an audience might believe my biggest priority in life is working for a top studio. It’s not, but I feel there is some pressure from society if I don’t, I am not living up to expectations. I’m poking fun at these expectations and dramatizing my own anxiety with them. The devastated reaction to rejection in this film is meant to be overly-dramatic. Rejection is going to happen. It’s important to keep trying anyway. Find a better opportunity or at least a more probable one to work up from. I have been rejected many times from opportunities of all kinds; but I never got excluded from one thing and completely given up on my life goals. However, I do wish to point out being rejected from many things and all in a short amount of time can take a toll on anyone and be dangerously depressing. I feel everyone goes through times in their lives when it seems that nothing will ever go the way they would like. Everything surrounding them seems to be screaming the wrong outcome and it gets a person stuck in a detrimental funk.

Here’s what I believe is the most important thing to remember; just like in film as well as many prolifically written stories, there is the all-hope-is-lost moment. This is the moment where the biggest threats have risen to
peak, there seems to be no possible solution. Yet somehow the protagonist realizes there’s something they overlooked or gets creative under pressure. They suddenly become the cleverest version of themselves and figure out how to overcome their biggest obstacles. These moments in stories give me faith in my story, if these characters can get through the challenges that seem impossible to them, I must be able to get through mine. The challenge is finding the patience and creativity for possible solutions. Film-making is problem-solving after all, as anyone with this experience will tell you.

Another message in “Stuck” is about problems or perceivable flaws as every realistic character has them. Most characters in this film are possessed and embodied by their affliction. In this case, the problem which most consumes their life, the root cause of everything which holds them back from being the best version of themselves. The protagonist is a blob, and the muck which incases them represents their worst flaw, self-doubt. The symbolism with muck is it’s something hard to move through in its consistency, it weighs down, and at times melts away the structure of the underlying character. The protagonist is covered in this muck the
moment the audience sees them in the first shot. At this stage, the audience is meant to believe the character is nothing but a blob. The intention behind this choice is that the character has been bogged down by muck for a while, before the film’s story begins.

The affliction concept is reiterated throughout the film. Another example is the sticky notepad employee. A character who is concerned most about organization and reminders of getting the job done as soon as possible. In the story, this character is enraged when they even need to slow down for a moment after stepping in the blob character. The sticky notepad blows small sticky notes at the blob as if screaming at the protagonist. The sticky notepad character is caught up in their own duties, too busy to consider anything other than the task on pad. Later, a whiskey bottle, labeled Jim Daniels drunkenly strolls by in one of the bus stop shots. The blob character sits down next to a robotic woman. She has a screen for a face and pokes tiny screens in the air. Her palette is saturated and meant to be easily recognizable to anybody who uses social media, her hair itself reflects the folded wings of Twitter’s bluebird mascot. Social media notification screens distract her as she pays no mind to her
surroundings. Social media gal is intended to be the mom of the doodling little girl who sits next to her on the bench. As for the little girl’s introduction in the story she is seemingly normal, not possessed by any internal afflictions made external because of her youth. She does, however, resemble a certain famous animated character with her rounded hair buns reminiscent of Mickey Mouse ears. Her overhauls and overall palette echo many other character appearances in animation history. She has blue hair and yellow rain boots like *Coraline* from the Laika production. As common in creative young kids she draws freely, unafraid of artistic criticism. Later the little girl becomes a self-doubting blob when the protagonist blob shows no interest or approval in her drawing.

The intention behind this specific idea, is most creative types probably started off purely having fun in their medium on some scale. My first exercise in 2D animation was a flipbook, my first stop motion shot was completed with a Gameboy camera while moving toy figures and my first computer animation experience was in Lego Creator for the PC. I didn’t care about materials, tools and results as much as I just wanted to have fun using my imagination. I wanted to see the illusion of life. It’s sad
the early youthful imagination must move away from the concept of fearless imagination, but on a professional scale critical thinking and planning is an absolute necessity on budget and time limitations.

Eventually in their development all creatives will go through critique and ones which will be hyper-critical. No one wants to hear or see anything they spent a long time working on ripped to shreds, but it happens. The best thing is knowing the difference between when to swallow your pride and when to defend your work. When some things work or needs to be more clear and effective in a shot. I’ve come to handle critique on films with these thoughts in mind, but especially for “Stuck.” I had to restart some shots several times to reach a composition which best fit the emotion and action. Other times, I had to force myself to stop nit-picking a shot and move on. Independent projects may allow freedom with ignoring criticism, but studio heads or clients don’t usually appreciate the employee ignoring their advice. The stress of deadlines is unavoidable for everyone on an animated project and critical mistakes can cost multiple creatives their job or worse their reputations. All these stressful points about animation have been pounded into my head and as a result into my
blob character’s gooey head. The blob is consumed by their muck because of its cynicism toward their work, what others think about their work and the difficulties of finding a fitting career so much that the blob has forgotten the person they were before, A person with immense passion for their medium. It’s only when the little girl shows her the picture of the person she sees, does the blob realize she is not under the control of negative perceptions toward her because some, like the little girl, do perceive her to be better than a muck monster. The woman can choose to see herself in the same light as the little girl does. She can learn to be unburdened with the mental muck and work with being less discouraged with her own endeavors even after rejection, she just needs to remember who she is.

**REVIEW OF RESEARCH:**

One film which reflects similar ideas behind “Stuck” is the stop motion piece, Mark Osborne’s “MORE”, which bemoans the work done in a factory setting (figure 8.1). The frowning, gray character in this piece is constantly distracted by a literal glowing door in their gut. The glow
symbolizes creative potential, the wish and drive to see happier times. Times, such as the one the main character keeps flashing back to in its youth of playing on a merry-go-round with other smiling, similar characters. In the short, the protagonist gets scolded by an overseeing boss from a scaffold. The scolding is a relatable occurrence in my own experience with undesirable, factory jobs, as I was often distracted with thinking about more creative endeavors outside of the task in front of my face. The protagonist is desperate to break free of their work situation. Their internal feelings and motives is all they can think of and as a result be frustrated with. The character reaches a new level of progress when they reach into the glowing box within themselves, pull out some of the gleaming substance and drop the substance on the new goggles they have been crafting. Immediately after putting the goggles on, the character witnesses a new world of vivid color, dancing hues, brighter horizons represented in 2D animation. The saturated graphic environment is a striking difference, from the dimensional, but gray-toned and dismal stop motion city-scape. The protagonist shares the revolutionary device to a society ready for change. Everyone rejoices in consumerism with the new
product sold in stores and holds the creator to a high status. The protagonist is lifted to the big-boss status and looks down on the workers and scolds them (figure 8.2). Except this time, the worker uses the googles to look up and see a smiling, waving boss. The worker takes the googles off looking stunned, suggesting the worker has realized the googles are projecting an overly-positive façade of a reality. End scene of the film, the protagonist sits alone in their office. They check the box in their gut, but there is nothing. The potential energy has been used up in a product made for everyone. My interpretation and I believe the creator’s intention is the original energy or glowing-door gut was meant to be more of a personal experience, nostalgic energy stemming from happier, care-free times, from a past time in a playground. When this energy is spread to others they may “see” happiness, but they are not fully experiencing the story or fond memories which were the personal drive to the creator. The experience still exists as a past memory for the protagonist to look back upon, but through the goggles the experience is diluted. Memories are specific experiences to those who have lived them. Past times cannot be revisited as a reality in the present, goggles or not.
My film does not go into what the experience of working in a few different factories was like, I wasn’t interested in making another, inferior version of “MORE.” My film, “Stuck,” is derived from my fear of never being considered skilled, imaginative or structured enough to work in my field, specifically for an animated TV or feature production. I’ve worked on freelance projects professionally specific to illustration and animation, but I know the lifestyle is not my preference, at least not as my stable source of income. Freelance is just something I would rather do on the side.

I have been studying animation since my undergraduate years at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, and I consider all those years as experience leading up to making my graduate thesis, “Stuck,” at Rochester Institute of Technology. Both colleges favored the story-telling curriculum versus specialization in animation. Prior to and after my college experience, my belief is story is the most important aspect in animation. Good story comes through with characters, their performances, and their reactions to events. For the characters in “Stuck,” I just reviewed the basic principles I practiced in my educational experience. No need for live-
action reference footage, since the main character was mostly an oozing blob. I did have to reference a lot of established, animated film posters and gather some reference for stylized backgrounds. I am not one who likes to spend an enormous amount of time on technical backgrounds.

Most of the backgrounds are a mix of an ode to UPA stylized perspectives and strong, saturated graphics such as Genndy Tartakovsky’s backgrounds in *Samurai Jack* or Craig Mccraken’s simple, yet informative backgrounds in *The Powerpuff Girls* (figure 14.1). I did reference some real photos for the art studio at the beginning of the film. The one in the film derives parts from those reference photos and appears to be large in a panning shot, like a warehouse studio.

For the bus in the film, I searched for photos of the 24 Marketplace bus design I took most days to school. I called the bus, Terrible Transit, because of the passive-aggressive stance I took with its service. The film is personal in subject, and did not take a lot of extensive, outside research.

**PRE-PRODUCTION:**
Pre-production was where I got hung up for a while, seems to be where most animators get stuck for some time. It’s only logical considering this is the best time to make significant changes to the story on how the film maker choses to visually present and reveal information. Even before any visuals were so much as thumbnailed, there were many changes to the first draft proposal. The protagonist was originally a writer, but always a self-doubting blob who was in their animated reality, human. Only the lead character would have been male. There was a friendship-based relationship between the blob and another budding creative type, an actress. The actress would have been able to see the blob character as the person he was. The friendship was significant because they inspired each other to be better in their fields, but I couldn’t visualize how to imply this in the story without the story appearing to revolve around romance. Not that this was necessarily a bad thing, but I wanted it to focus more on how people in general should be more supportive of each other and let go of insecurities about their selves in the process. The characters were to keep each other from the negativity of their individual head space. I would work to maintain this concept, while still touching on the idea that
this negative feeling about ourselves and our work as creatives never completely dissipates. Doubt persists, but you can’t let it stop you from attaining goals and dreams. Still, this notion of romantic focus seemed unavoidable with the characters left as is. By the end semester of my second year at RIT, I was exhausted. I took the committee’s advice on changing the blob’s occupation or lack thereof, to an artist desperately looking for a job. He also became a she, because the fact is there still aren’t as many female protagonists as males. This also made the character more like myself considering finding my career path is my next goal in life. Once, visuals started, I went through about three sets of thumbnail storyboards in this project just figuring out compositions and the order of story beats. I needed to discern what beats in the story the blob was feeling particularly intimidated or low. How fluid was the blob going to be? What was going to be the blob’s main method of locomotion since it wouldn’t have permanent legs? Which mostly turned out to be slugging along the ground, a flowing puddle at its most upset level and occasionally picking up its blobby haunches for running.
The character and background design, story changes, and staging alterations meshed together in the pre-production stage as one affected and determined direction for another. For example, if I wasn’t going to have more character performance with the mockquettes this meant the depletion of completing one or two more backgrounds for the final composite. The expunging of unnecessary work in a project is why every filmmaker should spend the most time in the pre-production stage. Many beats were cut sooner or altogether to improve overall flow. Once the general beats were established, they needed to be timed out and visually paced well in the animatic stage.

ANIMATIC:

The first animatic assembly was rough. The timing took a while to get down because my advisor and I spent a few meetings discussing ways to simplify individual shots into fewer shots. We talked about the choices and reasons of when to reveal certain events in order, namely when the blob would transform. Before or after the reveal of the drawing? A hefty section of the film was going to be the characters sitting on a bench while
waiting for the bus to come. Therefore, I had to condense shots, so I wasn’t making as many background compositions of benches in different angles. In turn, I fixed most of the bench compositions in the animatic stage, a few I adjusted in the animating stage. The blob would eventually go through a transformation shot in the story, and my belief was this shot was going to be the most important and one I wanted to look great. The shot was talked about like it was going to be very difficult to animate, and originally involved the little girl also changing back from her blob-state. However, Mari Jaye and I ended up coming up with what I thought was still a cool, but simple way of handling the shot once I began animating.

CHARACTER DESIGN:

The main protagonist was going to be a blob, so one question which was discussed in thesis meetings was what was this goopy substance going to be made of? Of course, the blob could essentially consist of an undefined blob material. Still, there was a thought of having the blob made of some artistic media to connect back to the overall theme of a struggling artist. Suggestions of media included the ideas of having the
character formed from thick paint or as an inky blot (figure 1.1). Coloring the character to be read as being made of an artistic media was going to cut into time limitations, so ultimately the blob ended up being mostly gray. You might say the material choice is a gray area. Joke aside, I define the gray material as purposely mysterious in substance because of how unsure the blob is of itself. Early concept art of the blob left hints of female anatomy or feminine hair buns, but were quickly ruled out as it was decided the blob should remain gender-autonomous until the big reveal. Other characters were more complex in their original design, one such was the sticky notes who looked more like a man silhouette covered in sticky notes. The design was reduced to a single, sticky note pad with rectangular glasses and stick legs. Although, I liked the original design, I was less enthralled about the idea of animating the fluttering of many individual sticky notes under time restrictions. The social media mom was a similar situation, as the original had relatively average human proportions and was obviously female. Her shapes were broken down for easier animating, she lost indications of gender clarity, and was transformed into a robot. Even Jim Daniels, small as his part always was,
had a man’s body with a bottle for a head and cigarette sticking out from
the top. Jim was modified and became only a wobbly, staggering bottle
(figure 6.1). The mockquettes, at one point, had more screen time. They
would have spent more time being disgusted and jeering the blob while
seeking validation from each other with their bullying (figure 5.1). My
advisor and I decided this would mean a little too much character
animation to handle and would take too much attention away from the
build of the rejected blob. The mockquettes then only appeared briefly in
a looping animation of the panning hall shot, about two seconds of screen
time. The little girl was the last to have a completed design, but went
through the least amount of reiterations. Reminiscent in design, attire and
palette to familiar characters as mentioned (figure 2.1).

BACKGROUND DESIGN:

As stated, I had no interest with creating overly technical
backgrounds for this piece. I searched for many examples of Craig
McCacken’s background work especially from his show, *The Powerful
Girls*. *The Powerpuff Girls* took place in an urban setting, so there was
plenty to reference for cityscapes and offices. Still, my style combined with the geometrical simplifications I took mental note of in the references produced something which looks different altogether. A few backgrounds were kept relatively bare because they were intended to focus entirely on the character as close-ups and close-medium shots. The shots which needed to call attention to the background the most were the studio space, office, poster parody shots and introduction to the urban bus stop. I can draw backgrounds, but they are far from my passion in any given project. Still, I managed to have fun with the poster parodies. I felt they gave me a breather from the seriousness of making a thesis film, but in a way which I was still working on the film. All movies parodied in these posters included; *Kubo and the Two Strings, Howl’s Moving Castle, Spirited Away, Inside Out, Up, The Lion King, My Neighbor Tortoro, Coraline, The Lego Movie, Wreck-it-Ralph, Tangled, Zootopia, The Nightmare Before Christmas, The Golden Compass, Monster House, Frozen and Big Hero 6* (figure 11.3, 12.1-12.3). The commonality is they are all reputable films from leading industry animation studios; such as Studio Ghibli, Disney, Laika and Pixar. I chose the animated films to
parody based on the wordplay I could use to alter the movie title and/or slogans on their original posters. As well as for characters I thought would be fun to draw with goofy expressions. The first hallway shots features parodies of the posters from the animation complex hallway, which adds to the personal flair of the story (figure 11.3). All backgrounds were completed digitally in Photoshop, even though some seem to have a vector-based quality through shape and simplified graphic, it’s a higher resolution bitmap technique.

**ANIMATING:**

Animating is always a challenge, at least when you want to take an animated project seriously. I decided utilizing TV Paint’s digital workflow would work for the best. I believe I have a strong understanding of animation principles and performance, but I know even animators in the professional field often go through trial and error. However, I did not have as much experience as I would have liked to using TV Paint to draw traditionally. My first introduction to TV Paint was done in the Spring semester of my 1st year at RIT, the brief tutorial was started at eight in the
morning on a particularly sleep-deprived week. Spring semester of 1st year I was also working on my first film for RIT and did not feel like I had the mental energy at the time to start using another program. I returned to TV Paint when my peers decided on making a collaborative film as a class in the late semester of 2nd year. Between this time there was too much of gap from the last time I opened the program, so it was square one again. We also colored shots in Photoshop, so software hopping among a full load of six classes proved too daunting to yet again familiarize with TV Paint. TV Paint is strictly bitmap, like Photoshop, I was accustomed to using the vector-based program Flash or drawing directly on paper. Flash takes time to make a drawing look polished enough for a quality film, the same can be said for TV Paint. There is the option of converting traditional drawings to be digitally polished and colored, but this can also be a time-consuming nightmare. I feel in the digital process, making the drawing frames look good eats up work days, but coloring is usually a breeze after. In traditional, pencil has a natural and visually appealing aesthetic in the initial roughs. I know digital programs can simulate traditional media to a degree, but it never feels quite the same. Not until
my second semester of thesis year, did I have more confidence with my lines in TV Paint. There was also the challenge of animating a character who looks gelatinous, flexible and goopy while still experiencing real human emotions of rejection, sadness, apathy and anger. There were shots where I believe I did this well and ones I believed could have been pushed. Mari Jaye recommended watching a short, animated music video, *The Music Scene*, to get a sense of rhythmic flow and malleable form (Figure: 9.1). In the music video, she encouraged to take note of the character with a screen for a face, for my social media character. Also to consider the sketchy, but still clear lines as part as the aesthetic to perhaps apply to my own technique with animating.

The less challenging part of choosing to animate a blob as my protagonist was I didn’t need to stick to a model sheet, since the point of the character was supposed to struggle with stable form.

As for the transformation shot, I animated the blob rotating and changing into the woman in place. Then simply panned a stylized background in the opposing direction of the rotating character. Other shots, like melting out of the office and running back and forth in the
studio ended up proving to be more difficult to animate. I believe each shot worked out. Character animation was easily my favorite part in creating this film.

**POST-PRODUCTION:**

Post-production certainly takes time in the final assembly. There were many parts I just wasn’t going to do in TV Paint in any convenient way. Moving a bus for example was a way easier method of simply sliding elements and rotating parented tires in After Effects. Background creation I don’t find to be an easy task in TV Paint either, so making backgrounds in Photoshop and compositing them behind the animation in After Effects was an absolute necessity. I added a few camera moves to shots bigger than the standard 16:9 aspect ratio of 1920x1080, which is again easily done (and with great easing capability too!) in After Effects. I fixed some color issues with backgrounds and experimented with points of focus utilizing both Photoshop and After Effects. I added glowing effects to tiny screens being popped by the social media mom, glow to the bus headlights and to the transformation scene of the protagonist character.
Finally, I moved fixes into Premiere and begun to see things come together, where the real elation of seeing something look finished took place.

**CRITIQUES AND FEEDBACK:**

I got my first group review to the story when I showed my animatic at the animatic screening night at RIT. I was running late on the whole project, I didn’t get an official time for the screening because they had all filled up, and I had close to no placement sound. I was feeling lousy about how things were looking at the time, but was pushed by my advisor to submit something anyway. I knew this was for the best, despite my reluctance, so I showed up with my animatic on a USB. Some of the undergraduate animatics needed more clarity and more established panels, so I felt a little more at ease with my own. However, once the screening got to the graduate animatics many were solid in placement sound, displayed nice gestural drawings and had well thought-out staging. Still, many of the graduate animatics received some critical advice on
concept, themes and resolutions. I imagined mine was going to be ripped to shreds after these. Luckily, there was some spare time, and I could screen. There were a few laughs at the poster parodies, the Jim Daniels and social media character and since this was intended to be humorous this felt good. Eventually, the animatic ended, and I stood up for feedback. I was sleep deprived, but awake enough to remember what was being said during critique. The consensus was the animatic was a relatively clear story, the viewers understood the different characters and their afflictions. The harshest part of critique was I should work on the timing of the latter half of the film, mostly involving the little girl and blob’s interaction. I knew despite the few suggestions made on changes, I had an extensive amount of work to do.

The most useful feedback was given during frequent meetings with Mari Jaye. As stated before, I cut down my number of shots significantly by condensing certain actions into single shots. This action alone cut down the time lag problem. Other essential improvements were made after discussing shots which needed perspective adjustments. Such as the shot of the businessman handing the portfolio back to the blob. At getting
the portfolio back the blob had to look small in the frame, but still optimistic in their initial expression. The next reverse shot would show the apathetic interviewer spinning around and pulling out their phone, while zooming onto the even smaller blob right before she melted out of the room. Another shot in significant need of perspective alteration was when the blob attempts to pick up the lost pages from their portfolio. The solution was having a low angle shot of the blob as she slides toward the camera. The same viewpoint was used after the blob unfurls the crinkled paper stuck to their side and realizes what the drawing was, this same shot tracks the blob up as they comprehend their mistake and hobble off to get the little girl’s attention before she gets on the bus. Quite a few shots have multiple characters acting in the foreground and background, so there was some challenge and making sure each took their turn in performance timing. When one character had broader actions, the other would need more subtle actions to not be distracting, but still look alive.

Other shots included when the blob finally notices the little girl in the corner of her eye, an over-the-shoulder shot of the little girl in
silhouette and the sulking expression of the blob. Then another reverse shot of putting the blob in the foreground as she turns away from the little girl who is displaying her sketchbook. Each of these shots was necessary in portraying emotional viewpoint, an important element in visual storytelling and preferable to settling on too many straight-on shots.

At the final screening, the film was generally well-received. The more positive comments called the film a, “professional-looking piece.” One commentator wanted the businessman interviewer to have a bigger part in the film. He suggested a more fantastic character with a grandeur performance as to leave the blob with further devastation when they were rejected at the interview. One student contradicted changing the businessman and expressed they were satisfied with the way they were. Another professor was a little thrown off by the stylized perspective in the office shots and said the portfolio didn’t look like it was laying on the desk. I wanted the businessman to seem like a flat and generic individual, so I disagreed. The wonky perspective was intended to match the businessman’s design as he is intended to be attached to his environment. The same commentator was confused to what the book the blob was
carrying around was, a book for school or portfolio for employment?
They suggested showing what was in the book would have cleared this up. Probably true, but this wasn’t the focus of the film. Most of the audience seemed to have no confusion about this matter or at least didn’t mention it out loud. The other criticism was that the shots of the little girl at the bus stop bench lagged. I didn’t agree with this comment as I thought they were necessary in their timing to show what the little girl was thinking. The same person didn’t seem to find any appeal in the little girl’s design or favor in the intended satire in her design. He noticed the Mickey Mouse silhouette of her, but didn’t seem amused by the idea.

My thoughts about the screening was I only wished I felt a little more prepared for my statement. I thought my statement was well written, but my delivery was lacking. I had an evening time slot and had to sit through some long films. There were no breaks when everyone came back from the lunch break at two. I had forgot to refill on water so I failed to get myself hydrated enough for speaking while I waited for about two hours. By the time I stood up, I was very parched, nervous, and although the content of the statement was personal I really didn’t feel as emotional
as I sounded. I sounded shaky like I was about to cry, but was really having a hard time breathing out of a dry throat. In hindsight, I could have escaped between films to get water, but did not want to chance missing my screen time. Not saying it wasn’t emotional for me, just not to the degree it sounded.

In the end, critiques and feedback tips were mostly helpful to the entire process of creating “Stuck.”

**REFLECTION:**

I always want to strive to be a better person. When I see my own work, I’m always telling myself I could do better. There are both cons and pros to an attitude of this kind. The pro is in a professional sense many studios and clients will ask a creative to improve or change various things about a project, in this case I might already be agreeing and willing to make changes. I believe it’s not usually a great idea to be so in love with an idea you refuse to see any need for improvement, at least consider slight variations for the greater good of a project. However, there is danger in never seeing anything good about your project and both mentally and
psychically denying to move-on instead of just saying, “good enough.” I feel a balance between striving for enhancement and simply getting things done needs to be reached for and attained to fully execute anything worthwhile. Still, I believe it’s an eternal struggle for myself, and many creatives.

To reiterate my earlier point, I’ve seen self-doubt in the form of hesitant words rise-up suddenly in many respectable, skilled individuals. The subject is easily universal, relatable, empathetic. Why I chose to focus on this topic is because it lies within everyone, whether on the surface or hidden away until some unexpected circumstances arise. Self-doubt makes people feel alone, when really, it’s a trait in everyone which should remind us that we are not alone in this feeling. These anxious feelings inside myself are something which will never go away completely. My level of self-doubt stemmed from many disappointing events in my life; the failed relationship of my parents, moments of poverty in affording food and necessary utilities, siblings going separate ways, monotonous work in factories in a small and economically doomed town, financial difficulties in affording my college education, feeling stuck, feeling
hopeless, feeling like you will never reach a point of having something ever come easy because everything, every little thing, was so difficult to achieve. At the same time, this is what has made everything worth the fight, when you have something good happen, when you meet people you can’t imagine having never met, even if only for what ends up feeling like a short time. There were friends I listened to, bonded with and realized I shared similar experiences in financial woes, anxieties about making films, family troubles, political disenchantments, or fear of a non-substantial future. At RIT I met many strong, diligent people and eventually I realized I was among them. I needed them, and again this is statement I wished to make with “Stuck,” you need others to see and look beyond yourself, others who believe in you when you feel at your lowest. Friends can ground you back in reality when you can finally see what you were able to overcome and how far you’ve come despite every background obstacle. I remembered circumstances my student peers shared and were able to get through. I found peace in realizing if I could find a way to keep visually telling stories among good, strong, but perfectly imperfect people I would be fine. Even if I didn’t end up with some high-end career/job. I
am not insignificant. I am me and me is all need to be accepted by those who should and do matter. In turn, I can accept people for who they are.

I struggled with an overwhelming amount of ideas, concepts, and daily occurrences in my time at RIT both involving my educational and personal life. I was always listening more than speaking, a habit of someone who spends a considerable amount time in their own headspace. Unfortunately, listening does not always entail full comprehension, but sometimes misconception and miscommunication. Words easily become twisted. Paranoia sets in and causes one to worry incessantly what others say or think about them. What if no one cares about the stories you weave? Isn’t the point of story-telling to share with an audience and hopefully one which is attentive and enthralled? I was too anxious about what the audience was going to think before I began. After all, the film was meant to present a message, viewpoint, a story, a satire of what I wished to show. Still, the fear persisted, I was frozen at times with the project. When all along there were a few things I needed to remember. My creations are made from self-expression derived from my experiences and thoughts. The main concern should not revolve around
whether anyone liked the film or not, but if I feel I succeeded in revealing the idea. The very idea connects back to the narrative of “Stuck” as the blob is wounded by the disinterested businessman, intimidated by posters, mocked by “mockquettes,” and bullied for accidentally being in the way of a bustling worker. The blob takes these negative events to heart and melts. When all she needs to do is connect with those who want to share her commonality. Take for example, the little girl in my film wishes to share her passion for drawing. The blob is too defensive and sick of rejection to show her work. Every affront in her daily life adds to and becomes part of the work she perceives as bad, flawed, and unworthy of sight. A creative identifies with their work. When they doubt their work, they doubt themselves.

In every experience I’ve had with making my own animated films I’ve, at least at one point, doubted the film. Sometimes from the point the idea was formed, or production started. I know this is true for other filmmakers because I’ve watched and listened while others were working on their films. I believe this is always true, whether the creator will admit it or not. Some are just better at saying good enough and moving on.
Could I have done better with what “Stuck” turned out to be? I have thought about what other renditions of the film might have looked like. What if I made less changes along the way? What if I made more changes? What if I had applied other mediums of animation? Did I need so much parody? Could I have traded some of this parody for more “original” satire? Well, I can imagine everything could have been better. In the end, “better” is subjective in terms of the creator’s vision and the response of the film’s audience. Although, I do hope an audience does draw some important message from viewing the film. Regardless, “Stuck” is my film and my vision, strengths and flaws in all. I will move on to make better projects.
“Stuck”
(Working title)
2D Animation
Whitney Walters

Thesis Proposal
For MFA in Film and Animation
School of Film and Animation
Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York
April, 5, 2016

Approved for Submission by:

Mari Blanchard, Thesis Chair,
TBA, Thesis Adviser
**Logline:**

A sludge-ridden scriptwriter struggles with achieving their dream because of their own obstacles and self-doubt. An encounter with a creative child leads to self-realization-reflection.

**Rationale:**

The story is about a protagonist who feels consumed by self-doubt (In this case literally buried in their own symbolic muck and with these inferior feelings the character becomes less than human). It’s something that seems to plague a countless amount of creative people. I want to show that even though such people believe there is no good or potential in themselves others may see it in them.

While ultimately creative types or even people in general have to drive their own successes and failures, I believe people need encouragement from others. However, sometimes when other people point out the good qualities of another, the person will deny or dismiss such traits. Maybe the denial comes from fear of eventually failing the other’s expectations or they just don’t see it to begin with.

The message matters to me because it seems to come to light wherever I go and from so many I’ve listened to. Particularly, in my experience with college education in my undergrad and my time here at RIT. I’ve heard doubt slip from the words of professionals, professors, and students. All who had already displayed strides in accomplishments or proved volumes in potential.
Not too long ago, I was listening to a podcast on the bios of some famous animators. Glen Keane, a notable traditional animator who did incredible work for Disney admitted to a time he felt out of place. Even today, Keane doesn’t put himself on the same level of fine arts masters like Michelangelo. As for Michelangelo my favorite quote from him is, “If people knew how hard I worked to gain my mastery it wouldn’t seem so wonderful at all.” Obviously implying he gave an overwhelming amount of time and effort to his study before he felt he was in a comfortable place to call himself a master. Still, I’m not sure Michelangelo would have considered himself a master if others hadn’t viewed him as such.

To me, the fact that all creatives have their fear of failure is both humbling and a beautiful tragedy. The important part is they find the will to continue, despite failure, despite doubt. As stated, I believe the support of others is necessary in this process. Michelangelo had the people, Keane had animation veterans before him. The message I want to bring home is we are most beautiful and human when we show compassion and understanding to each other. I believe such an idea will hold my attention and passion for a year-long project.

**Treatment:**

Muck covered hands frantically type on a computer keyboard, they pick up and float hesitantly over the keys, they start to shake and move out of frame. A few drops then a good amount sludge plops onto the keys. A printer is heard. Camera focuses on a wall calendar with days marked off and a deadline circled in red. A large, dark mass bursts from the office leaving behind a trail of dark slime. The frame shoots to a ticking clock on the wall in the office that sludge-morphs into a different clock.

A monster made from sludge is sitting down in another office waiting for a man to finish reading some papers. The man sets down the paper, the monster leans forward with anxious curiosity. The man frowns, obviously displeased with what he has just read. He slides the papers
across the desk and dismisses the monster from the office with a wave. The monster slithers down a hall glancing over some posters of successful films and old pictures of script writers shaking hands. The monster seems to let out a bubbling, grotesque sigh of defeat. The monster looks up from its rejected script to an opening elevator.

As the elevator descends, more people get on. The monster is careful to avoid having anyone touch it. The other people keep their distance as much they can in the small space, but seem to be unaware of the monster’s appearance. The sludge seems to slowly grow off the monster and creep up the walls. Still, no one notices. The elevator stops and a woman and her small child board. The woman pays no attention to the monster, but the child gawks at it. The monster becomes surprised that the child is staring at it. The child’s expression changes from wonderment to an outright smile. The monster becomes even more perplexed and turns away in annoyance. The creeping sludge on the elevator wall pulses. The monster drops a page from its script, but doesn’t notice. The child sees the page right away and grabs it. The monster sees the child with the page and for a moment looks horrified with what the child plans to do with the page. The child takes a pen out of her pocket and starts scribbling on the back of it. The monster opens its mouth in a snarl and reaches out for the page. As the monster nears snatching it back the child stops scribbling and turns the picture around to the monster. At the sight of the drawing, the monster drops it’s gnarled, reaching arms. The child smiles and turns with the picture to show the woman (her mom). The woman takes and turns the picture over to barely look at it and hands it back with no real reaction of interest. The child takes back the picture, slouching and disappointed. The monster tilts its head at the child’s disposition. The child looks at the picture, sighs deeply and stares blankly. A tear of sludge flows out of the child’s eye and starts to branch around her face, wrapping down her neck, shoulder and arm. The elevator door opens and the woman and child get off, the sludge continuing to envelop the child. The picture floats to the ground. The elevator
door almost closes when the monster uses its sludge to whip over and hold it open while simultaneously grabbing the page. The monster leaps out the elevator in a wave of sludge and flows around and in front of the woman and her child. The monster reaches out to hand the picture to the child. The child reaches forward and shyly grabs the picture. The sludge from the child’s face and arm flows off and across the paper to the monster and absorbs into the monster’s sludge. The child smiles and points at the picture (a drawing of the monster’s real identity) and then at the monster. The camera revolves to show tendrils of sludge flow up, evaporate and reveal a smiling short-haired, early-thirties woman. The revealed woman waves as the child and her mother walk away.

The scriptwriter woman looks back to the elevator as it opens back up to reveal the man from the beginning. He nods politely at the woman as he passes and she nods in return. As he passes the woman, his face changes to a sullen expression and he becomes another sludge monster.

**Vision:**

As of now, I believe this animation will be completed utilizing Photoshop and/or TV paint. A new software for animators called OpenToonz seems to be something to look into over the summer and decide if it could be useful. Characters should be simplistic, but appealing in design. Using less lines and warped shapes to imply space is a consideration. I prefer a more stylistic and less technical rather than highly rendered approach to layouts. My typical animation style is often described as “cartoony” and I take as emotionally expressive in both pose and facial feature.

I want to spend the majority of my time making quality animation with clear acting, as well as designing the most efficient layout/compositions to tell this story. Research and references will be an absolute essential. There is the possibility of using some 3D elements such as camera moves.
If alterations to story structure/ transitions are made other methods of animation may be used. In particular, stop-motion technique may be applied to the sludge on the monster.
Thesis Production Budget

**Work Station:**
- New Light Box $400
- Drawing Supplies (pencils, animation paper, erasers) $500

**Software:**
- Creative Cloud Adobe Programs (use on own computer): $20/month for 12 months

**Sound:**
- Sound Effects $100
- Composer's Compensation $300
- Voice talent: (in case) $200

**Release**
- Festival Fees $300
- Print for Promotional (Posters, cards, character drawings, etc.) $200

**Total:** $2,240
Whitney Walters  
Thesis Timesheet:

DEVELOPMENT:
- Gathered Reference
- Concept Design
- Mood boards
- Pose/Expression sheets

PRE-PRODUCTION:
- Storyboards
- Animatic
- Revised Animatic (scratch sound)
- Layouts (line)
- Layouts (color)

PRODUCTION:
- Shot list
- Keys (rough)
- Breakdowns (rough)
- Inbetweens (rough)
- Clean-Up
- Picture/Time lock
- Color
- Composite
- Music/sound
- Render
- Promote
CHARACTER DESIGN EXPLORATION: (BLOB PROTAGONIST):

Figure 1.1:
CHARACTER DESIGN EXPLORATION:
(BLOB PROTAGONIST):

Figure 1.2:
CHARACTER DESIGN EXPLORATION:
(Little Girl):

Figure 2.1:
CHARACTER DESIGN EXPLORATION:
(Social Media Mom):

Figure 3.1:
CHARACTER DESIGN EXPLORATION: (Sticky Notes):

Figure 4.1:
CHARACTER DESIGN EXPLORATION:
("The Mockquettes"):

Figure 5.1:
CHARACTER DESIGN EXPLORATION:
(Jim Daniels):

Figure 6.1:
Art Studio Reference:

Figure 7.1:
REFERENCED FILMS:

Mark Osborne’s “More” screenshots

Figure 8.1:

Figure 8.2:

Figure 9.1:
Stuck: Background Design:

Figure 11.1:

Figure 11.2:

Figure 11.3:
Stuck: Background Design:

Figure: 12.1:

Figure: 12.2:

Figure: 12.3:
Stuck: Background Design:
Bus Stop:

Figure 13.1:
Stuck: Background Design:
Background comparison to reference

Figure 14.1:
Stuck: Screen Shot Beats:

Figure 15.1: P.1-4:  

P.1
Stuck: Screen Shot Beats:
STUCK: Pre-Production Thumbs
CREDITS:

a WHITNEY WALTERS production

THESIS ADVISOR:
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CREDITS:

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