smile

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smile

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of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in
Film and Animation

School of Film and Animation
College of Art and Design

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Abstract

Smile is a film about June, an unhappy high school girl who lives in a world of unrelenting positivity. Everyone in this world has a massive, overwhelming smile and wears bright, vibrant colors. As she leaves school one day June is invited to a karaoke party that evening by a group of exceedingly enthusiastic students, which she hesitantly agrees to attend. June rides her rusty, uneven bicycle home to find her father working in the garage. She tries to enter the house unnoticed, but her father scoops June up in a massive hug and excitedly tells her that he picked up Chinese food for dinner. After watching Dad gleefully inhale his meal, June excuses herself to her room.

June eats her dinner alone and looks at her sad reflection in the mirror. In an effort to give herself a smile, she inserts the chopsticks into her mouth. Briefly they give her a wide smile like everyone else, but the chopsticks soon snap and leave her as she was: sad. However, this gives her a better idea. In her father’s garage she constructs a harness for herself that will pull her mouth out into a permanent smile.

As soon as she arrives she is pulled on stage to sing. All eyes are on her and the shining smiles of the crowd surround her as she struggles to sing through her harness. As the song builds the harness collapses, causing June to pick up the pieces and go home. She pushes her broken bicycle uphill as she struggles to carry the pieces of her harness before throwing everything to the ground in frustration. Through this frustration she has an idea and uses the pieces of the broken harness to repair the wheel of the bike. June continues her ride home on a much smoother bike and smiles to herself.
Introduction: What Do I Have to Say?

I did not set out to make a personal film for my thesis. My initial batch of ideas for this year-long production were about peculiar small towns and focused more on building worlds and high-concept science fiction in a rural setting. A suburb of monsters living their lives, an oppressive government and the two outcasts who rise against, a mysterious explosion that lights up the sky and creates an uncomfortable unknown. Ultimately these ideas fell to the wayside, they were fun explorations but whenever I tried to find a compelling narrative core to these concepts I came up empty. In this struggle my advisor asked me what I wanted to get out of this process the most, what aspect of filmmaking did I see as my top priority. The answer came to me easily: to tell a story that would make the audience feel something. I didn’t know what, but it was important for the last film that I would ever make as a student carried more impact than anything I had done previously. This answer, of course, carried with it a much more complicated question, “What do I want the audience to feel,” a thought that would quickly force me to ask myself, “What do I have to say?”

Those who know me casually could potentially answer that question with two words: “too much.” Honestly, they wouldn’t be out of line with that reaction. In conversation I can have a tendency to interject and ramble and make significant effort to put on a good show. I use that last phrase intentionally: I find myself in most conversations giving some amount of performance whether I am intending to or not. Everybody does this to some extent I’m sure, but in high school it became something I was more aware of doing. Why? Why wasn’t I just being
normal, why did I feel the need to put out this performative version of myself in order to get people to keep talking to me? The short version: because I was miserable.

To fully understand the reasoning behind my decision to make this specific film, as well as the production process I went through, it is important for me to explain my own mental health struggles to some extent. Depression and Anxiety are two issues I have been learning to live with for my whole life, and they aren’t the easiest or the most interesting things to talk about, especially to people who don’t experience those issues in the same way. Trying to explain irrational, unrelenting negative emotions to people who don’t experience life with those asterisks attached can be a frustrating proposition. This isn’t through anyone’s lack of empathy or desire to understand, I’ve just had a hard time putting into words the way things can feel on the worst of days. How do you explain feeling completely alone when you have a loving family? How do you tell the person trying to help that on most days you feel completely unable to connect to anybody? Explaining that every day you feel surrounded by people who have some fundamental difference from you that allows them to be happy. They are conversations that I have mostly tried to avoid because who wants to keep hanging around an unhappy, anxious, isolated person? So, rather than keep making vain attempts to explain my feelings and field questions I don’t have answers for, I overcorrected. Instead I’d be the most outgoing, the most enthusiastically conversational, and I would be a person that others would have to want to be around. This is not a healthy way to go about this problem, but it was the best I could come up with at the time.

The act of taking who I was and distorting it into something I felt was more socially desirable is something I have been doing in some form or another for as long as I can recall. It was second-nature in high school and during my undergrad: I was terribly unhappy but I did
everything I could to be as big a presence as possible in the hope that eventually I’d feel less isolated. This was, at the time, the most logical way to deal with my illogical depression and anxiety: I’d simply mask it through actions. I’d learn to present myself as happy and hope that the performance was good enough and the cracks wouldn’t show. The phrase “fake it till you make it” gets thrown around a lot to people who are unhappy or lack confidence. Just pretend to be happy and confident and eventually things will sort themselves out. Of all of the well-meaning advice I have been given through the years, this has been the most personally destructive.

It’s only been relatively recently, the last few years, that I have become to come to terms with the way my brain works, how it lies to me and what are healthy ways to address the issues it causes. All of the effort that was put into maintaining a facade of happiness, a constant performative joy, was energy that could be spent in healthier ways. Ways that can actually begin to repair the pieces of yourself that feel broken, rather than hiding the cracks. There are tangible things you can do as a person suffering that can improve your situation, but they often hide in the shadow of everything outside of your control. Even small, seemingly insignificant acts of self care and self improvement can have a massive ripple effect, albeit a slow one. It does not affect great change over night, and on some days it will still feel like I’m back at square one, but progressing is a process and understanding that is an important milestone.

These experiences and my desire to turn my experience into something tangible would become the emotional core of my thesis film, *Smile*. I sought to create a film that I could point to as an explanation for what it has felt like for me as a person dealing with poor mental health, and the ways in which I have tried to address those issues. I wanted to capture the illusion of
isolation that can happen when you are depressed. To give the sensation of being surrounded by an oppressive joy that you, for some unknown reason, can’t experience yourself. I wanted to show the desperate, irrational lengths that someone can go through to try to present as “normal” and the damage that approach to the problem can cause. Finally, I wanted to show the first step in the right direction: making the conscious choice to put effort inward towards self care and improvement. That is what I had to say at the time of preparing my thesis proposal, and is what would become the foundation for the story I would tell.

Pre-production, Research and Development

Part 01: A Time and Place

Once I decided to make a film about the feeling of being surrounded by an unrelatable joy, and the lengths a person might go to “fix” that feeling, I knew I wanted to set it in a high school. One evening I was out with a friend and fellow animator to grab a drink and discuss our respective thesis films, both of us still firmly in the writing/exploratory phase of production. He asked if I had considered staging the film in another setting that might be more effective, if that my desire to make the film set at a high school was truly the best option for the story I wanted to tell. Honestly, the concept of setting my story anywhere else had not occurred to me at that point. We kicked around some other potential situations in which a person would feel the kind of specific societal alienation I was going for: the streets and subway cars of a crowded city, a new hire in an office space, and a busy shopping mall were some that I can still recall. However, none of those carried the weight that a high school does for me as a place to tell this story.
Something I remember vividly from my grade school education is how overwhelmingly “supportive” it all was on the surface. This sounds like a positive thing, I know, but for some reason it rang as hollow and insincere to me at the time. Plastered on the walls, in every classroom and hallway, were bright and colorful posters with words of encouragement. “Never Settle For LESS Than Your BEST,” using four fonts across seven words, hung as a banner above the white boards. Images of scientists and doctors telling us, in multicolor type, that if we can believe it, we can achieve it. Monthly assemblies daring us to reach for the stars and that our dreams were all within reach. At a certain point all of that messaging becomes meaningless, especially if you’re a kid trying to figure themselves out and wondering why you’re so unhappy if you are truly capable of achieving anything. I’m sure the reality of the situation was far less exaggerated than how it lives in my memory, but regardless of the number of posters the feeling of overwhelming, unrelatable positivity stands out as a constant element of that time of my life. So if that was going to be an emotion I wanted to convey in this film, a school was the most appropriate setting for the film.

To make the school and the other students elicit the feeling of overwhelming optimism and unapproachable cheer that I wanted, I once again looked back to my experience growing up. More specifically, the visual cacophony of 1990s-early 2000s pop culture and media targeted towards teenagers, set in a high school setting. I found that these types of films, magazines, and television shows tended to fall into one of two visual motifs: things that are bright and shiny, and things that are grungy. This is something true of all eras: there is a “mainstream” culture that comes to the forefront, and there are subcultures that form outside of it for those who don’t fit into what the mainstream is currently selling. I wanted to create a world that embodied the
colors, attitude, and enthusiasm of the mainstream 90s culture, while allowing June, the unhappy protagonist of my film, to exist on the opposite side of the spectrum. In essence, I wanted to put Lindsay Weir in Bayside High.

Fig 1. Lindsay Weir, *Freaks and Geeks*.

Fig 2. The cast of *Saved by the Bell*.
I’ll explain. Bayside High is the setting for the NBC sitcom *Saved by the Bell* (1989-1993), a show which follows a group of friends who get into wacky hijinks and, more often than not, learn a lesson somewhere along the way. It’s an extremely by-the-numbers sitcom by today’s standards, but it was a staple of syndication for a lot of people growing up in the 90s (alongside *Boy Meets World, Full House,* and an ocean of other programs of the era, but we’ll focus on *Saved by the Bell* for our purposes here). The colors and fashion are bright and abrasive, but it’s the primary cast of characters that stand out to me as notably “mainstream.” The following are descriptions of the primary cast of *Saved by the Bell:* Zach, an attractive troublemaker, A.C. Slater, an attractive athlete, Kelley, an attractive cheerleader, Lisa, an attractive rich fashionista, Jessie, an attractive A student, and Screech, a lame dork who everyone laughs at. These may seem like reductive descriptions of these characters, but the writers of the show were painting with particularly broad brushes, which did not provide much nuance or character development.

*Saved by the Bell* is a show about the perceived ideals of the time: an aspirational group of “cool” friends who the audience can either identify with or strive to become more like, while having a “loser” like Screech in the mix to serve as our comic relief. *SBTB* feels hollow and vapid because it isn’t trying to be anything outside of that, that isn’t it’s purpose. It set out to be popular and easily consumed by it’s target audience, which is the goal of most produced media in at least some respect. It achieved this by being colorful, attractive, and showing an idealized version of a friend group, in an idealized version of a high school. Those were the elements I wanted to include in the world of *Smile:* happy, attractive people in a bright, colorful world.
However, I wanted to utilize that attitude and aesthetic to create a stark juxtaposition with my lead character June, who didn’t feel like she fit into this kind of world.

*Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000) was a show set in a high school in 1980, focusing on the lives of Lindsay and Sam Weir, a sister and brother trying to find out who they are and where they fit in. Prior to the start of the series Lindsay was a straight A student, part of the mathletes, and as buttoned-up as they come. The show starts with her hanging out with the “freaks,” a group of lovable burnouts and slackers who go against the grain of not just the majority of their school, but against the kinds of teenagers we typically focus on in shows like this. The first shot of the first episode makes this point exceptionally clear. We crane in towards the bleachers of a football field where two classically attractive students are talking about their low-stakes problems, before the camera dips down under the bleachers where we meet our primary cast of anti-establishment slackers. The kids under the bleachers. It was a show that was made for the people who related more to the “losers” on typical sitcoms than they did with the primary cast, for people who felt lost and like they didn’t fit like they were supposed to. Lindsay was the epitome of this: she actively rejected continuing to fill a mold she didn’t believe in and attempted to discover who she was, who she was supposed to be. Having a character like that, in a setting like the school in *Saved by the Bell*, gave the strong juxtaposition I needed for my film. Not just in emotionality, but visually.
Part 02: Visual Development and Influences

Color

I knew what I wanted the world and the characters to feel like, but how would I transfer that into the visuals of the film? The first piece of that puzzle I knew was within the color palette. Like *Saved by the Bell*, I wanted the world to have elements that were highly saturated and oozing with primary colors, whereas June’s colors would be significantly more muted and would lean more into earth tones. This includes June’s olive jacket, which was a direct reference to the one Lindsay wears in every episode of *Freaks and Geeks*. That visual distinction between June and the world around her was as important to me as the differences in their attitude and personality. Whenever June was alone, the colors around her would closer mirror her own. This is most notable in her bedroom, which I wanted to feel like a place she had some amount of control over and could feel more comfortable and further highlight how often she is visually out of place.

Style and Aesthetics

The visual aesthetic of the film is something I landed on fairly early in the process. The film is 2D, hand animated and features thick, rough ink lines for the characters and environmental elements. The final linework for the film was meant to evoke the rough, scratchy sketches in the margins of my notebooks. It was important for me to see the rough edges. This time in June’s life is messy and imprecise, so having perfectly smooth and consistent linework wouldn’t have been thematically consistent with the mood I was trying to set. It needed visual texture.
That texture can also be seen in my approach to painting the background elements. I wanted to paint the backgrounds with a tangible texture that would continue to reinforce the mood. A massive influence for the heavily-textured style I incorporated was the illustrations in the book *Monster Mama* (1993) from the artist Stephen Gammell, an illustrator also known for his work on *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (1981). Gammell’s illustrations have stuck with me since my mom read the book to me as a kid. Every splatter of paint, every stroke of the brush, every speck on the canvas was visible and added to the tone of the story. I knew I would be painting my backgrounds digitally in Photoshop, but it was vital that I incorporate painterly textures in my assets. I experimented with several brush types to find ones that would give me the textured paint feeling I wanted. It wasn’t quite paint on canvas, but it proved effective. The combination of the rough, thick ink and heavily textured environments created a visual aesthetic.
that felt unique and well suited for the film I wanted to make, as well as the feelings I wanted to evoke.

Fig 4, 5. Stephen Gammell illustrations from *Monster Mama*

**Character Design**

The students with the massive smiles was the first design element of the film that came together, as it was the image that started the concept in the first place. It was how I could visualize the internal struggle June was experiencing: she would be literally surrounded by massive smiling faces and she would be the only one who didn’t have one. A world full of characters with prominent, silhouette-breaking smiles was the idea nugget that became *Smile*, so their design aesthetics were vital to nail down early. Conceptually it was simple enough, but in developing them for animation there were some mechanical problems to solve.
The primary concern with extending a mouth far beyond the scope of a skull was this: what do they look like from all angles? An important aspect for me was to always have their silhouette be affected by their smile, meaning that on a profile and ¾ view of the characters, their mouth would extend back behind their neck. I had to figure out how to quickly visualize their head shapes in more basic construction terms so that I wouldn’t get hung up during the animation process with worries about how to get their heads looking right. The answer was relatively simple: to picture their heads as roughly the same shape as a spinning top. The top handle would represent the top of the head, where the eyes, ears and nose would be placed, while the mouth would occupy the general shape of the base. The bottom “rotation point” of this shape would be where the head and neck connect. This approach to their design streamlined/unified their head shapes: relatively thin “heads” that sit atop wide, round smiles. The silhouette of the smile read from all angles which made it feel inescapable for June and reinforced that element of the narrative. Once the smiles had been accounted for, designing the other students was fairly straightforward. I kept their wardrobe simple and colorful and tried to stay true to the 90s aesthetic I have been leaning so hard into. I ensured that, regardless of design, their smiles were uniform and constant.
June took a significantly more time to arrive at her final design. She needed to be a character that was capable of broad and subtle emotional performances. She also needed to have a design that would support the addition of a smile-forcing contraption (more on that later).
knew that if the smile was the prominent feature of the rest of the cast, June’s design needed to be the personification of a frown. My first instinct of including that in her overall design was in her hair: making her hair droop over her face would create a sort of umbrella effect in her silhouette, acting as an opposite to the upturned smiles of everybody else. This created a few problems in terms of animatability and making sure her design was viable from all angles. I had to make sure I could evoke the elements I wanted to while still having a design that was practical to animate.

A point of visual reference I used to sort out how to design and animate characters with such severe design elements was the works of Jhonen Vasquez. He was responsible for the creation of Invader Zim, an animated series that had a massive influence on my developing art style as a kid. His designs are severely angular and often had elements like eyes and hair break silhouette in order to be more present from all angles. Depending on the perspective different pieces might be shifted in order to create the best silhouette, a practice I would utilize heavily in this production. June’s massive, expressive eyes extend beyond her head from most angles, and the placement of her hair was designed to be able to shift slightly to always create the most expressive silhouette.
The longest lingering design problem was that of the harness June constructs to pull her mouth into a smile, breaking her silhouette to look more like everyone else. This was another element where Vasquez’s work was an influence as he often deals with the cartoonishly grotesque, and that was certainly a vibe I explored in designing the harness. I began by looking into medical braces throughout history, both for the spine and for the mouth. I have never been more thankful for medical advancement because some of the images I found were genuinely unsettling. There was a lot of bare metal and leather straps holding people into unnatural positions in an attempt to fix their teeth or their bones. Initially I had wanted the harness in Smile to include a torso component as well, forcing June into an uncomfortably perfect posture, but those designs proved too complicated to animate efficiently and the decision to only focus on the headgear component was made. I knew from the outset I wanted to include hooks of some kind as the thing that was pulling her mouth into the grim smile and experimented with several styles of construction. The first iterations had hinged arms and pulley systems and were massive, hulking contraptions. I had thought that perhaps I could utilize these more cumbersome designs
if I was to rig and animate the harness elements in After Effects to then composite onto the hand
drawn animation, but this prospect proved inefficient and the decision was made to simplify.

![Image of medical/dental braces]

Fig 10,11. Examples of historical medical/dental braces.

The next round of designs focused on creating a harness that was practical to animate in
TVPaint. The end result was based on a fairly simple tactic: a design that would easily fit in a
cylinder around June’s head, with structural elements that would match up to parts of June’s
design so that I would easily know where the harness needed to be in relation to June’s
positioning. The bottom of the harness would rest on June’s shoulders and extend a few inches
past them, with poles at the ends that extend upward. There would be a top support in the form of
a ring of metal, securing to the top of June’s head, and a half-ring of metal midway up the poles.
At the ends of that half-ring are the hooks that June attaches to the sides of her mouth, pulling
her mouth into a smile that mirrors the ones her peers possess. The harness was the cornerstone
of the premise for my film and I believe the end result was effective in evoking the combination
of absurdity and unsettlement that was so important to the story.

Fig 8. Rough sketch of what would become the final harness design.

Telling the Right Story

Part 01: The Constant Elements

My primary goal with this film was to tell a story that I found important, so it would be expected that I would go through several revisions before things were cemented. I expected this, but I did not expect how long it would take me to line up all of the right pieces. Before I go into how I got from the first treatment to the final film, I want to touch on the things that were constants throughout the process:

1. The film would be centered on an unhappy teenage girl who exists in a world where everyone but her has a massive, unwavering smile.
2. The film would take place in a high school in some capacity, loosely set in the 1990s.
3. Our protagonist would ride an old, broken bicycle.

4. She would eventually build a harness that would pull her mouth into a big smile, mirroring the rest of the world.

5. The harness would collapse in a public setting.

6. She would take the pieces of her harness and use them to repair the bicycle.

7. The final moment is a small, honest smile from our protagonist, finally able to start the long journey to being okay.

These elements were constantly present in the narrative from the time I first proposed the project up through my premiere screening. I have explained earlier in this document why the high school setting was important, but not my reasoning for making the lead female, especially if this is supposed to be a film so directly tied to my own personal experience and I am a male identifying individual. This note will be more present in versions of the story I will describe shortly, but there is significantly more pressure put on women to smile and be pleasant/approachable than there is for men. The unfair societal expectation that women be attractive and happy to have worth is so much more prevalent than any pressure that I feel as a straight white man. I wanted the film’s feelings of not meeting expectations, both societal and self-inflicted, to cover as wide a spectrum as possible, and making June a girl opened up more opportunities for my film to feel relatable to a wider audience.

The broken bicycle and the smile harness would serve the same narrative purposes in all versions of this story, as a metaphor for June’s lack of self-care and misplacement of mental energy. You need to do regular maintenance to your bike to keep it working properly, and the
same goes for your mental/physical health as a human being. In the beginning of the film June stubbornly strains herself to ride her broken bike, making it a burden for herself which causes her more strain and discomfort. Instead of taking the time to fix her bike, which would create a tangible improvement to her life, she puts her energy into building a harness that gives the illusion of an improved mental state while creating even more strain to herself. The harness collapses, as faking your way to good mental health is not a sustainable way to live, and she takes the pieces of that harness and uses that same energy to finally fix her bike. By the end of the film June learns that you have to take care of yourself and your mental health if you want to begin to truly get better.

The final note of the film, June’s small smile, was something of great contention in my Thesis Preparation course and throughout production. It was repeatedly suggested that I make the moment more grand to end the film, that they wanted June to be happy and having fun and not sad anymore by the time credits rolled. This was not the film I wanted to make for many reasons. Recovery does not happen overnight, it takes a long time and a lot of work to start truly becoming okay. This is especially true with people living with atypical brain chemistry. You don’t suddenly wake up one morning and no longer have Depression, it’s something you have to learn to deal with in a healthy way and it can take years to develop those habits. This was never meant to be a film about how to be happy, it was always about understanding that you need to make efforts to build yourself up. That the road to being okay means taking the agency that you do have and using that power to better your situation, however you can. Often that will be small things, but those small things still matter. This is why the small, quiet ending of my film was so important to me, and why I was dedicated to making it work.
Part 02: Slimming Down

The version of *Smile* that was in my thesis proposal took place over three days, while the finished film takes place within a single day. I think this particular fact is representative of the major changes that happened between those two versions of the story: I started out attempting to cram far too much story into the film. The early versions had June creating multiple versions of a smile-forcing device, going to school, having it fail, and trying something else the next day. At the time I wanted the build up to the full monstrous harness to be more gradual and, ultimately, shocking. She started small using tape, then tried stuffing pencils in her cheeks, and when both proved ineffective she resorted to a large metal contraption. A version of this progression does exist in the finished film, when June is eating Chinese food in her room and uses the chopsticks to force a smile in the mirror. This one scene (which was also present in the multi-day versions of the story) serves the same purpose of set up without bloating the film’s timeline.

Another cause of bloat in early versions was the amount of exposition I tried to fill the beginning of the film with. The first offender of this was the original opening scene: June in a meeting with the school guidance counselor. The film opened in the counseling office where June had gone to try to figure out why she wasn’t happy, and the only advice the counselor had for her was “Well, just smile through it and everything will be alright!” before giving her a button that just said the word “smile.” I liked this scene in theory for a lot of reasons. I saw value in establishing that June was making some amount of effort to understand what she was feeling, even if those efforts did not have positive results. It was also going to lay the groundwork to have male authority figures give June useless condescending advice, an event that women
experience with high frequency and something I wanted to highlight. Additionally, this version included a male student who I used to bait-and-switch a romantic subplot, only to directly deny it at the end when June realizes she needs to fix herself to be a better person on her own timeline. If there is one thing I regret losing so much of from this initial version of the story, it’s the more explicit feminist components. As mentioned earlier, I think addressing cultural expectations of happiness affects women much more than it does myself, and it’s an element I wanted to play a larger role in this film. Unfortunately those aspects became less prevalent as the story revisions continued and my focus shifted to massaging the core elements to play as intended.

One of the larger issues that this story had from its inception was the question of if June has friends or not. It was important to me that June not be a social outcast, or bullied, or even generally disliked by the happier students. Her family being loving and supportive was also vital to prevent any misreading of her situation. I wanted June’s struggles to not come from her surroundings, but within herself. I have friends, I have a good family, and I still struggle with Depression because having those things in your life does not fix your brain chemistry. I didn’t want the film to present ideas that I didn’t believe in myself, so just as the guidance counselor was cut, June’s friend Becky came into the picture. Initially she had a lot to say and spent significant screen time trying to get June out of her shell, but that too was severely cut back for being too expository and taking up too much of the film’s focus. She remains in the opening scene of the film in the girl’s bathroom and at the karaoke party (more on that later).
Part 03: Animatic Night and the Great Rewrite

As part of the thesis process, we are required to screen an in-progress animatic of our film as part of a public critique day for SOFA faculty and students. The goal of this screening is to make sure your film is functioning as intended and to gather feedback from people who are not as familiar with your project as you and your advisor. My desire for this screening was to gauge if the emotional throughline of my film was reaching the audience. In short, it was not. Nobody knew why she was sad, or if she was just being an angsty teen for no reason. This was my biggest concern, so I asked why they felt that way and what could be done to highlight my intended premise. I got a few answers that were of great value when it came to the restructuring that would follow.

The audience felt that June was being more angsty and moody than sad or lonely, and looking back at the version of the animatic they saw I can see why. This version involved Becky excitedly planning a birthday party for June and June being very passive about the whole situation. It came off more as June being rude and ungrateful rather than her feeling uncomfortable being in the spotlight, the latter being my intention. They also sighted the dinner scene June has with her father and how they didn’t know why she was being so cold to her clearly loving family. I intended to make his enthusiasm for the mediocre Chinese food feel like another source of overwhelming positivity that June can’t relate to, but the scene reads as a moody brat ignoring her dad. I also received plenty of feedback for making my compositions more clear and ways to tighten the pacing of some scenes, but it was the notes on the story and character that provided me with the tools I needed to make the narrative function the way I had envisioned.
Over the next two months, up through December of 2017, I would constantly be re-writing and making adjustments to scenes and dialogue. This was putting me behind schedule, but it was critical time that needed to be invested in polishing the story of *Smile* above all else (though I did start animation on the scenes I knew I would keep). It was in this time that a lot of small tweaks and changes would be made, but most importantly, it was when the karaoke party was formed. This was the final piece of the film that was missing: what situation or event would be the thing that made June go to such extreme lengths to seem happy? A few ideas were experimented with, including June’s birthday party which was the version in the animatic that screened, but none felt right. When my advisor suggested something like a karaoke party, it clicked immediately. It was truly the perfect solution, for one reason in particular: it was a performance. I’ve written the phrase “performative joy” earlier in this document and have cited it as something I wanted to highlight: the act of presenting a facade of happiness for the benefit of those around you. What better way to drive that point home than to have June sing a cheery karaoke song through the forced smile of her harness, on a stage in front of all of those smiling faces. It created the perfect crescendo to the film: a moment where June’s misplaced efforts could fall apart in a spectacular fashion and force her to realize that this was not the road to being happy. There would still be a few shots and sequences to be tweaked, but once the karaoke element came together, the story of the film was cemented.
Part 01: Music, Actors, and the Uncertainty of Collaboration

Prior to my animatic screening I attended an artists call meeting, an event where filmmakers and musicians from the area (mostly schools) present their work and try to find collaborators. I have traditionally done my own music and sound design for the films I have made, but I knew that my time would be spread thin with the rest of production and it would be a good idea to find a collaborator to shoulder some of the load, as well as contributing elements I might not otherwise have considered. At this meeting I met Marc Laroussini, an Eastman student who expressed interest in working with me on Smile. I had actually met Marc a few times previously, as we shared a few mutual friends, and I was also familiar with the work he was capable of creating, so I was thankful to find someone so well-fitting to collaborate with on this film. Additionally, he expressed interest not just in composing music, but in doing sound design as well. It was a field he wanted more experience working on and it would mean that all audio issues would be in his hands and out of mine, allowing me to focus on the animation and the writing.

We met a few times that fall to discuss the project and I kept him updated on the changes that were happening on my end. We both wanted to keep it relatively grounded, using natural sounds primarily to make up the soundscape. He had the idea of using construction sounds to create the “music” that plays during the harness building sequence. Like myself, he was excited when the karaoke scene came up, and was thrilled to write and compose the song that June would sing. He pitched me the idea of it being a take on the kind of songs a lounge singer might
perform in a piano bar, but really leaning into the “happy” messaging to fit the moment. June would pick the cheesiest, happiest sounding song to sing to prove that she was truly happy, and Marc was eager to take on that challenge. My favorite touch of the song is the slide whistle, a surprise that wasn’t in until the final version. It brought this childlike playfulness into a scene where a girl wearing a horrible smile harness sings through gritted teeth and gave the scene an elevated level of absurdity that it needed.

Marc also was involved with the Eastman theater productions and had an in with a number of actors who were interesting in working on the project. I didn’t get a chance to meet these actors until the first day of dialogue recording, so I was tremendously nervous to see if they would be a good fit. I trusted Marc as he knew what I wanted from the characters and what the tone of the film was, but it was still a potential problem if they could not deliver what was needed. Thankfully the trust was well placed and the actors were fantastic, especially Meredith, the actress who played June. We had three recording days all together, one with the full cast and two more with just Meredith to get the song and the rest of her dialogue. There were some scheduling issues that cut out record times shorter than I would have liked, but everything we need we were able to get with relative ease.

The only problems that arose on the audio end of production was the consistency of communication between myself and Marc. Marc was involved in a theatrical production and was relatively unreachable for long stretches of our working time together. Weeks would go by and without hearing from him or getting an updated audio track, and as May came closer I became more concerned. I had scheduled, and we had agreed on, a final delivery date for the total audio for the film to be locked three weeks before I had to screen. I ended up only getting the finished
file from him the day before I had to upload my film to the RIT servers. This caused a massive amount of stress for me: the whole reason I looked into working with someone was so that things wouldn’t be coming together at the very last minute. However, that being said, I’m more than happy with the work he was able to give me. I can have problems with what the situation was, but I don’t have any with the end result, and at the end of the day it was a successful working relationship.

**Part 02: Production Pipeline**

The production for this film was fairly straightforward. Backgrounds would be drawn and painted in Photoshop with each “layer” of depth broken out into separate pieces so that it could be composited in After Effects, using the 3D camera functionality to create depth in the scenes. I would paint each element a flat color on one layer, then on another layer paint with a textured brush to achieve that more tactile feeling I wanted the environments to have. Then it was a simple matter of exporting out every element of each shot as a .png so it would be ready for compositing later. Since I would be placing these elements in various proximity to the After Effects camera, it was important that all Photoshop assets were created at an extremely high resolution to ensure there would be no pixelation of the artwork. I imported the linework for the backgrounds into TVPaint so I would know where in the frame the characters needed to be in order to line up correctly.

TVPaint is the program where all of my character animation was hand generated, frame by frame. For the majority of production I kept every shot for the film in a single .tvp file, which kept everything in the same place for ease of organization. Each shot was its own “scene” in the
project file, which was a massive help during my rewriting process. TVPaint allows the user to hide individual scenes so they do not playback when viewing the whole project. After I got feedback from my animatic screening and knew what scenes I had to scrap or rework, I simply hid those scenes from playback and inserted new ones to take their place. I wanted to make sure I kept a record of everything, just in case I needed to look back at something from a few weeks or months prior. This is also why every day I worked on the animation I saved it as a new version of the file with that days date in the file name. All of this would be backed up on my hard drive and cloud storage so that in the event any file got corrupted the most I could ever lose is one days work..

I animated my characters in a traditional pose-to-pose fashion for 2D animation. I drew the key poses of the action and timed them to fit the pace of the shot, then drew the breakdown poses to solidify the timing of the action. There was definitely a lot of pushing and pulling the timing of these frames to get them feeling right. I tried to keep these frames rough and loose so as to not waste too much time on images I’d only be re-drawing and then inking over. This was easier said than done for me, especially in the early stages of this animation while I was still getting used to drawing the character. Because of this I began to fall behind in my production schedule. I addressed this in a few ways. First, I made more effort to be more loose with my rough animation. This was the biggest time sink for me during that period and was the most important to get a handle on. Additionally I enlisted help from others to assist me in my inking and coloring process so that I could be getting work done on multiple areas simultaneously. Asking anyone for help is not one of my strengths, but it was a key factor in getting back on track and I am thankful to all of the people who offered their assistance for this film.
My inking and coloring was also done directly in TVPaint. For the ink I used one of the programs built in brushes that had the kind of toothiness to the line quality that I was looking for. Anyone who assisted me on inking was given that brush and all of the settings I used to keep things consistent across the board. Coloring was done with the special CTG layers in TVPaint, which made the process relatively fast and efficient. Color was the one aspect of this production that didn’t take longer than I anticipated.

Rough animation and inking both took significantly more time than I can originally accounted for in my production timeline. Part of this is because of the additional time I took in rewriting the story, and part of it was me overestimating the speed in which I could achieve the quality I expected from this film. It was too important a project to me to settle for anything I saw as less than my best. So I pushed myself harder, worked longer days, and did everything I could to make up the difference.

**Part 03: Building the Bike**

June’s bicycle was built from assets made in Photoshop and assembled in After Effects as a rig. This was done by parenting the different elements together in a standard hierarchy so that things would behave naturally. The pedals linked to the gears, which linked to the frame, etc. The wrinkle came in needing to make a version of the rig with the uneven back tire. This would be parented together in the same fashion but required going frame by frame to keep the bike “flat” on the ground. The end result of the broken bike felt jerky and awkward in all the ways it was intended to, which I consider a success. By comparison, the bike after June fixes it feels a little underwhelming in hindsight. Looking at it now, I wish I did a little more with the bike’s
animation on those shots. Slightly more bounce or sway to accentuate the comparative smoothness now that it’s fixed. Still, I’m happy I didn’t resort to hand animate a broken bicycle and was able to arrive at this solution

**Part 04: Post Production**

Once a shot was finished with animation, ink, and color, the character layers would be exported as an .mov with transparency so that it could be composited with the background elements in After Effects. Once all of the pieces were in AE I would set them in a 3D space so I could make use of the program’s camera and lighting tools. Placing each asset layer at varying distances from the camera allows it to simulate realistic depth of field and parallax effects. This was something I had done on several projects previously, so there were no unexpected complications to most of the shots of this film.

This was my first project where I attempted to use After Effects’ built in lights to add shading and shadow to my characters. I did some experiments in pre-production to see if it would be a suitable alternative to painting my shadows in TVPaint, which would add a whole extra layer of work to every frame of the coloring process. Thankfully I was able to achieve a soft, gradual shadow by using the edges of the AE spot light tool. I was also able to manually exclude layers from being affected by the light tool, so that each character was only being affected by the light I wanted them to be influenced with. Aside from the camera and the light tools, the only other post effect was a light film grain that I applied to each shot. It added another
layer of visual texture that complimented the paint strokes of the backgrounds and the heavy ink of the characters. A few shots, mostly in the karaoke sequence, had some extra lighting effects to heighten the mood, but none of the compositing was overly complicated or was too much of a struggle to execute.

The Additional Challenges of Making it Personal

When I brought this film concept to my advisor as something I was interested in making, she told me to make sure this was really something I could work on for the next year of my life. Working on something personal and dealing with a heavy personal subject matter, even when it’s exaggerated to the point of absurdity, can take a heavy toll. Animation is already an artform that requires a massive time and energy commitment to execute well, and a year long animation would be the longest I’ve worked on a single project to date. She wanted to make sure that I was going to be prepared to handle the work and the subject before I locked myself into it. I knew I wanted to make an honest film about what it feels like to be unhappy in the ways I have been for most of my life.

I wrote the following in a production blog on January 29, 2018:

"I underestimated how difficult it would become to work on this film. This was especially true when it wasn’t being received the way I had intended. That’s one of the big problems with making a film that is a representation of who you are: when it doesn’t go well it feels like a rejection of the concept of yourself "

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There was a period of time between the fall and spring semesters where I was in an exceptionally poor mental state. This wasn’t purely a result of the film, but the production stress was definitely a factor. If I was going to have the mental and physical energy to finish the work, I was going to need to take some additional preventative steps to keep myself going. The thing that did the most good was the kind of action that was at the center of the film: taking the time to take care of myself. There was one day a week where after my work obligations I wouldn’t touch my thesis at all, so I could gain some mental distance from it. I’d usually run errands that day, but once I was home or out with friends I’d try to not let the film live at the front of my attention for that moment. This allowed me to come back the next day with higher energy and the ability to work through the next week. As this film and its production is so rooted in my own struggles with mental health, it felt appropriate to make note of this time of the production and how I dealt with it in the moment.

**Reception**

The film screened at RIT in a theater full of my peers, teachers, and friends. I got to campus two hours before the first screening of the day because I was already awake and I couldn’t just sit at home waiting. Eventually my film was up and the reception was positive, though not exactly what I expected. The most surprising thing to me was how many people laughed. I was very unsure of how the film would read in a crowd of people who knew who I was, but didn’t really know the film I was making. If I was going to categorize *Smile* in a genre the closest thing I could come up with would be dark comedy, but I didn’t see it as “haha” funny as much as I saw it as an absurdist look at the lengths someone can go to address their unhappiness. This isn’t to say that I was offended or annoyed at the laughter, quite the opposite. I
was relieved that it didn’t come off as a heavy handed melodrama about sadness. After the 
credits rolled I approached the podium to deliver my artist statement. My written statement 
talked about a lot of what I’ve written in this document: how unhappiness is a hard thing for 
people to relate to, how performative joy is a toxic notion and that the only real solution to 
dealing with an issue is to actually deal with it. My last note was that a small step forward is still 
movement, and that at the end of the day, any movement forward is good.

After the statement was delivered I fielded some comments from the audience. The 
feedback was overwhelmingly positive, which was a relief. A faculty member called it my best 
work by a long shot, which was great to hear. A few students talked about how well realized 
June’s performance was and how unsettling the smiling people felt. An old childhood friend of 
mine who made the trip told everyone about a school assembly where they handed out big fake 
smiles for all of the students and how, even as a kid, I was massively irritated by the notion. I 
had absolutely forgotten about this event, but it sounded like something young me would have a 
problem with. If nothing else, that moment reminded me that I have been wanting to tell this 
story and express these feelings for longer than I can recall. Eventually the light came on and I 
left the stage, thanking everybody one last time.

The film was a success for the audience, but more importantly, it felt like a success to 
myself. I did what I had set out to do: make a film that told a story I felt was important for me to 
tell. At the time it was the best animation I had done from a technical standpoint, the best designs 
I have created, and the best execution on a story that I wrote. A few weeks later I got notification 
that my film was to be included in the RIT Honors Show for that year. This was something I 
knew I wanted but was embarrassed to admit too openly: a tangible mark of praise for a film I
had done. In the months since completion I have submitted *Smile* to over twenty film and animation festivals. To date, it has not been accepted into any. This is a point of frustration for me, but ultimately one that I have elected to move past. I know I made the film I wanted to make, and I know that I’m happy with it as it is.

**Final Thoughts**

I started making films when I was twelve. My English teacher would allow me to screen them for the class on Fridays and after showing something I made to an audience for the first time, I knew it was all I wanted to do. At this point I’ve spent a long time doing exactly that, in various mediums and levels of quality. The root was always in telling stories. Okay, sometimes the root was in just trying to get them to laugh, but overall it was in telling stories. Stories are the things I can remember. I don’t remember every day or moment of my life, but I remember the stories. The events that were important or different or funny enough to tell someone who wasn’t there so they’d have the chance to experience it too, albeit in a different way. But though all the films I’ve made and the stories I’ve tried to tell, *Smile* is the most personal by a wide margin. It is the most honest to who I am and how I have felt/still feel about my place in the world. And that’s the risk in creating something that is, ultimately, deeply tied to yourself: it can be easy to tie up your self-worth with the reception of the film.

I came to RIT and to this program at a time in my life in which I was at an impasse. Either I was going to stay where I was and drown, or I was going to try to move forward. I elected to move forward. It was a big decision, one that I’m thankful for being able to make.
when I did, but it was no different than June fixing her bike in the end. It was a conscious effort to improve my situation through action. If *Smile* does anything, hopefully it’ll help someone else realize that’s always a possibility. Progressing is a process and I hope that I never stop progressing.
Smile
A 2D Animated Thesis Film
Luke Polito

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

Approved for Submission by:

____________________________
Mari Jaye Blanchard, Thesis Chair
Logline:

Surrounded by smiles and bad advice, an unhappy teen constructs a device to make her seem like everyone else.

Treatment:

June, an awkward high school girl, sits uncomfortably in the office of the high school counselor. He asks how she’s been doing and she timidly responds, saying that she feels completely out of place and unhappy. Her counselor, and everything in his office, is disgustingly positive and cheery and his face is pulled into an unnaturally large smile. He tells her everything is fine and that she should just smile more. He pins a button on her jacket that says “Smile.”

June leaves the office and walks through her high school hallway, passing by a lot of bright, smiling people and motivational posters with sayings like “Achieve!” and “Don’t Forget Your Smile!” written in large letters. Other students and teachers exchange pleasant greetings, but June awkwardly sulks through the hallway and exits the school. She unlocks her rusty old bike from a bike rack of perfect, clean bikes. As she does the kickstand snaps off. She looks down at it for a moment before pedaling away, leaving the kickstand behind.

That night, she lays in her bedroom and stares up at the ceiling. Her mom knocks at the door and tells her dinner is almost ready. June tells her she isn’t hungry. Mom tells her she likes her button and goes back downstairs to finish dinner. June takes off the button and looks at it. “Smile,” in big letters.

She looks at herself in the mirror and attempts to smile, but it quickly fades into an awkward sneer, then back to a frown. She looks around her room and reaches for a bin of art supplies (brushes, paints, etc). She grabs a wheel of tape and uses it to pull her face into a forced,
uncomfortable smile. She looks into the mirror and attempts to flaunt it. Unsatisfied, she looks over to the paint in her art supply bin.

The next day at school, she walks through the hallway with her taped-up grin and cheeks painted bright pink. As students greet her she tries her best to reciprocate, but is clearly very uncomfortable. A cute dude stops at her locker to say she looks really nice today. June is startled and tries to respond, but the tape forcing her smile snaps loose. The guy asks if something is wrong. She puts her head down, closes her locker, and hurries away.

That night she enters her bedroom with her arms full of construction supplies (wood, wire, hooks, etc) and throws them onto her bed. She unfurls a blueprint for a kind of massive harness, ties her hair back, and gets to work. From outside of her house her light is the only one on in the neighborhood, flashing occasionally as the sounds of her building echo through the suburbs.

She arrives outside of her school the next morning. The harness is a true monstrosity, it forces her spine in a perfect, uncomfortable posture and an elaborate series of hooks and pulleys shape her face into an unnatural grin. It creaks and jangles as she makes her way into the school, clearly struggling with how top-heavy this contraption is.

She walks through the hallway and tries to greet everyone, but the other people are (understandably) a bit uneasy around her and her harness. As she struggles to use her locker the cute guy from before approaches her and asks if she’s okay. June tells him that she’s never been better, through her mechanical smile. She closes her locker and a part of her harness gets caught. She struggles to free herself, assuring the guy that she’s totally fine and everything is great. The harness breaks apart and clatters to the floor around her. She stands alone in the hallway and looks at the crowd of people watching her. She slumps back into her normal, sad posture.
She picks up the pieces of her harness and puts them into her (overflowing) bookbag. The cute guy asks if she needs a hand. She says she’s fine. He asks if she’s sure. June puts the last piece of her harness into her bag, stands up, and walks away. She walks through the hallway, still full of people with massive smiles and cheery colors. June puts up her hoodie and hurries out of the building.

She gets to the bike rack and unlocks her bike in a hurry. She gets on the bike but after a few feet the rusty old bike collapses and falls apart. She hits the ground, her backpack bursts open and the pieces of her harness scatter around her. June picks herself up and looks at the damage to her bike, then to the pieces of her harness. She pulls her hair back and tinkers for a bit, eventually revealing that she has fixed her bike with pieces of her harness. She looks at her handiwork, smiles slightly, and rides down the road away from the school. Her bike rides smoothly.

**Rationale:**

When you are unhappy for an extended period of time, the happiness of others becomes an entirely unrelatable trait. It becomes impossible to imagine what it feels like to feel good, to feel “normal”, which causes even more feelings of isolation and loneliness. Everyone else seems like a more complete person and even the good fortune of your friends becomes an uncomfortably unpleasant event. *Smile* is a film about capturing what it feels like to see everyone and everything around you as everything you are not: happy, complete, and seemingly able to live a normal and fulfilling life. The film is set in a bright and over saturated high school to add to the overwhelming nature of feeling bombarded by the perceived perfection of those around you. High school is an insecure time for the best of us, and will serve as an ideal setting for June’s story.
Being told to “smile more” is something that people who aren’t smiling hear a lot. Not only is it terrible advice to give someone with depression, or even someone just having a bad day, but it also brings about the idea that their job is to just smile, be pleasant, and set aside their actual feelings. This isn’t a film about having depression, it’s about feeling like who you are is less than what you should be. It’s about feeling like you’re at 15% when everyone else is at 95. It’s about feeling like your best isn’t good enough, for yourself or anybody else. These are concepts that are familiar to a lot of people, for a lot of reasons, and one of my goals for the film is to capture these feelings in such a way so that it can be relatable to anybody who can relate, even if for completely different reasons than my own. The film ends on a small moment of personal satisfaction. June’s life isn’t suddenly perfect, she isn’t suddenly a happy person. Instead she learns that her effort is better spent affecting the things she can improve, rather than the things outside of her control.

**Vision:**

As a 2D animated film, June will be clearly different from those around her through incorporating the emotional traits of characters in their design. She sees everyone else not only as being happy, but so much so that it’s their only feature. They exist as shining, beautifully smiling people who only exist to make her feel worse (in her perception), and their designs will reflect that both in shape and color. Their smiles stretch well past their faces, their hair shines brightly, their clothes pop with vibrant colors. June herself will be very drab and subdued by comparison, her silhouette tight and compressed to avoid the gaze of those around her. However, when she creates her smiling solutions, she will go through drastic physical distortions that are only possible through 2D animation.
Her form will be stretched and broken, the sharp angles and points of the harness will emphasise her pained effort to appear “normal.” The harness itself is going to have a lot of weight to it, making believable character animation critical to the success of Smile. It is going to be a very animation-intensive film and I will be doing extensive tests to ensure that things will go smoothly during production. Though I will be animating primarily in TVPaint, I will also be incorporating After Effect animation to assist in making sure the elements of the harness move properly and don’t take up an unintended amount of production time.
**Budget:**

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Screenshots of *Smile* (2018)

A Film by Luke Polito

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Bibliography

_Saved by the Bell._ Created by Sam Bobrick, NBC, 1989-1993.

