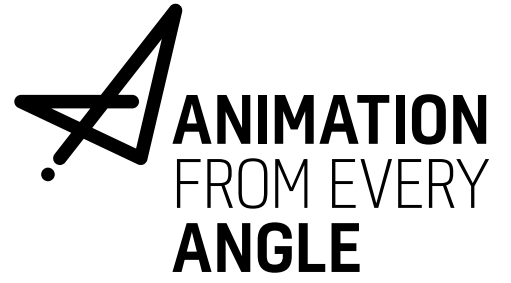


PRODUCTION 2022




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Wonder Media and Split Studio on My Life is Worth Living

by **Edward Hartley**

Conveying depression accurately can be a challenge, but the team at Wonder Media and their collaborators at Split Studio capture mental health with humanity in their new series, now available on YouTube. *My Life Is Worth Living* follows the story of four teenage characters, each with a mini-series based around a serious problem they face.

[This article is about a series which addresses suicide, self-harm, abuse and trauma. The team behind *My Life is Worth Living* compiled links to [mental health resources](#) on the production's website.]

The stories in these episodes may feel familiar to viewers, such as struggles in college, social media-induced anxiety, or living up to parents' expectations. They illustrate the important role support networks can play through the animated cast and their stories.

While the series isn't afraid to touch on deeper issues, it's never guilty of glorifying, glamorizing or trivializing these matters. Emily faces sexual abuse at home and feels trapped in her situation before confiding in a friend's mother. After Kyle experiences cyberbullying, he grapples with his online anxieties spilling over into his real life sense of self. These are examples of how the series boldly tackles serious subject matter.

Read our interview with [Wonder Media's](#) Amanda Carson and Mark Baldo as well as [Split Studio's](#) Chico Zullo and Jonas Brandao below. The teams discuss the series' stylish comic book aesthetic, and how they achieve subtlety during tender moments. They also share insights from the complex process of recording emotional scenes remotely with voice actors during a pandemic.

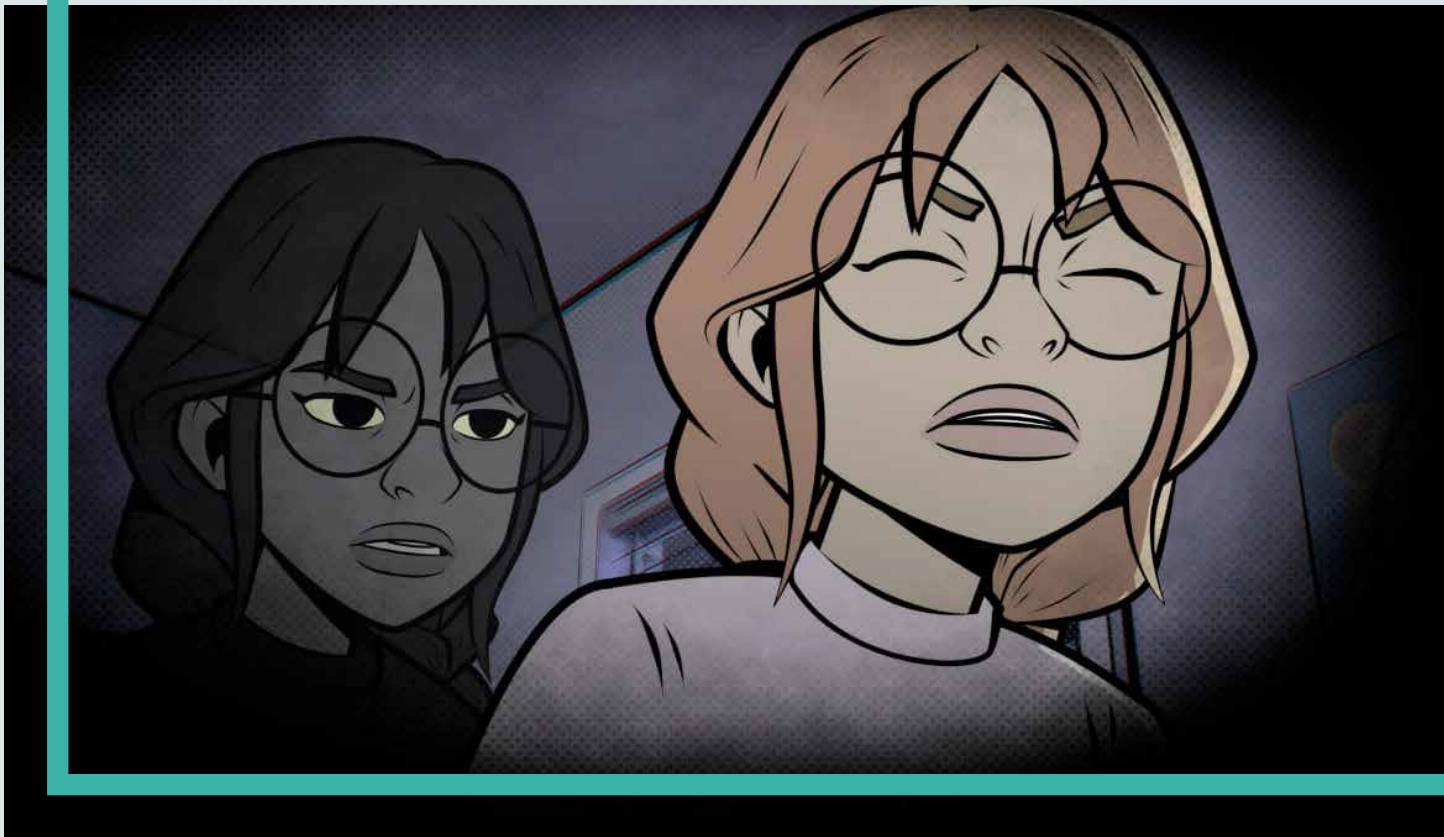


Jam-packed days and meticulous planning help 16-year-old Amie stay organized and pursue her goals. They also help her forget that her parents treat her like she's made of glass, and that her boyfriend worries about her.

Hi! Please introduce *My Life is Worth Living* and the meaning behind the series.

Amanda: There were three major entities working on this project: [The Cook Center for Human Connection](#), who funded the series and made it happen; Wonder Media, who I am a part of, and who Mark is working under; and then Split Studio, which is Jonas and Chico. The Cook Center's goal is to normalize the conversation around mental health. They wanted to do suicide prevention work, and their CEO Anne Brown got them connected with us. This series is very much in line with a lot of work we had been doing previously, a lot of which had to do with child abuse prevention.

We recently did a film called *Are You Okay?*, which focuses on bullying awareness and what bullying looks like now. So we got into working on *My Life Is Worth Living*, originally working with someone that we knew, [Gabe Alvarado](#). Gabe had an inspiring story, where he had gone through an experience with a traumatic injury, and had started doing speaking



engagements. We had become connected with him and his story. He had wanted to do something for kids: he wanted to do something either safety-related or mental health-related.

We were really struck by a story that he had brought up that happened when he was doing speaking engagements. He had people coming up to him, parents of teenagers, asking him, “with all you’ve been through, how do you get through it? How do you manage your day to day? How’s your mental health? How can I talk to my child about what they’re going through? Because I’m really struggling.”

This he was really struck by and we were really struck by it as well. The need for people to talk about this sort of thing, feeling inspired hearing somebody else’s story. So that was a really compelling thing for us, and we started developing it with him. We got crowd-funding to expand the stories and then the Cook Center for Human Connection came in. They were really excited about the idea and allowed us to make it what it is, and expand one story into five main stories. We were really lucky to be able to do that.

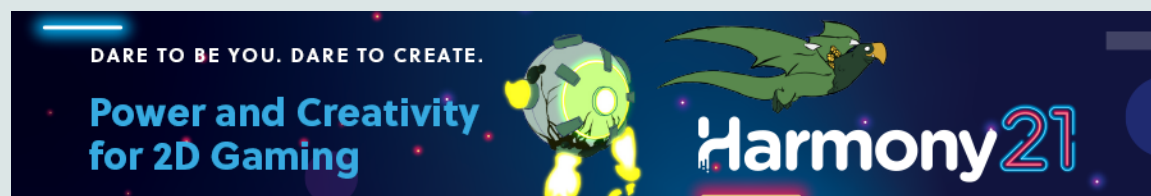
What we wanted to do is show a series following five characters that are in different journeys with their mental health, or at different risks for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, that have been affected

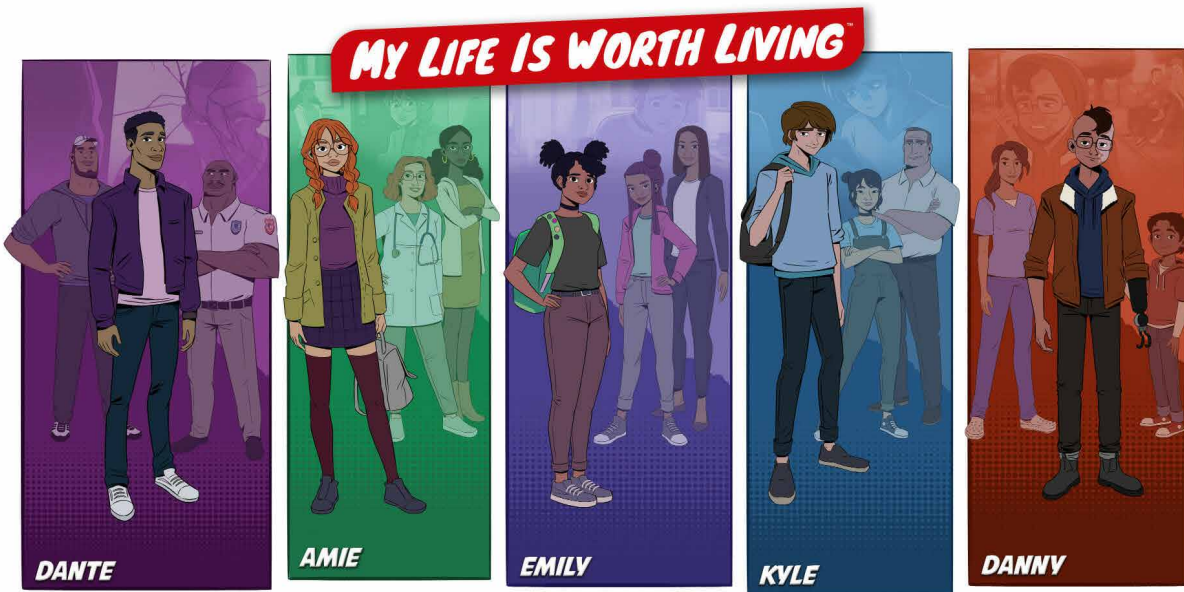
by suicide differently. We wanted to show what the universalities are between those experiences. What is unique about those experiences? How can we connect people and normalize talking about these things, how can we make sure we’re not afraid to bring up the word suicide? Making sure that we’re not afraid to ask people if they’ve been thinking of taking their life or if they have experienced that.

Because this needs to be a major part of the larger mental health conversation. It always feels like this is the scariest subject for a lot of people to talk about. So there was a long development process; developing what stories we want to tell first, and deciding what the scenarios are that we want these kids to be going through.



To his friends and father, Dante is a popular high school football star on track to enroll in business school. Behind closed doors, however, he hides a repressed identity and a passion for art.





Characters featured in My Life Is Worth Living. Image provided by Wonder Media.

What sort of research in the fields of mental health and suicide went into the project?

Amanda: We worked with experts, such as Dr. James Mazza. He's a professor in the School of Psychology at University of Washington – Seattle, and is day-in-day-out working out how we manage the fact that the second leading cause of death in the United States, for ages 10-to-24, is suicide. What do we do about that? What tools can we give young people and the people that love them to make sure that that does not continue. So he was an incredible resource for this series.

He reviewed all of the writing material that we did, and we bounced ideas off of him. Our head writer Jordan, and myself, worked with a team of writers; assigning one writer for each of the arcs, so that we got separate voices for each of them. Then making sure that we could shake them all together, so they felt like the same series. It was a really difficult, but also a really wonderful experience. It's also given us tools to talk about suicide, as it should. We hope that that is what other people are able to as well; after watching these conversations between these characters, identifying with them for whatever reason that they identify with them.

Mark: What Amanda and I say is that these are not the end of a conversation. These are the beginnings of a conversation. We want to normalize and destigmatize the conversation about mental health and suicide.

Who is the series' ideal target audience?

Mark: Wonder Media reached out to me and showed me the pitch document that they had created for this program. I've had long conversations with Amanda, with the team, and Wonder Media. The team wanted to reach a teenage audience, because that's who it is focused for. In that initial conversation, I said: "if you want to reach that audience, that is bombarded with so much stuff, we have to make it really interesting and visually stylish."

I was looking at the character designs for the pitch document and I said: "you know, this would lend itself to be almost like an animated comic book." So I started putting together visual pitches for the Wonder Media team, talking about how we need to turn out the characters and make that work with the background. Even at the time, the stories and the scripts didn't have a lot of motion, but it had a lot of emotion. We're going to try to tell a very dramatic story, very stylishly, in a way that's visually interesting.

What techniques helped achieve this art style?

Mark: We wanted to bring the series to life with comic book styling, because this is animation, and it's a visual medium. I started drawing from anime sources for compositions. Things that we can do in animation that look very stylish, very cool, very dramatic, but that are not very technically difficult. There are simple ways to tell the story, just with simple camera drifts. Touching the camera for dramatic angle, and having someone in the extreme foreground and

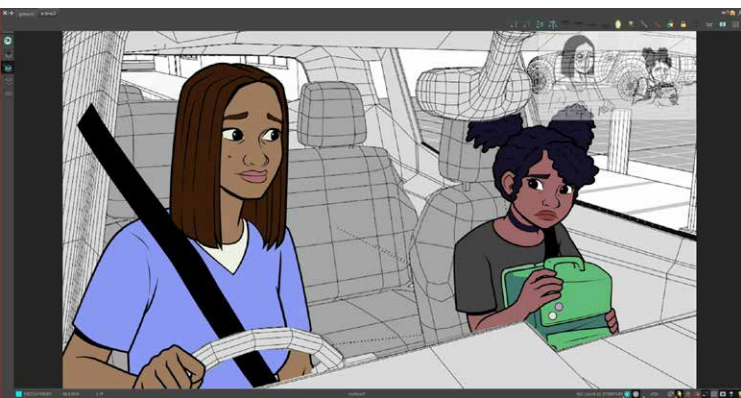


someone in the extreme backgrounds. We definitely started talking about who we were going to do this with, and how are we going to pull this off. Enter Jonas and the Split Studio team in Brazil...

Jonas: Split Studio has been in the business for 12 years now. Throughout that time, we've always worked with Toon Boom Harmony. I met with Toon Boom when I was still in college; I pitched a short film idea to François Lalonde, and he decided to give me some trial licenses so I could work on my film. When I started working in animation and started my company, we had no doubts we should go with Toon Boom. Since then, most of our productions are made in Toon Boom Harmony.

We've been doing TV shows for at least seven years now. This project specifically is something that is really important for us, because as a studio, we dedicate ourselves to a lot of social causes. As an example, we have a training program where a lot of people from poorer areas of Brazil are taught for free. Included in our productions, we have some people that worked on the show from that process. We've been doing for a few years now a show with public television in Brazil about sexual violence prevention for kids. The kind of work that Wonder Media does is very attractive to us, because it's not only an animated project. It's more than that.

I think through the ability of our skills, we can make the world better. I think the things that we do have a huge capacity of achieving the attention of millions of people. So works like *My Life Is Worth Living* makes us think that we are doing the right thing as people. As our main show, we have our best artists and our best directors involved in *My Life Is Worth Living*. [Chico] Zullo is managing all of the creative aspects on our end. Even though we had worked with Wonder Media before, like Amanda said, on the short film, *My Life Is Worth Living* is a serial show, and because of that it requires a lot of technical resources.



Referencing 3D models can help when working with complex scenes, such as a car's interior.

There are a lot of processes that we had to reinvent the way of doing, because the way we used to do things didn't work for the show. It's been a huge learning process for us, and I think everybody's very happy at Split with the way things are going and how we're handling the show. Everybody that's worked on it is very proud of being part of it.

Can you tell us more about what this project means to you?

Mark: I've been doing this for over 30 years now. I've worked on huge feature films, I've worked on small television commercials, and I've done 2D animation, 3D animation, computer generated stop-motion animation. All mediums of animation. I love animation. When I was looking at this, and I was really thinking about it, I was really drawing on my 30 years of experience in the industry to figure out the best way to represent the show.

When speaking to the Wonder Media folks, they opened up a new dimension to animation, where these animated stories could actually save someone's life. That's something that's completely new to me, and I was very excited to become part of it. That was the ultimate reason why, after speaking with Wonder Media, I agreed to take on the project.

Because, again, I've been doing this for a long time, I've been entertaining people for a long time, but the opportunity to use animation to actually save lives became incredibly appealing to me. I'm really very proud to be a part of it. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever add that to the equation of everything I've done. I guess I'm just very proud to be a part of it.

Amanda: In all the work that we've done as Wonder Media, leading up to this project in particular, that is the most surprising thing. But also it's what we'd hoped for. We've been working primarily with clients that want to create a YouTube presence for their prevention material. You actually get to see people's response and you get to see people interact with each other. When someone says that they're struggling, other people hop in and support them. That's the most amazing thing to see.

After you finish something like that, you get to give it to other people. You actually get to see them interact with it and engage with it. I feel like that's a really unique experience. Because there is obviously a ton of life-changing art and media that exists, but you don't always get to really see what people think. You don't ever get to see exactly when they're feeling impacted by it. That happens alone in their homes when they're watching it, and you don't know what's really going on there, you hope it's helping them. But you often don't know.



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INT. AMIE'S KITCHEN - DAY



1. WE START THIS EPISODE WITH AMIE COMING HOME FROM SCHOOL AND FINDING A POST-IT NOTE FROM HER PARENTS -- TELLING AMIE THAT THEY HAVE GONE OUT. AMIE IS ALONE AND HER NEGATIVE VOICE PUTS A NEGATIVE SPIN ON THE NOTE--

INT. AMIE'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS



2. AMIE MANAGES TO PUSH OUT THE DARKNESS AND BEGINS WORKING IN HER DAY PLANNER, WHILE LISTENING TO SCOTT'S WEB CAST ON HER PHONE -- WHEN SCOTT MENTIONS "FEELING BROKEN" IT CATCHES AMIE'S ATTENTION...

INT. AMIE'S BEDROOM - DAY



3. AMIE GOES TO HER BEDROOM AND READS THE CARD SHE RECEIVED WITH A BOUQUET OF FLOWERS, FROM NICK. ONCE AGAIN, AMIE'S NEGATIVE VOICE TELLS HER THAT SHE IS BEING A BURDEN TO EVERYONE...

INT. AMIE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS



4. AMIE HAS HEARD ENOUGH AND CONFRONTS HER NEGATIVE VOICE. FOR THE FIRST TIME, AMIE OPENS HER TO THE DARKNESS AND FACES HER NEGATIVE VOICE. SHE STRIKES A DEAL THEY CAN BOTH LIVE WITH...

EXT. PARK BENCH LOCATION - DAY



5. AT THE END OF THE EPISODE WE SEE AMIE AND NICK ON THEIR FAVORITE PARK BENCH, WATCHING SCOTT'S WEB CAST ON NICK'S PHONE. THE TWO DISCUSS AMIE'S VOLUNTEERING AT THE MENTAL HEALTH FAIR, WHILE DRINKING ICED COFFEES. THE NEWLY ADOPTED BERNESE MOUNTAIN DOG SITS WITH THEM.

Beat boards from My Life Is Worth Living.

The most amazing thing with a series like this is that you get to actually see people say those things. What we're always hoping for is happening: people see it and feel relieved to see it. To feel like they either heard something that was said in a way they haven't been able to, or makes them feel inspired to tell their story, or inspires them to have a conversation that they haven't been able to have.

The writing process behind the series sounds fascinating. Can you tell me more?

Mark: For me, when Amanda and the team and I were finalizing the scripts, I could absolutely relate to Dante's story. Because my father was in the military, and I wanted to be an artist. He had a certain idea of who I should be and the direction I should go in. I did not want to go in that direction. So a lot of these conversations are literally drawn from my past, from personal conversations. That's why when we were writing it with Amanda, the interactions, whatever Dante says and the response from his father, Bruce, have to have to sound true. Because I've had these conversations, I know how they sound, and I know how they end. So we were focusing on that a lot. For me, the Dante story was very personal in that respect.

Amanda: Going along with that, Dante's experience really resonated with quite a few people on our team during the process of building his story. Whether it was the team of artists, somebody on our art team, our CEO, or Mark — it resonates. Our writer for that arc as well, Jordan, felt he just really knew these conversations, and was very attached to them.

We've all found, in each of the story arcs, that there are moments that really hit you. And you think, "I've definitely felt like that." Throughout all of them, that major thread of not wanting to burden people around you with what you're going through is such an incredibly relatable feeling. Feeling like your story, or whatever you're going through, is too much for people. That's a big universal thread through all the stories that I hope will be relatable.

We also wanted to get the people that we're representing in these first five story arcs right. Because we know that there are as many stories as there are people, so these are not representative of everyone's story. But we wanted to make sure that we are addressing specific groups that are at higher risk for suicide.

Chico: I connect more with the character in the third act: Kyle. I used to play soccer and I suffered bullying when I was a kid. Actually, compared to Dante's arc, my parents were always super supportive of my career as an artist. But one thing that I really like about the development of Bruce, is that his father is really real.

He's not the stereotype of the bad father. We had to make some changes in the last episode. We had to bring some sweetness during the scenes. Even though he is very strong, he can be very rude and very intense. We brought some sweetness every time that we could, to make sure that when he transforms in the last episode, it feels real. It was really touching, the way we would deal with scripts throughout the storyboard and the animation. There were times Mark would say, "he can't be that rude," and we would tweak the storyboard.

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Amanda: We didn't want to make him seem like a caricature of a person. We wanted to make sure that, even in the design, and the way that the animation is translated, makes sure that he looks like someone who has his particular point of view. He has whatever has been going on in his life that is making it impossible for him to connect with his son at that moment, but it doesn't mean that he doesn't want to in some way. We were concerned with Dante's story because we didn't want to get to the fourth episode and have him make a lightbulb switch. Like, "I'm fine now. Everything's fine. I'm suddenly totally getting it."

We wanted to show hints of him wanting to be able to connect, but feeling this block, feeling this wall, and not being able to break it down. And feeling isolated.

Chico: Yes. And to understand what's going on with his son. It was very successful in this way. But personally I relate more with Kyle.

Amanda: Kyle's arc deals a lot with the presence of social media in his life. Specifically, tied to what other people think of him. He's feeling very paranoid that everyone is always watching him and always criticizing him and feeling like he's not as cool or confident as his father. Feeling like he just can't quite connect to people because he's always bogged down with feeling this distrust of the people around him, and that's only amplified by social media.

So we see him going through bullying. We see him going through what he's been dealing with on his own, with his own mental health, and what he thinks of himself. Something he says specifically in his story: "it's not just the comments calling me trash, it's that I believe it." They're all just reinforcing what he already believed about himself. That was, I think, a really relatable thing to feel: It's not like these are new things; they're validating the worst things that I think about myself, and so they must be true.

Chico: Production-wise, it was a huge learning curve, working with Mark and Wonder Media on this, because my background is more working with comedy. We got this really emotional script we have to work with. It was a challenge that I really enjoyed jumping into, because of that emotional charge. Throughout the production, in the first eight episodes, I was learning what Amanda and especially Mark wanted as the storytelling. I believe that, by the third arc, I already understood what we should do. So doing those storyboards and the animation was more enjoyable for me. That's why I really connect and relate with Kyle's arc, too. That's another side of the story that I'd like to put in.

Amanda: That's funny because before the pitch even happened we had those initial character designs. We were working with one writer at first just to build the foundation of a series bible to start fleshing out who these characters are. What are we seeing in suicide statistics, that would lend itself to who these first stories should be about, and doing a lot of initial brainstorming work there before the pitch. Then taking those ideas, putting them into a pitch and creating them and saying "we don't have to do it exactly like this, but these are the types of stories that we could do."

When we took it to the Cook Center, they really loved the initial ideas. Once we had them on board, and they decided they wanted to do this with us, that's when we really got into the weeds with the details of the stories. Making sure that they really do feel tied to what the experts are saying is needed, or the types of stories they've heard, or that they've had experiences with.

We built a team of Jordan Gibler, myself and four other writers, so that we have a separate writer for each arc. We could have them working at the same time and also lend their own unique voice to premises that the characters had already. They were able to really expand upon them and bring their own experiences in as well, and it made them that much richer. So once we were able to get all of that script work done with them, for the first couple arcs we did an entire round with Mark where we were buckling in on the dialogue.

Then we would move it out to the clients and get their thoughts on it. Even though there was a lot of script work happening at the same time with this relatively small team, really mining these stories, and really getting them to a place that felt real. It was like we were just walking in on a conversation that was really happening. Once it got to the client, there wasn't a lot of back and forth. They've been wonderful people to work with, the Cook Center. I really enjoyed the entire writing process.

Mark: It's not that we were hiding ourselves in these stories, but more that we're collaborating and adding a layer of honesty and of personal experience to the script. Everyone had something to add that was honest and important.

Amanda: I will say we were very lucky. I think we've been lucky this entire time to have people who all have the same goal. Most of the time, people weren't being a stickler on something just because they like a particular way something is being said or if it makes the most sense to them. Everyone has been really open to collaboration and hearing other people out. Assessing whether we should say things that way

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because it doesn't feel good or maybe a teenager would hate hearing it, or something like that.

That was the other thing, making sure that not only were we handling these difficult themes safely, but also making sure that we were connecting to a teenage audience. And that we weren't pandering to them. Anytime we do something teen-related that's a big pet peeve. It's a very grating thing when you hear something pander to a youth audience. They sense that lack of authenticity right away. There was a lot of reminding each other that these are all human beings.



A painful secret has been haunting Emily for months. She's managed to keep it from her mom, but now mom's going out of town for the weekend, and Emily will be left alone with Brandon, her mom's fiancé.

When you consulted with experts, was this to ensure the scenarios were realistic?

Amanda: Yeah. Most importantly, we were making sure that the way we were talking about suicide and mental health wasn't super triggering, or inspiring contagion, or showing suicide methodology. Because it's really a sensitive thing. When you need to talk about suicidal ideation, you need to express visually how it feels to some people, what suicidal thoughts can feel like.

It's a really tricky balance to be like: "okay, I need to show this without showing all of it." Are we not really conveying the severity of what's going on here or have we gone a little too far? Are we now doing something that would inspire more suicidal behavior or thoughts in someone?

We don't want to do that. That's the opposite of what we want to do. So that was something we were always checking in on, with the clinicians on the teams; trying to make sure that it never felt that way. Or it always felt emotionally grounded and important. Or the weight was there, but in a way that wasn't dangerous.

Mark: In episode two, when Dante punches the mirror, for instance, and shatters the glass. There is a shot in that sequence where he looks at the shards of glass in the sink. It was really dramatic and really powerful. But immediately we went: "Are we giving someone an idea? Are we triggering something? Are we suggesting something?" So we removed it completely. That's kind of an illustration of telling these very dramatic stories, very carefully.

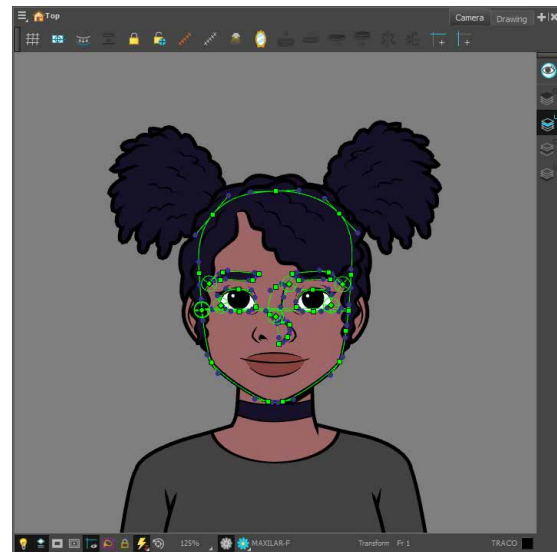
Amanda: Yeah, and that was the thing with the scripts. I think the script may have said something as simple as, "he considers the shard." Which could be vague, but also not, depending on who's reading it. I think the client looked at that and said: "that's a red flag."

We want it to come across that he's in an emotionally volatile place, and he is dealing with these feelings in a way that's more intense than he's ever felt before. You get that punching a mirror in the locker room is not normal. It's not the sign of someone who was doing okay. It's a sign of someone who cannot express themselves and is just at a boiling point — and that's all you need to know.

What techniques did you use to affect the mood throughout the scenarios?

Chico: We were really leaning on acting from the characters to provide emotion. Mark was really important at this stage, because he did really great directing. At first, when I was talking to Jonas at the beginning and to the team, I thought that there would be even less motion than we have in the episodes. But it really struck us that we need more motion than we had. Mark gave us the right points and the words that we need to work on to convey emotion.

This style, the designs of the characters, are more realistic than you would usually do in cartoons. So it's really easy to lose the model during a scene once the character moves his face or his head right, left or something like that. Having envelope deformers and



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the drawings inside Harmony helps us when, even if the animator misses the model in a scene, we can give the scene to a very skilled animator, and they can bring it back to the model without a big retake.

With such a focus on the closeup character's emotions, it seems like this was very important to get right?

Chico: Yeah, we had to focus on that. We started thinking about that right from the start, in the storyboards and animatics. As I said before it took us maybe like five six episodes to understand what we needed emotionally to tell the story. We did it right from the start, from the first episode, but it got us back and forth working on those boards. The last episodes that we delivered to Mark and Amanda, we had really few notes on them. It really seemed to me that we understood what needed to be done.

Jonas: From a technical perspective, where Toon Boom Harmony really helps, is that since we need to achieve subtlety, like Zullo mentioned, we can use the deformers and controllers to make slight changes when necessary. Because the characters, even though they are stylized, they have to have a natural, realistic performance in the acting. In that sense, the builds we do... they're not very complex. But they offer enough to convey a performance that matches what the scene needs to tell.

What's the process of capturing the voice actor's expressions in the animated character?

Mark: A lot of the time, like in feature films, they put a lip-sync cam in the voice booth. It's super useful to animators to see the voice actors actually perform the words. A lot of the time, it's a luxury that productions cannot afford, because you're recording several takes and then you're only picking one take. So it has to be the one take where you used the right lip-sync cam footage. And it becomes a bit of a logistical nightmare.

It's a luxury that a lot of productions can't afford and certainly we could not afford that. So I had to bring in what I saw, or what I see through my ears, and communicate that to Zullo and his team. And that is how it's done.

Amanda: Something important to say about the voice acting and recording process was that we're still in a pandemic. When we were doing voice recording for this, we were *deeply* in a pandemic. The entire production has been done remotely, and specifically this was something that I hadn't done at this scale remotely before. We did all of these voice sessions completely with, I think, nearly all the actors recording from their own studios.

We worked with Verité, which is a studio based here in L.A., who Split and Jonas have worked with before as well, to cast the show and to set up the voice sessions. Voice direction came from Rene and our buddy Nico, at Verité. But all of this was being

done essentially over Zoom. And so everyone was in their own separate environment recording, and it was really wild what we were able to do.

We never had two actors or more in the same room at the same time. Everybody recorded on their own, by themselves, and so that was a major part of making sure that it was emotionally sound afterward. Sometimes you would hear the radio play and think: "Wow, like, this is already very close." And sometimes you'd think, "these two characters don't sound like they're in the same conversation." Because they weren't having the same conversation.

As much as we tried to channel what we had experienced in the previous session, it was sometimes just a very different style. So we would have to go into those other voice files and make sure that the emotion of the scene was not lost and we were able to give Split something that really felt was an accurate representation of these scenes. But it was wild how many sessions there were and sometimes how long there they were. They were all done remotely. It was a really special and bizarre experience, all at one time.

Amanda: Luckily we also had Zullo spending a lot of time in the sessions as well. The three of us were in nearly all of those sessions together so that Zullo could have that initial representation of what these voices would be, and feel informed in that way. Many times it was incredibly late for him to be in those sessions, being five hours ahead of us.

I remember one session, for Kyle's arc specifically, was over four hours. It was nighttime in L.A., and it was already deep into night-time for New York, which is where that actor was living. Then Zullo was five hours ahead of us. It was so bizarre, but it was great.

Mark: And it was a Friday!

Chico: By the end, the biggest challenge that we had was to match the emotion in the voice recordings. That's something that I always said to the team: "This acting is too good for us to ruin. Let's make it right!"

Every time that we sat with Mark, it was a great opportunity to bring all that emotion to the scene. So it's been amazing to work with this team, with such quality and a great effort from everyone.

- All episodes of [My Life Is Worth Living](#) can now be watched on YouTube.
- Discover more meaningful work from Wonder Media on their [website](#).
- Read more stories from our animation community on Toon Boom's [blog](#).


Cinzia Angelini on drawing attention to war's impact on children with *Mila*

by Philip Mak

The vast majority of people who have grown up in the Global North have had the fortune of never experiencing lethal conflict. Yet for nearly 200 million children around the world, living in a deadly war zone is their daily reality — a number that has increased by almost 20 percent in 2020, according to [Save the Children](#). Filmmaker Cinzia Angelini hopes that her short film, *Mila*, will raise awareness of the impact that armed conflict has on innocent civilians and the next generation.

Angelini wove together her mother's and relatives' memories of Trento, Italy during the height of World War II — ultimately bridging her personal heritage and professional passion as an animator. Supported by UNICEF Italia, the 20-minute short follows a young girl immediately following an air raid; simultaneously losing everything and finding hope in a complete stranger.

350 volunteers spanning 35 countries created *Mila* over the course of 10 years, with additional production support by Cinesite. The multi-lingual, multi-cultural crew constituted the largest independent animation studio ever.

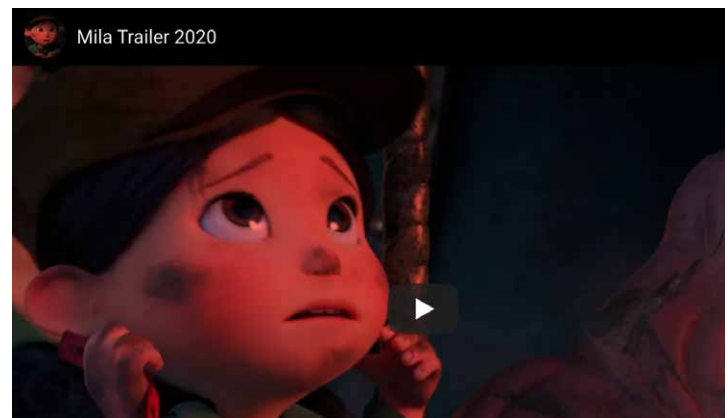
 [Cinzia Angelini speaking at TEDxVail about her experience producing *Mila*.](#)

"[The story of *Mila*] is more of a sentiment of how my mom felt in the middle of bombings and how she couldn't think or move or do anything. She was really terrified and frozen by fear. I always thought about what impact war has on kids' lives. Those moments of tragedy, how are their lives affected by that? That's the core of the film," says Angelini.

So, how did Angelini bring together hundreds of people to give their time for free? According to her, it comes down to the universal resonance and relevance of *Mila's* message.

"Artists really want to love the project they're working on in their free time. The fact that *Mila* has such a strong message against war brought people in and they fell in love. And then it spread by word of mouth," explains Angelini.

Seen through the eyes of a child, she hopes that using animation as a medium will make *Mila's* message about armed conflict more accessible to both younger audience members and their parents — sparking conversations in the moment and positive changes in the future. She wishes that viewers of all ages find inspiration in kids' ability to cope with tragedy. And to find hope in the face of despair and destruction.



Official trailer for *Mila*.



"I think animation is so special because it's the first medium we fall in love with as kids. What you experience as a child always stays with you," says Angelini.

She continues, "Animation touches a special cord in everybody's soul. When you look at difficult things through animation, it's like taking it almost from a poetic angle. Live action is great, but I think you can interpret very difficult things through animation in a very creative and awesome way that has even more of a chance of touching people."

Music is almost as important as animation in the film's educational and empathy-building powers. Angelini chose not to have any dialogue in order to make *Mila* even more universal, instead working with a full orchestra in Italy who volunteered two days to play an original score composed by Flavio Gargano. Incredibly, they performed and recorded everything live with the film screening behind them.

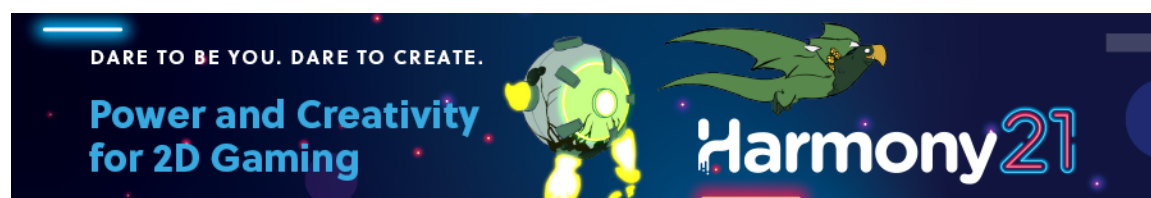
Given that *Mila* was also animated entirely by volunteers, Angelini admits there were significant pipeline challenges; particularly in the first half of the last decade, when collaborative tools were not as widespread and working remotely was not yet the norm. At any given time, she estimates there were 80

different people working on the short. Fortunately, they discovered that they could take advantage of time zones and have a pipeline that was active 24/7.

The crews were supported by Cinesite, who offered production support beginning in 2019. Given the size and scope of *Mila*, they were invaluable in helping it cross the finish line in terms of lighting, rendering and more over the course of 10 months. In doing so, they had to harmonize their independent pipeline with Cinesite's established one.



Production still from *Mila*, provided by Cinzia Angelini and Cinesite.



"It was incredible the amount of beauty and love that the Cinesite artists put into *Mila*, while still respecting all the work that had been done in the prior 10 years. I think it's amazing that we were able to bring these two worlds together," notes Angelini.

In exchange for all the volunteers' hard work, *Mila* offered animators not only a feature film-quality portfolio piece but also membership into a global family of artists who could and would support them; whether it be through letters of recommendation or introduction to contacts. Angelini notes that many went from students to studio leads over the course of production.

For her, supporting and mentoring women in the industry is both personal and paramount: "A milestone in my life happened when I was showing my portfolio just after school to one of the Italian studios: it was some clean-up drawings, but I always wanted to be an animator. The person I was interviewing with said, 'You're a woman. You can either do background colouring or clean up. Why do you want to go into animation?'"

"I wanted to be an animator. I realized very soon that I was not going to listen to any negativity coming my way. So I was just gonna do my thing and keep my head down, and I did. When you have something like that happen early in your career, it can really impact you heavily. So, I've always supported women in the industry."

Fortunately, Angelina's story has a happy ending. She now works at [Cinesite](#), where nearly 45 percent of animators on its upcoming feature are women. Angelini is hopeful that *Mila* will be nominated for an Academy Award. And she hopes to someday have the budget to turn the short into a full-length film, to carry its message even further.

"Awards and prizes are amazing, but the most important thing for me is knowing that people are watching *Mila* and learning. We always said that all the effort of the last 10 years was worth it if we even change one future decision maker; one kid that watches *Mila* that will be a future president or diplomat. Someone that will make a difference," says Angelini.

What advice would she give to animators hoping to follow in her footsteps? Much like *Mila*, hers is a message of hope: "If you're going to do the independent route, you need to know that it's very difficult. And you have to believe in your project. If you believe in it, everybody will believe in it. If you're really passionate about what you're doing, just keep your head down and keep going. People who really believe in you will come your way."



Production still from *Mila*, provided by Cinzia Angelini and Cinesite.



Noah Cutwright on Kickstarting The Carsons

by Philip Mak

Crowdfunding is an increasingly viable avenue for animators getting their productions off the ground. By pitching to the public, artists can get the financial support needed to create a short that can be shopped around to studios, streamers and networks. An artist in the midst of this process is award-winning Los Angeles animator Noah Cutwright. Noah is currently [using Kickstarter](#) to crowdfund his animated pilot for *The Carsons*.

Launched a decade ago as a webcomic, *The Carsons* is a semi-fictionalized and comedic take on Cutwright's own life; following a young Black couple trying to make it in Los Angeles. The satirical series parodies the single-camera mockumentary format, made popular by live-action sitcoms like *Modern Family*, *Parks and Recreation* and *The Office*. While those shows were overwhelmingly white and middle class, *The Carsons* will ground its humour in Black culture and the lifestyles of working-class Millennials and Gen Zs.

Clearly many see value in Cutwright's vision, as he raised his Kickstarter goal in just five days. The project also attracted the support of Matthew A. Cherry and Chaz Bottoms — two creators who have also seen success on the crowdfunding platforms with their respective projects, the Academy Award-winning short [Hair Love](#) and upcoming musical series [Battu](#).

Bottoms says: "*The Carsons* is Noah's charming, funny and fresh animated series that I've been a fan of for a long time. The Kickstarter is a chance for the world to see Noah's vision and to get to know these hilarious characters. The talent with this project is out-of-this-world and Noah has been an incredible director, writer, producer and collaborator."

Cutwright has been working with Toon Boom animation software since he was 12 years old, and will be using [Harmony](#) to bring *The Carson's* pilot to

life. We caught up with him to learn more about the project, his view on mockumentary sitcoms and his tips for a successful crowdfunding campaign.

Hi Noah! We love *The Carsons'* mockumentary angle. What drew you to this style?

Noah: I think the idea of doing a mockumentary stemmed from my love of sitcoms. Growing up, my family loved shows like *Good Times*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *George Lopez*. I always thought the sitcom is such a fun format — it's timeless, yet with every decade or so, there's a certain time capsule quality to it. Each sitcom is like the perfect encapsulation of the era it came out in.



Promotional art for *The Carsons* provided by Noah Cutwright.



The Carsons is meant to be a love letter to the experiences of folks in my generation, and the sitcoms we've found ourselves loving are ones like *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation*. It seemed fitting that *The Carsons* followed suit. Not to mention, I felt like that would be such a fresh take for an animated sitcom in particular; it's certainly not something I've seen.

Totally agree! How did Matthew A. Cherry and Chaz Bottoms become involved?

Noah: Matthew A. Cherry was one of our first backers, on day one. He was super generous by donating and sharing on social media. It was really cool to see someone I've admired for so long supporting the project.

As for Chaz, he and I are good friends. We've been working together on projects since 2019 and I've always admired his drive as an animator and person. He's been super helpful in terms of advice. In fact, his advice was what gave me the final boost of confidence I needed to go forward with this Kickstarter. He's just an all-around talented guy, and I've genuinely appreciated every bit of his support and friendship throughout this journey.

▶ **MOVIE NIGHT**, an animated short directed by Noah Cutwright and Jimmy Taylor.

Speaking of your Kickstarter, why did you decide to do a crowdfunding campaign?

Noah: I was just really ready to see this show get made, even if it was only one episode. When I was writing the pilot and developing the series, it just felt like the perfect encapsulation of what my friends and I were experiencing and, on top of that, we all thought it was really funny! I knew I was still very new to this industry in many ways, but I didn't want to just wait for someone to tell me 'yes' and that it was my turn.

I want to make the show that I've wanted to see. The talent behind this series is *insane!* The cast, the artists — for a lot of us, it's our opportunity to show what we can do. I've had difficulty getting the show in front of the folks I wanted to before the Kickstarter, but who knows. After all the buzz generated by it, maybe all that's about to change.



WHERE EVERY GREAT
STORY BEGINS
Storyboard PRO 20

Clearly it's connecting, as you've raised your Kickstarter goal! What tips do you have for other animators who also want to pursue crowdfunding?

Noah: One of the biggest issues a lot of the character's struggle with on this show is self-doubt, and it's definitely something me and many of my peers deal with as well. What I would say to any other animators is believe in yourself. As cliché as that may be, it's a lot harder than it sounds.

I used to talk myself out of doing things because I thought I would fail, but the thing we always forget is that we may also succeed. When you go into something like this with all of your heart and passion, good things will come out of it. We just have to get out of our own way.

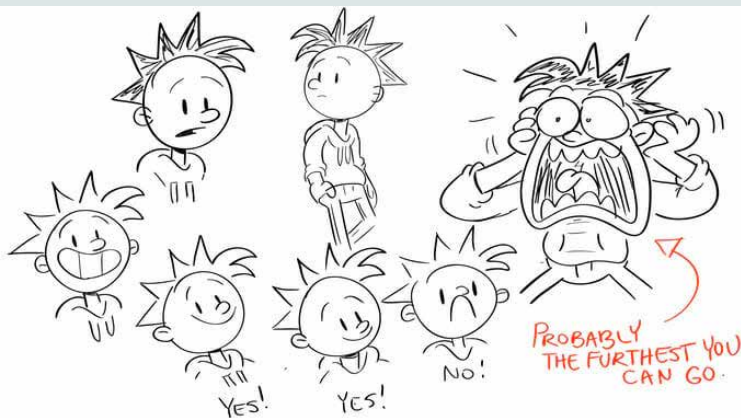
That's amazing that you're creating the stories you want to see — especially ones that are more diverse and inclusive. Was this important to you?

Noah: I think it's just important because it's a reflection of the world we live in. People want to see themselves in the stories told about them, and Black folks are no exception. There's something so gratifying about watching or reading something and feeling like it was written for you. You feel seen.

I know the biggest thing that drove me to want to make this show was I wanted to see Black characters who are just starting to 'adult' and struggling to try to figure out how to navigate maturing relationships and finding out who they are. That's been my experience, and many folks of my generation are dealing with that — likely while working full-time jobs that barely pay enough to do anything without stressing about paying rent on time. I think having characters you can connect to on that human level helps to make us all feel validated and realize we're not alone in any of these struggles.

And after your Kickstarter, where do you want to see *The Carsons* go and grow?

Noah: I would ultimately hope to see the show picked up to full series by a streaming service or network, but at the end of the day I just really like to see how folks respond to the pilot. If people respond well, and find it as funny as we think it is, we'll continue to see more from the Carson family in the future!



- Interested in backing *The Carsons*? The Kickstarter [campaign](#) is running until Wednesday, December 15.
- Curious about Noah Cutwright's work? Be sure to take a peek at his [portfolio and reel](#).

Samples of preproduction documents shared on *The Carsons* Kickstarter campaign.



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How WIA Vancouver's ACE program helps women Pivot into creative roles

by Erin Hynes

According to a 2019 USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative [study](#) conducted in partnership with [Women in Animation \(WIA\)](#), women continue to be underrepresented in the animation industry; occupying just [20% of creative roles](#) in the field. While representation has certainly begun to improve in recent decades, women are still a minority across almost every level of creative and business leadership in animation.

WIA is a non-profit organization that promotes and supports women working in the art, science and business of animation. WIA Vancouver's ACE (Animation Career EXCEerator) Program was designed specifically to help advance the careers of women in the animation industry. The program does so by giving women credit in the making an original short film, TV proof-of-concept or web series pilot. The program provides supportive mentorship and training along the way.

The goal of the ACE program is to advance creators who identify as women into key creative roles in animation. According to Tini Wider — a line producer currently enrolled in the program as Producer — the opportunity for women to develop, create, and own a project is integral to improving representation in the industry. "There are women in the industry now, but it is thin at the top," she says. "One of the current challenges is to find ways to elevate women into those leadership roles."

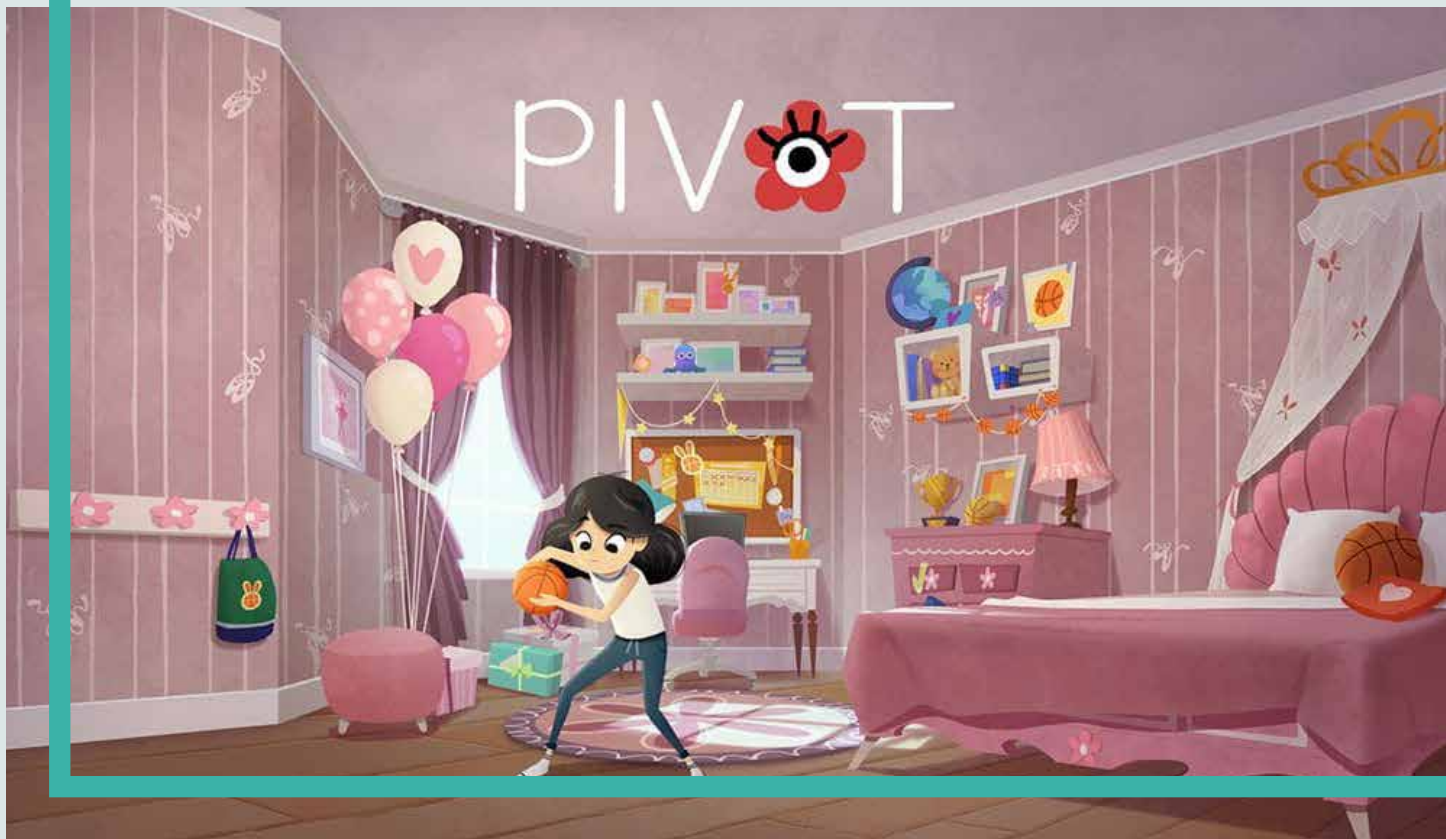
ACE addresses this problem by giving women the foundation they need to advance into leadership roles. The program provides participants with the opportunity to develop, create and own original intellectual property. Having completed the two year program, participants develop skills to take on the responsibilities of leadership roles.

As part of ACE, Tini is working with a team of several other women on an animated short film. Ana Gusson directed the film, written by Robyn Campbell. All three women applied to the program, which brought them together to work on the project. The film, called *Pivot*, explores a defining moment in the main character's quest to be herself at the risk of disappointing the person she loves the most: her Mom.

To join the program, Tini, Ana, and Robyn had to apply for their positions. "To become a participant, you explain why you are the right person for your role. This mimics the real hiring process for a production," says Ana. This is just one of the ways in which ACE helps women to build the foundation for success. By focusing on how to present yourself and your craft, women gain skills and confidence to apply for leadership roles.



Production still from *Pivot*, provided by WIA Vancouver and the participants of this year's ACE cohort.



Ana says she started working in animation at a time in which women began to appear more in film schools and in the industry. "I was very lucky that my first job out of school was with a production whose director was a woman," says Ana. Prior to that, she had worked mostly with men, who were always in senior positions. "Working with a woman director was so important for me because it provided me with an example to look up to. I had never worked with a woman who was in a senior role. Having that experience inspired me to become a leader myself."

Ana's experience points to how important it is to acknowledge that simply hiring women for entry-level roles in animation isn't enough. To achieve genuine parity, women need representation across the spectrum of roles from entry level to leadership; not just in animation, but across all industries

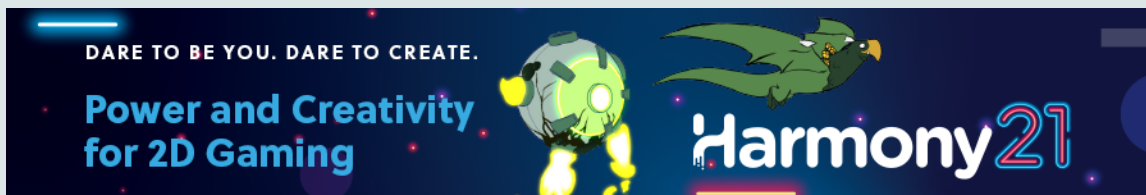
Women in leadership roles are particularly important. [Studies](#) demonstrate that people pursue goals when they see people like themselves succeed. When women see other women in roles, they find it easier to imagine themselves in those roles themselves, and are therefore more likely to put themselves forward. In addition, when they see women in leadership positions they are more likely to speak up themselves. Once women are well-represented in leadership, there's a trickle-down effect: Women tend to hire

more women. Having women in key creative roles increases opportunities for gender parity into the future.

The ACE program also helps to build the confidence of women working in animation. Robyn says that it has enabled her to find her individual voice. "The mentorship I've received so far has been really encouraging," she says. "I've become comfortable writing content that is empowering and relatable for female-identifying and non-binary viewers in particular. This was a really important step for me in finding my personal voice as a creator."

Outside of the ACE program, Robyn works as a full-time screenwriter, but worked in development prior to that. In her 3 years in development, she saw projects pitched on a daily basis. She observed a clear gap in animation content written for female-identifying audiences. Robyn emphasizes that programs like ACE are important because they not only train women, they give them the confidence to find their voices. And fill gaps in content.

While the ACE program gives women the foundation to advance in their animation careers, there are some aspects of the industry that are harder to address. For example, Tini explains that in her years of working as a producer, she observed how the culture in animation studios can disservice women's advancement.



"I was attracted to animation originally because of the industry's amazing culture of collaboration and camaraderie," says Tini. "But, there are still many unspoken expectations in the animation workplace. Working past 5:00 pm is not uncommon, and networking events are often held in the evening. Since women typically hold the bulk of family and caregiving responsibilities, this means they often miss out on opportunities that will advance their career."

Tini, Ana, and Robyn all agree that this issue has improved in the last year; in part because of the shift toward remote work. "Studios are now recognizing that working from home doesn't have to impact productivity or workflow," Tini explains, "Many studios are adopting flexible work structures; this helps to balance work and life for women, or anyone, who has responsibilities at home." The pandemic also removed some pressures of in-person networking. Rather than heading to a social event after work, networking is taking place in digital spaces, which can be more accessible for caretakers.

The animation industry also continues to lack equity for women of color. In the [last 12 years](#), 37% of producers of animated movies were women, but only 5% were women of color. These figures demonstrate that while there have been gains for women in animation, there is still work to be done for women of color.



The current iteration of the ACE program will wrap in 2021; a new cohort of women will join the program in 2022. With their time in ACE coming to a close, Tini, Ana, and Robyn appreciate their experiences in the program. Aside from professional development, they are grateful for the connections they've made with like-minded women. "Everyone on the project is appreciative of each other, and supportive," says Tini. "This has been the most ideal production experience." Tini hopes that in the future, collaborative experiences like this become the norm.

For Robyn, a highlight of the program has been learning how relatable her film has been for others. "Many people have come to me sharing their personal stories, explaining how they relate to the story," she says. She found herself having deep and personal conversations with people about the issues that the film addresses. "It's as though the story has given people permission to talk about something that they may not have been comfortable discussing before."

Production still from *Pivot*, provided by WIA Vancouver and the participants of this year's ACE cohort.

While the impact that their participation in ACE will have on their careers is impossible to predict, Tini, Ana, and Robyn are encouraged by the doors they opened. Tini hopes to continue making shorts and working on projects in which she can contribute creative input. Ana's goal is to take on more directing roles, and Robyn will continue writing scripts. They all already have their next projects in mind, but first, laughs Ana, "I'll take a little break!"

- Curious about *Pivot*? The short premiered at [Spark Animation 2021](#) on October 28.
- [Toon Boom Animation](#) is a proud supporter of [WIA](#) and [WIA Vancouver](#).



Production still from *Pivot*, provided by WIA Vancouver and the participants of this year's ACE cohort.



WHERE EVERY GREAT STORY BEGINS
Storyboard PRO 20



Black Write Edition's organizers on supporting emerging Black storytellers

by **Erin Hynes**

In September, Nelvana, a leading international producer, distributor, and licensor of children's content, and Kids Can Press, an acclaimed children's book publisher, announced a collaborative talent incubator: Black Write Edition.

The incubator invites Black storytellers and illustrators to submit their work and ideas. The initiative's mission: Discover, support, and mentor emerging Black creators. Black storytellers and illustrators within Canada can submit their story proposals or illustration portfolio through the blackwrite.ca website before November 30.

We caught up with Athena Georgaklis, Head of Development at Nelvana, Natalia Williams, Director of Internal Communications at Corus Entertainment, and Naseem Hrab, Associate Publisher, Creative at Kids Can Press, to learn more about the initiative.

The idea for the incubator began over a year ago, when Athena and Natalia worked on a panel that highlighted lack of representation in children's content. Athena says that from the panel, they learned that while there were significant improvements in diverse representation, children's content was still far off from achieving actual equity.

According to [preliminary data](#) provided to The Associated Press by the CCBC, which has been tracking statistics on children's book representation since 1985, children's books written about racially diverse characters or subjects grew by only 1% in 2020. Lack of diversity and representation persists in animated kids series, too. According to [research](#) from Ryerson University's Children's Media Lab, white characters continue to make up the bulk of who is shown on screen in animated series aired in Canada.

Athena and Natalia were surprised to learn how slow moving the progress in equitable representation was, because both of them understand how important it is to work toward that equity. Natalia says that in raising a bi-racial son, she sees first hand the lack of content that includes Black characters, and she sees how impactful it is for her young son to engage with content which shows characters he can identify with.

Nelvana previously launched a program for diversity and inclusion, oriented around development. Athena explains that the Black creator program (which is still active today) provides opportunities, but they find that they don't receive as many projects or concepts submissions as they hoped. Athena believes that this may be because the program targets more established creators, with the expectation that they already have experience pitching. That started the idea for the new incubator.

According to Athena and Naseem, breaking into the animation and literature industries can be overwhelming. Many artists have no experience or mentorship when it comes to pitching, which creates a barrier for joining development programs, or working with studios and publishers. They wanted to create a program that would "open the door" to the industries, and amplify underrepresented voices.

Kids Can Press joining the incubator was important, as the publisher wants to diversify the stories they list. According to Naseem, it's important to think about the famous "windows and mirrors" metaphor, as



Promotional banner for Nelvana and Kids Can Press' Black Write Edition talent incubator.

explained by Emily Styles. Styles argued that curriculums in schools should be both windows and mirrors, because students and teachers need to see both others and themselves in the content they engage with. Naseem says Kids Can Press wants the books children read to offer a reflection of the world around them, rather than a narrow view.

The goal of the incubator is to address initial barriers of entry, by inviting Black creators in Canadian with an idea to apply. Black Write will match promising creators with industry professionals from two of Canada's leading children's content companies in order to develop original work. It gives budding creators who may have little-to-no experience the chance to develop their project and make essential industry connections. That way, when they complete the incubator, the creator has the skills and connections to sustain a continuing career.

Natalia explains that they put together a very broad outreach approach for the incubator. It was important to consider how best to reach the right community groups, which meant looking beyond formal avenues. For Black Write, they wanted to reach as many people as possible, so they looked at organizations like the Jamaican Canadian Association to get the word out.

Candidates who are selected for the incubator will be paired with creative advisors in animation production or book publishing to develop and fully realize their work. The goal of the first edition of the incubator is

to develop at least one original concept each for TV and book publishing, as well as to foster community between emerging voices and industry professionals. By fostering these connections, the incubator can support ongoing mentorship that will help lead to long-term professional relationships.

Naseem emphasizes that applicants don't need any formal training or professional experience. For the publishing side of the incubator, an applicant should submit a story on paper. Applicants may have experience submitting to short story contests, or perhaps they've written for a local newspaper, but they should have no experience in traditional publishing.

According to Naseem, what's most important is that the submission shares a strong story or has a strong character. She says that what especially stands out are stories which only that person can tell. Rather than trying to fit into trends, she suggests going for something original and surprising. Aside from that, applicants to both the animation and literature sides of the incubator should demonstrate a willingness to hone and craft their story.

Athena says that submissions to the TV stream should present a clear and concise concept, and should show who the applicant is. Ideas can be presented in whatever format an applicant wants, whether that's a video, a presentation, a storyboard, or written document, anything goes. The team behind Black Write hopes that artists apply, even if they feel intimidated,



or that they don't have what it takes to publish a story or create a series. They emphasize that this is the moment for creators to take a chance on themselves.

Black Write Edition is the first iteration of Nelvana and Kids Can Press' incubator. In the future, the incubator will invite other marginalized and underrepresented voices to apply. Athena explains that even as new waves of the incubator are launched in the future, the existing programs will continue to grow. The participants in Black Write will have ongoing support and mentorship, so that they can continue to grow their careers, even after completing the incubator project.



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Way Singleton and Breana Williams on the Black N' Animated podcast

by **Edward Hartley**

Way Singleton and Breana Williams are the hosts of [Black N' Animated](#), a podcast which spotlights the Black animators working behind-the-scenes of your favorite shows and series. Having just celebrated their 50th episode at the time of our interview, their back catalog is a who's who of Black animation talent and industry insiders, and is well worth a deep-dive. Featuring guests "of all shapes, sizes and shades," *Black N' Animated* celebrates diversity, alongside rigorous analysis and tangible industry advice for animators.

When not presenting the podcast, both hosts ply their trade at Disney Television Animation. We asked Way and Breana about their experience working on major productions at the studio; in particular, the challenges they face in their respective roles as storyboard artist and production coordinator. True to their mission to educate, inform and inspire Black artists pursuing careers in animation, they share their biggest influences, sharpest industry insights, and advice drawn from their own experiences on how to manage your mental health while developing your craft. Listen to their podcast blow and read our interview!

Hi Way & Breana! In your own words, who are you and what do you do in animation?

Way: I am Way Singleton, and I am a Storyboard Artist working in animation, currently storyboarding on *The Ghost and Molly McGee* at Disney Television Animation.

Breana: My name is Breana Williams and I am Production Coordinator at Disney Television Animation on *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder*.

When did you both discover your love for animation?

Way: I grew up obsessed with cartoons. I tried to watch any cartoon that premiered on TV, and I was constantly flipping channels back and forth between Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, Disney Channel, and any other channel that I knew some cartoons would be showing. As the internet era of animation was rising, I would watch shows and shorts on YouTube and Newgrounds.

A lot of these independent online cartoons helped me realize that I could make cartoons myself. I didn't really think of animation as a career path until I started touring colleges in high school.

Breana: It's a super-cliche answer, but my two influences on my love of animation were Disney films and anime. I remember always being super-interested in waiting for my Disney VHS tapes to finish playing. Walt would come on and start talking about the [multiplane camera](#) in *Bambi*. That had me hooked to the screen.

I wanted to be a 'drawer,' as I called it, and stuff like *Sailor Moon* and *Pokemon* didn't look like anything else on TV. I wanted to make things like that. And I carried that love of those Disney films and everything anime with me into high school and deep-dived on how to get into animation as a career.



Congratulations on passing 50 episodes of Black N' Animated! For readers who are unfamiliar, can you describe the podcast?

Way: Black N' Animated is a podcast that strives to educate, inspire, and empower Black creatives seeking careers in animation. Bre and I interview Black creatives with different roles in the animation industry. Not only to give information about the jobs done in this industry, but also to highlight Black creatives working these roles, to help inspire budding animation talent, who might be seeing a lack of people that look like them, working behind-the-scenes.

We also talk about Black animation from a Black perspective, hitting topics like the [Censored Eleven cartoons](#) produced by Warner Bros., or talking about animated content with Black representation like [Static Shock](#) and [The Proud Family](#).

Are there any other contributors you'd like to introduce?

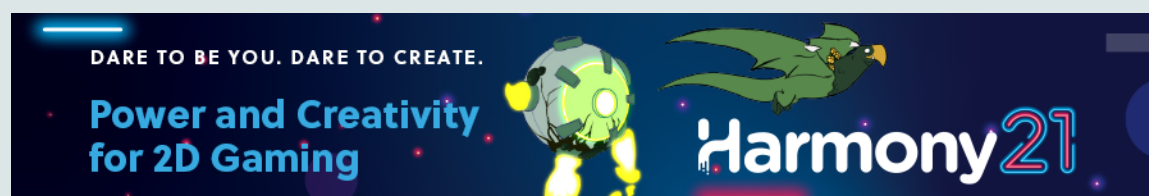
Breana: Of course! BNA wouldn't be where it is today without the help of our BNA team leadership. Our former Director of Programming, Nilah Magruder. Our current Directors of Programming, Myra

Thompkins. Lorraine Grate, our Co-Director of Programming. Neil Wade, Director of Studio Outreach. Lauren Andrews, Union Liason. Our Administrative Assistants, Jacqueline Barnes and Kalley Haddleston. And our-super awesome Podcast Audio Editor and Engineer Tyler Schlossman — he's the audio king.

What kind of guests do you have on the podcast, and how do you choose who to have as a guest?

Way: Our guests are mainly Black Professionals working in Animation. Usually we'll either ask a friend or co-worker if we could sit down with them for the podcast to talk about their craft. We've also had guests recommended to us by listeners. Since we do about 15 episodes a year, we try to diversify our guests in terms of their role in animation, their gender identity, and amount of experience, so that our listeners get a wide range of stories and animation journeys to hear about.

Breana: Our podcast is about showcasing the diversity within the animation industry; that Black people are here and thriving in these roles. It makes sense that we break it down even further and make sure we have that diversity in terms of gender and sex within our guests too. Highlight Black women, men,





Portfolio sample provided by Way Singleton.



Portfolio samples provided by Breana Williams.

nonbinary, lesbian, etc... Black people in animation come in all shapes, sizes and shades.

When you're not programming and presenting Black N' Animated, what does your working week look like?

Way: It looks stressful! Working in animation can be taxing. As a board artist, a lot of my mental energy has to go into creating images out of words, which can take a lot of time and energy but it's fun. I feel like I learn more about myself with every project I do. A lot of the time, it feels like my brain is trying to force a cube shape into a circle hole. It's a lot of problem solving, but I love puzzle games!

Breana: Working in animation is very much a job. It's not hanging out with your friends and shooting hoops with Bugs Bunny on the lot like some documentaries or the internet may make it out to be. Productions have to put a lot of time, care and love into telling the stories that people love to see on air, and it can be a lot sometimes. Especially when you're doing it during a pandemic.

As a Production Coordinator, I'm a people mover and manager: Making sure the artists meet their deadlines, turn in the work, organizing files, scheduling meetings, putting out fires, and problem solving. The life of production is busy, but it's rewarding because you get to help make sure that a beautiful piece of work gets made and gets made right. It's tough, but I'd rather be doing this than anything else.

What can you tell us about your upcoming projects? What can you share with us?

Way: Black N Animated is continuing to provide events where aspiring animation professionals can learn about the different opportunities and roles they can have in animation, as well as network with studios and other animation professionals.

Breana: We're hoping to just keep moving with being that bridge that helps put Black voices in front of the studios. Or just providing resources to Black creatives who may not have access to this stuff on their own. Mixers, online safe creative spaces, portfolio review, etc.

And personally, I'm not sure. I hope to pitch sometime in the future so maybe we'll see what happens there!

What advice do you have for young Black animators entering the industry?

Way: Some good advice I'd like to give: Remember to be kind while you're pursuing your goals. Don't feel entitled to having someone's attention, or a job, or something, because you went through animation school. Or because you are a big animation fan. Be thoughtful and empathetic to others.

Breana: Don't give up. Protect your mental health. I always say this and I can't stress it enough. It's really difficult, and it's not easy. The road may be long. Imposter syndrome is real. But you can do this. Your work and your stories have value and you can succeed. Do your best to protect your mental health and allow yourself to rest and practice self-care on your journey.

Interested in learning more about Black N Animated? Be sure to visit the show's [Carrd](#) for links to the podcast's website, episodes, and social media accounts.



Freebird is a short film about living a beautiful life with Down Syndrome

by Erin Hynes

To mark World Down Syndrome Day, intellectual disability charity [L'Arche Canada](#) partnered with [Tonic DNA](#) and international recording artist [Jordan Hart](#) to create a new short film that challenges misconceptions around Down Syndrome. Written and directed by Joe Bluhm and Michael McDonald, *Freebird* is a coming-of-age story. The film's protagonist learns to navigate the world with a loving mother, an absent father, a classroom bully, and a life-long crush. The film's soundtrack is Jordan Hart's song, *Freedom*, and the film was officially released on March 21st.

We caught up with the creative team behind *Freebird* to learn how the project came together, how they used the film to address stigma about Down Syndrome, the making of the film, and its reception. Read on to hear from musician Jordan Hart, creative director Nicholas Herd, and directors Joe Bluhm and Michael McDonald.



L'Arch Canada wanted a film that reflected the core message of its activism: 'Why does the world assume that a disabled life is not profoundly beautiful?'

This project got started initially, because of the song Freedom. Can you tell us about how you decided to create a music video for the song?

Jordan Hart: I was planning on making a music video for my debut EP, and I felt that it was a great opportunity to shine a light on a community that deserves visibility. So, I called Michael, a friend of mine, who works in disability advocacy at L'Arche Canada. I asked him if he'd be interested in collaborating on a video marking World Down Syndrome Day specifically, because I know that there is so much misconception around Down Syndrome.

How did Tonic DNA connect with L'Arche Canada, and how did this project come to be?

Michael McDonald: Jordan sent me the song, and when I listened, I immediately thought of the stories and oral histories that I've heard from around the world. I absolutely felt the song was a good fit, and so we talked about creating a live action film. I reached out to Nick, who was immediately on board, too. We actually got started with planning the live action shoot, but then the pandemic hit.

We didn't feel it was responsible to do the shoot, given the pandemic. So we shifted to the idea of an animated video. We asked Nick whether he'd ever seen an animated film that featured a Down Syndrome character who looked like him, and he said he hadn't. So we started reaching out to a couple different contacts to see who would connect with the script. Tonic DNA was at the top of our list, so we were overjoyed when they told us they were interested.

Joe Bluhm: Tonic DNA cares about telling meaningful stories, and stories that matter. When we saw the script we were attracted to it right away.



Character designs from Freebird provided by Tonic DNA.

What kind of representations of Down Syndrome has been normal in the media? In what ways did you want to depart from those representations in this film?

Nicholas Herd: I grew up loving animation, but had never before seen representation of Down Syndrome in an animated film. So having the chance to create that representation in *Freebird* was very special. You know, I was an advocate myself when I was just a baby. My mother got involved with the Down Syndrome Association because she noticed that I had to give justification for my own life, from a really young age. There is so much stigma around Down Syndrome.

One thing that was particularly important to me was that we show lots of the character's lives, instead of just a glimpse. And I wanted the story to be for all people who can see themselves in it. For example, another theme of the story is being an advocate and caretaker for your parents. The film is about how everyone is free to be who they are.

Michael McDonald: Often depictions of Down Syndrome have a negative connotation, like pity and fear. For example, after discovering a baby has Down Syndrome, the following scene in a movie or show will be sad. We wanted to make sure we departed from that. We also put thought into the broader allegory of the story. The father in the film represents an ableist view of the world, and the mother represents the opposite, she celebrates neurodivergent minds. We felt this juxtaposition was important.

Could you describe the style of the animation you used for this film?

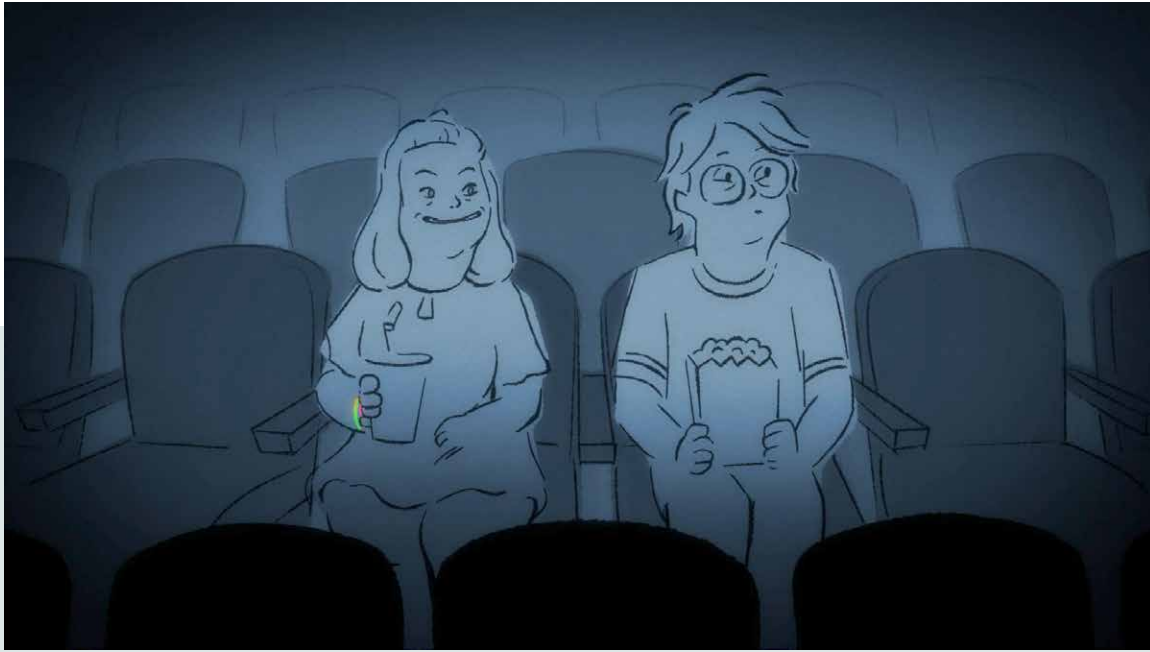
Joe Bluhm: We used a limited colour palette for the film, as well as line art. We didn't intend for the line art to be perfect, because we felt that would bring movement and life to the piece. We kept backgrounds neutral, so that the focus would be on the characters and the story. We also purposefully left much of the animation loose, so that viewers could project themselves into it. The most thought definitely went into character design, and Nick was super helpful in that department.

Nicholas Herd: Yes, I can see myself in the character design, which was important, because the character is meant to represent a real person who has Down Syndrome. The first time you see the character, you're meant to know he has Down Syndrome.

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Still image from Freebird, from L'Arche Canada, Tonic DNA and Jordan Hart

What has reception for the film been like so far?

Jordan Hart: The reception has been amazing. We've noticed many parents commenting on the video that watching it made them feel relief, love, and cognizant of what their children are capable of. It's so special to see how many people have been impacted by the film.

Michael McDonald: You really can't say to a person in 4 minutes what this film manages to communicate. I think that's what the magic of a song, animation, and storytelling together do. It's been amazing to see all the shares on social media, and comments from parents from all over the world.

Is there anything more you would like to share about the process of making this film?

Nicholas Herd: Be sure to watch to the end of the video, because we highlight real people with Down Syndrome from around the world, and say what they've been free to accomplish in life. I'd also just like to say that this story isn't just for people who have Down Syndrome, it's for anyone who can see themselves in this story.

Joe Bluhm: Tonic DNA, and myself, are so grateful to have been able to work on a story like this. Every single person on our team felt connected to this project, it was a very emotional process. It's truly fulfilling to work on a story with so much meaning behind it.

Michael McDonald: With the history of disability storytelling, it's a big deal that we had Nick on the team to shape the story. We couldn't have done this story justice without him.



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Rise Up Animation on BIPOC artist mentorship

by **Erin Hynes**

The murder of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer, caught on camera, was one of many defining moments for the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. Communities across America and around the world gathered to protest against police brutality and to demand better from other powerful institutions, including the entertainment industry. Facing increased public scrutiny, [media companies responded](#) to criticism of underrepresentation and racial disparities, both on-screen and behind-the-scenes. This was far from the first time the entertainment industry was called to be more accountable to BIPOC creators and viewers; as previous movements, such as [#OscarsSoWhite](#), revealed ongoing underrepresentation.

A group of friends, all animation industry professionals, were grappling with what they themselves could do to support the BLM movement in the midst of the global pandemic. “We were all donating, reaching out to friends, and taking time to educate ourselves about racism and inequality,” says Trent Correy, director and animator at Walt Disney Animation Studios. “But, we realized that the best work we could do would be within our own community.”

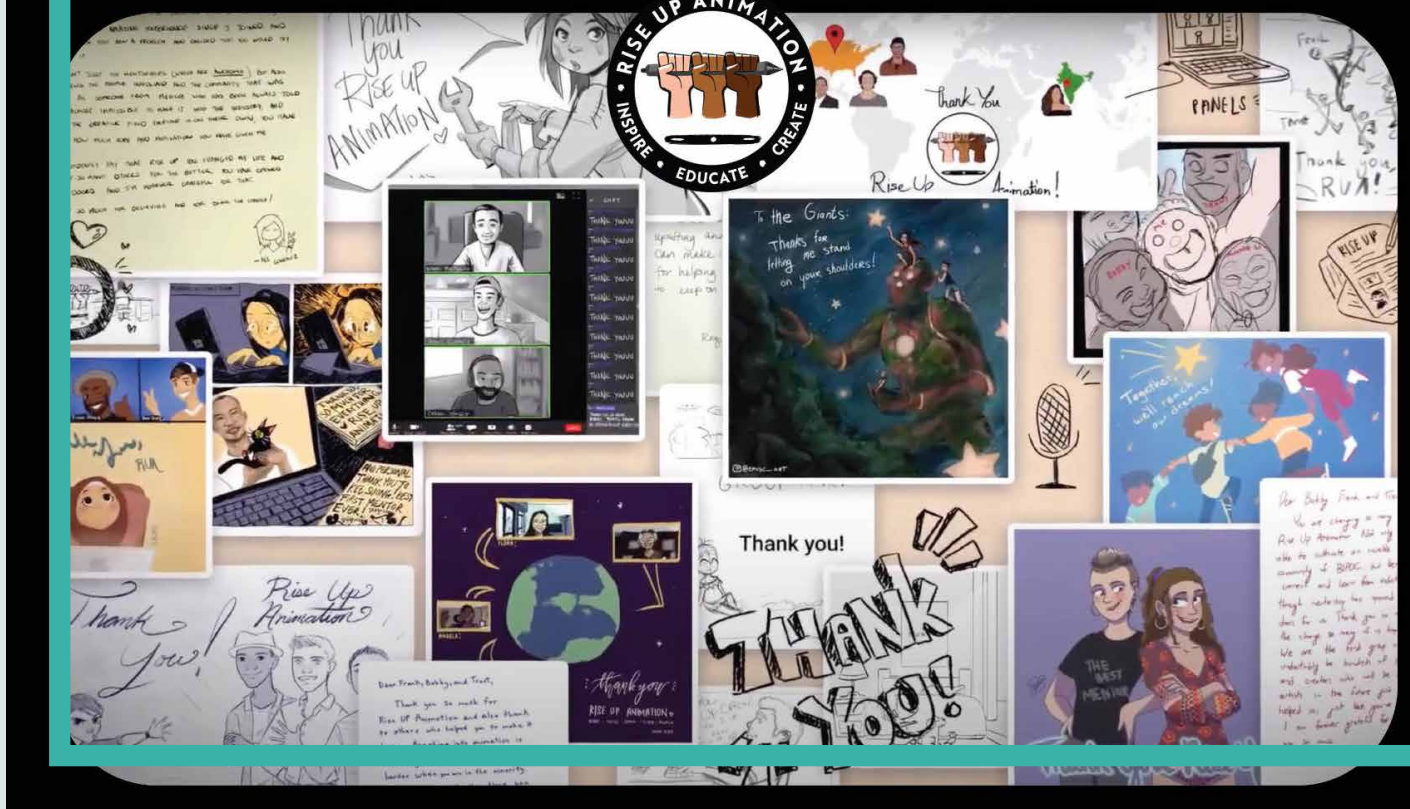
Trent Correy, Frank Abney, Bobby Pontillas, and Monica Lago-Kaytis began to brainstorm ideas. “We wanted to think of a way that we could really support BIPOC talent who are trying to break into the industry,” says Bobby Pontillas, director, character designer, and animator. The four friends, who came to know each other by crossing paths in the industry over the years, understood how difficult it can be to get your first industry gig.

“The animation industry has a legacy of mentorship, going back to the early days of Disney,” says Trent. “All of us have benefited from mentorship in our animation careers. Mentorship has gotten us in, but it’s also helped us grow as artists.” Trent explains that while there are plenty of animation schools, pricing presents a barrier of access. “We wanted to find a way to provide mentorship opportunities that were accessible,” he says.

The group felt that mentorship could help address the industry’s diversity problem. The presence and visibility of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) within the professional workforce is key to increasing on-screen representation. With BIPOC talent behind the scenes, TV shows and films can do a better job of creating narratives that reflect the lived experiences of underrepresented viewers.

BIPOC artists have long faced systemic barriers in pursuing careers in animation. A lack of mentorship opportunities is just one of those barriers. In June 2020, the organization Black ‘N Animated shared an [open letter](#), from the US Black Animation community to the industry itself. In it, they explained the depth of the problem. They wrote:

“The Black animation community finds itself fighting for our humanity at the same time that we fight for the right to exist in our chosen profession. Audiences can plainly see this struggle in the absence of developed Black human characters in cartoons and the absence of Black professionals named in the credits of these productions. Black people have been systematically suppressed in all levels of the industry: in education, in hiring, and in promotions for leadership positions.”



By addressing accessibility to education through mentorship, Trent, Frank, Bobby, and Monica felt that they could help relieve one of the systemic barriers that BIPOC artists face. It was just a matter of how they would do it.

“That’s when we realized that we were in a unique moment. Because of the pandemic, everything was being conducted online. This meant we could easily connect with young artists around the country, and the world. And the best thing we could offer them was our mentorship,” says Monica Lago-Kaytis, producer and CEO of Frogbot Films. “We decided to put together a program that would offer free virtual portfolio reviews to BIPOC talent.” And that’s how Rise Up Animation (RUA) was born.

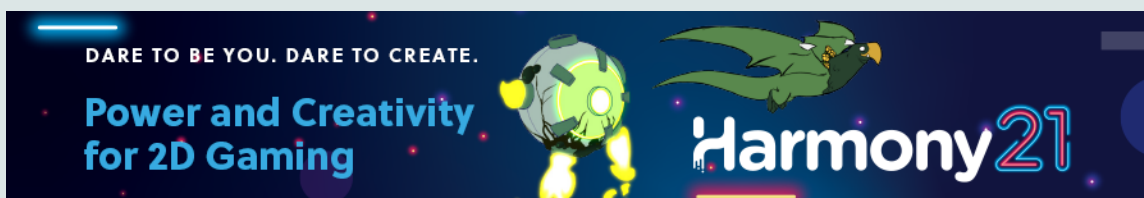
The four founders put out a call to their friends and colleagues across the industry, and within a week, they had 300 volunteers who’d agreed to join the initiative. Industry professionals from studios, including Pixar, Disney, Dreamworks, Netflix, Nickelodeon, Sony, Cartoon Network, came forward to offer mentorship, participate in panels, and volunteer their time. They sketched a logo, created social media accounts, and started posting.

Now, less than a year later, RUA is a registered non-profit organization with over 500 active mentors and a community of over [33,000 followers on](#)

[Instagram](#). The organization focuses on providing free one-on-one feedback sessions. Applicants simply fill out a form in which they indicate their chosen discipline and personal details. The only qualifications are that they are over the age of 18 (or have parental guidance), and identify as BIPOC. They don’t need to have prior education or experience in animation. RUA then matches the applicant with a mentor. “From there, the mentorship experience is very individual,” says Bobby. The mentee can choose to connect with their mentor in whatever way is comfortable for them. That might be by email, phone, or video call. They spend anywhere from 30 minutes to one hour with their mentor. During the session they might look at the mentee’s artwork, resume or they might just share stories. It’s up to the mentee to decide what they’d like to gain from the session.

Following the session, the mentor can choose to continue mentoring that mentee and the mentee is free to sign up for another feedback session 60 days later. These virtual feedback sessions give mentees around the world a glimpse into the animation industry that they wouldn’t be able to access without travelling to Hollywood.

“Unfortunately, most of the mentors we have available at RUA aren’t BIPOC. This actually reinforces how important mentorship for BIPOC talent is. The fact that most of our mentors are white demonstrates



the need for diversity and inclusion in the industry,” says Monica. That’s where panels come in. Aside from feedback sessions, RUA provides weekly panels that highlight BIPOC animation professionals and provide resources and tips.

“The panels are about showing up-and-coming BIPOC talent that there are people who look like you in the field,” says Trent. Seeing diverse representation is incredibly important when working toward equity in any field. A [recent](#) working paper published in the The National Bureau of Economic Research shows that having just one Black teacher not only lowers high school dropout rates for Black students but also increases their likeliness to enroll in college. Similarly, by hosting panels led by BIPOC artists, RUA provides their mentees assurance that they do belong in the animation industry.

One of those mentees is [Kylie Gay](#). She attended the Savannah College of Art and Design, where she earned a major in animation. Kylie had graduated from school and started applying for jobs, but kept receiving rejection letters. She signed up for every career and animation webinar she could find, but says, “You can only get so much out of a webinar. They can tell you what to put in your portfolio, but really you need someone to take a look and help you understand why what you’ve got isn’t working.”

Because there’s barely any animation presence in Florida, where Kylie lives, it felt to her as though the animation industry was worlds away. “I started to feel as though a career in animation wasn’t in the cards for me, and I’d begun to think about what my other career options might be.”

That’s when she discovered RUA. “I found RUA within an hour of their first Instagram post,” she says. She attended the panels, got connected with her mentor, and had her first feedback session. Kylie explains that the mentorship was incredibly helpful, but that she also found strength in the community. At the time Kylie had no one to talk to about her career frustrations because all of her friends had found jobs.

The RUA community offered a safe space for support. She joined the RUA Discord channel where she was able to connect with other BIPOC artists who could relate to her frustrations. They shared resources, reviewed each other’s art, and had honest discussions about things like mental health. “This support helped me to muster up the confidence to keep at it, to keep submitting my work,” Kylie says.

RUA is meaningful for the mentors as well. “As mentors, we understand the frustration of searching for a job. We know how tough it is to break into the animation industry, especially for BIPOC artists,” says Bobby. So talking with mentees who are sometimes on the brink of giving up can be emotional. Bobby explains that as mentors they can provide practical guidance, but emotional support as well. “It’s our job to encourage mentees not to give up,” he says.

Monica explains that RUA wishes they could guarantee every mentee a job. Mentors will always do their best to get portfolios in front of the right people, “but we can’t promise jobs,” she says. “What we can promise is to give the support and confidence that mentees need to keep applying.”

For Kylie, the big break came without an application. In the late fall, Disney Television Animation reached out directly to Kylie — a member of their art department had seen her work on Instagram. Within a month, she had an official job offer. “I had to read it several times just to absorb that the offer was real,” Kylie laughs. Now, a few months later, she says the job is going well. Currently, she’s a storyboard revisionist, but in the future she has dreams of making her own movie.

When Kylie landed her job, the news spread across RUA’s channels. Trent says that when he heard about it, it felt like a victory. Not just for Kylie, but for the whole RUA community. And for Trent, Frank, Bobby, and Monica, the founders of RUA, victories like Kylie’s represent the ethos of their organization. “The name ‘Rise Up Animation’ was about capturing this idea of raising BIPOC up,” Bobby explains. “We want to give BIPOC artists tools, knowledge, and community. We want them to see themselves represented in the animation. And we want to raise them up to be an active part of this industry.”

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Santiago of the Seas'

Niki López on diversity in preschool animation

by Philip Mak

Conversations around representation in media have brought marginalized communities into the mainstream, with broadcasters and streamers publicly touting their respective diversity and inclusivity initiatives. While children's entertainment is still experiencing growing pains, Nickelodeon's *Santiago of the Seas* is charting a new course in preschool content.

Santiago of the Seas is created and co-executive produced by Niki López (*Fairly Odd Parents*, *Glitch Techs*), a Puerto Rican-born artist. Premiered in October 2020, it follows the eponymous 8-year-old, kind-hearted pirate Santiago "Santi" Montes and his best mates as they go on adventures, search for treasure and keep their home safe from villains like the nefarious Bonnie Bones. For López, it embodies an ongoing journey towards representing her language and culture, while teaching a new generation the power of kindness and empathy.

The series sailed onto screens at a pivotal time, with children consuming more media than ever due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, one [ParentsTogether study](#) found that 48% of parents report their children are spending six hours per day online — a 500% increase from pre-pandemic levels. Prior to this, kids up to 8 years old [averaged an hour and 40 minutes a day](#), while research by Nielson puts that number closer to 3.9 hours per day among 2 to 11 year olds.

If children are at home watching more content, it should positively reflect what their families look and sound like. Unfortunately, American animated cartoons remain largely white. [One sample of 1,500 characters](#) found that 11.6 percent were of Asian heritage, 5.6 percent were black and 1.4 percent were Latino.

A lack of representation in media can lead to negative psychological outcomes for those with identities that are not shown or are depicted negatively, according to Jordan Levinson, writing for UCLA's [Psychology in Action](#). For children, this may make them feel invisible or unimportant — leading to [poor self-esteem](#) and other serious effects. By contrast, popular characters who share their identities can lead to higher self-esteem.



Character design of Santiago Montes, provided by Nickelodeon.



[An interview with Niki López, hosted by ASIFA Hollywood.](#)



Setting sail

Beneath the altruistic characters and action-packed adventures, the true treasure of *Santiago of the Seas* is how the animated series pays homage to López's heritage through infusions of spoken Spanish and Latino-Caribbean culture. She has described the show as a "love letter to Puerto Rico and an ode to the magical power of empathy within an inclusive community."

López tells us, "The idea for *Santiago of the Seas* really originated out of homesickness for my community — the food, the music, the environment. I was having an informational with Mary Harrington, who I call the fairy godmother of Nickelodeon, and she asked me what was important to me when I was little and I told her about my childhood and some of the mythology and history within Puerto Rico. When I started to talk about a Robin Hood of the high seas she was like, 'Ooo, I feel like there's something there. You should chase that.'"

So, she did just that. López took a sabbatical and went back to Puerto Rico on a treasure hunt of inspiration. While there, she visited two caves where this legendary pirate used to hide his booty — all the while imagining what her show's animated world would look like and how it could translate to a young audience, both visually and linguistically.

"I put myself in that mindset of what this world could be and how it could work in a preschool setting, while elevating the representation of Latino-Caribbean communities as well as highlighting the importance of bilingualism and how crucial it is to champion these moral values of empathy and kindness. It was just a big old melting pot that I put all the things that mattered to me and it exploded into the *Santiago of the Seas* pitch," says López.

A brief stint in the advertising world helped López refine her pitching skills, ultimately getting the show greenlit. As a Latina series creator, López herself represents how the tide is changing — part of a rising cohort of diverse faces in the animation industry. She had been hired by a woman of colour to work on her first production at Nickelodeon, who saw the value in having different perspectives.

"I've been very lucky to be surrounded by allies at Nickelodeon who are always looking to find ways to elevate my voice and truly honour my vision, and I hope I can do the same to those within the crew and outside even outside the studio. If there's any way that I can give people advice or mentor them, my doors are always open," says López.



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A sea change

Describing her role as “the keeper of the lore,” writers now pitch their ideas to López and she advises whether they work in the world of *Santiago of the Seas*. Sometimes they are too dark for the demographic, but the process is always collaboration. López readily admits that stepping into this leadership has come with its challenges, however working closely with her talented, kind crew on fulfilling her vision has been a humbling experience.

She explains, “I think it’s been cool to let go a bit and be pleasantly surprised as to how elevated the show has become by trusting my crew. I definitely went through the rite of passage of, ‘Am I doing this right? Am I a good leader?’ The impostor syndrome played its tricks on my head every so often, but time conditions you to the experience and I’ve been lucky to have certain people in my crew who have been extremely supportive, as well as Eryk Casemiro (Senior Vice President, Nickelodeon Preschool) and Ramsey Naito (President, Nickelodeon Animation).”

Support from both López’s crew and studio executives have meant clear sailing for *Santiago of the Seas*. Across both ratings and reactions from audiences, the positive results have spoken for themselves — in both English and Spanish. For López, this bilingual inclusivity was both paramount and personal.

“We have research and real time instances of how little kids are immediately affected by the show — kids that might come from Spanish-speaking

households and they’ve been hesitant to speak their language. They are seeing a hero that looks like them and represents their community and is speaking in Spanish, so they feel confident to embrace their culture and language. Having that effect is so cool; you’re giving them the confidence they need to realize it’s okay to be you and to be proud of where you come from,” says López.

She continues, “There’s no need to hide any of that and I wish I would have seen more of that when I was young because I remember watching American television productions and I never saw a character that reflected me or where I came from or was empowering in the way of them speaking Spanish. I was like, ‘Oh, okay. Well, maybe English is the way to go.’ I’m trying to pay it forward and change the game so little kids don’t have to go through that journey of self-doubt like I experienced about speaking my language and embracing my culture.”

Having recently received a second season order, López’s bilingual, multicultural message has clearly resonated. Looking ahead, she hopes to explore the *Santiago of the Seas* universe further through a film or even a spin-off series for Bonnie. While those possibilities have yet to be discovered, more empathetic children can now be found across the world — no pirate’s map required.



Character designs in *Santiago of the Seas*, provided by Nickelodeon.



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How Black fans and creators are redefining anime

by **Edward Hartley**

There were always Black fans who identified with anime, including in the 1980s, when in-the-know Americans would meet up to buy and discuss Japanese animated titles such as *Akira* and harder-to-find bootleg OVAs. The movement was rooted in a grassroots scene that relied on word-of-mouth and physical spaces like video shops to sustain itself. Comparisons can be made to the mixtape culture of early hip-hop that was developing contemporaneously. This should come as no surprise, given how hip-hop so often serves as, to quote Nerds of Color writer Kendall Bazemore, “the vehicle for the Japanese understanding of American Blackness.”

Fast-forward to 2020, and the two worlds are more entwined than ever. Black artists are increasingly looking to anime for inspiration and collaboration, as BIPOC representation has become increasingly important to audiences and makers alike. A new wave of Black creatives are now in the genre, making space for diverse crews and characters. We spoke to some of these artists about their perspective on diversity in the industry today, and the influence Black creators are having on anime.

Through her writing on Black anime characters, *But Why Tho?* Podcast host LaNeysha Campbell provides Black audiences with valued resources for finding representation in the genre. Characters such as *Berserk*'s Casca and Atsuko Jackson of *Michiko to Hatchin*, she says, make Black women such as herself feel seen.

“As a Black woman, I feel like our representation in anime has and continues to improve over the years. It is not perfect by far, but we are there, and it is getting better. While there are characters that I can claim as Black, that doesn't mean the anime acknowledges them as Black. But now I feel like we have a little more representation of characters confirmed or clearly identified as Black. It is important to me because, as a long-time fan of anime, I can't help but want to see a character that looks like me. In general, people want to see themselves reflected and

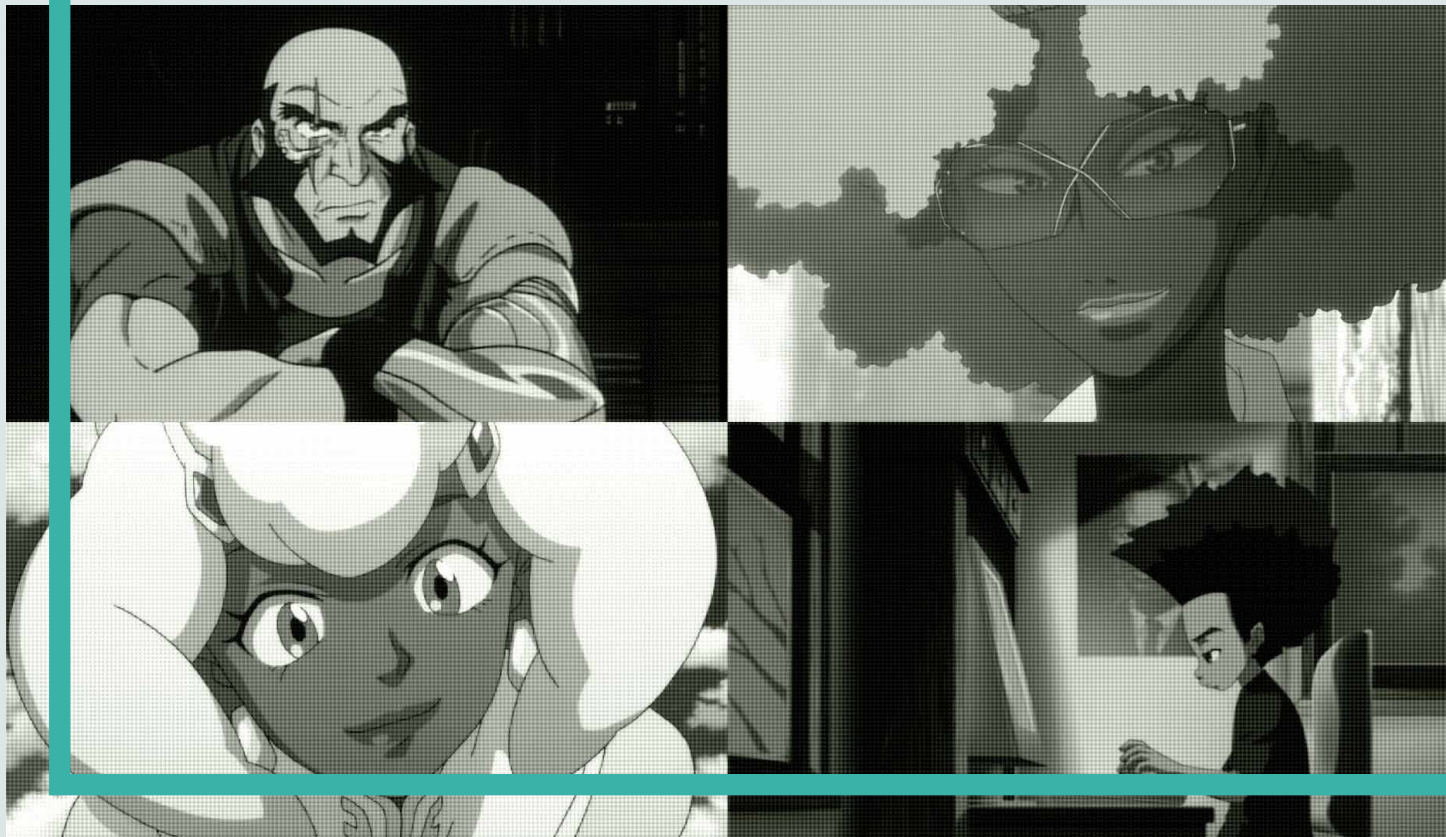
represented in the mediums they love, respectfully. When our characters are made with that intention instead of stereotypical or racist caricatures, then it is a fulfilling thing to see.”

The feeling is shared by Joshua Toussaint-Strauss, a video producer in the U.K. whose work for The Guardian charted black representation in the genre. “I guess I don't really expect to see myself represented in anime, because the shows I've watched over the years have so rarely included Black characters. So when I do see a Black character I'm instantly drawn to them. This might be partly why I grew to love *Naruto* so much, because it has quite a few respectfully drawn black and brown characters. Representation is incredibly important to me, but with anime, it's complicated by the fact that I have such low expectations for Black representation. I don't expect it, and I try to ignore the bad examples, because I don't want it to affect my enjoyment of the genre. But I think it has, to a certain degree.”



[Joshua Toussaint-Strauss's video for The Guardian, Anime gets blackness wrong, here's how fans are fixing it.](#)

Joshua and LaNeysha can point to examples that, unfortunately, show a negative side to anime's treatment of blackness. Characters such as Mr. Popo in



Dragonball Z or Sister Krone in *The Promised Neverland* are regrettable examples where the genre has resorted to stereotypes and caricatures that, to Joshua, “evoke the racist tropes of the 40s and 50s.”

“The worst examples of Black representation in anime are characters who are drawn with exaggerated features. This kind of imagery is incredibly hurtful for Black people. It’s certainly not what a fan wants to see when watching their favourite show” he explains.

It is on today’s animators, writers and industry leaders to avoid making the same mistakes. Studio Grackle founder Spencer Wan, puts diversity at the fore of his studio’s philosophy. “Unless you make an effort to include, you’ll unintentionally exclude. That’s something I think many people in our industry could still take to heart,” says Spencer, who is now heading his own studio. “But I do think it’s getting better. I see more of a push for diversity than I ever have, especially from peers around my age, and we’ll continue to push. I definitely intend to.”

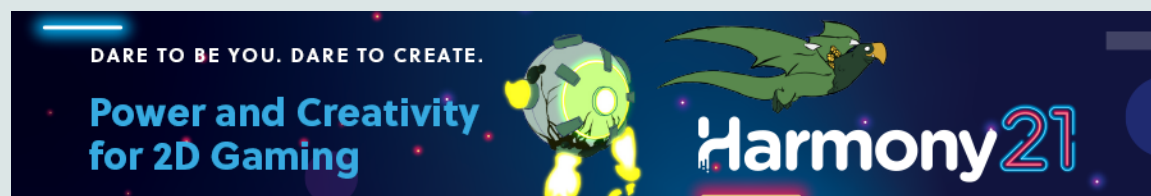
This push for diversity in anime could lead to better representation for its PoC audiences. “I would like to see a more proper and respectful illustration of People of Color in anime” adds LaNeysha. “I want to see Black features used on characters respectfully and not drawn as racist caricatures to make Black characters

the butt of jokes. I’d like to see more real effort from illustrators when drawing, animating, and coloring various skin tones and shades.”

She continues, “I think anime is making some great progress when it comes to diversity and inclusion. The fact that there are Black anime creators, more Black voice actors, and even a Black-owned anime studio in Japan like D’ART Shtajio is amazing! Additionally, western studios like Powerhouse Animation are doing great things to improve diversity in anime as well. All of this helps.”

D’ART Shtajio, a Black-owned business, is the first American animation studio in Japan, founded by twin brothers Arthell and Darnell Isom. Having recently appeared in the music video for Jay Z and Pharrell’s *Entrepreneur*, and after being featured in a leading lifestyle magazine, Arthell set some of his schedule aside to share his experiences. He was more than happy to talk about making it *Big In Japan* as a person of colour and an American.

As well as his own journey getting into the Japanese industry, Arthell explained the relationship between Black identity and anime, in a conversation that covered everything from Kung-Fu movies to Caravaggio. I ask him how it feels to be representing Black animators in a traditionally Japanese industry:



"There are new eyes on us. I feel a bit more pressure. We have to be more conscious of these things. Initially, we didn't think too much about it. 'Okay, we're American, and we're Black' or whatever. We were just making content and that was enough for us. But as we've gone forward, things like that change. People expect more things from you, and that affects the content that you make. I think initially we just wanted to fit into anime! But now we're trying to represent both things. We have to think about our own cultures, too, and make sure that representation is in there."

Diversity is benefitting from increased demand in western entertainment, and Arthell describes the Japanese landscape as being open to, but somewhat apart from that. Diversity and differentiation is more inherent in Japan, he believes, with a broader range of characters, themes and storyline than is found western or North-American animation.

"They're not closed-minded here. They're open to viewing anything really, particularly looking at the landscape of anime in Japan in general, there is just so much differentiation. The different characters featured, the different storylines they tell. So I feel like now, how diversity is being pushed in entertainment in general in the West, Japan is very open to that. They did *Afro-Samurai* and it wasn't a big deal for them. It's a story about an African-American *Samurai* and no-one was against it. There was actually a *Samurai* from Africa in Japan, I think he worked under Emperor Nobunaga. It's a really interesting story."



Trailer for Netflix's *Yasuke*, created by LeSean Thomas

Having watched Tom Cruise play an American who earned the title of *The Last Samurai*, it was, perhaps, unsurprising to find out that fiction had overlooked reality. In truth, the honor had belonged to Yasuke, whose story at the time of this interview had been green-lit for its own anime series on Netflix. He was an African man who travelled to 16th Century Japan with Portuguese missionaries, becoming close to *Daimyō* Oda Nobunaga and eventually becoming his trusted *Samurai* retainer. Yasuke's story neatly foreshadows the cultural intersections, and sometimes mutual obsession, that would come to be between Black and Japanese culture. Netflix's production of *Yasuke* will be a harmonious meeting of the two worlds. The lead will be played by rising star Lakeith Stanfield (*Sorry To Bother You*, *Uncut Gems*) and the show is produced by LeSean Thomas, himself an important figure when it comes to the influence Black fans and creators have had on anime.

Arthell's own origin story is also fascinating. He opens up a little about what life was like and traces the roots of his creativity back to childhood:

"So I grew up in Patterson, New Jersey. My family was poor and I grew up like any other kid in an urban environment. But one of our escapes was drawing. Both my brother and I would draw from as early as I could remember. It was a way to get away, because we didn't have toys and things but we always had paper, not always sketchbooks, but like newspapers, you could draw on anything. So that was always fun. The cartoons I would've grown up with at the time would be the normal Looney Tunes and Warner Brothers, and so like everyone else in the West I really liked all that, and Disney and stuff. I was drawn to animation in general, and comic books. I was just into art and I wanted to get more into that world. The entertainment world I guess. The thing that switched me over to anime... I think if I hadn't watched *Ghost In The Shell*, I'd probably be in the western industry right now."

Arthell has made no secret of the influence that the 1995 cult-classic had on him, a film he says he watched almost every day on VHS during his college years. *Ghost In The Shell*, with its dystopian atmospheres and cyberpunk background art, compelled him to look into who had created it, and how. Realising that the artist behind it was also the art director on other favorite anime titles, such as *Last Exile* and *Ninja Scroll*, Arthell set out on a quest to meet him. He sent letters, then emails, and eventually turned up in Japan in person to receive mentorship from Hiromasa Ogura, an experience he says was highly influential in his development:

"It was a great experience, I got to work with him and learn so much. He didn't care that I was Black, or American or anything like that. Of course it was a talking point. He's not blind! But it was never like, 'you can't be here.' He was super excited to work with me and he was interested that this American had come all the way to work with him in Japan. He couldn't speak English but he wanted to try to figure out how to make it possible to learn. I could speak Japanese but they still had the patience to speak slowly to make sure I could learn properly. It was a great experience. You should have a realistic idea of your heroes. They're not deities. I never expected more from Ogura-san than just for him to be a great artist who was doing great things. I just wanted to learn that and I gained a great friend from that. Not only did I learn to paint but I met my hero and gained a friend."

There are parallels between Arthell's own journey of mentorship by Hiromasa Ogura and the journey of a classic anime protagonist. In many ways he is the



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main character, voyaging to a distant land to learn a rare skill from the elusive master *Ogura-san*. It was during this mentorship that Arthell 'studied the blade', absorbing lessons and techniques in light, form and stroke to become an accomplished background artist.

"One of *Ogura-san's* major focuses is; he really feels like light and shadow is really important, so he really pushes his darks. Also, his colour palette is quite muted, he doesn't use bright colours where everything is pink and purple. That was one of the things that helped me gravitate towards *Ogura-san* because it was more realistic. One of my other favorite artists is Caravaggio. His whole movement was tenebrism which was also about light and shadow. I felt that there was a really huge parallel between their approach to art. For me, I think I try to do that as well. Having really strong darks, and really paying attention to how light affects things in the artwork. That's something that *Ogura-san* always impressed upon us, that light is really important, what does the light do?"

As Arthell was starting his journey in 1990s America, the anime landscape looked vastly different to how it does today in 2020. It was very much underground, as the internet was barely a thing. He explains; "at that time there was no anime on TV, so you would have to kind of be in the know about it already, to know to go and rent it from the video shops — and not all the video shops had anime to watch." Fans and followers of the culture would venture to Chinatown, or to niche videocades to find coveted Japanese anime videos among the pirated rap albums, bling and bootleg designer goods.

"There's always been these subcultural movements that happen between anime and black culture that are interesting. Kind of the same with Hip-Hop early on when that was all underground. In the black culture we had Kung-Fu movies, and we had anime, and it was all this underground thing. The black culture was really pushing that. I had a talk with a few of my friends and we were talking about why anime and Kung-Fu resonated with black people, and we came up with the idea that there's usually an underdog. Most have a theme that there's a weaker character who becomes stronger and then excels.."

He continues: "With black culture in general, from our history and where we came from – sometimes without a sense of culture or belonging – we are always trying to search for something, and do better, and do greater things. So I think we identify with the characters in anime and gravitate towards it. It's an escape. People find their favorite characters, see things through their eyes and see a better future. I think that's why anime resonates with our culture so much."

This uniquely black form of *bildungsroman*, a familiar underdog character overcoming disadvantages in order to ultimately succeed, may hold the key to the special appeal anime has to its Black fans. A collective compassion for underdog characters who overcome odds and prove themselves to be formidable, like the flamboyant Mugen in *Samurai Champloo*, condemned to a tough life by being born in exile — a character clearly drawn as being Black.

Joshua Toussaint-Strauss elaborates: "I think there's quite a few reasons anime resonates with Black audiences. Looking at narrative themes, there's the escapism, themes of loyalty, comradery and persecution, and an abundance of non-white heroes. I would agree that there are a lot of parallels with black people's affections for Kung-Fu films which had similar themes."

LaNeysa Campbell agrees; "I think the appeal comes from seeing characters that might face discrimination, persecution, or challenges that have to work hard to overcome them. I am a sucker for characters that don't give up in the face of adversity, or an underdog that people doubt achieving the impossible, because I see myself in characters like that."

This appeal has led to a genuine courtship between anime and the Black community. Fan networks have exploded around anime cosplay, and Hip-Hop artists continue to give their *co-sign* to the genre. Back in March of this 2020, a viral video showed popular rapper Lil Uzi Vert in an Audi R8 that was customised all-over with vibrant manga print. The *XO Tour Lif3* hitmaker makes no secret of his love for anime, citing it often in lyrics and making it a big part of his artistic identity. This crossover between audiences is pushing the worlds of anime and rap music into a healthy period of symbiosis. D'Art Shtajio's recent video for The Weeknd's *Snowchild*, led by Arthell, is the latest example of this bearing fruit.



[Music video for Snowchild by The Weeknd, animated by D'ART Shtajio.](#)

"They approached us, presented the song and said that essentially this was what they wanted to create. It just went from there, we were just super excited to work with them. He's a massive artist and he has amazing ideas. We were trying to figure out how to get his ideas into it. The interesting thing was, of course The Weeknd is exploring lots of visual avenues with animation and his recent videos and stuff, but we were also concerned about his fans. We didn't know if all of his fans were anime fans, because the image is so different. We wanted to make sure that the thing that we created was something that his fans would like as well, and not be alienated by it."



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Appealing to the star's lifelong fans, and bringing traditional anime into The Weeknd's musical world, known for being dark and brooding, presented unique challenges that the D'Art Shtajio team embraced.


"We had to do our research and try to figure out what the body of his work looks like, and how it feels, and yes, his work is often very dark. Trying to get that same feeling with the anime, which is something I really liked about working with XO [Weeknd's label]. One of our tenets here at D'Art is to make anime accessible to everyone, we really do feel like it's a genre and anything can be done within it."

"In a way, it feels very validating to know that some of these celebrities and artists grew up loving anime just like I did" says LaNeysha, with words that will resonate with many of her generation of anime fans. "Whenever I hear an anime reference in a song or see streetwear influenced by an anime, I love it. While I think the popularity of anime has always been there, more people know about it now, and now they are sharing how it influenced them through their own crafts."

"It's one of the greatest, most sophisticated forms of storytelling in the modern age," adds Joshua, "so I think it's fantastic that anime is becoming more acknowledged as a serious genre in arts and entertainment, worldwide, and I love to see it referenced in popular culture."

This period of cultural crossover has Arthell feeling optimistic. "For us at D'ART Shtajio, we're excited about it and we really like it. Particularly with who we are, of course we love hip-hop, as well as everything pop-culture. For us, anime is a medium and I think it should be in all avenues of entertainment."





How streaming video changed adult animation

by Philip Mak

Adult animated comedies have dominated the North American primetime and late-night time slots for the last three decades, driven largely by traditional broadcasters like Fox, Adult Swim and Comedy Central. With the arrival of SVODS in the 2010s, the tone and tune of toons began to shift — case in point: the multifaceted, unflinchingly raw portrayals of mental health and addiction on Netflix’s *BoJack Horseman*.

Having premiered in 2014, *BoJack Horseman* galloped so a new cohort of non-comedic, niche adult animated productions could run — series that are increasingly putting the “stream” into the mainstream zeitgeist, from musical-inspired shows like *Central Park* to the horror-action of *Castlevania* to the uniquely insightful and pan-dimensional podcasting of *Midnight Gospel*.

In each show, animation is integral to the storytelling; *BoJack Horseman* heart-wrenchingly captures internal processes from BoJack’s mother losing her memories to Alzheimer’s disease to the titular character’s opioid-fuelled descent into psychosis. Not only does the medium lend itself to depicting tragic situations, but softens them while adding a sense of suspended disbelief. Similarly, this allows for pubescent teenagers on *Big Mouth* to suddenly burst into song with their hormone monsters or for horrifically bloody prehistoric violence on Genndy Tartakovsky’s *Primal*.



Trailer for the final season of *BoJack Horseman*, produced by Tornante Television, Boxer vs. Raptor and ShadowMachine.

It is a fact that streamers are driving the adult animation boom, comedic or otherwise. Research by industry expert John Evershed of High Concentrate LLC, who produced a [widely circulated white paper](#) on the topic, shows that of the 103 upcoming original

animated series, 25 have been ordered by Netflix and a further 17 by HBO Max. The latter SVOD is not only producing content in-house but also purchasing existing IPs, having famously bought the streaming rights to *South Park* for a reported \$500 million.

While comedy does well with the ever-elusive 18 to 34 demographic domestically, Evershed notes that it is very culturally-specific and can be hard to translate for global audiences. He says, “A show like *Rick and Morty* will work in English-speaking markets, but it’s a fairly specific style of comedy that doesn’t translate that well into a lot of other markets, whereas when you start to get into genre stuff and that’ll really start to fly internationally.”

Amongst comedies, those with a sci-fi slant seem to be especially trendy at the moment — riding an inter-dimensional, inter-generational interest begun by *Rick and Morty*. Hulu’s *Solar Opposites* became the streamer’s most-watched original comedy premiere, while CBS has blasted off with *Star Trek: Lower Decks* and Fox has the upcoming series *X-Files: Albuquerque*. Reboots are also in high demand, with a new class of Clone High coming to HBO Max, while revivals of *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *Run & Stimp* and a *Daria* spinoff are also in the works.



Trailer for the fourth season of Big Mouth, produced by Danger Goldberg Productions, Good at Bizness, Inc., Fathouse Industries and Titmouse, Inc.

As *Big Mouth* creator Andrew Goldberg points out in [Los Angeles Times](#), streaming has changed not only the type of animation people consume, but also how they consume it — specifically, now they can binge it. He says, “You’re really making 10 episodes at once that are meant to be watched in a row, which is cool and different. And the ability to serialize relationships is really exciting and is one of the ways that we find even more emotional stories, because we track the relationships across different episodes.”

While animated sitcoms like *The Simpsons* and *American Dad* have typically featured 22-minute episodes with self-contained plot-lines and salacious punch-lines that appealed to both regular and occasional viewers on linear television broadcasters, streamers can host series with complex storylines sprawling across entire seasons. In the same [article](#), Hulu’s SVP of Originals Craig Erwich notes that many viewers watch episodes more than once, while Amazon Studio’s COO Albert Cheng points out that adult toons appeal to younger Millennials.

Reaching this demographic is increasingly shaping content strategy. Among upcoming original adult animated series, Evershed’s research finds that the 60 percent are still comedies — with the next biggest groups being drama, sci-fi and action. Slightly over half are original IPs (52.2 percent), while 12.2 percent are based on existing television shows and 11.1 percent are sourced from video games, such as *Witcher* and *DOTA*.

“The video game generation has grown up watching cutscenes, CG and characters in very expansive worlds with complex stories. Video games are the biggest IP franchises for the 14 through 34 demographic — they’re bigger than movies. That trend will grow the overall adult animation category as well,” says Evershed.

This comfort with a wider variety of content may be why younger audiences are open to adult animation. With hundreds of millions of video game fans globally, it is easy to see why studios are expanding those stories beyond consoles and computers.



Trailer for Castlevania season 4, produced by Frederator Studios, Shankar Animation, Project 51, Powerhouse Animation and Mua Film.

Amongst the most widely celebrated video-games-turned-animation is *Castlevania*, produced

by Powerhouse Animation in Austin, Texas. The studio is led by Brad Graeber, who also serves as supervising producer on the aforementioned Netflix adaptation. When his crew was pitching Frederator to work on the series, they used a trailer they created for an original IP they would also come to make: *Seis Manos*.

Powerhouse was founded 20 years ago, launched with a passion for traditional animation at a time when 2D films were still in vogue and on screens domestically — working on Adam Sandler’s *Eight Crazy Nights*. However, as 3D became de facto at the box office, Graeber and his team shifted to doing everything from educational to video game content. While doing the latter, he began to develop his crew’s action animation skills.

“The animation industry has been reticent to do action-oriented adult content for a long time and so when the door was open, thanks to productions like *Castlevania*, we went all in to take advantage of the opportunity and show folks that it can be done. We’ve been thinking and talking about it for almost two decades and finally got the chance to do it,” says Graeber.

The type of hand-drawn animation required to create action-based adult content is more complex than the flat staging on series like *Family Guy*. For instance, to achieve the fluid motion of a fight scene, artists need to do detailed in-betweening as characters move in perspective. Once that pipeline and those skills have been developed, the possibilities are limitless.

On top of *Castlevania*, Graeber and his crew are busy working through lockdown on their aforementioned original IP *Seis Manos* — an action adult animation following Mexican orphans trained in martial arts — as well as Kevin Smith’s *Masters of the Universe: Revelation* series, rebooting *He-Man* for a new generation. Unsurprisingly, all three are for Netflix.



Trailer for season 1 on Seis Manos, produced by Powerhouse Animation Studios and Viz Productions.

To sharpen his crew’s action animation skills, Graeber has martial arts experts come in to answer questions and do fight choreography sessions filmed by his storyboard artists. That said, when it comes to combat and gore, he believes it should only be included to further storylines. With wider possibilities in animation, how far is too far?

“As long as you’re adding to the story, almost anything goes. We’re not a torture porn sort of studio so we’re not ever going to do anything just to be outlandish, but there is a difference between violence



in animation and violence in live action. Also, there's a bit of cognitive dissonance that we play with in these pieces — mostly that domestic audiences are not used to seeing the level of violence that is in animation overseas," says Graeber.

As Graeber points out, adult animated action is already widely popular outside of North America, with the most prominent example being Japanese anime. He believes that Millennials growing up watching dubbed versions of this non-comedic cartoon content may have paved the way for homegrown series like *Castlevania* and *Seis Manos*.

So where is next for adult animation? Evershed thinks it will only continue to get more specific. He says, "Where I see it heading longer term is a pure action or pure drama or pure horror. You're going to get some of these more straight-up genre pieces that you would otherwise see in Japanese anime being written, produced and created by Western storytellers."

Given the evidence of the last year, if the streamers distribute it, viewers will come.



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Animating Latinx culture and characters on *The Casagrandes*

by **Philip Mak**

It started as a rumour. The first time Miguel Gonzalez heard about *The Casagrandes*, it was barely more than hushed speculation after a Mexican-American family had been introduced on *The Loud House*. Keeping his ear to the ground, eventually his friend, director Miguel Puga, told him the rumour was becoming reality — and he knew he had to be a part of it.

Flash forward and Puga is now co-executive producer and director on *The Casagrandes*, while Gonzalez serves as art director on the groundbreaking Nickelodeon animated series. The *Loud House* spin-off follows Ronnie Anne, her multigenerational Mexican-American family and their multicultural community in the fictional Great Lakes City (based on Chicago, with hints of New York City and Los Angeles). The show has been celebrated for its diverse, inclusive perspective.

“I don’t want to build walls; I just want to build the table longer so we can all have a seat. I have a daughter and I want her to see herself and have a role model in a character like Ronnie Anne and say, ‘I want to be like that when I get older,’” says Puga.

Having premiered to widespread praise in October 2019, *The Casagrandes* has already won an Emmy and was renewed for its third season before its second even launched. For Mexican-American artists like Puga and Gonzalez, the series is a dream come true — not only to help create a cartoon where their culture is focal and authentically shared, but also to have that representation both on-screen and behind the scenes.

The *Casagrandes* began while Puga was a storyboard artist on *The Loud House*, and he quietly transformed

a new character from a redhead into a Latinx girl: Ronnie Anne. Catching the attention of the show’s producers and writers, he was asked to help them develop a show idea they had for Ronnie Anne and her brother Bobby.

Puga pitched a concept based on his own life’s story growing up in a multigenerational Mexican-American family. That was in 2014. Not long after, the project got greenlit and he has subsequently built out a crew he describes as a family that works together and supports each other.

“One of the first things that I pitched to my producers was let’s make our cast and crew reflect the characters that we’re working on. I reached out to over 300 Latinx artists and I’m very proud to say I think we’re one of the most diverse crews in Burbank. A lot of our artists reflect themselves into the show — they pull characters and designs off of people they know or they grew up with,” says Puga.

It’s very important for kids also to see themselves reflected on TV

Miguel Puga

Gonzalez estimates at least 30 percent of the show’s team is Latinx, which helps contribute to the authenticity of the animation and art. He was brought onto the team by former *The Loud House* creative director Amanda Rynda and, while he was aware he could

not change the style massively, he knew he had to bring in a more Mesoamerican colour palette — and Nickelodeon agreed.

The series' palette draws inspiration from homes in Gonzalez and Puga's families to artist Frida Kahlo's house in Mexico City to luchador masks to pottery and textiles. Each source is brighter and more vivid than the last — a contrast to the more muted Michigan colour story of Loud House.

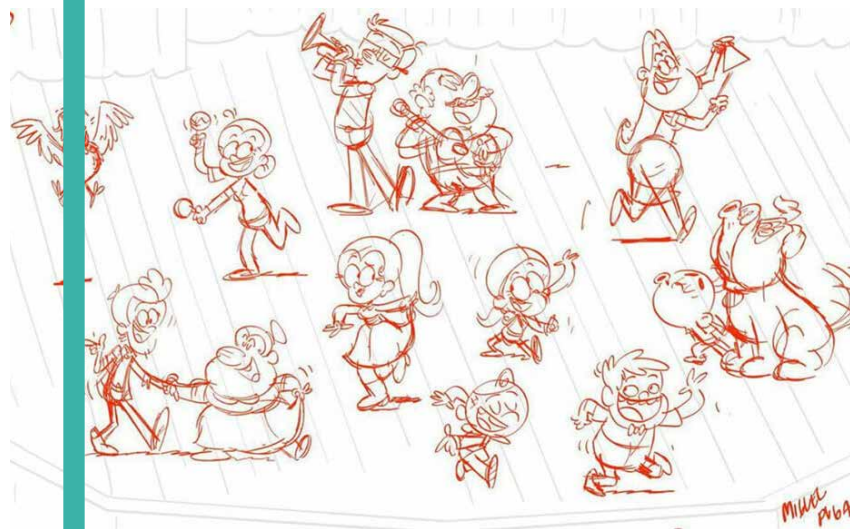
While statistics for toons are scarce, according to the TV portion of UCLA's [Hollywood Diversity report](#), Latinx actors represented only 6.6 percent of broadcast, 4 percent of digital and 5.5 percent of cable lead roles. Strides are being made in animation, with The Book of Life director Jorge Gutierrez attributing this to the Dora generation — a cohort of creators who grew up seeing a Latinx central character as normal, according to [Variety](#). The proof is in the productions — Elena of Avalor, Victor and Valentino, Onyx Equinox — as well as rapidly growing industry groups like LatinX in Animation, founded by Magdela Hermida Duhamel in 2018.

For Gonzalez, representation is foundational to his work now: "On The Casagrandes, I can represent my culture — growing up, we didn't really have that. I knew it was important for me to somehow be part of this so that we could be honest with our culture; I feel like a lot of people take on these cultural-themed shows, but they don't bring on the talent that represents that culture. People can see right through it, so I want to make sure we're being represented honestly because if you can't relate to us, then what's the point?"

The team is supported by cultural consultant and cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz, who served a similar role on Pixar's Oscar-winning, Latinx-centred animated film Coco. Puga has been a long-time fan of his and he helps to ensure that Mexican-American traditions are shown in a way that can be universally understood and enjoyed, without ever making fun of them.

Puga notes that while the cultural context is different from The Loud House, the pipeline is quite similar — albeit with adjustments currently to adapt to the ongoing pandemic. He aims for the production to be as stress-free as possible, with a floating storyboard artist and designer available to ensure nobody ever becomes overwhelmed or overworked. With pride, he tells me everyone loves to work on the show.

Artistically, Gonzalez integrates drawing styles that overshoot lines, uses black fields to contrast all the vibrancy, and takes direct inspiration from Mexican folk art and culture — from Papel Picado and Sugar Skulls to food to winks to famous wrestlers like El



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Tigre. As he explored these kaleidoscopic facets of his culture and its shades, he created reference sheets for his painters and colour supervisors.

"I know we're doing really well compared to other productions at Nickelodeon. [Our animation has] a really simple style, but we just make it look easy. Our stuff is comparatively pretty minimal. I think that's one thing that's cool about Casagrandes is that you don't really need all the bells and whistles — just stories with heart that people can relate to," says Gonzalez.

Looking towards Sunday comics strips, many American cartoonists also shaped The Casagrandes' animation style including Walt Kelly, Hank Ketcham of Dennis the Menace and Charles Schultz of Peanuts as well as Spanish-Mexican illustrator and writer Sergio Aragonés. Blending contemporary film and television references like the work of Quentin Tarantino and Samurai Jack with old-school toons was also elemental, with The Casagrandes' matriarch Rosa having black dots for eyes similar to The Flintstones.

Rosa was inspired by Puga's own stoic mother and softer grandmother, with most characters being amalgamations of his real-life relatives and childhood growing up in Los Angeles' Boyle Heights neighbourhood. Now, with his crew, it has truly become a family affair.

"A lot of these things start with a nugget of a real story and then we try to elaborate and embellish them, and turn them into a universal story that is relatable to everyone. The show launched off the way I grew up and now, with everyone on the crew, I feel like everyone pitches their own little nuggets and we get all these amazing stories," says Puga.

These nuggets include moments from Puga's childhood that ended up in The Casagrandes. The character of Ernesto Estrella, for instance, is based on the flamboyant Walter Mercado. As a child, Puga's

mother dragged him and his brother to stand in line for hours at a department store to see the famed Puerto Rican astrologer and actor.

"We finally saw Walter Mercado being carried in on a golden throne, and my brother and I were so confused. I think my mom felt embarrassed, and everyone was going crazy. Also, the line didn't even exist anymore because it was just like a zombie horde going towards him so my mom was like, 'Alright, let's go home!' after three hours. I pitched that idea and we had an episode loosely based off of it," says Puga.

Enriched by thoughtful sound design and music, the world these stories and characters live in was of paramount importance. The Casagrandes differs from The Loud House in that it is set in a city, and Gonzalez had to make it look safe so that children audiences would want to spend time there. A trick he used was adding lots of foliage and greenery, as well as the aforementioned bright palette and Sunday comics style.

Sprinkled throughout the city and series are Easter eggs that are winks to the crew's families, Mexican-American culture and pop references — from candies they grew up with to Gonzalez's wife's name on signage to a blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo by the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. While these may be easy to miss, The Casagrandes' positive impact for diversity, inclusivity and representation of Mexican-American families is clear to see.

Looking ahead, Puga hopes The Casagrandes will encourage other artists to pitch and produce shows that reflect their own childhoods — Latinx or otherwise. He says, "I want any kid that's growing up right now to see me and say that their dreams are attainable. Just have an idea and go out there and make it — that's always been my main goal. And if that's the positive impact I'm giving, then I love it. Someone influenced me growing up, and I hope to influence one or two other people."



Hopefully, my daughter will follow in my footsteps; I'm kicking the door open for her so she can come sit at the table too.

Miguel Puga

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How animation festivals were reinvented during the COVID-19 pandemic

by Mike Schnier

Each year, festivals around the world bring artists, audiences and studios together to celebrate the craft of animation. For professional and aspiring filmmakers, these are opportunities to get recognized for their work, to foster connections with peers, and be inspired by screenings that they might not be able to see at any other venue. These festivals also serve as avenues of outreach and connection between studios and emerging talent, with portfolio reviews and professional development sessions. Animation festivals were among the many in-person events cancelled, delayed or transformed by COVID-19, which was felt by the community as well as event organizers.

“We were right on the cusp. The pandemic was first hitting California when we were about to launch,” said Einar Baldvin, co-founder of [GLAS Animation](#) — an annual festival held in Berkeley with a focus on independent and underrepresented voices in animation. “All the prep was done, which is essentially a year’s worth of work.”

The planning starts right after the previous festival finishes.

Einar Baldvin

wwIn early February, GLAS Animation reached out to public health officials. Their team was initially told that COVID-19 outbreaks would not disrupt events in mid-March. The situation changed as the pandemic spread through the United States.



The signal film for GLAS 2020, directed by [Lénaïg Le Moigne](#) and featuring sounds by [Skillbard](#).

“The festival scaled down from ‘It’s happening,’ to ‘We’re going to get everybody hand sanitizer,’ to ‘The international guests and speakers are no longer coming,’ to ‘We’re just going to have the screenings and no speakers’ said GLAS Animation director and co-founder, Jeanette Jeanenne. “Eventually we had sent out an email telling everyone the festival was going to be stripped down, with no parties or anything. And the next day, we realized that we can’t do this and put a stop to it altogether.”

Yvonne Grzenkowitz, executive director of [Animation Nights New York](#) (ANNY) shared a similar experience from the East Coast: “We suspended our events the same day that Tribeca suspended their festival. It all sort of happened at once. On the day I was making the decision, I think there were 100 announcements being made in the city.”

“I initially thought, ‘There is a bathroom right there. We will do a PSA and make sure attendees wash their hands.’ If I had a huge grant, we would see what we could address with drive-in theatres,” Grzenkowitz said. “But we could not in good conscience bring people together deliberately in a space, if there’s a deadly disease that could potentially kill attendees.”



A still from Animation Night New York's virtual event space, provided by Yvonne Grzenkowitz.

Poster design for OIAF 2020 designed by Christy Karacas.

Due to the circumstance of when festivals fell on a calendar, some event organizers were given more time to prepare and adapt. Managing director of the [Ottawa International Animation Festival](#), Kelly Neall, told us that the OIAF's film operations team had opportunities to learn from other festivals and find solutions for screenings and panel discussions. "Initially we were thinking we could do a couple in-person events, but because so many of our delegates come from the States and abroad there was just no way."

We were not going to hold an international super-spreader event in September.

Kelly Neall

Yvonne Grzenkowitz used the time between her festival's cancelled monthly event and ANNY's annual showcase to build custom online platforms for their

screenings, due to concerns with automated moderation and policy on popular video streaming services: "I just didn't want to get hit with piracy or content flags. We're showing films that are really targeted to an adult audience, sometimes with nudity or language. There aren't people making those decisions — the videos are crawled by algorithms."

Each of the organizers wanted to bring the experience of their festivals to audiences sheltering in place, but they all had to solve important problems in a limited amount of time. They needed to consider how to convert in-person screenings, panels and events into a worthwhile day or week of online programming that meets the needs of filmmakers and audiences. To completely reinvent their festivals, the organizers needed to consider why attendees return to their events each year — and how much of that could translate to a computer monitor or tablet to begin with.

The Ottawa International Animation Festival has been hosting screenings, exhibits and workshops since 1976, in partnership with its parent organization, The Canadian Film Institute. The festival brings an international audience to Ottawa, a city with a renewed animation industry — and is now home to new studios, such as Mercury Filmworks and Atomic Cartoons. In a typical year, OIAF is a five-day event



held alongside The Animation Conference, where artists and industry pitch, network and participate in panels. The event also includes the Night Owl Party, an Animator's Picnic, and the student-focused Animation Exposé, among its packed schedule.

"What we hear is that OIAF really energizes students and gets them inspired. We get these huge groups coming up from the east coast of the United States and across Ontario. They get to see work from around the world that might be completely different from anything else that they've seen before," said Neall. "Azarin Sohrabkhani always puts together an amazing series of professional development talks. It's a chance for animation students to see some of their idols. In our last live event, we had Rebecca Sugar, and it was just so uplifting to the students, some of them in tears."

OIAF sketch drawn by Pilar Newton-Katz.

"I have been attending the OIAF since 1994. They used to skip years, so this past year was my 20th festival, I believe," said [Pilar Newton-Katz](#), an accomplished freelance animator and educator based out of Brooklyn. "The first thing that I noticed about the festival was the camaraderie. Of course the animation and panel discussions are amazing, but being able to go to a screening and see the filmmaker standing right next to you order a beer at the party that night is always so amazing to me."

GLAS Animation was founded more recently, first screening films to attendees in 2016. GLAS usually takes place over four days at theatres, galleries and institutions across downtown Berkeley, a university town that is a welcome change of pace for attendees from the Bay Area. The festival showcases work from American and international artists in a curated competition showcase and also features retrospectives, special-curated programs, workshops, panels, performances, and art installations. Each year, GLAS also provides animation grants to help support two independent animation artists within the United States.

"We have the younger generation at the helm," said Jeanenne, speaking about GLAS Animation's appeal. "And I think our different experience leads to a different curatorial perspective which works as a great accompaniment to other festivals."

"The big attraction, apart from the work, is the community," Einar Baldvin suggested. "There's a lot of interesting people in a rather small space, because of the way it's set up. In Berkeley, everything's around the same corner."

You can walk to the theater, to the parties, to the different venues, constantly bumping into the same people and really getting to know them.

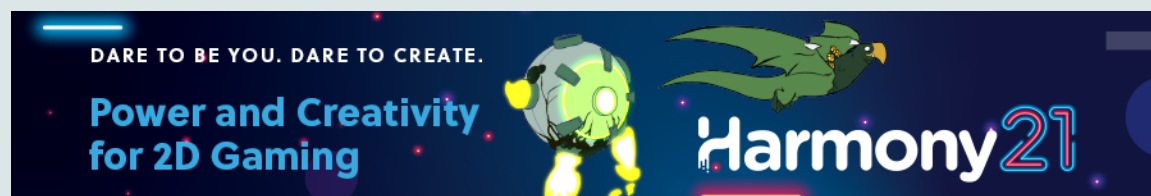
Einar Baldvin

The importance of location was a common theme for event organizers: "Coming from out of town, everything's in walking distance. You can't really avoid each other in downtown Ottawa," said Neall, speaking about OIAF.

For Animation Nights New York, Grzenkovicz told Animation From Every Angle that their city has a different strength: "The best thing about New York City is it's a hub. Every event had been packed with people, like sardines in a can — sometimes uncomfortably. It's just kind of neat to have everyone in the same room together in real life. There's an energy there."

For Grzenkovicz, that energy could be felt when the audience reacts to a film: "It ties us all together in a way that you can't quite replicate when there's lag and stuttering."

Since 2015, the small team at Animation Nights New York have curated monthly screenings, an annual Best of Fest conference, and ANNY Exchange networking events, which connect animation talent to AR, VR and animated projects. ANNY also works with Cannes Marché du Film and Short Film Corner to shortlist qualifying films for the ANNY Cannes Program. The venues the festival screens at include 180 Maiden Lane, the One World Trade Observatory, the Arts Brookfield Terrace at Brookfield Place, and The Gutter Spare Room in Williamsburg Brooklyn.



Considering how important those locations have been, what happens when attendees are no longer able to experience everything that comes with attending an event in Ottawa, Berkeley or New York City? Newton-Katz told us she was pleasantly surprised by how much OIAF's online events still felt like the festival she had experienced in previous years. The highlights for her included, "the talks, the screenings, the meet the filmmakers [sessions] and the Zoom hangs. We were given ample time to engage."

"The staff really went the extra mile to make things seem like it was a regular OIAF," Neall added. "We did pre-recorded videos with all the filmmakers taking a bow and edited that into our official competition screenings. Chris Robinson [OIAF's Artistic Director] was doing Q&A's afterwards. We've never done that before."

While all the organizers acknowledged tradeoffs with not being able to hold their events in-person, providing all of the sessions online created new opportunities. For the first time, attendees who were not able to travel or access the space could fully participate.

"A lot of people can't normally afford to come up to Ottawa every year or they're held back by budgetary restrictions or mobility issues, so it was nice for them to be able to experience the festival. It depends on our capacity, but offering some of the programming online can be great to help, [and continuing this for] future live events is a definite possibility." Neall added, "Our Meet-the-Filmmaker sessions, which also happen at the live event, were fantastic this year. Usually we can only interact with the filmmakers in attendance. This year, we were able to bring in all of the filmmakers,"

"We embraced a bit of Twitch's gaming side for the opening ceremony," said Baldwin, describing GLAS Animation's 2020 showcase stream. "We actually started our ceremony off with a game of Warcraft 3. They got excited once they figured out it was a joke. We're just kind of embracing that we're on Twitch."

Instagram promotion for GLAS Animation's 2020 Online Showcase.

"We felt that Twitch was a community-centric platform and is something that we could continue to nurture for a much longer period of time, beyond the pandemic. So we've been hosting regular events there." At the time of writing, GLAS' interviews were seen by 10,000 attendees, comparable to their in-person audience in 2019.

Overall Jeanenne reported that sponsors, filmmakers and audiences were receptive: "People are just very understanding and supportive, and the whole world is going through the same thing at the same time."

Animation Nights New York resumed monthly events in December, with a Virtual Reality Mixer Space available for attendees following online screenings, which can be accessed using dedicated VR headsets as well as traditional desktop and mobile web browsers. Grzenkowicz said that she invited sponsors and partners to tour their virtual venue over the summer: "All of this would have been a little silly if we were having in-person events, but it was interesting to talk to them and have them seriously consider a virtual reality event."

I found it fascinating. People can be resistant to change, but everyone's been very excited.

Yvonne Grzenkowicz





Why are creators and audiences drawn to short-form content?

by **Edward Hartley**

There is a behavioural shift happening between creators and their audiences, and along with it is a new focus on short-form content. The big platforms are placing their bets, with new services like Facebook Watch, Snap Originals and YouTube Originals emerging. As more of our viewing becomes streamed rather than programmed, we drift further away from the half-hour to hour-long blocks that used to define television and into a more dynamic place. In response, broadcasters are experimenting more with form and medium, opening up opportunities for a wider variety of voices and talent. Do TV and film executives have their eye on short-form social media creators for their next generation of showrunners?

If so, they would do well to start their search on TikTok. The video-sharing app, which allows for videos limited to a minute long, is the most downloaded App of 2020 and now boasts 850 million users. Its appeal comes from the ability it has to host situational humour. We see real moments play out, as well as real interactions and consequences. A myriad of scenarios limited only by the imagination of creators. Audiences find this relatable and accessible, creating a living, breathing culture that traditional formats struggle to keep up with. For example, Quibi, a short-form player which raised \$1.75B, has since folded after a challenging launch. The platform's all-star casting, high production values, and serialised content failed to connect with audiences where community-created content on TikTok succeeded.

What then, do modern audiences want? Consider the year we've had, and some things become clear. With human contact discouraged and live-action filming near impossible for many months, a huge gap has been left in the culture we consume. Collectively, we craved distraction and entertainment to keep our minds off the more serious stuff. Animators are among the artists who have stepped up to the plate, keeping us captivated with small moments of fun and familiarity, and reminding us to laugh once in a while. For their service, some have racked up avid followings

that number in the millions. We spoke to some of the artists finding short-form success on social media. Discussing everything from influences to internet humour, we hear how they leverage their platforms into the wider world of animation.

King Science spent his time in the U.S. Military practicing discipline and drive. However, it wasn't a career in the field that he had his heart set on. "I knew to work hard as I could to get to the success I wanted to get to", he says over a video call. "When I joined the military, I knew that after my four years here, I would be on about a million followers in something. Then when I got out, I'd just do that". For Science, his that was animation, and he set about learning the art and designing a character to act as his centrepiece.

Science used his character to document parts of his life: from everyday occurrences — disagreements with your mother, or speaking to a crush — to more serious subject matter, such as attending the Black Lives Matter protests. Through this story-telling, Science found popularity rapidly, and reached his goal. His TikTok reached the million follower landmark in just two months before a rapid rise to 9 million that has seen the 21 year old have talks with major studios and be recognised while walking through his neighbourhood.



“When the animation community got my attention on YouTube, it wasn’t necessarily the animation that got me hooked.” Science recalls the channels and creators he spent his teenage years watching.

The pace of YouTube comedy was just funnier to me. They were a lot more blunt. Internet comedy is so different to what you see on TV.

King Science

Like many in his digitally-native generation, Science was enticed by the creative freedom that social media offered. “YouTube leaves you with more creative control, which means more risk-taking. I would see things and think, ‘are you allowed to say that?’ But it would be like, really funny.”

Having a platform to freely publish ideas and access an audience presented an opportunity where traditional TV had fallen short, which was enticing

to young creators, giving rise to a culture of snappy, short-form comedy now referred to broadly as ‘internet humour.’ An ever-evolving canon which has played out across platforms like YTMND, Newgrounds, YouTube, Vine, Twitter, 9Gag Snapchat and the now hugely popular TikTok. King Science, and his friend network of animators, artists and comedians, are among its new stars.

“TikTok has been working and it hasn’t failed me yet,” says Science. “If I had stopped at 2 million and then returned to YouTube, then I wouldn’t have made it to the almost 9 million followers I have now. You just keep pressing that button that gives you what you need until it doesn’t work.” Science gives a calculated answer as to why his content in particular resonates so strongly with his audience. It is not by accident; he’s confident and concise about what each piece of content needs to have in order to work. “I always make sure I have an exact goal in what my content is, and I make sure that it’s better than what I think anyone else can do, in a week. That timeframe, that sound, that trend. Executed in the right time better than what anyone else is doing.”

While he knows what he’s doing, Science talks on the subject in the kind of carefree, casual way that makes it all sound easy. “I just combine things that I liked and that I saw other people like every time I post!”

The Animation Study

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Science points to another, altogether more tried-and-tested trick to explain his success: Based loosely upon himself, Science's character sports a trademark outfit of cream hoodie, blue jeans, and cartoon crown. It provides a relatable anchor that allows him to roam and explore other subject matter from his life, like his insomnia, or moving out of home: "Following a character is super easy. From my years watching YouTube, it's clear people like following a character. So I decided to make sure I had a set character."

Another artist who understands the appeal of the lovable character is Brooklyn-based artist, John McLaughlin. His "fuzzy dudes" inhabit stunning visual environments that he creates and shares with his 56,000 fans on Instagram. Often depicted dancing to modern pop music and in glossy 3D environments, his characters are shareable eye-candy.

"The world of Fuzzy Dude was born out of my interest and love of character design, but the inspiration behind my animations varies a lot and changes often," says John, who is quick to cite his lionhead bunny Pepper as a primary source. One reason John is drawn to short-form is his own attention span. He is always, he says, "subconsciously catering" to the possibility that he will get distracted and move on to the next thing. He understands that his audience may be doing the same: "You're rendering for the smallest screen, where people look at it for maybe half a second before scrolling away."

John believes that, despite their alien appearance, his characters appeal to people due to a feeling of familiarity and humanity. He likens watching them to the feeling of watching reruns of Sesame Street, tapping into the undercurrent of nostalgia that drives many social media trends. Asked if social media has opened doors for him as an artist, John is quick to praise its power to connect people to his work.

"Big time. My first major artist collaboration was through Tumblr. I partnered with them as a creator for New York Fashion Week. Since then, a lot of work has come through Instagram Direct Messages and general discovery from the platform." Through these channels of discovery, John has worked for major brands like Nike, an experience he's grateful for: "My experience has been nothing but positive when it comes to working with larger brands."

Navigating social media, by and large, is becoming more complicated, with many platforms having unique formats and codes. One has to be able to adapt across different channels.

"The big thing is adapting," says King Science. "This is new to me, I've never typically made super short videos, so it's actually really helping with comedic tim-

ing and it's helping with visuals. When I do go back to making long-format videos, it's going to be really hard to click that off."

With our modern 'feed' culture, and content that we can simply swipe away, it's unsurprising that timing and delivery take on utmost importance for him and other creators on the platform. "On TikTok, they can swipe. If they can do that and go to a whole other video, then you need to get their attention or they leave."

Each platform brings unique technical problems, too. One of the biggest issues John McLaughlin encounters is, "dealing with and learning to embrace file compression," and accepting that, while you may have render something, "on a large monitor where you see every little detail and get it perfect," that same level of detail isn't always going to be noticed by the audience on their smartphone. "Sometimes I don't like the aspect ratio," King Science describes of his experience scaling for mobile screens. "Because there'll be some scenes where I'm like, 'Why does the ceiling have to be so high?' or 'I don't know how to frame this with two characters.' But I've gotten used to it." For him, his choices often come down to the practical. As a one-person animation outfit, the short-form format of TikTok just makes sense at this stage in his career.

I'm a one man animator until I get a team, so, it's just the most logical thing.

King Science

To really understand the modern culture around short-form video, it helps to rewind back to Vine. The 6-second video sharing app was short-form in a nutshell. Internet-humour bottled up into its purest essence and disseminated at lightning speed. Vine has been defunct since 2017, but it is commonly accepted that the platform walked so that TikTok could run. With such a narrow time limit on clips, concerns about context, narrative and detail took a back-seat. Timing, delivery and energy were the drivers. Vine produced new viral moments seemingly every day, that caught on like popular playground trends. It gave birth to a style of humour so distinct that even today, some viewers on TikTok will brand the most satisfying or irreverent moments of humour 'Vine energy.' Understanding the DNA of a Vine could be instrumental in unpacking the huge popularity of its successor, and might provide some clues as to



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why we're increasingly moving toward a short-form culture of entertainment.

"This area of social media is unique from other conventional media, like full-length movies," Wahyu Ichwardardi, known to his fans as Pinot, tells me over email. "So when Vine released in 2013, with its limitations, like 6-second durations and the ability to only post video recorded within the app, I saw an opportunity to create a new audience with a new kind of storytelling."

Pinot's work on Vine incorporated hand-drawn sketches, animated then placed alongside real-world scenery. The interaction between sketched and life-like elements creates a satisfyingly short hit of action in each Vine. "With these new video platforms like TikTok or Byte, I can now create short animation myself, in a short production time, for an audience of hundreds or thousands."

Today, Vine is a thing of the past, and Pinot is most active across Instagram and TikTok, where he shares mixed-media works and experiments with nearly half a million followers. He shares interesting thoughts about how the visual language of the internet has changed, since the time of Vine and before. "Instagram and other video platforms are a place where we can see how content and its audience evolve over time. All the animatic content we see, like memes, emojis and GIFs, are the conversational tools of the modern audience. Every animatic content and every pixel art animation I make also serves as a conversation tool for that audience."

Pinot's newer work explores a range of visual languages, and has recently incorporated pixel art using a variety of retro hardware devices such as Macintosh computers and Nokia handsets. In this era of Future Nostalgia, his usage of beige corporate desktops and 'brick-phones' exudes the kind of retro-factor that translates well in today's heavily aestheticised social media culture. Like the 'old tec' of Phillip Reeve's *Mortal Engines*, prized for its lost scientific and technological knowledge, the tech of our own past often serves as a treasured cultural artifact to those discovering it new. Pinot calls this style 'low-tech.'

"The pixel art content is basically all my unfinished childhood projects and ideas," he explains. "Now I have a chance to continue those projects, because the old low-tech style becomes a new aesthetic, and gains a unique appreciation." In his animation, Pinot creates a kind of trickery where we see modern pop culture and memes shown through the pixelated screens of these early internet-era devices.

For me, the project is not just a nostalgia journey but also a tech history lesson for my children.

Pinot

For Pinot, looking backward is an important part of moving culture forward. "They joined me as a team when we created a lyric video for Twenty One Pilots with old software on a Macintosh computer." Another low-tech Macintosh piece Pinot did in homage to Childish Gambino's *This Is America* went viral in 2018.

Despite all of its advantages, it is possible to view this explosion of short-form as a symptom of the age of over-information. Theories abound of shortened attention spans, and on average, a person will scroll through 300ft of online content every day. One would be forgiven for wondering if we are losing our ability to concentrate on things meaningfully. Should animators be conscious of this in their work? The creators we spoke to gave optimistic answers in response.

"Animation delivers imagination better than other mediums," Pinot suggests. "Short animation on social media has the whole package: expression, visual, audio, motion, story, color. Even in this short-attention span age on social media."

For King Science, much of it comes down the medium of delivery. "I don't think people's attention spans are shortening," he assures us. "The way I would start a TikTok is not the way I would start a YouTube video, nor is it the way I'd start a Netflix series. Because, people's attention spans are different on each platform. On each medium, our brain realises what it's doing and we respond to that."

John McLaughlin ends by addressing another big issue of the social media age: Mental health, and the anxiety that can often come with sharing work and comparing your career against others online. "Try not to get too caught up in what others are doing by comparing your experience with theirs. No matter what you see, everyone is dealing with their own struggles and had to start somewhere." This is sage advice for anyone looking to share their journey and build an audience online. The importance of going at your own pace, and not being put off by starting small.

"Often, even if an artist looks like they made it and are doing huge projects, they are struggling behind the scenes or grinding super hard to keep up," John continues. "Look at work, be inspired, but in the end, do you."

The pandemic's impact on working parents and caregivers in animation

by Erin Hynes

Women today make up the [majority of the American workforce](#), which has resulted in a notable shift away from the tradition of single income families with a stay at home mom. But working mothers face serious challenges in finding balance between parenting and their careers. Now, the most pressing challenge is the pandemic.

Studies show that in families with two working parents, women continue to [take on more](#) of their household's responsibilities. This reality has been exacerbated by the pandemic, which brought the closure of daycares and schools. [In recent decades](#), early childhood education has encouraged women's participation in the workplace by providing options for daytime childcare.

However, the loss of this support system during this pandemic has been a major setback for working mothers, potentially [undoing 10 years of progress](#) in workplace gender equality. In the animation industry, in which [only 20% of creatives are women](#), the impact of the pandemic has certainly been felt. To understand how mothers in animation have handled the challenges of lockdowns, we spoke with some of these women.

[Beth Slevin](#) is a busy supervising director and a mom of two, ages 3 and 6. Her husband is a stay at home dad, which has allowed Beth to focus on her career full time. "I have always been adamant about keeping my work life and home life separate. But in switching to remote work, that separation has become nearly impossible," she says.

Beth explains that the collapse of the separation between work and life has been a difficult adjustment, but that she's grateful for one particular aspect of it. "I don't have a commute anymore, and there are no longer networking events to attend. Having that time back means I can have lunch with my family every day, and I have more time to spend with my kids after work. I've had time to really hang out with my kids, and that's been special."

Beth shared with us that in the past, she has felt the classic working parent guilt of feeling like she doesn't

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have enough time to spend with her kids. Before lockdown, long and hectic work days, traffic jammed commutes, and networking events made it difficult to fit in quality time with her children.

Research shows that this feeling is common amongst parents, with 20% of working mothers reporting that they find balancing work and family very difficult. For Beth, the silver lining is that her husband is a stay at home dad. “We know that for many families this isn’t an option, so we feel so very fortunate and privileged to be able to do this as long as we can,” she says.

For two-parent families in which both are working full-time, remote work and remote learning has required complex solutions. **Megan Kreiner** is an animator at **Walt Animation Disney Studios**. She and her husband, who also works full-time, share parenting responsibilities for their two children, ages 7 and 10. Even before the pandemic, Megan says balancing motherhood and work was tough. “There’s definitely a misnomer about the possibility of balancing both a career and parenting,” Megan tells us. “In my experience, something’s always gotta give. Having a career and children together requires a lot of sacrifice, especially when both parents are working full time.”

Megan says that when the pandemic lockdowns started, she and her husband quickly realized that it would be tremendously difficult to keep up with their work while also juggling remote learning for their kids. For them, the solution was to hire daytime help. Their family’s caregiver comes to their home during school hours to provide an extra hand in keeping the kids on task so Megan and her husband can focus on their jobs.

“I’m still involved with supporting the kids during remote learning, so it can be very difficult to stay focused on creative tasks for work,” Megan says,

“without help it’s unlikely that I would be able to work full-time.” Hiring a private caretaker has been immensely helpful for Megan’s family, but this may not be a solution that is accessible to all workers.

The experience of women in the workforce can vary depending on the ages of their children, too. **Jeanette Moreno King** is an animation director, President of **The Animation Guild**, and mom of two children, ages 11 and 14. She says that her kids are old enough that they can be mostly independent throughout the day as they attend their virtual classes.

Jeanette explains that it’s difficult to cope with the emotional toll of the pandemic. “It’s been hard to keep my kid’s morale up, and to keep them motivated,” she says. “They’re used to having a social component in school, and they’re missing milestones that are so important at that age.” Jeanette tells us it’s a struggle to assure her children that things will get better, because they are old enough to fully comprehend the impact of the pandemic. “As a parent,” Jeanette says, “you want to make everything better for your kids, and when you can’t do that, it’s painful.”

Having been in the industry for over two decades, Jeanette is well aware of the varying obstacles that mothers in animation face. She says that when she started out in animation, parenting wasn’t talked about at work. “When I first got pregnant, I felt like I needed to learn the secret parenting handshake to connect with other parents. Everyone was so quiet about their family lives.” But over the years, she’s seen this change.

Jeanette says that with every new generation that enters the animation field, the traditional workplace norms shift. “I’ve noticed that younger generations of parents are much more open and honest about their difficulties in balancing work and family. There used

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Additional resources can be found at animationguild.org/familyandmembership and womeninanimation.org/community-resources/

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to be a martyrdom attitude to work in this industry, but it's fading. Instead, we're having more conversations about how the animation field can support not just mothers, but all parents."

According to Jeanette, this shift is reflected in The Animation Guild as well. The Guild is a labor organization that represents animation and visual effects artists. Historically, unions have focused on traditional work issues like safety on the job, wages, and health-care benefits. In recent years, Jeanette says the Guild has recognized the importance of offering support beyond those traditional issues. "We're realizing that the Guild can be a hub of communication that supports people with all types of workplace related issues, including ones having to do with parenthood," she says.

One initiative in support of this shift has been the creation of a Discord channel for Guild members. Discord is an instant messaging and digital distribution platform designed for creating communities. On the Guild Discord, members can discuss anything and everything. "It's an accessible space for members to connect with each other, share their experiences, and offer advice and encouragement to each other," says Jeanette. She explains that initiatives like this are changing the way people communicate in the workplace by normalizing vulnerability. When Jeanette started her career, she felt that she couldn't ever show vulnerability.

"If I did, people might attribute it to me being a woman. I'm happy to see that changing."

**Jeanette Moreno King
on normalizing vulnerability**

Another Animation Guild initiative that is encouraging new approaches to workplace support is the Family and Membership Committee (FAM Committee). Kristin Donner, Chair of the committee, tells us that her team quickly realized there wouldn't be a one size fits all solution for the challenges that the committee's members were facing with remote work.

Kristin says that this is because every member's needs are unique. For example, the parents of an infant need a different kind of support than the parents of teenagers. "Moreover," Kristin says, "obstacles aren't always directly related to parenting. Since the start of the pandemic, the FAM committee has put extra

emphasis on the importance of wellness and mental health. We've created a safe space for members to share their stories and experiences."

Although the committee is known as the "family" committee, it isn't exclusively for parents. According to Kristin, the committee exists to provide a supportive community for members in any stage of life. "We feel that it's important to acknowledge diverse forms of family and different dynamics of caregiving. Some of our members may not be parents, but they may be caring for an elderly loved one, or supporting a sick partner or friend. Regardless of how you define your family, or what kind responsibilities you have in your personal life, you can find support in the FAM committee."

Kristin says that she believes the work from home conditions spurred by the current pandemic might result in positive changes that stick around post pandemic. And the other women we spoke with think so too. When animation teams begin returning to working in the studio, Megan Kreiner hopes that flexibility is maintained, as well as broader conversations about the perceptions around parenting and family support. "In my experience," she says, "there's a perception that parents are less dedicated to their work. We need to continue to challenge this perception, because it's not true."

Across sectors, these perceptions can perpetuate the [motherhood gap](#), also known as the motherhood penalty. When men and women first enter the workforce, they're typically paid equally. But a pay gap begins to appear when women get married and have children. While some women choose to work less once they have children, many don't. Regardless, [research shows](#) employers pay them less because they seemingly assume mothers will be less committed to their work. This might further explain why in the animation industry, only [10% of leadership roles](#) are held by women.

The initiatives of the Animation Guild and the FAM Committee show that it is gradually becoming normalized to have open conversations about the challenges of balancing work and life. This signals a changing approach to workplace culture within the animation industry. By listening to the diverse experiences of women, parents, and caregivers in animation, we can begin to lay the groundwork for tangible change.



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Lackadaisy shows how crowdfunding opens new genres for animated film

by Erin Hynes

When Tracy Butler and Fable Siegel approached studios with the concept of an adult animation series, they were met repeatedly with the same response. The idea of *Lackadaisy*, a series that follows booze drinking cats as they indulged in crime against the backdrop of 1920's Missouri was captivating. But according to producers, the project was too risky to finance. In Hollywood, studios believe that when it comes to adult animation, only the sitcom format sells.

Published online, [Lackadaisy Cats](#) has been a webcomic since 2006. Set in prohibition-era St. Louis, the narrative revolves around the fortunes of a prohibition-era speakeasy called The Lackadaisy. After the speakeasy's founder is murdered, his widow must clumsily continue her husband's legacy of conspiracy, murder, and crime to keep the bar afloat. And all of the characters? They're anthropomorphic cats. *Lackadaisy* immerses readers into a world of sepia-toned crime, adventure, and occasional laughs.

Tracy says that when she first imagined *Lackadaisy*, she pictured the project as an animated film. She'd grown up watching Disney films, Looney Tunes, and Don Bluth features, and she dreamed of breathing that same animated and musical life into the story of the The Lackadaisy speakeasy. With her background as a game developer, graphic designer, and illustrator, Tracy knew that such a project would be complex and expensive.

It wasn't until recent years that Tracy noticed an influx of independently-made animated films. She knew that there were modern animation tools and techniques available, the ability to fund projects through online campaigns, and a community of viewers eager for independently-created media. This combination of factors compelled Tracy to think seriously about adapting her established webcomic into the format that she always dreamed it would be.

After pitching to some networks who said that the project was too risky, Tracy and Fable turned to *Lackadaisy's* dedicated audience. They decided to launch a crowdfunding campaign to fund a proof-of-concept, short animated film. They knew that if they were successful, the campaign would demonstrate not only an audience interested in seeing Tracy's booze-loving cats on screen, it would demonstrate that audiences were ready for adult animation genres to diversify beyond sitcom comedy.

Crowdfunding campaigns have successfully funded an array of animated films and web series. In 2018, Vivienne Medrano's *Hazbin Hotel* was launched through an ongoing [Patreon campaign](#). An adult themed, dark comedy musical, the animated series has since published to Youtube a pilot episode that has amassed over 40 million views. More recently, the proposed animated series *The Legend of Vox Machina* raised over 11 million dollars in pledges on the crowdfunding platform [Kickstarter](#). The funding is enough to cover the production costs of the entire 10 episode series, which is set to be released in the fall of 2020.

Examples like these demonstrate the potential of tapping into established audiences while working simultaneously to draw in new supporters. With the right PR and marketing, a crowdfunding campaign can broaden the reach of a project. Tracy and Fable knew that with a well-crafted campaign they could



bypass studio financing and instead, create *Lackadaisy* through independent funding.

Tracy and Fable recognized that they had little experience with Kickstarter campaigns. So, they got in touch with, as Fable says, the “Queen of Kickstarter:” Spike Trotman. Spike is the cartoonist behind long-standing webcomic [Templar, Arizona](#), and is the founder of comic publishing house [Iron Circus Comics](#). Spike was an early adopter of Kickstarter and is considered a pioneer of the platform. Spike, and Iron Circus, have funded 24 projects through crowdfunding to date. Tracy and Fable knew that Spike’s involvement could be the key to a successful *Lackadaisy* campaign. When they pitched the concept to Spike, she agreed to come on board, and the team behind the campaign was complete.

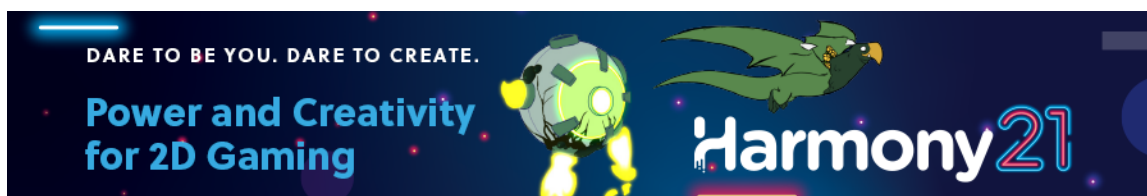
Spike was an invaluable addition to the *Lackadaisy* team. She provided the campaign expertise that is essential to capturing the interest and support of an audience. She helped structure the pledge levels, set a funding goal, put together a marketing blitz, and got in touch with a publicist to help spread word about *Lackadaisy*. And, Spike attached her name to the project. According to Fable, Spike is a trusted entity on Kickstarter. Twenty two of the projects that Iron Circus has funded through Kickstarter have been fulfilled, and the other two are in progress. With

Spike’s name behind the campaign, contributors were assured that *Lackadaisy* would be completed.

In early March, Tracy, Fable and Spike had put together the proposed production team, voice actors, schedule, funding goal and stretch goals. The campaign, [Lackadaisy: The Animated Short Film](#) launched, and in less than 24 hours they achieved their primary funding goal of \$85,000. One month after launching, the campaign came to an end having reached nearly all of the team’s stretch goals. In total, they raised \$330,000 in funding.

The wild success of *Lackadaisy*’s campaign has empowered Tracy and Fable in more ways than one. By independently funding the film, the team behind *Lackadaisy* has preserved their artistic authority over the project. Fable says that without the involvement of a network or Hollywood producer, they have the freedom to control every aspect of *Lackadaisy*, from the storyboarding to who they hire to animate or voice act. For example, Fable explains that the story includes Creole characters. It was important to the *Lackadaisy* team that the characters be represented by Creole actors. With full artistic control, this detail was one that they could ensure was fulfilled.

The animation style of *Lackadaisy* is another unique aspect that Tracy, Fable and their production team



were able to choose thanks to their artistic freedom. They chose to animate the film in a style that mimics Xerox line animation, or xerography. Xerography is an animation tool that was notably used in Disney's *101 Dalmations* (1961), and *The Secret of NIMH* (1982) from Don Bluth Productions. The technique is known for its ability to transfer pencil lineart directly to animation cells and create a textured look. It was used consistently up until the 1980s, when studios replaced it with CAPS, an early computer-based program developed by Pixar that replaced inking and photocopying entirely.

Fable explains that they've chosen to composite their digital animation in the style of xerography because the technique has a look that reflects the nostalgia of *Lackadaisy's* 1920s Saint Louis setting. This compositing technique makes the animation feel like a living drawing, which furthermore references *Lackadaisy's* origin as a hand-drawn webcomic. Fable says this animation style gives the film more texture, life, and mood. It is reminiscent of the darker tone of Xerox era films, particularly from the 80s. This allows for a perfect mix of the setting's dark atmosphere and nostalgia to be reflected on screen.

Now that *Lackadaisy* is funded and production is underway, Tracy and Fable are looking forward to sharing the finished film sometime in 2021. The film will first be premiered to the backers behind their Kickstarter campaign, and will then be made available to watch for free on Youtube. Tracy says that the immense response to the crowdfunding campaign, combined with the viewership numbers on the final film, might be the key to earning the attention of Hollywood studios. With the success of their Kickstarter and the film as a proof-of-concept, they'll have proven that *Lackadaisy* is a risk worth taking. The dream is that the concept would then be picked up as a network series.

Although sitcom format has been the tried-and-true style of adult animation to date, audience expectations are changing. Films like *Anomalisa* (2015) and television series' like *Bojack Horseman* demonstrate a growing interest in genres outside of comedy. Audience-driven successes like *Lackadaisy*, *Hazbin Hotel*, and *The Legend of Vox Machina* further reinforce the diversification of genre and storytelling that audiences want.

Regardless of whether *Lackadaisy* is picked up by a network, Tracy and Fable emphasize that this opportunity to make the short film is rewarding enough. They explain that the process of making the film with a passionate production team has been inspirational. And, they have the added bonus of sharing the film's progress with a dedicated community of Kickstarter backers. When *Lackadaisy* premieres on YouTube, sometime in 2021, Tracy says it will be a testament to the opportunities that young creators have today. Thanks to technology, the internet, and online communities, animators, artists and other creators can bring projects to life by tapping into the power of crowdfunding and audiences.



Arthell Isom and Henry Thurlow on being moved by anime

by **Mike Schnier**

Have you ever been moved by an animated film?

Arthell Isom was so deeply moved by the background paintings in *Ghost in the Shell* that he studied Japanese, bought plane tickets, learned the craft of background painting at the Yoyogi Animation Technical College, worked at Ogura Kobou (Hiromasa Ogura's studio), and later founded his own studio: D'ART Shtajio.

His colleague, Henry Thurlow, could relate: Having been employed in the American animation industry, Henry felt dissatisfied with the productions he was working on. He wanted to create animation that was more like the horror OVAs he watched as a teenager, and that was not what the US animation industry was producing at the time. For Henry, the only way to work on that kind of project was to travel to the other side of the world, and eventually that led him to work with Arthell.

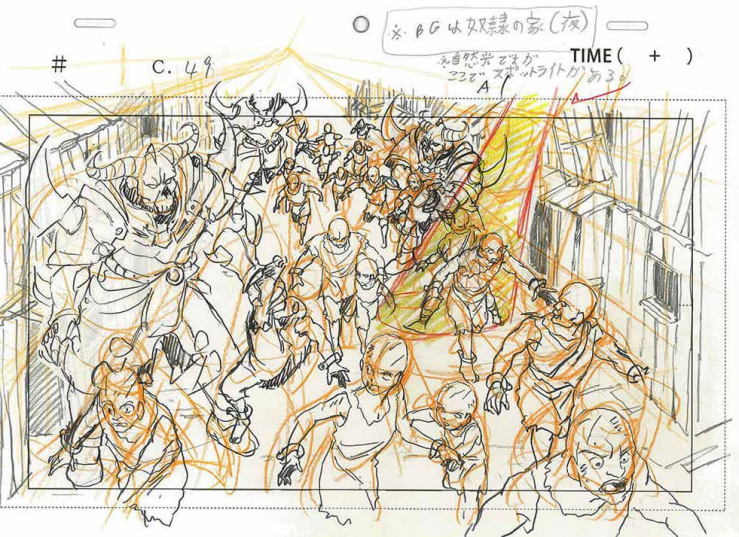
Based out of Tokyo, D'ART Shtajio is a 2D animation studio which specializes in the production of anime. If you are a fan of *One Piece*, *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*, and *Attack on Titan*, D'ART Shtajio was one of the service studios which contributed to those productions. The studio also animated original shorts for Sturgill Simpson's *Sound & Fury* anthology, the music video for The Weeknd's single [Snowchild](#), and Shojo no Piero (The Doll).

We spoke with Arthell and Henry to understand why anime had such an influence on their careers as artists, how it led them to Japan, and what that experience was like.

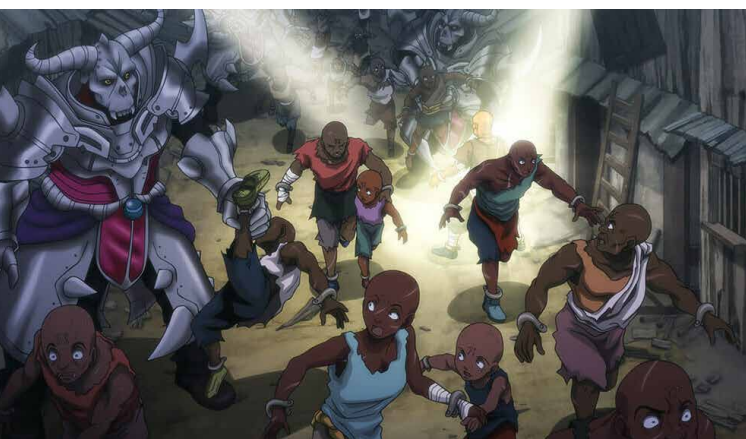
In the first episode of [your vlog](#), you describe the origin of your studio's name, derived from 'shtaji' — the Japanese term for the rough underpainting — and 'studio.' Why was this important to you?

Arthell: My original role in Japan was background painting, which is more of the fine-art side of animation. While I was working for Ogura Kobo it was really driven into our heads that the underpainting is really important. During that stage is where you should design how the painting looks: that's where you decide what the lighting is going to be, you decide your base colours, and at that time we were still painting on paper.





Layout from Sturgill Simpson's *Sound and Fury* by Takeshi Shirato, provided by D'ART Shtajio.



Still image from Sturgill Simpson's *Sound and Fury*, provided by D'ART Shtajio.

Everything you wanted your painting to look like, you had to decide before you put your first brushstroke on a piece of paper. That stage is the shtaji — or the underpainting, essentially the most important part. When we were defining our company and what we stand for, that is the most important part: the foundation of what we're making. If we're directing or animating or creating a character, that first stage is what audiences — even if they don't see it, it's what they're perceiving.

It's how much work we put into the design or the base of our production. It's what I want our studio to stand for.

Arthell Isom

Now everything's digital, so you can change it — you don't have to think that far ahead.

Henry: I was just going to throw in that I don't have anything to say about this because this is one-hundred percent Arthell's original word.

Arthell: And then we mixed the word studio with shtaji, so that's how we got Shtajio.

Henry: I think it's easier to explain in Japanese, because everyone here knows the English word studio, and when Arthell brings up shtaji to represent underpainting, it's a Japanese word. Here it's a one-or-two sentence explanation, while in English you need to explain it over the course of a paragraph.

When you were speaking about productions that you had more creative control over, you mentioned *Sound and Fury*, *Indigo Ignited*, *The Doll*, and your studio's commercial work. What did that creative control allow you to do differently?

Arthell: Between the two types of productions: There's one where the client hires us to do a specific job for them and then there's one where we have control — where we do everything and decide essentially what we're going to do.

For the first kind of production, the client will provide us with a story, and essentially their vision of what they hope to see, how they want the pacing to go, and what they charge us with doing. They give us a very detailed map of what they want, where we're providing more of a service. With the other case, because we have creative control over that map and everything we create ourselves — we get to tell our own story.

Henry: I am the main director so often — not always — a project will get passed to me. My role is to take care of the project and make sure it gets produced correctly. During the first meeting when I am hearing about the project, whether the client has full control and they're just telling us what to make, or whether it's an artistic project that we get to have creative control over — that makes all the difference in the world to me.

I am going to deliver something good either way. But for me, if I hear the client just wants this commercial and they've already figured out how they want it to play out, and the timing and absolutely nothing can change — a part of me is relieved because that



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means I don't need to think too hard while making this thing.

I prefer this kind of project, but admittedly it is a lot harder.

Henry Thurlow

The other projects that occasionally come in, where we have full creative control — say we need a short film to participate in an anthology, like *Sound & Fury* — in that case it's a lot more work for me. I am going to be working non-stop and completely stressed out for the next year or however much production time we have. The flip-side of all that hard work and the non-stop thinking about making everything connected, is that at the end I feel that we have a D'ART Shtajio original.

Arthell: I am going to add, because it's where Henry and I differ a little: Even with productions where we don't have creative control — I am an art director, so my job is to think about what the world looks like. Perhaps because of that, I still have a little more control. I get to design the world, so for my role these projects are both the same creatively.

Either way, I still try to find ways where I can make a project fun for me. I can put myself into it, like what can I make this world look like, what colours am I going to use, and how is the lighting going to look. For me both projects still are fun. Directing and art directing is a bit different. With *Sound & Fury*, I also got to write the story, so I was taking a different tack.

What kinds of misconceptions or misunderstandings do you most often hear about Japan's animation industry?

Henry: You would think I would have a ton of answers, because I did work in the American industry for a few years, and still have a lot of friends who work in studios out there. I don't think they think about it very often.

I think there's a handful of artists now who really want to work in anime-styles, and maybe they do think about it: "How can I get freelance work? What's the status of the industry out there?" But I think the people working on American shows are just thinking about the industry in America. "How can we

get better contracts here? How can we make better projects here?"

Arthell: I follow it from a different perspective, more of the art side. One misconception I hear, from peers at schools I graduated from — for some reason — artists in the states think that Japanese anime is easier or a lesser art form.

I have to explain to them that Japanese anime is really difficult. It's not just putting big eyes on a character or making their hair blue. You can see the end result doesn't look like anime at all, it just looks like a character with big eyes and blue hair.

Henry: I see that whenever a series tries to parody anime. I haven't been in America for 10 years — so I actually don't know, but I feel like this happens less now because anime's gotten so popular.

If you're talking about art school people or art teachers, I totally agree with Arthell, because there were totally teachers in my art school who said: "You're going to make that? Well you're not going to have a chance to make that in America — and besides, it's not even animation because they don't even move. Where's the good acting if they're not even doing anything?"

I have to believe that they're just lying to themselves because they must know that Akira looks better than what they're making. They must know that. Even if there are still frames in anime, the cinematography, the mood, the backgrounds, the stunning detail level, the depth in the story... you know it's amazing.

In what ways can art and design impact a film? How does your experience designing the way a world looks influence how you approach projects?

Arthell: I feel that the world and design is often forgotten. Of course people focus on the characters — the story is about the characters and their role in the plot. But without the audience realizing it, design adds to the story and characters. It's up to the world designer to fill in details about where the story is taking place, who the characters are, how the characters are feeling. Design actually gives you more of the story.

You can tell a lot of the story just through the way the world looks. If there is a poor character, or if a character is in a war, just by designing the world. That's the importance of world design: In some cases we are telling more of the story than the characters do.



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Production art from *Shojo no Piero (The Doll)*, provided by D'ART Shtajio.

Colour, the way you approach a style, brush strokes — that all impacts story. Colour affects the way we feel. Blues are somber, warm colours make things excited. It all affects viewers as they're watching.

If we can tell more of the story with just the environment, which I feel anime does a good job with, sometimes you'll see cutaways where it's just the background. Sometimes there are no characters on the screen and you'll just see trees slowly moving.

Henry: Or the cityscape...

Arthell: For example, in my *Sound & Fury* episodes, I tried to use mostly backgrounds. You didn't see the main character. There were a few city characters in the environment. I tried to use the world to tell the audience what was happening. It starts off in an alley. It's dark, there are dark colours, it's a little dirty. It tells us that this character is not part of the world. The main street was much brighter — and there was somewhat... life happening there. I wanted to use the alley to express how the homeless character felt. That was one use of environmental storytelling.

Your recommendations on YouTube sent me down a spiral through a number of OVAs, including *Unico in the Island of Magic*. How do you feel that the anime industry has

changed since you were watching the OVAs that influenced you?

Henry: That one I saw as a kid, even before I started getting into all those OVAs. *Unico in the Island of Magic* was unique in that Osamu Tezuka, the godfather of manga, could get productions done however he wanted. So *Unico in the Island of Magic* is outrageously fluid in its animation.

To talk about the OVAs that I used to like, I think that the industry has changed a lot, and to be honest not in ways I love. Change is always going to happen, but the kind of stuff that I always used to watch and rent from my video store really isn't produced anymore. When I thought of Japanese Anime in the early years — for me middle school, high school, college — anime represented that super serious animation that no one else was making, with outrageous levels of details and shadows.

Yes, series with more simple character designs did exist, but when I thought of anime I wasn't really thinking of that.

When I was thinking of anime I was thinking of *Record of Lodoss War OVA*, *Vampire Hunter D Bloodlust*, *Twilight of the Dark Master*, *Bio Hunter*. Look up screenshots from any of these. It must have taken three-to-five hours to do one drawing correctly, because there are so many layers of shadow. They had

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teams of people just slowly making these unbelievably detailed animation. And it was super dark, and scary. Nobody else was making scary animation.

When I was going to a video store on a Friday, I went to get, essentially, a horror movie: "I am going to watch a scary cartoon. That's going to be fun!" They don't really make that anymore.

Arthell: For me, the background designs in the 80s were phenomenal, and background designs now are just as good. There's a different approach to it now, because of digital tools. They still look good and in some cases are even better than they used to look.

Henry: The backgrounds didn't get simplified in the way that the characters did. Maybe on some individual productions, but not overall.

Arthell: Our approach is still the hand-painting way, but we use digital tools.

Henry: Studios still hand us paper sequences, will tell us that they need to be finished on paper, and ask if we can do it. Every now and then I'll get something like that, and as I'm drawing a line with my right hand, I definitely notice my left hand wants to go to that Ctrl-Z. And it can't.

What led you to work as animation artists in Japan?

Arthell: I decided to come here because I watched *Ghost in the Shell*. That's what made me realize that I wanted to be a background artist, and that this was the place I wanted to learn and study. I came to school out here, and that's essentially what led to me moving here and deciding that my future in animation would be in Japan.

Actually, it was very easy for me. I guess I should have thought more about it, probably. I was still young, at the age where I was like, "Whatever, I am going to do this." -Arthell Isom

Henry: I have the same story, almost, as Arthell. One day, I moved out here.

I worked in the American industry, in New York, for a few years. I worked on *Superjail!*, I worked on a few *Dora the Explorer* video games, commercials and music videos. I didn't have any plans to move to Japan, because I thought, "Oh, we're going to start producing amazing *Ghost in the Shell*-type things here in New York — any day now." Anime was becoming popular. That's how I felt.

After working there for a few years, I realized: No, we're not. It was very depressing. So I just kept my eyes and ears open to opportunities to get to Japan, which was the only country producing content I actually wanted to work on. I saw an opening for an English-teaching job out here, and they essentially flew me over.

Was it a hard decision and was it different than you expected?

Henry: Our goal is kind of the same, but everything is also quite different. The work ethic, the attitude of career versus personal life, the way of producing the anime. It's changing a bit now because the world is getting globalized and everyone is learning different processes, so Japan has adopted some of the West's practices, like working in software instead of on paper. The west is also adopting some of the ways they draw layouts here...

Arthell: I've actually never worked in America. I've only worked in the industry here in Japan. I can't really compare the two, though the mindset is very different. That did stand out to me when I moved here. I think it made me work harder and made me more invested in the craft. Everyone was so focused and loved their jobs. You could see that it was hard, we would be at the office for two or three days straight, because we would have crunch time or something, but no one was complaining that they were going to quit. Everyone enthusiastically came to work, stayed all day, and tried to do the best thing they could do.

That really made an impression on me. Where I was like, "This is crazy, I wanna be just like them. I want to love my work just as much." I felt this is what I needed, and I don't know I would have the same feeling if I was in the States.

Henry: Nowadays I see more 'foreigner' names in the credits of Anime. They might not recognize exactly what they are signing up for like how many hours for how little money, but for us we moved to the other side of the planet, and then both of us didn't get into the industry immediately. We had to work for over a year before finally breaking in. During that time we were doing tons of research.

Do you have advice for animation students in, say, New Jersey who want to follow a similar path?

Arthell: It's different if they're in college. If they're in high school, I say really buckle down. Definitely focus on studying, where you're going to go to college and how you're going to improve on your current level of skills in art.

I do think that if you're in high school, you should have an idea of where you want to work. That way you can then decide what's necessary to get into that company: "What colleges I should be going to?" or, "Where should I focus?" If you're in high school and you want to work in Japan, then definitely you want a head start on learning Japanese, so by the time you graduate you'll be more prepared to come out here.

Henry: I feel like I kind of did this the long way. I feel like I was the hardest worker in my classes, but I feel like I should have worked harder in hindsight. I worked to be the head of my class and get noticed by my teacher, but in hindsight nobody in that class was going to get jobs, professionally. I needed to compare

my work with professionals and try to get my work at their level earlier on, as opposed to trying really hard to get the A.

You mentioned that you wanted to create a company that can tell different kinds of stories, different perspectives, grounded in reality. What would you like to see next for D'ART Shtajio?

Arthell: Even when we were in college, getting to here, I felt like there were all these baby steps we still had to take. I feel as a company we haven't found what we want to be yet.

Henry: Not at all. We've done a sprinkling of the creativity that we wanted to make in our first few years here. The Doll short film, the Indigo Ignited pilot, Sturgill Simpson's Sound & Fury anthology — all of those shorts are mostly what we want to make, but that's it. The other stuff is all client-based, delivering what a client needs. Certainly not D'ART Shtajio originals.

At the end of the day we're not even looking to be a studio that produces just short films and pilots. What we want to be is a feature film and series producing studio. If you look at it that way, we haven't created one project we really wanted to make.

So what we'd like to see for D'ART Shtajio? For us to land a high-budget project with a good schedule to finally produce what we are looking to do.

Arthell: Like Henry said, our goal from here is to produce our own feature film or series. Definitely not what you're seeing on TV now. I think for us, we wanted to push the industry, push the storytelling. There's so many more types of stories that can be told.

Henry: It breaks my heart a little when we get people messaging us to say, "I have an original idea for an anime I'm looking to produce: It's Hunter x Hunter meets Cowboy Bebop."

Then it's not original. It's a world and set of powers that already exists. And a set of fight scenes that you want to emulate.

That's not truly a story from a different perspective with a different set of characters that you completely don't see. -Henry Thurlow

How would you like to see the industry grow and change?

Arthell: Everyone's essentially creating anime and everyone's trying to tell different types of stories — which is good. I think that's what's going to happen. I think the industry's getting broader and broader. There are going to be more people moving out to Japan. But even now, I've been in Japan for fifteen years, Henry's been here...

Henry: Coming up on eleven.

Arthell: When we first got out here, I think character animators, there were a few more sprinklings of foreigners. Background art was maybe number two. Now when you look at the credits there are many animators — tons of foreigners. I think as the industry gets broader, there will be more countries trying to produce anime, trying to tell stories within this genre. I think Japan as a whole will also be telling different kinds of stories. I hope our studio will be one of those studios leading as a vanguard.

Henry: I would like to see all the animators and staff members get treated with respect and get the salaries they want, of course. Hopefully that's the direction we're headed in.

In terms of what gets produced? I just hope we get opportunities to produce what we want here. What the industry does is almost of no concern to me, so long as our company gets the chances we hopefully will have. I wouldn't mind if it grows completely separate from us, because then we would stand out.



Production art from *Shojo no Piero (The Doll)*, provided by D'ART Shtajio.

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Echo Bridge is making adult animation work in Florida

by Philip Mak

“Great storytelling.”

[Echo Bridge](#) founder and veteran animator Esteban Valdez keeps steering our conversation back to the importance of quality entertainment. His St Petersburg-based 2D animation studio celebrated its 10th anniversary this year and has seen business boom, in spite of the pandemic.

The team at Echo Bridge has grown, doubling to 60 staff in total — all working remotely. The studio is looking to double its 2019 workload and is already booked out through 2022, producing everything from television series to commercials to music videos to educational training. How has Valdez managed to not only survive, but thrive during uncertain times?

With an entrepreneurial spirit, Echo Bridge is broadening the scope of traditional 2D animation studios — both in terms of a diverse range of high-quality, adult-oriented productions and forward-thinking business practices. (And, yes, great storytelling.) In doing so, Valdez has attracted a wide swath of projects that are enabling him to develop a new kind of production company that refuses to be limited in what it creates.

“Animation is supposed to be the pinnacle of our artistic achievements when you take into consideration how far we’ve come, from cave paintings to motion pictures, and we like to say that it’s about ‘the story’. It’s about our connection to ideas, our culture, ourselves as human beings and the simple fact of the artist connecting with the audience,” says Valdez.

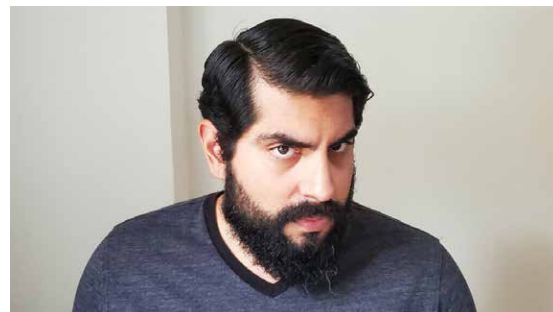
He continues, “If we look back far enough, art has and always will be a form of communication. Anima-

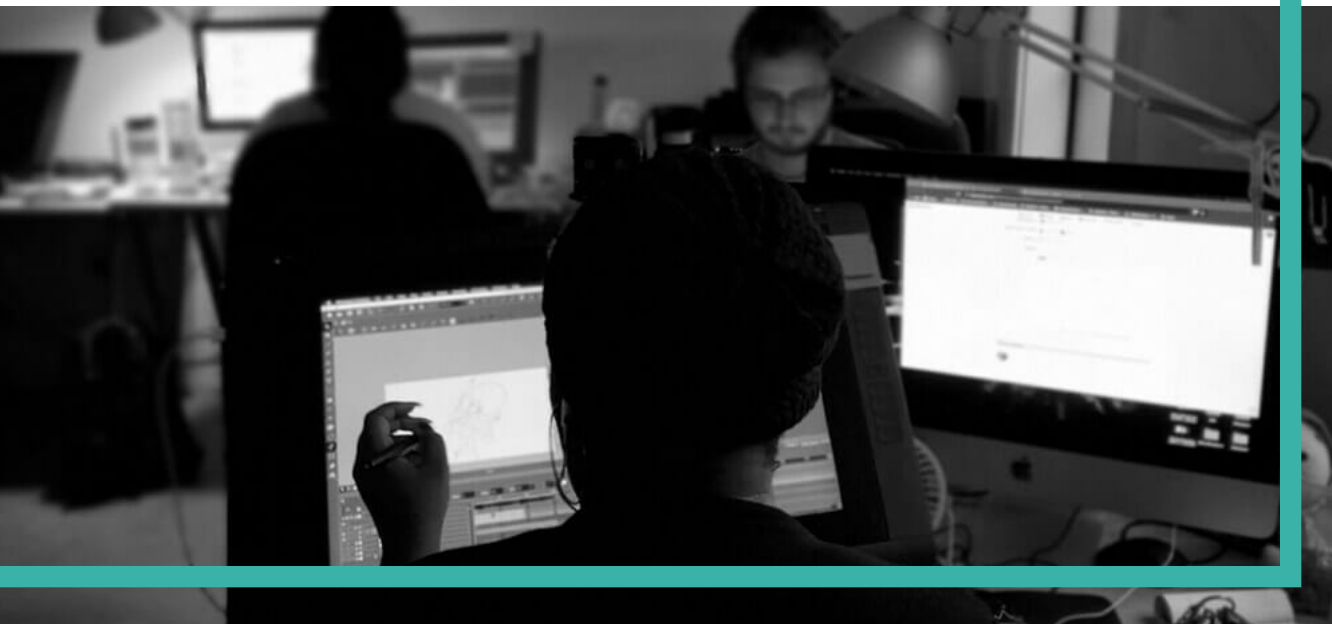
tion is able to take us to a completely different realm of thought than any other medium ever could see as we’re combining every artistic discipline from music, poetry, architecture and more, to our technological advances, cultural experiences and values to express an abstract ethereal idea visually.”

Where the Echo Bridge story started

Valdez grew up in Boston, raised in a family that did not necessarily understand earning a creative living but supported his journey. His entrepreneurial spark ignited in high school, when he started a small illustration and design company with friends. He started his animation career in 2000, mentored by James Houston and Academy Award nominee Daniel Sousa.

Joining the industry as it was making the transition from pencil and paper to digital animation, Valdez’s own life was also in flux — living out of suitcases going from city to city, state to state, production to production. Eventually, he landed an episodic director





role at FatKat Animation Studios in Canada and was able to enjoy the benefits of settling, albeit not for too long.

“I returned to the US in 2008 during the economic crash with several directing deals on the table which never came through, so I decided to take the last \$200 I had to my name and produced an animated short film that got the attention of clients, ultimately launching Echo Bridge,” recalls Valdez.

“The name is actually the street my parent’s house was on. Because I spent so much time jumping around the globe, I wanted to have a place that I could plant my metaphorical roots in. The idea was always remembering that home is where it all started from and that no matter where I am in the world, I would always have a place to go. Echo Bridge is home for me and a creative haven for others too.”

Having set up shop in St Petersburg, Valdez would like for Echo Bridge to exist there for at least 40 to 60 years — allowing his animators to work in one place for their entire careers and actually build lives in the community. Part of the appeal of the city is its high quality of life, low taxes and affordable cost of living, particularly compared to industry hubs like Los Angeles and New York City. However, Florida does not offer the same sort of tax incentives for animation productions that other states do.

After lobbying for incentive programs for over seven years, Valdez launched one of his own — the only of its kind on the East Coast. The cash-back incentive program allows Echo Bridge to offer a much more competitive rate, both for domestic and internation-

al productions, without having to meet strict state audits and parameters. By Valdez’s estimation, this has been massively beneficial for his business during lockdown and will help future-proof it for the world afterwards.

Maturing as a studio

In a North American film market dominated by 3D and CGI, committing to being a 2D animation studio can in and of itself be seen as a disruptive act. Yet for Valdez, it was simply the only option for the sort of stories he wanted to tell — those that created emotional connections with audiences in an artistic and authentic way.

“We have a longing to connect socially, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and mentally to one another, now more than ever, and while CGI has its place in the world, no one is going to connect with a graph editor. Here is where I think 2D animation is a superior medium as we know, consciously or subconsciously, where and who it came from every time we see the artist’s hand,” explains Valdez.

He continues, “Adult animation is the most authentic — animation was never really meant for children. The idea that we use this medium as ad space for plastic mostly, that’s the industry side of it. And while it has some merit, it’s an oversaturated industry. I’ve always wanted animation to grow. We have only scratched the surface of what it can do, but we never explore the topics that would really make an impactful project.”



WHERE EVERY GREAT
STORY BEGINS
Storyboard²⁰

“With adult animation, you can explore areas that are too risqué or taboo or whatever the case would be. It’s very interesting that nobody really saw the value of that 10 years ago. Maybe the Asian and European markets, but in the North American markets it’s still a foreign concept,” Valdez says.

And while he notes that many of today’s emerging studio executives are fans of anime and foreign film, it may take some time before adult animation finds its footing in North America. That is not stopping Valdez from continuing to take steps in that direction, however. Echo Bridge has broadened the scope of 2D animated content by working on a variety of projects — often with total or near-total creative control.

“We’re missing out on tremendous opportunities to really flex our creative muscle, push the limits and boundaries of our teams and pipelines. From a business perspective, mature animated productions are incredibly undervalued and the marketplace for them is massive — there is a multi-trillion dollar global audience potential that no one in North America is even bothering to look at!” exclaims Valdez.

Among his team’s recent adult productions is the first season of Fuse Media’s *Sugar and Toys*, an adult comedic take on Saturday morning cartoons geared towards multicultural Millennial and Gen Z audiences. Created by Carl Jones and Brian Ash, the show has received widespread acclaim and was renewed for a sophomore run this past April. Jones also introduced the Echo Bridge team to Malaysian singer Yuna, and they would go on to create the music video for her *Pink Youth* single.

Valdez wrote, edited and directed the *Pink Youth* music video himself, set in a dystopian where Yuna and Lil Simz, who features on the track, must restore colour to the world. Though the video seems to carry a message of diversity and self-expression, Valdez hopes that audiences interpret what they want to from the visual storytelling and highly detailed background art.

He explains, “We always try to create something that will give the audience something to think about or to talk about with others, to have a conversation with the audience, not to talk at them.”

The entire *Pink Youth* production was created in three weeks using [Toon Boom Storyboard Pro](#) and [Toon Boom Harmony](#) — speaking to Echo Bridge’s agility and nimbleness in a digital pipeline. Though it was created before lockdown, the reason why more record labels and artists are turning to animated music videos remains the same: they don’t need a big set, they can bring together singers on opposite sides of the globe and the only limit is imagination.



Still from Tropkillaz’ music video for Quem Mandou Chamar, animated by Echo Bridge.

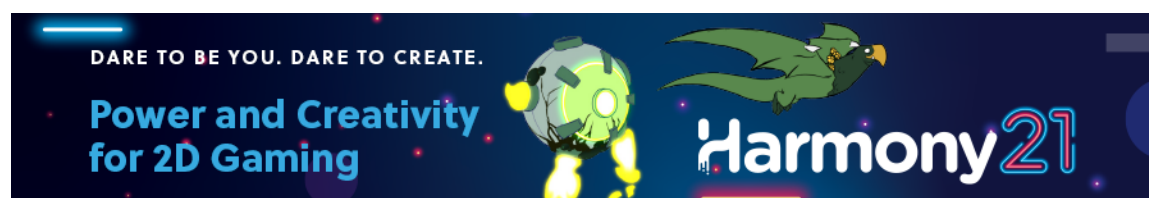
A bridge to the future of animation

Looking ahead, Valdez feels the industry will remain oversaturated — across both the studio and independent scenes. With demand for original animated content continuing to boom during lockdown, he notes creators need to stop treating animation like a commodity and focus on long-lasting productions.

“For both large and small studios, it’s a great time to be in animation in the short run, but it’s the long term where I can see larger studios destined for troubled times. A pending financial crisis, potential stagflation, production budgets may continue to shrink as wage demands increase, the workforce demographic is aging and shrinking, and a lot of what I see is something similar to the 1970s for animation where more independent productions will end up taking on a much more prominent role,” Valdez predicts.

He continues, “The long term is probably going to be much more favourable to artists and animators who take the time to build a stockpile of their own content, improve their production management skillset and know how marketing works. The bigger the marketplace grows and with the massive amount of content pouring into the streaming platforms, audiences are going to continue to look for something more tangible and personal — places like Vimeo and other self distribution outlets will help create a space for artists and audiences to connect much like a painter and a patron.”

His personal hopes looking ahead? “If people are able to look at animation as they do, you know, a Scorsese film, then we’ve really hit the money.”





Animating HIV/AIDS in the Love Me Like There's No Tomorrow Music Video

by Philip Mak

Freddie Mercury was many things: a flamboyant fashionista, an ostentatious public personality and the larger-than-life frontman of legendary British rock band, Queen. Paradoxically, he was notoriously private; the singer had contracted HIV/AIDS during the heat of the 1980s crisis and lived with it for years, though he could no longer deny how ill he was by the early 90s. On November 23, 1991, Mercury issued a statement announcing his status and calling on the world to join him in fighting the disease — he passed away the next day, aged 45.

Though Mercury has been gone for nearly three decades, his rallying cry against HIV/AIDS lives on. Following the success of the *Bohemian Rhapsody* film and in celebration of what would have been the vocalist's 73rd birthday, a 2D animated music video for his solo single *Love Me Like There's No Tomorrow* was released on November 24, 2019. Proceeds from the song supported The Mercury Phoenix Trust, a charity founded in Mercury's memory.

The *Love Me Like There's No Tomorrow* music video was conceptualized, produced and directed by Esteban Bravo and Beth David. Queen's label, Universal Music Group (UMG), reached out to the creative duo last March after seeing their viral LGBTQ animated short, *In a Heartbeat*. When speaking to the band's managers, Jim and Tilda Beach, the pair wanted to get as much information about what Mercury was like in order to envision the music video.

The directors are lifelong fans of Mercury and Queen, and identify as members of the queer community. "As LGBT people, seeing someone as legendary and revered as Freddie Mercury — so proud and flamboyant and unashamedly queer — is incredibly inspiring. He was so unapologetically himself," says David.

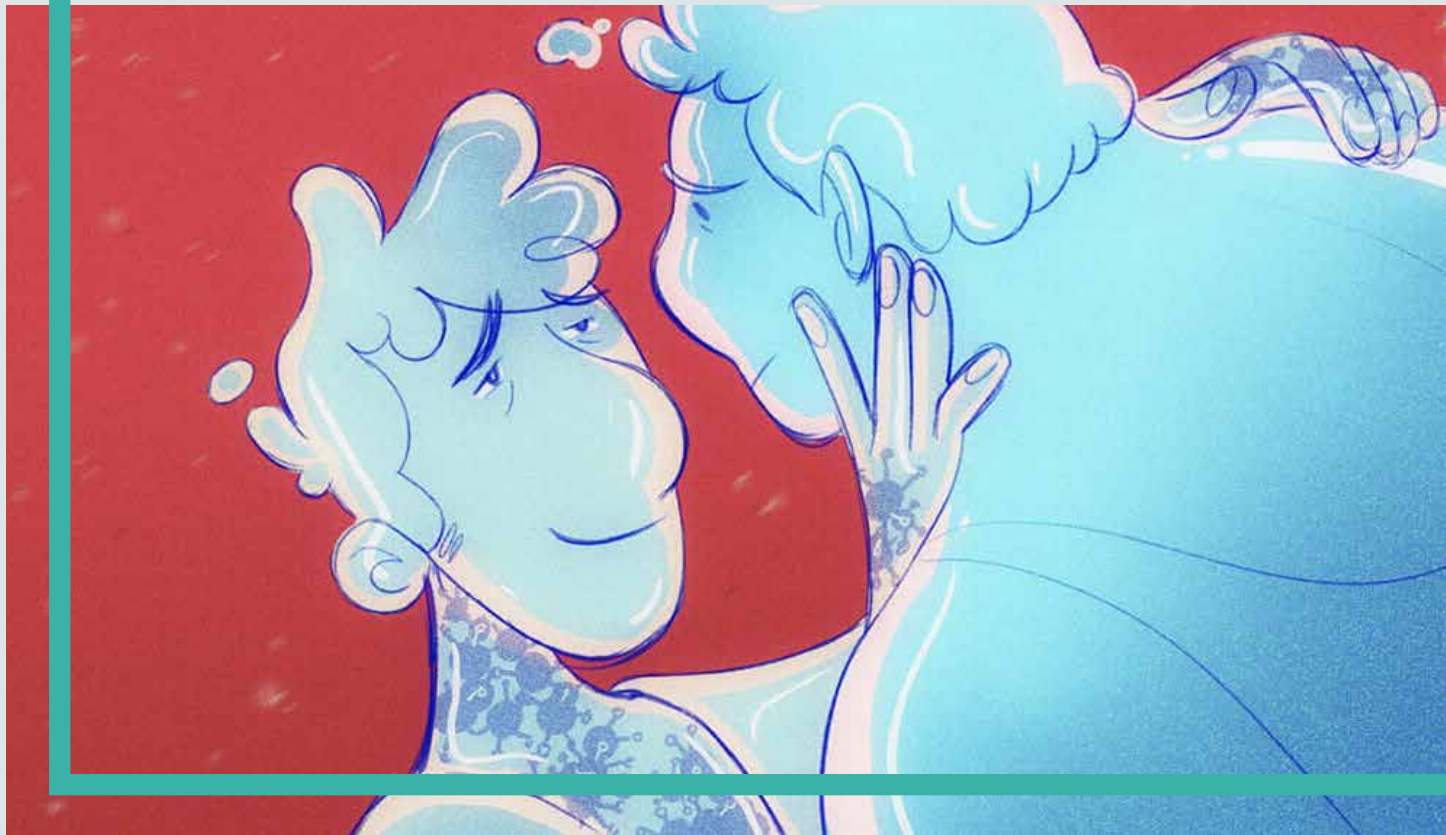
For Bravo, Mercury's music took on added relevance as he became more comfortable with his sexuality, "My mom was always a big fan, but for me Freddie

was a bit of an abstract figure until I came out in college — it put all his music into context. It helped me a lot in my whole coming out process. As we were doing [*Love Me Like There's No Tomorrow*], we looked into the 80s and Stonewall and the history and felt so much appreciation for what [Freddie] has done for visibility and acceptance; he helped change minds about LGBT people."

After researching the science behind HIV/AIDS, Bravo and David envisioned a gay love story between two white blood cells. After one of their protagonists contracts the virus, the video depicts their subsequent struggles — with each other, society and the disease itself, all styled in the 1980s garb as a nod to the crisis and Mercury's own life.

"We knew early on that we wanted to do a story on HIV, but it was only after researching the science of it that we decided to look at it from the point of view of the blood cells — to personify the spread of the disease," says David.

They needed to research HIV/AIDS in order to represent it — what it is and how it works. They poured over expert websites, podcasts and blogs catered towards people who have been diagnosed, learning both about what it was like during the outbreak of the 1980s crisis as well as the modern day.



“It was really hard to represent what the process of being infected by this virus was like, and what this virus does in taking over and debilitating your immune system until it impacts the T cells and then reproduces within the T cells and then kills the T cells. Even though that’s at a microscopic level, we wanted to represent what the disease does to the body,” notes Bravo.

Though they both specialize in computer-generated animation, Bravo and David knew from the beginning that *Love Me Like There’s No Tomorrow* should be done in 2D. With production starting in May 2019, this allowed the directors and their team of 12 animators to create the music video in three months — on top of their full-time gigs at Blue Sky Studios in New York City.

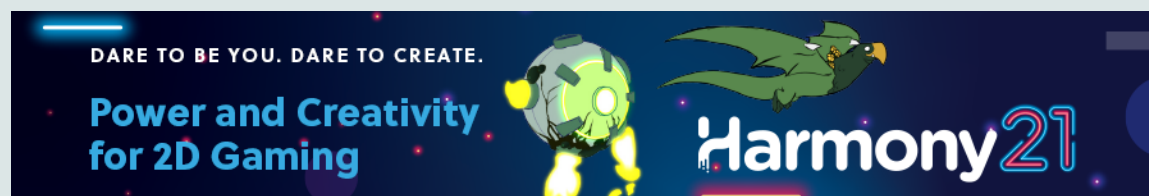
David says, “Our 2D animators did absolutely breathtaking work; we’re really happy with everything we got back from our artists. I think working in 2D allowed us to do more because we didn’t have to worry as much about the technical side of CG.”

The results were as bold, brave and beautiful as Mercury himself, explored through an evocative depiction of an authentic gay love story. Though the two main characters are T cells, their relationship and challenges are undeniably human — and heartbreaking.

By leveraging animation’s ability to suspend reality and create powerful visual metaphors, the directors produced something that could not be realized in live-action.

With animation, you already focus much more on the idea of a certain situation rather than the reality of it. In our case, the notion of the virus can be simplified into this little particle that’s taking over our main character’s lover’s body. By putting it into such simple, primal terms, it is felt so much more loudly than it was in a live-action setting — without using words and being universally understood.

Esteban Bravo





“The human versions were the real versions and we wanted to be able to show them in the present day. Hopefully people would connect with that. There’s a small detail that grounds it in reality: they’re both wearing wedding rings in the end. That means they lived long enough, at least until 2015, for gay marriage to be legalized,” explains Bravo.

With a subject as sensitive as HIV/AIDS, the directors wanted to ensure they were communicating the right message. UMG asked GLAAD to review the content, with the LGBTQ non-governmental organization giving the *Love Me Like There’s No Tomorrow* music video its full support. The response from the public has been equally positive as well, with many YouTube viewers commenting they wanted to learn more about HIV or praising its efforts in de-stigmatizing the illness.

He continues, “We wanted to develop a metaphor for what HIV and AIDS does. We created this whole world of what the inside of a blood vessel would look like and a story between two white blood cells, and we gave them human shape, form and emotions. The power of that imagination and the ability to stylize it is what elevates the medium.”

One of the most powerful elements of *Love Me Like There’s No Tomorrow* is its happy ending. (SPOILER: both characters have long, loving lives together.) Transforming the characters from young blood cells into older humans, this is a departure not only from Mercury’s life, but from the narrative that often surrounded HIV/AIDS during the crisis of the 1980s and 90s: that having the disease was a death sentence. This was a touching tribute to the fighting and suffering many had to and continue to endure, as well as further helping to de-stigmatize living with HIV.

“That was our intention from the beginning: for this to be the happy ending that a lot of people from the era didn’t get. Together, through their fight and love of one another, they were able to overcome the disease,” David tells us.

I’m just so relieved when people say that we would have made Freddie proud.

Esteban Bravo

“After [the *Love Me Like There’s No Tomorrow* music video] came out, I checked the YouTube comments and it was overwhelming that so many people were so moved by it. Even just the story itself —two people who love one another who are almost pulled apart by an illness— was something people really responded to positively,” says David.

Be sure to watch the full music video for [Love Me Like There’s No Tomorrow](#).





Broken Being: Prequel is Mature, Unmistakably Vietnamese Animation

by Philip Mak

Humid mangrove forests along the Mekong Delta, pristine beaches, impossibly vast fields — just a handful of Instagram posts Westerners have shared of Vietnam. While those postcard-perfect pictures may be great for tourism, in actuality an influx of foreign capital has propelled the country's economy to being one of the fastest-growing in the world. Vietnam's population is also rapidly shifting towards urbanization and the majority of the nine million people in its largest metropolis, Ho Chi Minh City, are under the age of 35.

Normally, these factors —large-scale foreign investment, a young population, a relatively inexpensive workforce— are fertile ground for a nascent animation industry. Yet for a variety of reasons, ranging from government censorship to a shortage of training centres, Vietnam remains largely outside the global animation market across creation and consumption, service work and original IPs.

Other countries in the [\\$52-billion Asian market](#) like South Korea, the Philippines and Taiwan have transformed themselves into service work hubs for Western and Japanese companies. The continent accounts for up to 90 percent of American television animation production, by some estimates. Given these successes, Vietnam could also see huge economic benefits by participating in the market — and empower its homegrown storytellers in the process.

One award-winning 2D studio attempting to establish itself on the global stage is DeeDee Animation. Founded in 2015 and based in Hanoi, its mission is to bring high-quality, made-in-Vietnam animation to both local and international audiences. It has a team

of 30 including story artists, concept artists, character designers, animators, background artists, writers and editors.

I think it's important for Vietnamese studios to develop their own IPs in order to grow the local industry. Our market is huge and has lots of potential that has yet to be fully explored. In order to do so, we need high-quality, locally produced Vietnamese animated films.

**Minh Ha, production manager
at DeeDee Animation**

While it has done productions for Western studios, DeeDee Animation is best known for its original 2D animated short *Broken Being: Prequel*. The 15-minute film was animated using Toon Boom Harmony and garnered worldwide acclaim on the festival circuit, including winning the Jury Award from the Vietnam Film Festival (Golden Lotus Award) and Best 2D Film at the Khem Animation Film Festival. DeeDee is distinguishing itself from other studios by not only creating service work that's being seen, but getting Vietnamese-made stories heard.



“We wanted to create something that translates and communicates traditional Vietnamese culture through animation — something that has never been done before at a high standard. That is why the film resonates with the Vietnamese audiences, both through its art style and story elements,” says Ha.

According to the [South East Asia Animation Report](#), Vietnamese animators make only around \$800 USD per month. In the region, 57 percent of studios are less than six years old and 81 percent of their staff are aged 35 and under. Only 31 percent are developing their own IPs, which makes DeeDee’s work on *Broken Being* truly exceptional.

As proven by blockbuster productions like *Ne Zha* and *The White Snake* in neighbouring China, a burgeoning middle class could also create local demand for Vietnamese animation — whether it be in cinemas or on digital streaming platforms. On top of government censorship, one of DeeDee’s biggest hurdles is overcoming perceptions about animation in Vietnam itself: that it’s only for kids.

Ha says, “While animation surely does have a strong impact on children, we believe it is a storytelling medium that can open imaginations and tell stories that connect with all kinds of audiences in ways live-action never could dream of.”

Broken Being: Prequel took three months to produce though the concept was in the works long before. Made entirely in-studio, the short follows a male protagonist in a utopian Vietnamese village seeking answers about his deceased lover — and discovering that his picturesque reality may not be real at all.

“The story comes from the hypothetical question: ‘what if the reality we’re living is not real, but a mere simulation created by higher beings?’ This was manifested within the film as the main character discovers that his wife was a clone and his whole world is an artificial product,” says Ha.

Art director Hoang Ha explains the animated aesthetic of *Broken Being*, noting the character designs were inspired by Genndy Tartakovsky’s iconic Cartoon Network series *Samurai Jack*, while the work of legendary Disney artist Eyvind Earle and traditional Asian folk art influenced the backgrounds with their larger-than-life scale.

Despite being largely Vietnamese themselves, DeeDee’s crew explored their culture and worked to animate it authentically in *Broken Being*. Ha elaborates on this point: “The sequence in the film that we are most proud of is the village’s festival at the beginning.”

The scene was inspired by traditional Lunar New Year’s festivals held in Vietnam, particularly in rural areas around the holiday season. These annual events are a mix of traditional and spiritual beliefs and practices.

DeeDee’s team focused on recreating the festivals’ atmospheres — researching their own culture in order to better represent it through animation, from architecture to fashion to ceremonial activities. In doing so, Ha notes they got to the root of many Vietnamese traditions they had known for their entire lives and developed a deeper understanding of their origins.

Ha says, “Spirituality is something that stands out in Vietnamese culture and underlies almost everything we do — from how we live to how we eat. A lot of our traditions are based on spiritual beliefs, with influences from various religions like Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.”

“When producing *Broken Being*, Vietnamese spirituality stands out as it creates such an interesting contrast with the science-fiction genre. As different as they are, they compliment each other and create something truly unique,” he continues.

The combination of cultural research and visual development was time consuming, but the results speak for themselves — a story told through small details painting a larger picture. A stand-out scene in the festival sequence is set in the shrine, where a sacred Vietnamese spiritual ceremony is depicted. To represent this, DeeDee’s artists studied the poses and movements of traditional dancers.

To bring their creative vision to life, DeeDee’s artists planned *Broken Being* in Toon Boom Storyboard Pro before animating it in Harmony. By producing the project in a seamless pipeline, the studio saved time. Additionally, Hoang notes the intuitiveness and flexibility of the tools provided in both software allowed them to refine, revise, reuse and repurpose assets easily while maintaining quality.

Hoang says, “The Harmony features our team used the most were the node view and the compositing tools. We could composite our scenes within a 3D environment and arrange our background, camera and character elements in ways that better pushed the depth. We elevated the look of the characters by adding shadows and highlights with the cutter and masking nodes, and there were also a lot of different effects provided in the program such as colour scales, bloom, blur and particles that really helped us nail a final look that felt very polished.”

He continues, “Since Storyboard Pro and Harmony are both vector-based programs, we were able to customize our output files to fit our purpose. The working files don’t take up much space in the hard drives, allowing us to work smoothly without any hiccups.”

DeeDee’s team hopes to find a distributor or investor to turn *Broken Being: Prequel* into an animated anthology series. Once this happens, the work it has put into developing the universe’s rules, backstory and visual language during pre-production will serve as guidelines in the future. In the meantime, it is building out the short’s universe through comics.

Producing work of this quality positions the studio to grow alongside the Vietnamese animation industry.

A challenge for both will be finding trained artists, which is often difficult given that many in the country simply cannot afford to purchase software. Fortunately, Ha notes that DeeDee Animation is happy to train its crew in Toon Boom.

Looking ahead, Ha explains there will still be challenges connecting with Western and Japanese studios, but there has never been more hope — particularly if the growing Vietnamese animation community works together.

“Vietnamese animation is unique in the same way Vietnam is unique. We are a country with an interesting culture, influenced by both the traditions of East Asia and the West via French colonialism. Vietnam has a dramatic history that makes us unique and I think this was translated well in the film: obviously Asian, but there’s something in there that also speaks to a wider range of international audiences.”

If there is anything to take from Broken Being, for us it is proof that Vietnamese studios can tell great stories with animation — in our very own way.

Minh Ha, production manager at DeeDee Animation

He continues, “What makes Vietnamese animation unique right now is the stories Vietnamese creators have to tell. I believe our industry’s breakthrough will come from studios collaborating to produce high-profile international projects. Those opportunities would vouch for the quality and professionalism that we offer, and position Vietnam as a production hub for global clients.”

Watch [Broken Being: Prequel](#) on DeeDee Animation’s YouTube channel.



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Taylor K. Shaw on Building Community with Black Women in Animation

by **Mike Schnier**

In 2017, Taylor K. Shaw was developing an animated series about black women living in Chicago. Shaw felt it was important to reflect her experiences, which informed her view that her project required black women creators to not only write for and voice the characters, but also design and bring them to life as well.

Every detail matters in animation. Every thoughtless cliché or recurring stereotype accumulates, and can alienate viewers that a show attempts to reach.

From her own coming-of-age watching Saturday morning cartoons, Shaw understood firsthand how important these details could be for viewers like her.

Shaw quickly encountered an obstacle: While she knew that there were black women working as animators, story artists and character designers, she found it difficult to recruit black women to fill these roles in her own production. At the time, there was no formal network and no process for drawing in animators who had lived experiences similar to the characters she needed to bring to the screen.

The lived experiences of black women in America are distinct, and this just as much a reality in the American animation industry. In June of 2019, the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, in partnership with Women in Animation, [published a report](#) about opportunities and challenges facing women in our industry — including women of colour.

The report not only found that women of colour were severely underrepresented both on-screen and behind-the-scenes in key roles — from 2007 to 2018, only three percent of the feature films sampled included a non-white woman as a protagonist, while Jennifer Yuh Nelson was the only woman credited as a solo director during that decade — the researchers also found that two-thirds of the women of colour

There would be maybe one black girl in a series, and the way she was represented, the way she spoke, the way that she was — it meant something to me. It really mattered.

Taylor K. Shaw



who participated in the study reported negative experiences while working in the animation industry.

These negative experiences included being tokenized and needing to work harder than their colleagues — or see their contributions erased. Many of those participants expressed that while they understood that their own backgrounds were valued as an asset by employers, those studios and networks are often tone-deaf about issues related to gender and race. In this environment, the participants said that being identified for opportunities related to their identities led to suspicion and negative feelings.

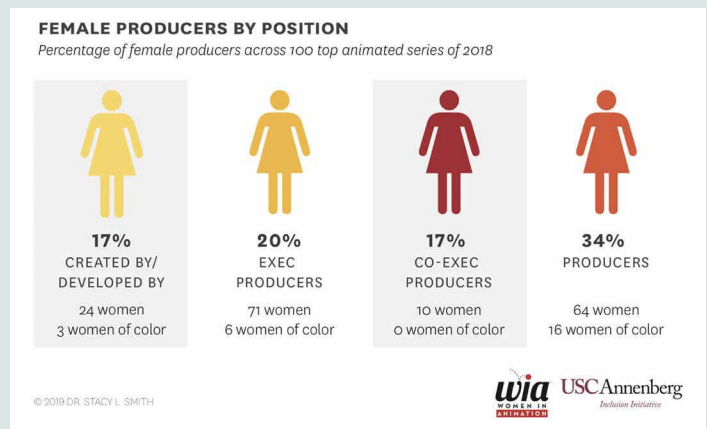
These findings rang true for Taylor K. Shaw, who told Animation From Every Angle: “A unique challenge for creator visibility in the animation industry is that the barriers to entry have been so high for women of colour — and for people of colour in general.”

Outside of Annenberg, the American animation industry, as well as the broader entertainment industry, have been under increasing scrutiny for their lack of representation. Recent public movements demanding accountability for these issues in Hollywood include [#OscarsSoWhite](#) and [#WhiteWashedOUT](#) — which address inequities and imbalances of power in narrative, casting, production credits, as well as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ membership itself.

Animation is reckoning with an additional issue around on-screen representation. In 2017, comedian Hari Kondabolu produced a documentary, *The Problem with Apu*. The documentary was critical of *The Simpsons* for having Hank Azaria voice the role of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon — linking the performance to a history of blackface and brownface in the United States. The film ultimately led to Azaria stepping down from that role. In an interview with the New York Times, [Azaria commented](#): “Once I realized that that was the way this character was thought of, I just didn’t want to participate in it anymore.”

In the current environment, studios and networks are facing two sets of pressures: First, they want to meet demand for more on-screen representation; they also do not want to unintentionally caricature broad groups of viewers. The most direct solution would be to include creators from underrepresented groups at every step in the production process, but it is easy for a studio to say that they want to be more representative — meaningful change requires persistent work.

Taylor K. Shaw saw that bringing in black women to animate her project would take real work, so she partnered with social entrepreneur and storyteller JLove Calderón to form Black Women Animate — a production company built to help black women,



WOMEN BELOW THE LINE IN TOP ANIMATED TV SERIES

Role	Women	Women of Color
Story Editor	28%	1%
Head of Editing	18%	4%
Animation Director	16%	8%
Lead Animator	20%	13%
Lead Character Designer	24%	7%
Lead Storyboard Artist	11%	3%
TOTAL	19%	7%

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WOMEN IN ANIMATION Industry Initiative



WHERE EVERY GREAT STORY BEGINS
Storyboard FOR 20



women of color, and nonbinary artists of color in the world of animation obtain visibility and find job opportunities — with input from experienced industry veterans like Sidney Clifton.

“Now we have a community of over 200 black women, girls and non-binary creatives of color who are animators,” Shaw told Animation From Every Angle.

everyone right now wants to be more diverse and inclusive, and they don't have to do it alone. Black Women Animate is here to partner — on original content, on commercial projects— to really support the entire industry in being a part of our mission of bringing true equity to Hollywood and beyond.

Taylor K. Shaw

As a young company entering into their third year, Black Women Animate has been developing a reputation as a small-but-mighty production company. The studio works with freelancers, pulling teams together based on the needs of a given production. Black Women Animate has completed commercial work for clients including Footlocker and Adult Swim, and was recently brought on for a project at a major network — in part, thanks to getting details and nuances in character designs right.

Cartoon Network partnered with the studio for the past two years to run the [Black Women Animate Bootcamp](#). The aim of this bootcamp is to connect animation professionals with Black Women Animate's community, while helping women and non-binary creatives of color hone their crafts and find paths

into the industry. Last year's event featured a portfolio-building workshop with Cartoon Network's recruiters, a conversation on owning the table with Brenda Gilbert of BRON Studios, as well as breakout sessions led by industry creatives including Shawna Mills, Halcyon Person, Stacey Evans Morgan, Kiana Khan Smith and Lynne Southerland.

BWA's sister company, Inspire Justice, co-sponsored the event and hosted a raw and unfiltered conversation about race, gender and equity in the industry with actors of the likes of Matt McGorry and Karla Souza (HTGAWM), Dawn-Lyen Gardner (Queen Sugar) and veteran writer Dayna Lynne North (Veronica Mars, Insecure), among others.


For Taylor K. Shaw, it was a dream come true: “What Black Women Animate is for me, and why the bootcamp training days are so magical, is I can see the young people realize that ‘this is a job I can do’ in a room filled with people who happen to look like them. Our bootcamp is a meaningful opportunity to invite creatives to stay connected to their dreams and to their art.”

Managing Partner JLove Calderón adds, “One of the biggest challenges facing women of color and non-binary creatives of color is access to production companies and studios who can employ them and/or whom they can pitch their original content too — our Bootcamp brings together industry execs, side by side, with our artist community. We are breaking down the walls that separate us: creating access; building bridges; getting people meaningful work doing what they love.”

“Animators are arguably the architects of our childhood. This art form provides so much space for all of us to escape and imagine more,” says Taylor. “I love the craft, personally, because it is beautiful to see so many hours of work go in, and what comes out is a product that brings us further into the minds of amazing creators. I am really inspired by all of the artists that we work with as Black Women Animate. They inspire me to create and keep creating.”

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Untangling diversity in animation with Hair Love's Matthew A. Cherry

by **Toon Boom**

Last year, sixth grader Faith Fennidy was sent home because her braids violated her New Orleans school's dress code, a week after six-year-old Florida boy C. J. Stanley was turned away from his classroom for the same reason. These are not isolated instances; African-American children have historically faced institutional prejudice towards their hairstyles, which is reinforced throughout their lifetimes by a media and beauty industry that often fail to represent them and recognize their needs. Creator Matthew A. Cherry hopes to change narratives and inspire the next generation with his animated short, *Hair Love*.

Hair Love was released in domestic cinemas ahead of Sony Picture Animation's *The Angry Birds Movie 2* on August 14. It began as a viral 2017 Kickstarter campaign, which raised over \$284,000 against a goal of \$75,000 — setting a new record for short films on the crowdfunding platform. It has also been turned into a best-selling children's book by Penguin Random House.

The animated short follows a dad who is combing through YouTube tutorials, brushing up on how to style his daughter Zuri's afro, which seemingly has a mind of its own. Cherry tells us that he wanted to represent both African-American girls with curly hair and black dads, who often get portrayed unfairly by the media. In Zuri, he also hopes to create a heroine who looks like his young audience and normalizes their natural hair.

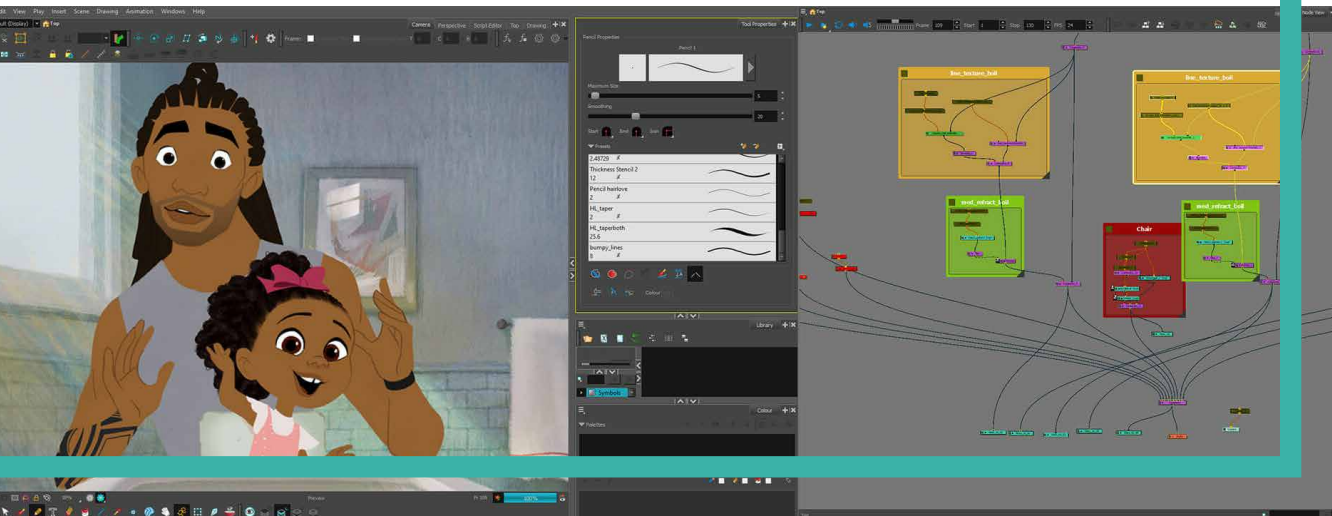
The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with Cherry recounting how people at the premiere told him this was their story, bringing their copies of the book and recreating poses from it on social media. He says, "I think the main reason [*Hair Love*] has resonated so much with the public and media is because we all can relate to having someone we love asks us to do something we don't know how to do. The mere act of you trying to figure that out is a way for you to show them how much you love them."

Cherry is a former professional football player turned filmmaker, though *Hair Love* is the first time he's tackled animation. He served as executive producer and co-director on the film, alongside Everett Downing (animator *Up*, *WALL-E*, *Brave*). Other EPs included Frank Abney and Peter Ramsey (*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*).

As artists, we are our own brands.

Matthew A. Cherry

Producers included Karen Toliver of Sony Pictures Animation, who championed the project from the beginning, as well as Stacey Newton and Monica A. Young. Toliver tells us, "One of the things I love about Sony is we're very open to exploring because people don't know what to expect from us — and we like that. I really do think *Hair Love* was a great example of finding a filmmaker who hadn't been in animation before and exposing him to it, and we're going to do a lot more of that."



Initially, Cherry was worried the story would be too small for animation given it is set in a family home as opposed to a fantastical world. To help him untangle the toon storytelling process, Cherry turned to Ramsey. He says, "I sent [Ramsey] the script right before we did the Kickstarter campaign and asked if he thought it could work in animation. He told me, 'Animation is just a medium — I think the story could work in any medium, but the fact that you have this fantastical element about the hair having a mind of its own, it does lend itself well.'"

Though Cherry originally wanted to do *Hair Love* in 3D, he discovered he could achieve much more with his budget using 2D animation. Plus, he wanted to pay homage to the hand-drawn toons he had grown up watching — particularly given the style's resurgence in popularity thanks to streaming platforms and adult comedic content.

When it came time to do the animation, Cherry and Toliver turned to Los Angeles-based studio Six Point Harness, who produced *Hair Love* in a Toon Boom Harmony pipeline.

"It was a no-brainer for us — we're always attracted to stories that are unique and new and socially relevant," says Greg Franklin, creative director at Six Point Harness.

He continues, "There's a huge market out there that's underserved for this kind of material and when something comes along like *Hair Love*, people are thirsty for it. Bigger entertainment companies are realizing there's a hunger for diverse content that they may have previously dismissed as niche."

From *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* to the live-action *Black Panther*, the correlation between diversity and dollars at the box office is getting bigger by the blockbuster. That said, even seasoned animators can discover new challenges when creating something as distinctive and unique as a semi-sentient afro.

Franklin recalls, "From a technical aspect, we had a character with voluminous hair that was very complex. As an animator, that's a lot of details that you've got to track. That itself was a big technical challenge: finding ways to depict that while keeping the quality high and the effort invisible."

"Also, as somebody who wants to bring authentic stories, I kept my ears open and sat back and listened to make sure I knew what was important to come across on screen," he continues.

This is seconded by Six Point Harness technical director Alex N. Soto, who says, "Even watching the [*Hair Love*] boards before any animation started pulled on the heartstrings. Our job was to make sure that it came through in the animation."

Soto also notes that though this was Cherry's first animated film, he was very interested and involved in the production process, and offered a balance of feedback and freedom. Because he and Sony wanted a more hand-drawn aesthetic, Six Point Harness essentially had to animate *Hair Love* twice — all on an extremely compressed schedule.

Six Point Harness' team would traditionally animate every single shot first on paper before doing it again in Toon Boom Harmony to get the essence of the scene and have everybody on the same page. From there, they could assemble a rough-cut animation to build on.

“We were able to take that and use the Toon Boom puppets with really good rigs that were above and beyond what we’d normally use for a short film. We were even able to use rigged puppets as clean-up, which helped us keep everything on model,” says Franklin.

When Cherry’s heartfelt story combined with Six Point Harness’ emotionally evocative animation, the results were nothing short of magic. *Hair Love* had already teased up a huge fan base going into theatres thanks to its Kickstarter campaign, which had developed a sense of ownership among its audience.

Bigger entertainment companies are realizing there’s a hunger for diverse content that they may have previously dismissed as niche

Greg Franklin

“It’s so hard in this marketplace to make noise and get attention — a lot of the time we have to spend marketing dollars to get people to pay attention to something. Matthew already had that connection with the audience; if he hadn’t done the Kickstarter, I don’t think we would have had this groundswell of people feeling like it was everybody’s short,” says Toliver.

When asked how he developed such a thriving fanbase, Cherry tells us, “As artists, we are our own brands. With social media, everybody that follows you is a potential supporter for whatever it is you want to do — be it selling artwork or making a movie. I made a conscious decision a year before launching the Kickstarter that I wanted to organically grow my following so that if I did something bigger, I’d have a bigger pool of people to pull from for support.”

He continues, “I also tried to engage with everybody. My advice is don’t ever think anybody doesn’t have a big enough following to support you and be very conscious of building up your social media following, because they go hand in hand.”

Clearly, all that engagement has paid off — from *Forbes* to *Teen Vogue*, the buzz has been as big and beautiful as Zuri’s curls. Does Cherry feel he’s fulfilled his mission?



“Our goal was to inspire real change — to get young women of colour, young girls with curly hair to embrace their natural selves. Media is so powerful and when you grow up seeing television shows and magazine covers and billboards of supposedly the most beautiful people in the world but none of them look like you, that can do a lot to your self-confidence,” he says.

He finishes with, “We wanted to provide a mirror so that young people could see themselves and do the same for black dads, who tend to get a bad rap, and show that there are young men out there with tattoos and their locks in braids that are among the best fathers in the world. I think we have done a lot to change the conversation.”

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Found in translation: Esther Cheung's *In Passing*

by **Toon Boom**

Much like New York City in *Annie Hall* or Tokyo in *Lost in Translation*, Hong Kong feels like a living, emoting character in Esther Cheung's animated short, *In Passing*. The film is as much a love letter to the Cantonese port city as it is a prequel to her parents' real-life romance — telling the story of how they grew up in the same high-rise building in the 1970s without ever meeting, and set on the sweltering eve of a typhoon.

Though Cheung was born in Toronto, the connection she feels to her parent's hometown is tangible. Set in Hong Kong in 1976, her animation makes big statements in the small details, from the hints of Pepto pink that are pedestrian in the Asian city to the miniature tiles, bamboo scaffolding and flapping laundry on the exteriors of the impossibly tall, densely packed apartment buildings. Each is an Easter egg to those who appreciate the bustling metropolis — when you know, you know.

Her parents are among the tens of thousands of Hong Kong nationals who came to Canada in the decades of uncertainty leading up to the territory's handover from Britain to China in 1997. Through their journey, *In Passing* was a way for Cheung to come into contact with her own heritage and culture. Her mission was to create an animated short that would resonate with others in the diaspora, and also everyone else.

**Hand-drawn has a charm you
can't get from CG**

Esther Cheung

She conceptualized, animated and produced the piece over eight months as the final project for her animation degree from Sheridan College in the Toronto suburb of Oakville, Ontario. The film's references are less Warner Bros. and more Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*.

Cheung tells us, "I look towards film from Asia [for inspiration] — from Taiwan or Hong Kong. I look through a lot of those to get ideas for the ways those stories are told in a way that's not as formulaic."

From a plane grazing the top of her parents' building to her grandfather's reflection on a television screen, Cheung masterfully plays with lighting, shadows and colour, along with hand-drawn digital animation made using Toon Boom Harmony. Her hard work has paid off.

Her success bridges academia and awards, including the Ottawa International Animation Festival (OIAF) and the Taichung International Animation Festival (TIAF), among many others. Both inside and outside of the toon industry, Asian creators in the West are finally getting the recognition and representation they deserve — whether it's Domee Shi's Pixar short *Bao* or Kevin Kwan's book-turned-romcom, *Crazy Rich Asians*.

"I think representation in animation is 100 percent important; I think representation in general is import-



ant. There's not a lot in animation. It's predominantly dominated by the same type of person, and so a lot of characters end up being the same too. It would be nice if it reflected real life where there's a lot of diversity," says Esther Cheung.

As part of her research for *In Passing*, Cheung would go back to Hong Kong to speak with her grandmother and the remaining aunts and uncles she has there. She points out that while she does speak some Cantonese, it's a little rough due to a lack of practice. Naturally, she's learned some tricks for when she goes back.

"I definitely am not [perceived as a local in Hong Kong], but I try to fit in. I don't know how to read menus or any Chinese at all, so my parents had to help me a lot with the writing in the film," Esther Cheung tells us.

Her parents were hugely involved in the creation of *In Passing*, helping Cheung with not only her Chinese writing but also details only a local would think of — like Hong Kong's constant noise. They also pushed her to pursue animation in the first place. Having had a lifelong love of drawing, she decided during high school that a career in a related field like architecture wasn't for her.

"My dad said, 'Do art. It's clearly one of your strong suits so just go with it.' A family friend works in animation and is successful, so that also helped," Cheung recalls with a laugh.

Her father and mother buck the harmful stereotype of Asian parents in the West, who are often associated with STEM education and strict "tiger parenting"

— a term popularized by Chinese-American author Amy Chua in her book *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. For Cheung, support has led to success. Also, Canada's thriving animation market is fertile ground for a lifelong creative career in the industry.

Looking ahead, Cheung is already plotting her next creative project: an animated documentary. While she wants the film to be longer than *In Passing*, she doesn't know what the subject or style will be yet. For now, she is reading the graphic novel *Footnotes in Gaza* by Joe Sacco, which depicts two horrific incidents during the Suez Crisis, for guidance on how to journalistically translate reality into illustration.

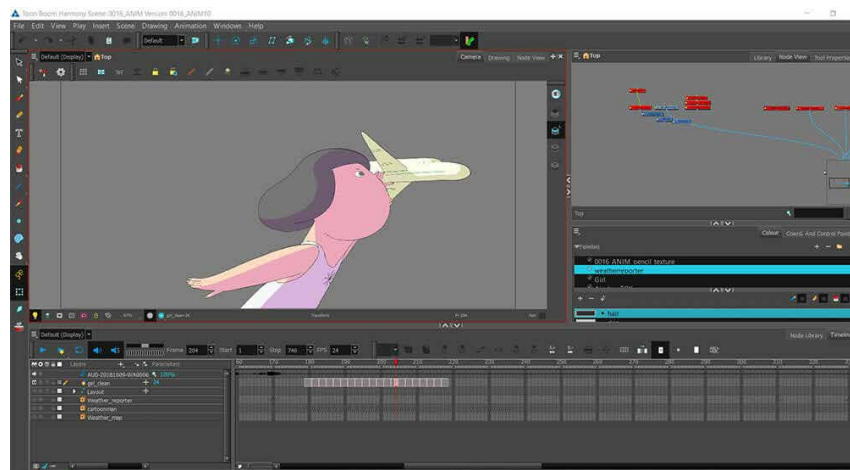
"I have a lot of ideas and they stay in my head for a really long time. I think [the animated documentary is] going to stick around for a while," says Cheung.

"For instance, with [*In Passing*] I had a mood and Hong Kong in mind when I started — and that lasted for two years. Eventually, I sat down and worked out what it could be and even more so when I was in Hong Kong."

While the small details of Cheung's animated documentary remain up in the air, a big one is certain: it will give a platform to a topic that is not normally covered and be done in hand-drawn animation.

"Hand-drawn has a charm you can't get from CG, it's definitely going to be hand-drawn," says Cheung.

She continues, "I think there's a lot of possibilities with [animated documentaries] to tell more specific and untold stories — and that's what really excites me."



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How Creator X is closing the opportunity gap in animation education

by **Toon Boom**

In the post-digital classroom, some students are taught creative career skills, including animation, using state-of-the-art tools like Wacom Cintiqs and professional software. Crash course: while talent is widely and evenly distributed, these learning opportunities are not.

Creator X was launched to bridge this gap between talent and opportunity in arts education, enabling students to pursue careers in Arts Media and Entertainment (AME). Based in Sacramento, California, the three-day annual summer camp connects 120 like-minded youth to network with each other as well as learn directly from industry professionals, workshops and keynote presentations covering six disciplines: story, music, traditional art, dance, performance and animation — entirely for free.

Camp alum Kristin Schueller recounts how this impacted her career, “Creator X gave me the confidence to explore different mediums to express my creativity. The instructors helped me to find a better direction for my future of attending art college. They also gave advice from their personal experiences in the industry that was extremely helpful to me.”

On top of these priceless life lessons, the students end up walking away from the camp with about \$1,500 worth of tools and software. Much like the program itself, the story behind Creator X is almost too good to be true.

The men behind the mentorship

Creator X was founded in 2018 by Sheldon High School (SHS) animation teacher Shawn Sullivan and his former student David Garibaldi, who has since gone on to become an internationally famous speed painter. His accomplishments include being a finalist on season seven of *America’s Got Talent*, perform-

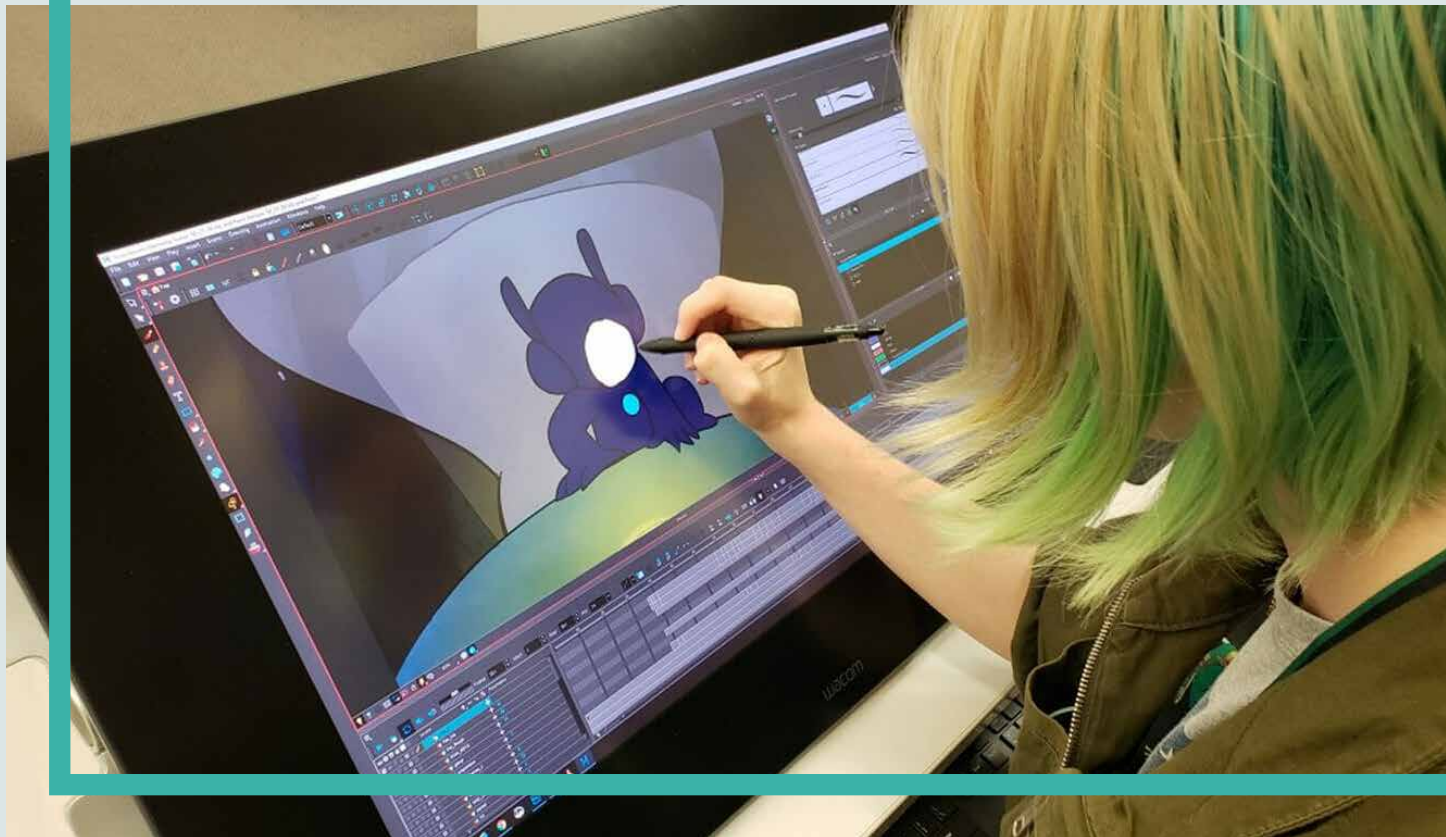
ing for the Obamas at the White House and he is currently touring with NBA half-time shows around North America.

While Garibaldi has become the face of Creator X, Sullivan has always been its heart. When he joined in SHS in 1998, he launched the school’s animation program — a feat that had never properly been done anywhere in America before.

“The big push right now is STEM — Science, Technology, Engineering and Math. There’s an area being left out, which is the arts and creativity. It’s great that we focus on STEM, but if we don’t teach and encourage kids to be creative, they’re just going to regurgitate what they’ve learned in a classroom as opposed to coming up with new concepts,” explains Sullivan.

He continues, “Art isn’t the only way to teach creativity, but I feel it’s one of the strongest. So teaching animation and creativity is very important, not just for the kids, but for the world in general. If we’re going to ask these kids to go forward and solve world problems, we need to make sure that they have the creative skills to do it.”

Today, the SHS animation program covers techniques across 2D, 3D and VR, teaching everything from the basics to basically professional. Sullivan has made it a point to incorporate talks and workshops from industry leaders into his K9 Studios, with the goal of reviving apprentice-style teaching that educates and empowers his students to work in the real world.



Much like the values of giving back and knowledge sharing he teaches his students, mentorship was essential to Sullivan's own story. He graduated from UC Davis with a degree in fine arts under the tutelage of the international artist Wayne Tebow. When he was 23, he met David Feiss (creator of Cartoon Network's *Cow and Chicken*), who introduced him to animation as a career just as he was getting his teaching credentials.

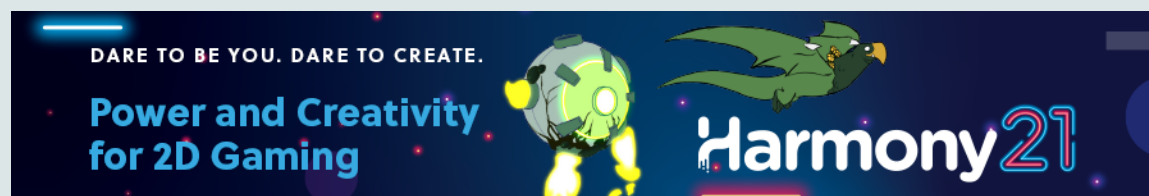
Instead of choosing between his love of toons and teaching, Sullivan resolved to marry the two. The resulting program has received top marks from students, parents and the industry. His pupils' work has been picked up by HBO, won National Television

Academy Awards and a Regional Emmy Award, and his course was named the best high school animation program in the world by the Walt Disney Family Foundation.

Sullivan says of the honour, "I didn't know it was a competition. [The Walt Disney Family Foundation] kept showing up, bringing people to come see what I was doing. And then later they announced I was in the running against a program in China and another one in Southern California, and they declared mine was the best. It was a huge honour."

Today, he is working with 13 different schools to replicate the program for them. Going back to the beginning though, Garibaldi was one of his first students in the late 90s — a core group Sullivan calls his "old men." In those days, the prof barely had any equipment, software or hardware, and pupils often had to work from his personal home computer to finish films. When he first met Garibaldi, the latter was what Sullivan likes to call an "aerosol artist."

Sullivan told him, "If you keep doing what you're doing with the graffiti work, you're going to pay for it eventually. But if you want to get paid for doing it, come see me." David followed me immediately into my classroom asking, 'What do you mean get paid? What do you do?' I told him, 'If you want to work





with me, you need to stop doing the illegal stuff and I'll start showing you how to take what you're doing and put it in a positive direction.' Everything I taught him in my class, from animating to editing to sound to storytelling, is part of his show today."

Sullivan continues, "He worked hard and eventually, when he graduated, he started trying to figure out what he could do with it. He kept creating and designing his work. Eventually, he started coming up with how to incorporate all those things I showed him and it's in the show he does today. He would tell you he'd probably have been in jail; he changed his life by walking into an animation class."

Taking Creator X from X-tracurricular event to X-traordinary impact

Over the last 20 years, Sullivan's mentorship has evolved into a partnership with Garibaldi — and thus, Creator X. In fact, as the program has grown, it seems the roles have occasionally reversed.

Hesitant about taking a leap forward with the program, Sullivan recalls how Garibaldi used his own words against him, "'So what's stopping you? What's holding you back? You need funding and what's stopping you? Why is funding stopping you?'"

"He's like, 'Hey, if you really want to do this, you find a time, we'll find the funding and we'll make sure this gets out to the kids.' And so he came in and did seed money for us and got us up and running."

Together, they are leveraging arts education and animation to make a difference in the lives of students in the Sacramento area, though they aspire to see it replicated around the state, country and world, eventually.

"If you go to my classroom, it's outfitted like a professional studio with software like Toon Boom, and then I have full-sized Cintiqs and students have all this high-end computer stuff to work with," says Sullivan.

He continues, "But if I drive two miles in any direction, I'm in the boundaries of a whole other school. And when I went to go visit those teachers who wanted to start animation programs, their kids were drawing with a mouse and they didn't have any animation software. So the idea was to start advocating to ensure [proper] tools got into other schools and in other programs."

Art isn't the only way to teach creativity, but I feel it's one of the strongest.

Shawn Sullivan

This classroom work is done under the Animation Intern Program, a separate initiative Sullivan set up. He aims to provide his fellow educators with training, curriculums and lessons, workplace learning opportunities and access to industry professionals. Given the red tape many teachers face, Sullivan has also found loopholes to get his program into other school districts including creating a company to make it easier for schools to bring in animation pros.

It's this determined boldness from Sullivan and Garibaldi that's given Creator X its X factor. And while the results of the program speak for themselves, students are always happy to say something as well.

Recent Creator X participant Aiden Petersen reflected, "Creator X helped me become more confident in my art. It taught me how to get more into character, and become more expressive so that other people could appreciate my art — how to create a good story, that people would understand and enjoy. I learned to be loud and excited and to have a good attitude about everything. I don't think I just learned art skills at Creator X, I also learned life skills."

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Five in Focus' The Butterfly Affect puts women in key creative roles

by Toon Boom

Fairness and equality are common themes in children's animation — though you wouldn't necessarily believe it if you looked at the industry. A widely circulated study by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and advocacy group Women in Animation (WIA) found that in the last 12 years, women represented just three percent of animated film directors and only one of those filmmakers (*Kung Fu Panda 2*'s Jennifer Yuh Nelson) was a woman of colour.

According to WIA, women occupy just 20 percent of creative roles in animation, representing 10 percent of producers and directors, 17 percent of writers, 21 percent in art and design, and 23 percent of animators. The proof is in the productions: more efforts must be made to turn our society's principles into progress.

Five in Focus is a year-long program improving gender equity in the animation industry. Designed by Women in Animation's Vancouver Chapter and Women in View, five women were nominated to represent key positions in the market where women are traditionally underrepresented — aiming to advance their careers through extensive mentorship from the WIA community, exposure to a wide range of industry activities, master classes, pitch training and more.

The women selected for Five in Focus include director Stephanie Blakey, writer Jen Davreux, producer Amanda Konkin, animation director Kaitlin Sutherland and art director Maisha Moore. The program also provided them with the financing to create a 2D animated short, *The Butterfly Affect*. The film follows a worm trying to make its way in a world built for butterflies — relevant, right?

The Butterfly Affect took its inaugural flight at the Mothers of a Medium program on October 27 at the SPARK ANIMATION 2019 Film Festival, with all five women in attendance. We spoke to them ahead of the premiere to explore why they are passionate about animation, their experiences in the industry and in the Five in Focus initiative, and how they believe the market can be improved for other women.



Five questions with the Five in Focus



Stephanie Blakey, director

Stephanie Blakey is a storyboard artist at Atomic Cartoons in Vancouver, where she has worked on the Netflix series **Cupcake and Dino** and **The Last Kids on Earth**; the previous short she directed, **The Last Resort**, was an animated comedy-horror that won the Audience Award at the Austin International Film Festival and was screened on the international festival circuit. After attending Emily Carr University for animation, she obtained her Master's degree in Directing Animation from the National Film and Television School in England and has television series training from La Poudrière in France.

Why do you love animation?

I love how you can tell so many stories in so many incredibly different ways — I'm always surprised by animation and what's possible. I also love the amount of control one has over a film; every single thing is tailored specifically in an animated film and every decision has a reason. Animation is not a genre, it's a medium. You can create the corniest of comedies or the darkest of dramas and use every part of the animation process to enhance the experience.

What's your experience been like as a woman in the animation industry?

Overall, it's been great! I find that there are tons of women or women-identifying folks in the animation industry, so it's definitely not the boys' club it used to be. There are still times where I'll have to point out problematic things to men while on the job, but I'm incredibly lucky in that they've all been kind, understanding and easy to approach. Sometimes you may feel hesitation to speak up, but at the end of the day if what you say or point out will have a positive effect on the final outcome, say it — chances are they'll listen and know better for next time.

In your opinion and experience, what else can be done to make the animation industry more accessible to women?

The simple answer is to hire more women! Having more women or women-identifying people in the workforce will ensure that they hire others and so forth. Also, if you're a male in the animation industry and women or women-identifying people approach you with questions or concerns: listen to them — especially if you're in a place to help out. The very least you can do is listen.

What has been your favourite part of working on *The Butterfly Affect*?

There have been so many things. If I had to narrow it down, I'd say that it was being able to meet and work with the other four women. I've learned so much from each of them and have the utmost respect for their work, and am so proud of how far they've come and how far they'll go.

How has being part of Five in Focus helped you advance professionally?

I'm still submitting [*The Butterfly Affect*] to film festivals around the world so there may be more professional advancement to come. I've already been offered a promotion to the position of storyboard supervisor [at Atomic Cartoons] and am absolutely thrilled to have more creative input at my day job. It was also mind-blowing to think that for years I'd been attending the Annecy festival as a hobby, but this year my team and I were there as speakers at the Women in Animation World Summit. I'll be singing praises for the Five in Focus initiative for years to come.

Amanda Konkin, producer

Amanda Konkin has a masters degree from the University of British Columbia and, after a decade producing in theatre and digital media, she transitioned into film and television in 2013. She is currently a production manager at Rainmaker Studios, though her extensive credits list includes **Reboot: The Guardian Code** for Netflix, **Surfs Up 2: Wavemania** (Sony) and **The Switch** for OutTV.

A promotional banner for 'The Animation Study'. On the left, there is a stylized logo consisting of a purple triangle, a pink rectangle, and a teal circle. To the right of the logo, the text 'The Animation Study' is written in white. Further right, the text 'You can Animate in Harmony' is written in large white font, with '\$35USD for 18 videos (annual access)' in smaller purple font below it. The background is black with several colorful geometric shapes (pink, purple, teal) scattered around.



Why do you love animation?

After I started working in film, I found my way into animation in 2015 and fell in love with the medium. I grew up with Disney as a cornerstone of my childhood —the first movie I ever saw in a theatre was *The Little Mermaid* — and those animated stories were so formative in my early years. I'm so pleased to be able to work in this industry now and help tell stories for young audiences, and shape their formative experiences.

What's your experience been like as a woman in the animation industry?

I feel very supported as a women in the animation industry. Organizations like Women in Animation and Women in View help me recognize that there are so many women who have come before me that worked hard to form a supportive community that I am lucky to be a part of. It's nice to find similar stories and experiences in such a male-dominated industry and I am grateful to have worked with such amazing people in my past projects.

In your opinion and experience, what else can be done to make the animation industry more accessible to women?

Create a culture of acceptance and support. It's important that studios work to support women in important creative roles. If you are a woman getting into the industry, find a community, a colleague or a mentor that will help you get through and find your voice. Support the success of your peers and realize that we all have the power to raise each other up through our personal accomplishments!

What has been your favourite part of working on *The Butterfly Affect*?

Working with the other women! We have a Google Chat group that we all communicate through regularly and if I'm having a particularly stressful day or if something really great happens, I have the impulse to jump on the chat and share with the team. It's really incredible to have built this sense of camaraderie and even though we are working towards something tangible together, it's these moments and relationships that I will remember most fondly.

How has being part of Five in Focus helped you advance professionally?

The Five in Focus program has been great in helping mentor us through our own IP creation and providing amazing resources, sponsors and technology for us to utilize during our film production. We have made some amazing connections and the knowledge I have gained throughout the project has already had a huge impact on my other creative projects. After this project is completed, I will be working towards the delivery of a live-action short film called *H.appiness* that was awarded the National Harold Greenberg Shorts-to-Features Grant.



Maisha Moore

Maisha Moore is a Vancouver-based designer and illustrator, currently working at Cinesite as a development art director. A graduate of Capilano University's 3D Animation program, she has switched her career's focus from CG modelling, shading and texturing to design — now creating everything from toy packaging to imaginary worlds within feature films.



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Why do you love animation?

I love to draw and was drawn to animation from an early age. The art of storytelling through a hand-created visual medium is nothing but magical. I knew I wanted to be in the industry in some capacity by the time I was 14.

What's your experience been like as a woman in the animation industry?

I have had a good, respectful experience thus far in my career, but I know that is not everyone's experience.

In your opinion and experience, what else can be done to make the animation industry more accessible to women?

I think we need way more exposure of the non-drawing jobs for women who are talented in other areas beyond purely visual art or animation. We so often focus on art — people perceive the industry as being for visual artists only. Studios don't run without writers, accountants, IT techs, coders, coordinators, producers and human resource managers, to name a few. I feel we need more women in these roles.

What has been your favourite part of working on *The Butterfly Affect*?

I loved working with our small team. Creatively you can change direction very quickly, problem-solve on the fly and chop up and redirect the pipeline at a moment's notice. This causes chaos on long-format studio productions. It was very exciting to be able to switch things up and work in this agile way.

How has being part of Five in Focus helped you advance professionally?

The Five in Focus program has been great, I am now a production designer. The program has made me want to develop my ideas and art more. I want to create passion projects and spread more art.



Jen Davreux, writer

Originally from a small town in the Okanagan, Jen Davreux is a storyboard artist, independent comic artist and writer in the big city of Vancouver where she is pursuing a career in animation. She developed a passion for drawing and storytelling at a young age, and beyond her writer role at Klei Entertainment, she currently co-writes a webcomic titled *Go, Titan X!* and has recently begun plugging her words into video games.

Why do you love animation?

Animation is such a creative medium and I was always drawn to the idea that you could create worlds and characters entirely from scratch. It has a unique way of simplifying and amplifying movement and emotion to give you a feeling that you just can't replicate in live-action. There was an incredible boom of action shows with awesome female leads when I was a kid — *Kim Possible*, *My Life As a Teenage Robot*, *Sailor Moon* — and I think they really sparked my imagination for the kind of stories I wanted to tell.

What's your experience been like as a woman in the animation industry?

There's been some happy surprises and some not-so-happy ones. The first happy surprise was finding out there were actually many more women interested in animation than I'd been led to believe when I'd been applying for schools; in my program, we actually made up the majority of the students. I also feel like I've been very lucky to work with a lot of directors and supervisors who actively wanted to help me and women in general grow and be a part of the industry.



WHERE EVERY GREAT
STORY BEGINS
Storyboard_{PRO}20

The biggest frustration I always found animation actually caught me off-guard when I first encountered it, and that was with the content we were —and weren't— producing.

I noticed that whenever I'd draw a female character frowning or showing frustration, I'd get a note back from the clients along the lines of "she looks too 'bitchy'" or "please change this to have her smiling", with no such notes for the male characters.

Jen Davreux

When I pitched an idea for a show I had, I was thrilled to get called back to discuss moving forward with it until they told me that they thought the roles of the lead girl and her sidekick male friend should be switched to put the boy in the lead. I was told a girl lead in an action-comedy series wouldn't sell and was given an example of a single show with a female lead that hadn't done well the previous year. All I could think of were the many female-led shows I had grown up with that had inspired me to go into the animation industry.

In your opinion and experience, what else can be done to make the animation industry more accessible to women?

I've been seeing a push recently to see more women and girls onscreen, and I think that's definitely a big step in the right direction. It was one of the things that inspired me and made me feel like the animation industry would be a welcoming place, and I know it will do the same for a new generation of girls.

What has been your favourite part of working on *The Butterfly Affect*?

Early on, when I sat down to write my first draft of the script, I had a moment of, "Wow... I'm writing something that's actually going to be animated and turned into something" and I was just giddy. I've also been able to meet a lot of really amazing

people—including the four incredible ladies I got to work with—that I most likely wouldn't have had the chance to otherwise.

How has being part of Five in Focus helped you advance professionally?

It really helped to push me and change my mindset. I felt my attitude change from, "I really want to be a writer, but I'm not sure if I'm ready or good enough," to: "I am a writer, I've already proven that I can do it and now I just need to find a job!" Knowing that I had such strong support from everyone connected to Five in Focus and Women in Animation also felt like this gentle hand on my back keeping me moving forward, without fear of stumbling. Having a credit to my name gave me more confidence to go out and apply for writing positions, and I found people reached out to me as well after seeing my name connected to the program.

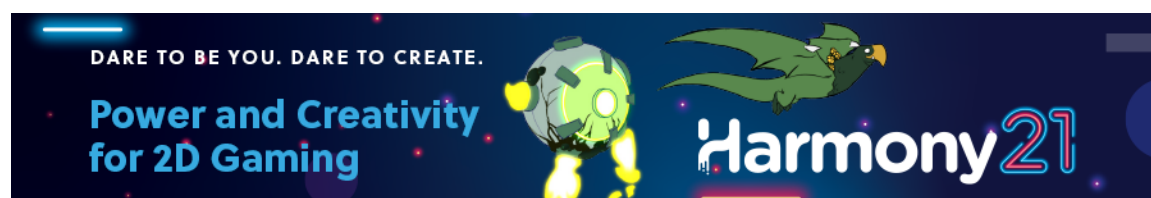
Kaitlin Sutherland, animation director



Sutherland is a 27-year-old animator living and creating in Vancouver, British Columbia. A graduate of Sheridan College, she currently works at WildBrain where she has risen the ranks from layout artist to animation supervisor, overseeing productions including *Dorg VanDango* and Netflix's *Chip and Potato*.

Why do you love animation?

Animation is the very literal manifestation of my imagination — things that are impossible to achieve in reality, scenarios and characters that could not exist outside the bounds of our minds are given life



through the art of animation. I grew up watching a lot of cartoons. The stories, the colours, the movement, everything about them captured my attention completely. It was while watching the making-of feature on my *Lilo and Stitch* DVD that I first realized there were people behind the animation I loved and that they got paid to make it! It was obvious to me from that point on that working in animation was a definite career goal for me.

What's your experience been like as a woman in the animation industry?

Honestly, I don't think there's been a better time in animation's history to be a woman. Certainly there are still areas where the divide between the genders seems quite large, specifically the lack of female directors or women in higher roles not relating to production support. I'm currently working on Dorg VanDango, a Cartoon Saloon and Wildbrain co-production with an all-female animation supervisor team! It's awesome having so many talented women in one room working together to make a show, however this is a 2D production and I believe these roles are still fairly male dominated on the 3D side of things. I'm very glad that the Women in Animation, Women in View and Five in Focus program exist to help highlight talented women in this industry and help even the divide in leadership roles.

In your opinion and experience, what else can be done to make the animation industry more accessible to women?

Continuing to support programs like WIA's Five in Focus would be an amazing way to continue to highlight up-and-coming female talent and give women the opportunity to move into the roles they may be overlooked for in their day to day jobs. I truly believe that the exposure from this program is going to go a long way in adding some extra support behind my desire to move into higher roles in the industry. With or without the program, I want to highly encourage the women in this industry to go for the jobs they want.

I feel like a lot of young women are taught to be overly cautious and hesitant about speaking up lest they seem like they're bragging or being overbearing in some way, but I'd really like to encourage my fellow female artists to speak up and believe in themselves.

What has been your favourite part of working on *The Butterfly Affect*?

The learning experiences and the travel opportunities are definitely my favourite parts of working as part of *The Butterfly Affect* team. Now that the film is done, I can safely say I knew next to nothing about how to put together a short film of this caliber. Of course I've made a short film on my own in the past, but it's a whole different story when you've got so many artists to keep track of, a crazy amount of high profile sponsors and are planning on tackling the festival circuit once the film is completed. The whole process has opened my eyes to how many moving pieces there really are under the surface of making a short.

It would be a shame not to see more talented women stepping into higher roles because they were too shy to say they could do it. You can do it, I believe in you.

Kaitlin Sutherland

How has being part of Five in Focus helped you advance professionally?

The animation director title sure looks pretty on my resume [*laughs*]. Honestly, having worked as an animation director on this film for the better part of a year has made me question if this is the next step I want to take in my career — I had to wear A LOT of hats during this production, so many in fact that it really lead me to question what exactly fell under the job description of animation director and it definitely wasn't what I expected.

Being on such a small production team, we all had to step into a lot of roles to get this film done; asking around though, it really seems like the role is different depending on what the production needs. I'd love to be able to say that this film immediately launched me into my dream animation director position, but if the opportunity to do so arose, I'd feel a lot more comfortable stepping into that role now than I would have been before this project.



WHERE EVERY GREAT
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The Bravest Knight: Daniel Errico's quest for LGBTQ children's media

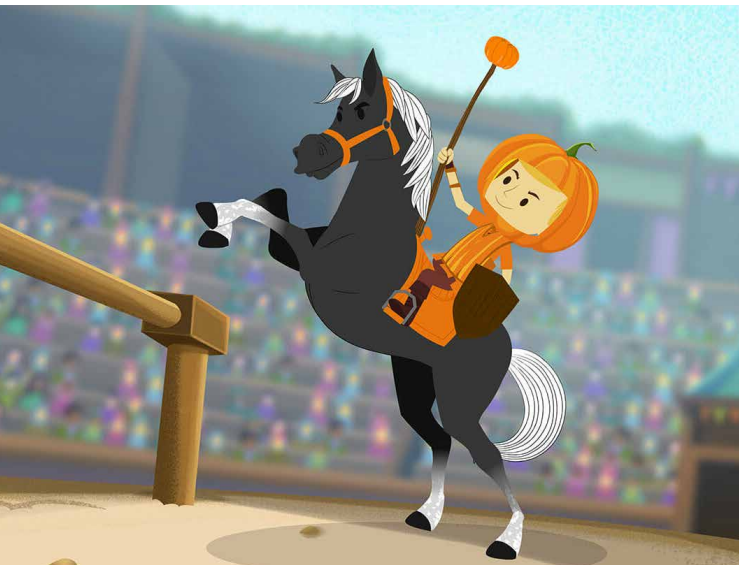
by **Toon Boom**

Once upon a time, generations of people of colour and the LGBTQ community grew up without seeing themselves represented in children's media — whether in illustrated books or on screen. Modern creators faced a challenge greater than any dragon: How to show more kids that they can be the heroes of their stories? New York City-based author and producer Daniel Errico had the courage to rise to the occasion with his Hulu animated series, *The Bravest Knight*.

Based on Errico's 2014 book *The Bravest Knight Who Ever Lived*, the children's television series follows Sir Cedric (voiced by T.R. Knight) — a pumpkin farmer turned knight who has found his happily ever after married to Prince Andrew (Wilson Cruz) with whom he has a 10-year-old adopted daughter, Nia (Storm Reid). The show has also attracted guest stars including RuPaul, who is voicing a Big Bad Wolf in (traditionally) women's clothing, and Wanda Sykes as Mona the Mayor.

According to Hulu, Cedric is training Nia to follow in his armoured footsteps by sharing “how he transformed from day-time farmer to full-fledged knight” and in the process teaches her “important values such as honor, justice and compassion.” The 13-episode first season of *The Bravest Knight* premiered with five episodes on June 21, with the rest released on October 11.

Children's media and animation play [an essential role in building empathy](#) — particularly at a time when diversity is met with divisiveness. [A recent GLAAD](#) study found young people in the US were significantly more uncomfortable with LGBTQ individuals than they were a few years ago. On-screen representation can play a large role in how groups of people are perceived and how children see themselves.



Why are we slowly tip-toeing towards progress when we're fully capable of making great strides quickly?

Daniel Errico



Aimed at a preschool-and-above audience, *The Bravest Knight* is one of the first children’s shows in history to feature an openly gay main character. Additionally, the protagonist and his husband are in a biracial relationship with an adopted daughter of a different ethnicity.

The [GLAAD Where We Are on TV Report 2018](#) notes that LGBTQ representation on television hit a record high last year, with 8.8 percent of series regulars openly identifying as gay, trans or queer. Among those mentioned, people of colour outnumbered white characters for the first time ever. While many now celebrate this level of diversity, for creator and producer Errico the quest to getting Sir Cedric’s story told was harrowing — fraught with publishers, studios and broadcasters afraid to support children’s media with LGBTQ-positive messaging.

“I spent a long time trying to get people to pick [*The Bravest Knight*] up and I honestly couldn’t even give it away for free — people were so scared of having an openly gay protagonist,” Errico tells us.

“Eventually I had a call with Hulu and it was like the clouds parted. They understood the importance of a message like this and wanted more content like [*The Bravest Knight*] and were willing to publicly support it.”

Representation in series like *Steven Universe’s* wedding between Ruby and Sapphire and *The Loud House’s* couple Howard and Harold McBride have

been met with largely positive responses. While this is proof there has been progress, there has also been pushback. The marriage of Mr. Ratburn to his husband on an episode of *Arthur* earlier this year was widely celebrated on social media, though Alabama Public Television refused to air it as they felt it was a breach of “trust” with their viewership.

Faced with similar barriers throughout the pitching process, Errico thought: “Why are we slowly tip-toeing towards progress when we’re fully capable of making great strides quickly? It is absolutely possible to give proper representation tomorrow if we choose. Why hold back when there are kids today who need to see those characters?”

While Errico himself identifies as a heterosexual cisgender man, he has compassion for the struggle of the LGBTQ community and is passionate about storytelling. A mechanical engineer by training and former investment banker, he quit his job to pursue his dream of working in children’s media. Having noticed a lack of diversity on-screen, he is especially inspired by the stories that haven’t been told before.

“Children’s media was something I always wanted to do but never thought was practical. Then, I reached a certain age and realized it was what I wanted to do with my life and also how much the things I had watched and read growing up had affected me in a meaningful way,” says Errico.

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He continues, “That was one of the most inspiring thoughts I ever had: that a book I read as a child shaped my views as adult. This is a way to reach someone that profoundly affects them for the rest of their life and I wanted to be a part of that.”

The Bravest Knight was partially inspired by two gay friends of Errico’s who had a fairy tale romance, though their love wasn’t represented in any children’s books. This led him to create the e-book *The Bravest Knight Who Ever Lived*. Knowing the story didn’t end there, he self-financed a short animation with the help of an artist in Denmark.

Errico is a lifelong animation fan and has dreamed of telling a story arc across an entire season. Given the fantastical nature of fairy tales, the medium also has less limits than live-action when it comes to breaking the rules of physics.

“I think animation is the most engaging form of storytelling we have right now, when it’s done right,” says Errico.

He continues, “With animation, you get to spark kids’ imaginations in ways you otherwise couldn’t. Kids are already primed and ready for their imaginations to run wild. Animation makes it a little easier to bridge the gap between what they’re seeing and what they can think about in their heads.”

Eventually, he connected with the New York City- and Vancouver-based Big Bad Boo animation studio, who work on productions that promote messages of inclusivity and diversity. They found the fact that *The Bravest Knight* had two gay dads inspiring rather than intimidating, and set out to redesign the characters and prepare for the “Pitch Your IP” session at MIP-COM in 2017. From there, they got the green light from Hulu and the rest is history.



“I get messages on a daily basis from kids, parents, family members who just can’t wait for more episodes,” says Shabnam Rezaei, co-founder of Big Bad Boo, in an interview with [Animation Magazine](#).

She continues, “I think the loveliest messages though are from same-sex parents who finally feel like they have a place to take their kids where they feel normal and all along, those were the people I thought about and think about most. I am ecstatic about that.”

As streaming platforms like Hulu not only multiply but also become more multicultural and inclusive in their representation on-screen and behind the scenes, one can hope LGBTQ-friendly children’s entertainment will be more the norm than the exception. This is thanks to the true knights in shining armour like Daniel Errico and the team at Big Bad Boo, who have paved the way for future creators to get their stories told.

When asked if he had any advice for others hoping to pitch their projects, Errico says, “If you tell the story you want to tell, there’s a strong chance someone else will want to as well. Also, always create. To have your dream fulfilled, you have to put yourself out there — the better you get at that, the bigger advantage you have over everyone else.”

He finishes with: “My advice would also be to actively seek rejections because each one gets you closer to your goal and more immune to them. If you’re the person who can take a ‘no’ and brush it off and move on quickly, you will be a force to be reckoned with. Something I learned early on is people who tell you they don’t like something don’t speak for the world or the market or your audience — they don’t speak for anyone else other than themselves. There’s something very comforting about that.”

While we aren’t quite at ‘happily ever after’ yet when it comes to LGBTQ representation in animation, creators are turning the page on a new chapter. For the next generation, that is not only progress, but promise.

