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MISS-ADVENTURES:
FANTASY AND FRIENDSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF ANIMATION

by

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B.F.A. New York University, 2014

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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ABSTRACT

Friendship is not always magical, as the protagonists learn in *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*. In this buddy-comedy set in a magical fantasy world, the titular characters are two teenage girls who go on epic quests and cause mischief. Many aspects of the story went through changes during the production of this hand-drawn animated short film. However, the main characters and their chaotic friendship remained consistent throughout the animation process. While developing this film, I noticed that my peers responded positively when I referenced my Ashkenazi Jewish heritage in various story elements. The film's artistic style was heavily inspired by early 20th-century Russian artist Ivan Bilibin, who illustrated Eastern European folktales and fairytales. I also studied the work of other Art Nouveau-inspired artists, such as Charles Vess, with the goal of creating a 2D animated film with a youthful storybook feeling. As the film became more personal, it also became more engaging and emotional. This film has allowed me to examine my own beliefs about friendship, reflect on my Jewish identity in the context of animation and fantasy, and take audiences on a haphazard adventure in a world of magic and monsters.

The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/421744704> using “missadventures2023” as the password.

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In loving memory of Mili Dawai. From Fiji to the United States of America, she was a loving and caring presence in the lives of so many people.

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INTRODUCTION: THE IDEA FOR MISS-ADVENTURES

The original concept for my graduate thesis film came to fruition as I imagined a royal and a wizard, like Arthur and Merlin, as two 13-year-olds going on adventures and getting into trouble. This idea evolved into *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*. This film is a buddy-comedy set in a fantasy world that addresses the topic of friendship within the context of animation, cinema, and the fantasy genre.

Friendship is a recurring theme in many animated movies and television shows. Several animated shows that are marketed towards younger audiences revolve around friendships between two or more characters solving life's challenges together. The situations that these characters find themselves in, and how they handle the situations, often serve as life lessons.

The fantasy genre allows audiences to escape into vividly imagined universes and forget about the troubles of their daily lives. While doing this, fantasy stories can still transcend escapism and become allegories and analogies to real-life events.

Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy was released while I was in elementary school. In these movies, the characters with the most agency and presence within the story were played by white male actors. The female characters were mainly there to support the character arcs of the male characters. The actors who were people of color only played villains: orcs, Uruk-Hai, and the dark lord Sauron. While Ian McKellen is an openly LGBTQ+ actor, the version of Gandalf he portrayed had no indication of sexuality. These aspects of Peter Jackson's trilogy became more apparent to me as the history and context of these stories were discussed in the media. For example, the authors and hosts of the podcast *Worldbuilding for Masochists* have called attention to the white-Christian-male bias within many fantasy stories. J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote the *Lord of the*

Rings trilogy and *The Hobbit*, was specifically writing a white-Christian-male narrative. As a Jewish person, I felt alienated by Tolkien's Middle Earth stories the more I read into them. This is an example of how the fantasy genre can also alienate audiences when these stories portray the "good guys" as one demographic and the "bad guys" as another.

Many ground-breaking animated television series were being released on networks such as Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and the Disney Channel in the 1990s and early 2000s. These animated series had a profound impact on many millennials, including myself. This is evident in how many of these shows were rebooted decades after their initial release, such as *Animaniacs* and *The Powerpuff Girls*. Many of these shows, and many animated series that came after them, depict character friendships as an important part of coming of age.

BEST FRIENDS FOREVER

As I mentioned earlier, the characters for this idea were loosely based on King Arthur and Merlin reimagined as 13-year-olds. However, I did not imagine both characters as female at first. As I was developing the story for my graduate thesis film, I started to flesh out the characters and draw character designs. This is when I started to think about the characters gender and background.

I quickly decided not to make both characters boys. With movies and shows like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Adventure Time*, *Pinky and the Brain*, *Ed Edd and Eddy*, and *Phineas and Ferb*, I did not feel I had anything to add to the all-boy buddy story.

I then considered making one character a girl and the other a boy. As a young boy, I had friends who were girls, so this idea appealed to me. However, I realized that audiences would assume that the characters were romantically interested in each other. There are animated shows like *Star vs. the Forces of Evil* and *Kim Possible* where the protagonist has a best friend of the opposite gender, and they end up becoming more than friends and start dating. Fearing that heteronormative biases would affect how audiences viewed my characters, I then considered making them both girls.

The thought of both characters being girls reminded me of my older sister and her friends. My sister would often have her friends over at our house, and I was the annoying younger brother who always wanted to hang out with them because they were the cool older kids. Making both protagonists girls gave me a personal connection to the story.

My own childhood friends still influenced Molly and Sage, and both protagonists inevitably got aspects of my own personality. Molly and Sage also have characteristics from archetypes seen in other stories that have inspired me.

Molly and Sage are deliberately different in terms of personality. There are several examples of this already in animated shows and movies. In real life, we may see groups of friends who all share the same personality, as with teenage cliques. However, a group of friends having the same emotions and reactions to situations does not create compelling drama and conflict, which are necessary for fictional stories. Having two or more characters with different personalities allows for dramatic opportunities (Animation Discourse, Juli).

It is also important to note that Molly and Sage's key traits have moral dualities. Molly wants to have fun, and she wants her best friend to have fun. However, her thrill-seeking ways put people in dangerous situations. Sage is protective and supportive, but also overbearing at times. Sage wants to have control of the situation, but she ends up going into a raging fury when the situation gets out of hand. These dualities elevate the protagonists to be more than just good or bad characters; it gives them emotional depth and complexity.

At the beginning of *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*, we hear Sage refer to Molly as "your highness" in a snarky yet endearing manner; thus, making it clear that Molly is a Princess. The princess archetype has appeared a lot in Disney animated feature films, but princess characters have also appeared in many other stories. More recently, in movies and shows, audiences have experienced female characters who are instantiations of the warrior archetype. We have even seen the princess and warrior archetypes combined into the warrior-princess archetype, such as with Noelle Stevenson's *She-Ra* reboot, DC's Wonder Woman, and Disney's *Raya and the Last Dragon*. In a review of *Raya*, Beatrice Loayza of *The New York Times* wrote "'Disney Princess' may eventually just become another word for 'superhero.'" (Loayza) This warrior-princess archetype is where Molly fits in. The two main props that Molly has are her tiara and sword. These

props are also symbols pertaining to her archetype; the sword represents the warrior, and the tiara represents the princess.

One thing that differentiates Molly and Sage from female Disney characters, including the princesses, is the way they communicate with each other. In the book Language & Gender in Children's Animated Films, there is a whole section on how characters in Disney Princess films and Pixar films insult each other. One of the observations the authors made is that male characters in these films will often insult other male characters as a sign of friendship as opposed to insulting with intending to offend one another. The authors also pointed out that female characters rarely do this to other female characters. (Fought, Eisenhauer) It is important to remember that this research was done specifically on Disney Princess films and Pixar films. In other media, such as the television series *The Golden Girls*, female characters often tease and insult each other while remaining friends. In one episode, Blanche brags about dating a man who is “nearly five years younger than” she is, to which Dorothy replies, “in what, Blanche, dog years?” (*The Golden Girls*, Harris) In this sense, Molly and Sage have more in common with *The Golden Girls* characters than the classic female Disney protagonists. Molly and Sage are the type of friends who tease and insult each other as a sign of platonic affection.

CHARACTER DESIGNS

The character design process helped me figure out who Molly and Sage are as characters. It also allowed me to explore the intricacies and nuances of their platonic relationship. There are details in the designs of the protagonists and monster characters that delve deeper into their backstories.

Molly's face, and particularly her cat-like eyes, signify her playful, adventurous side. Her body is roundish but still muscular, signifying that Molly is both strong and friendly. The popularity of characters like Luisa Madrigal from Disney's *Encanto* shows that audiences want to see female characters who can be physically strong while also having emotional depth (Cadorniga).

Molly's character design and behavior show how she is both a regal warrior and a thrill-seeking adrenaline junkie. In a group of friends, Molly would be the party animal who leads her buddies into fun adventures that often end in chaos.



Figure 1 Molly Character Turnaround by Nathaniel Shrage

As I mentioned at the beginning, Sage's relationship with Molly mirrors Merlin's relationship with King Arthur. Sage and Molly are best friends, but Sage is more studious and often uses her magical powers to protect Molly. Unlike Merlin, however, Sage does not fit the wise-mentor archetype. Additionally, Merlin is generally depicted as being older than King Arthur, whereas Sage is the same age as Molly. Given that she is a young teenager, Sage still has a lot to learn about herself and her magical abilities before she acts as a mentor figure to anyone.

The archetype that Sage most resembles is the anime magical girl. In the lexicon of Japanese animation, magical girls are young girls who use their magical abilities to fight monsters and overcome obstacles. Magical girls also have transformation sequences where they become their alter egos. Midway through *Miss-Adventures*, Sage also transforms into her alter ego. However, Sage's alter ego is an angry teenager who cannot control her emotional state; she does not get a cute schoolgirl outfit or a magical prop, like a tiara or wand.

Sage was also inspired by the character Daisy Wooton from John Allison's comic book series Giant Days. In Giant Days: Volume 5, there's a scene where Daisy is on an archeological dig that is being led by a bad-tempered professor who constantly ridicules Daisy. After days of bottling up her emotions, Daisy eventually snaps and releases her anger and frustrations with the professor. (Allison) Giant Days is a slice-of-life series, but there are plenty of moments that are exaggerated in a surreal manner for dramatic effect. When Daisy unleashes her anger on the emotionally abusive archeology professor, it plays out with her hovering above the professor while surrounded by a raging fire. Much like Daisy, Sage is normally a reserved and timid character, but even those characters have moments where they have had enough inconveniences or problems.

In terms of design, Sage's head is structured around a cube, which is meant to convey her protective nature, like a brick wall. Her eyes are still rounded, like half-moons, to suggest that

Sage is friendly. She is also quite slender; her legs are thin, and her feet are small relative to the rest of her body. This is all meant to suggest that Sage may not be as emotionally stable as she initially presents herself.

While developing and designing these characters, my faculty mentor Jo Anne Adams said that Molly reminded her of an Olympic gymnast and that Sage reminded her of an Olympic long-distance runner. Jo Anne suggested that while I refined the character designs, I should reference athletes from these sports: gymnasts for Molly and long-distance runners for Sage.



Figure 2 Sage Character Turnaround by Nathaniel Shrage

Another way the character designs of Molly and Sage contrast with one another is in color palette. Molly's colors are generally warmer to match her hotheadedness. Sage's colors are cooler and more earthy to show her connection to magic and nature. Sage's cooler color pallet is also deceptive as it tricks audiences into thinking she would never lose her cool, which is exactly what she does after a pile of rocks falls on her. In short, the character designs contrast in shape and color in ways that complement each other. In Michael D. Mattesi's book on life drawing titled *Force*, the author writes "while working at Walk Disney Feature Animation, one of the best rules I learned

was ‘CONTRAST CREATES INTEREST’” (Mattesi). In his book, Mattesi is applying this principle to life drawings, but it applies to many other areas including character design.

In an *Any-Mation* video essay titled Geometry of Characters, Cole Delaney discusses how Pete Docter uses contrasting shapes to tell a story about character relationships (Any-Mation). In *Monsters Inc.*, Sully is mostly composed of squares while Mike is literally a round sphere with arms and legs. In *Up*, Carl is also composed of a lot of hard squares, while the shapes within Russel and Ellie’s designs are round and soft. In my film, I used squares and angles to design Sage while using more rounded shapes to create Molly. Even within each character’s design, there is variety in the shape language. Sage’s head is square, but her ears are rounded triangles, and her eyes are soft and circular. Molly’s head is circular on the other hand, but her eyes are sharper, and her tiara is also a sharp triangle. In turn, these complex character relations can be shown and visualized by using contrasting shape language.

After designing Molly and Sage, the next step was to design the monsters. The ghouls and the Golem are the main obstacles that Molly and Sage face, besides the booby trap at the cave’s entrance. The design of each ghoul, including the “Ghoul King”, was loosely based on a ghoul I designed for my undergraduate film *The Girl & the Ghoul* in 2012. These ghouls utilize sharp and angular shapes to convey danger. Parts of the ghouls’ bodies also resemble a coffin shape to signify death.

Originally, the Golem was going to be a troll, like the cave troll in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and the troll in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. The troll was a good fit for the big bad monster when I initially imagined this fictional world to be a parody of other fantasy stories. That all changed during the second semester of my first year of graduate school while I was taking the Visual Development for Animation & Visual Effects course. One of our assignments for this

course was to design alternative settings for our films. For this, I designed an alternative Southern California high school setting because I grew up in Southern California, and I also designed a Jewish Shtetl setting because my ancestors were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. My great-grandfather Lou Ginsberg was born in a Jewish Shtetl like the one in *Fiddler on the Roof* before he immigrated to the United States with his parents and siblings. Norman Jewison's movie adaptation of the musical inspired me while trying out that idea.

I was initially hesitant to add any Jewish subject matter to my thesis film because I am the only Jewish student in my cohort. I was not worried that I face bigotry or antisemitism, but I feared that adding such subject matter would alienate non-Jewish audiences. It turned out the opposite was true. While most of the design work from my Shtetl settings did not make it into the final film, my classmates reacted positively to that work. Somehow, making the story more personal also made it more interesting to others.

In turn, some students in my cohort suggested the troll could be replaced with a Golem, like the one from Jewish folklore. The more I pondered the idea, the more the Golem made sense to me. In the folktale of the Golem of Prague, the Golem acts as a guardian figure. According to the legend, a Rabbi molded the Golem from clay and gave it life. I imagined a backstory for my thesis film where the Golem was created by someone; possibly a Rabbi, a wizard, or a Rabbi-Wizard to guard the mystical crystal that Molly and Sage are trying to procure.

The Golem could also be read as a metaphor for animation. Just as Rabbis in Jewish folklore bring life to beings made from clay and mud, animators bring life to their drawings, stop-motion puppets, and 3D models within a computer. This is yet another reason why the Golem fits into my animated short film.

THE SETTING

The main setting of *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage* is the cave. It is designed to be an ominous and dangerous place with stalagmites and stalactites protruding like sharp teeth, booby traps designed to kill unwanted visitors, and skeletons of previous adventurers who did not make it out alive. The cave is lit by torches to suggest that someone or something regularly goes there, most likely the being who placed the crystal inside the cave. The protagonists eventually enter the main cavern, which is large enough for the golem, the tree that has ensnared the crystal with its branches, and the fight scene that ensues with the ghouls.

Obviously, there is also the outside world. The scene at the end reveals a castle, the place where the girls live. The outside world is designed to give audiences a sense that there is more left to be explored, and more adventures for Molly and Sage.

During development, I did a great deal of world-building that did not make its way into the story for this short film. Early drafts of the script included a scene with Molly's father, the King. This scene would have revealed Molly's home life and how her parents thought of Sage. There was also a scene with Sage baking cookies in her parents' bakery that was meant to show what Sage does when she is not adventuring with Molly. Ultimately, scenes like these were cut out to make my graduate thesis film more concise, while also focusing the story on Molly and Sage's friendship.

Like the fictional fantasy worlds of other storytellers, I gave a great deal of thought to how magic works and what sociopolitical factors would come into play. The story also needed to establish where Sage's mystical power originates from, how she channels it, and what she could specifically do with this power for the magic to feel believable. The goal is to show that anyone in

this world can learn magic, but they need to work hard to learn how to use it and some people are more naturally adept magic users than others. This is not stated in the story, but it is shown in this short film that Sage can only do elemental magic because she has not mastered more advanced magic. Sage is shown conjuring water, ice, clouds, fire, and lighting; all of which are associated with elemental magic. Additionally, Sage's emotional outburst after a pile of rocks falls on her shows how her magic is tied to her emotions.

Much like our world, fictional worlds often have social, governmental, and economic systems. However, these factors are not directly relevant to Molly and Sage's quest to find a magical crystal. Given the short runtime of this animated short, lengthy exposition and explanations of the world, or lore dumping as it is sometimes called, would not fit into the story. Instead, audiences can discern information about Molly and Sage's society based on their relationship and what is shown onscreen. The audience will know that there is magic in this fictional universe because Sage uses magic, not because a character explains how magic works.

During the storyboarding stage, I made choices regarding what the audience would see and what they could deduce based on what they saw onscreen. Storyboarding allowed me to test which aspects of the setting needed exposition and what could be shown visually. In the end, it became clear that most of the story could be shown visually, and most of the original dialogue was cut out.

When it came to designing the setting and environments, I initially looked at artwork by Frank Frazetta and illustrations from *Dungeons & Dragons* books for inspiration. The gloomy paintings of past fantasy illustrators did not fit with Molly and Sage's graphic character designs. It quickly became clear that the painterly style of those artists was did not fit the film. As the story's universe became more influenced by my Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry, I did some artistic

exploration in the style of Marc Chagall, who like me, was a Jewish artist of Eastern European descent. I also revisited illustrations from children's books I read as a child; this included works by people such as Maurice Sendak and Arthur Rackham.



Figure 3 Early Visual Development Artwork for The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage by Nathaniel Shrage



Figure 4 Marc Chagall-Inspired Visual Development Artwork by Nathaniel Shrage

Eventually, while looking at Eastern-European folk art on Google Images with Professor Jo Anne Adams, we noticed illustrations by Ivan Bilibin. It was Bilibin's illustrations of Eastern European folktales that appealed to me. The narrative of *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage* is told in a folktale style, which is why those illustrations felt like a good place to reference with their Art Nouveau line quality and earthy color palettes. It reminded me of artwork by Charles Vess, whose illustrated multiple stories by Neil Gaiman, an author whose work draws heavily from folklore and myths. Most importantly, the style of Bilibin and Vess worked with Molly and Sage's character designs better than my initial visual development artwork.



Figure 5 Visual Development Artwork by Nathaniel Shrage

STORY STRUCTURE

As an undergraduate, my Advanced Animation professor Dean Lennert presented our class with a basic five plot-point structure to help us develop our senior films: 1) Inciting Incident, 2) Call to Action, 3) Twist, 4) Test, and 5) Resolution. When employing this structure, I often add plot point 0) Ordinary World, which happens before the Inciting Incident. While he did not specify where he derived it from, it appears to be a simplified version of other narrative structure outlines, such as the work of Joseph Campbell. This simplified plot structure is suited for short films like *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*, and it can easily be expanded on for longer stories.

Molly and Sage's Ordinary World is only implied at the very beginning of my graduate thesis film. It is a fantasy world where Molly is a warrior princess and Sage is a sorceress. The Inciting Incident happens when Molly marches into the cave and sets off the booby-trap, prompting Sage to save Molly. The Call to Action is when the girls find the crystal that is being guarded by the golem. After Molly jostles the crystal out of the tree, the girls are attacked by ghouls, a sort of mini-Test. During the battle scene, Sage is struck by one of the ghouls, she hits the wall of the cave, and rocks fall on her. Then the Twist happens when Sage explodes out of the rock pile and goes into a magical raging frenzy. The main Test comes when Molly realizes that she needs to calm Sage down before she wakes up the golem. Molly is ultimately unable to calm Sage down, and the golem wakes up after getting hit in the head with a ghoul's dismembered head. The Test continues as the girls make a mad dash for the cave entrance, only to find that it has been blocked by boulders. As the golem approaches, Sage has no choice but to use the crystal's magic to blow them out of the cave. Finally, we get to the Resolution: after surviving the explosion that blew

them out of the cave, Molly and Sage agree to go on more adventures together. It is also implied that the girls have forgiven each other, and themselves, for their shortcomings.

My story also works with more elaborate structures, including Christopher Vogler's breakdown of Joseph Campbell's work in The Writer's Journey (Vogler). There is an implied Ordinary World that Molly and Sage exist. The Call to Adventure happens before the film's beginning when Molly invites Sage to go on this adventure. While there is no blatant Refusal of the Call, Sage is reluctant to charge in like Molly. The Meeting with the Mentor happens when Sage scolds Molly after she sets off the booby-trap. Within this story, Molly and Sage are each other's only allies. They do face multiple tests and enemies in the form of the booby-trap, the ghouls, and the golem. Molly and Sage's Approach to the Inmost Cave happens literally as they enter the main cavern with the crystal and the golem. The Ordeal occurs when Sage goes into a blind rage and Molly needs to calm her down. The Reward is making it out of the cave alive with the crystal. The Road Back happens as the girls run away from the golem. After Sage uses the crystal to create an explosion that blows them out of the mountain, there is a Resurrection when the girls tumble down the mountain and wake up at the base of it. Finally, Molly and Sage Return with the Elixir or, in this case, they head home with the crystal.

But stories are not forged on narrative structure alone, as doing so would create a formulaic story with no catharsis. In the case of *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*, the relationship between the girls drives the story both on an emotional and physical level. While Merlin served as the original inspiration for Sage, Sage does not fill the mentor archetype as does Merlin (Vogler, 39-48). Sage is in fact just as much a protagonist as Molly; in *Miss-Adventures*, both girls have their own character arcs. Both girls go on a journey that is external/physical and internal/emotional.

According to John Truby, characters need a weakness at the beginning of the story before they take action and end up changed as a result (Truby, 32–35). At the start of the film, Sage is timid and overprotective. She bottles up her emotions until they explode into a raging fury. These are her weaknesses. Sage's action is to follow Molly into the cave to find the magic crystal. After a series of events, Sage is forced to use the crystal to blow Molly and herself out of the cave and away from the golem. Thus, by the end of the story, Sage has overcome some of her self-doubts and shows she is willing to continue going on adventures with Molly. As for Molly, her weakness is that she acts without thinking. Molly's action is that she leads Sage into a cave to find a magic crystal. Molly is changed after she sees Sage lose control of her emotions and go into rage mode. By the end of the film, Molly learns that she should be more thoughtful and considerate of Sage.

Both protagonists in *The Miss-Adventures of Molly and Sage* change in a way that addresses their weaknesses at the beginning of the story. Additionally, the relationship between the protagonists allows them to follow an arc, grow, and end up changed for the better.

WORLD BUILDING

In one of the first episodes of *World Building for Masochists*—a podcast created by fantasy authors Rowenna Miller, Marshall Ryan Maresca, and Cass Morris—the hosts discuss the importance of making conscious choices when creating fantasy universes for stories. They claim that many fantasy storytellers make presumptions about what elements their stories should have without putting much thought into why they are including them. Many storytellers presume that fantasy stories must have elves, dwarves, and orcs simply because Tolkien included those beings in Middle Earth. Some storytellers copy magic systems that other stories used instead of creating a system of magic that works in the context of the fictional universe being created.

Early in the development of *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*, I also made these mistakes. I mentioned before that I initially imagined the world that Molly & Sage inhabit to be a parody of what Tolkien created in his books. I assumed that it needed to be that way for audiences to believe that they were watching a fantasy film. Luckily, with the help of my classmates and Professor Jo Anne Adams, I developed a new fantasy universe. John Truby writes “never select the natural settings for your story by happenstance” (Truby, 156). In the context of *Miss-Adventures*, the natural settings were initially the common stereotypes of the fantasy genre. After realizing this, I made deliberate choices for how the story’s universe operates instead of resorting to fantasy tropes and stereotypes.

When it comes to world building, a storyteller can easily overbuild or create aspects of the fictional universe that are not relevant to the story or plot. For *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*, I started with a script in screenplay format. Screenplays are formatted so that one page of screenplay equals approximately one minute of screen time. The original screenplay for *The Miss-*

Adventures of Molly & Sage was about nine pages long, which would have yielded a bloated nine-minute film. Moreover, the script included characters and locations that proved to be unnecessary for the story. For the *Miss-Adventures* universe, I created family trees for Molly and Sage, a natural history of how the world of *Miss-Adventures* came to be, various fictional religions, and other world-building aspects that ultimately became irrelevant for the final film. The tale in my thesis film is a story about Molly and Sage's friendship. The initial overstuffed world building may become relevant if I create more stories about Molly and Sage, but my graduate thesis film revolves around their platonic relationship and their plot to capture a magic crystal.

After editing and revising the script to about four pages, I was left with a cave high up in the mountains as the main location. In *The Anatomy of Story*, Truby states that the mountain "is where the strong go to prove themselves, usually through seclusion, meditation, a lack of comfort, and direct confrontation with nature in the extreme" (Truby, 160). Molly and Sage go into the mountains to seek adventure, they encounter multiple uncomfortable situations, and they must confront nature head-on to get the magic crystal. In the context of the story, the nature Molly and Sage confront is represented by the cave, the ghouls, and the Golem. While Molly and Sage do not venture into the mountains for meditation, they do go there to clear their minds, blow off steam, and be themselves away from society.

Many world cultures have stories about protagonists leaving society or their homes and wandering into the wilderness. In Greek mythology, there is the tale of Actaeon who leaves society to hunt in the wilderness only to have a fatal encounter with Artemis. In Russian folklore, there is the tale of Vasalisa the Wise leaving her home to go into the forest and be tested by Baba Yaga. These stories address the primal conflict of humans vs. nature. In my graduate thesis film, that conflict is resolved when Molly and Sage leave the mountains with the crystal and head home.

ANIMATION AND THE FANTASY GENRE

Why would someone make an animated fantasy short when filmmakers nowadays can use visual effects with live-action footage to create epic fantasy worlds? With animation, you can create a world where an anvil can fall on a character's head, and they still survive. Looney Tunes is a great example of this. For instance, the Coyote has many large heavy objects fall on its head while trying to catch the Road Runner. The Coyote also constantly falls off cliffsides, freezes in the air before succumbing to gravity, and then goes flying down with that signature whistling sound. After all of that, the Coyote gets up to concoct another plan involving Acme products. It is not realistic, and therefore would not look right as live-action cinema. However, in the context of an animated world, Looney Tune's cartoonish violence is believable. It is also worth noting that many animated movies and series have fantasy elements even though they lack the generic fantasy genre tropes. *Steven Universe*, for example, takes place in a modern setting but it also includes magic and sentient gems that have humanoid bodies.

For *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*, I explored what cartoon physics I could use without making it feel too silly. Like Wile E. Coyote, Molly and Sage manage to survive multiple incidents that would most certainly kill someone in real life. For example, Sage has a pile of large rocks fall on her. She then explodes out of the pile, enraged and ready to destroy ghouls. Molly and Sage also get blown out of a mountain, they go crashing down the mountainside, and survive to walk off into the sunset. In live-action filmmaking, these situations would not be believable since audiences would expect the characters to be dead. Wile E. Coyote can fall off a cliff, hit the ground, and manage to get back up with no broken bones. When a real coyote falls off a cliff, it hits the ground, dies, and blood and guts splatter everywhere. This shows how animation allows a

storyteller to create a world where characters can defy death as well as the physical forces of our universe.

In fact, animation allows a storyteller to have full control over the fictional world they create. During a question-and-answer session at Vulture Festival in 2015, Pete Docter discussed how animated world-building differs from creating a world for live-action cinema. During the event, Docter stated that “unlike live-action, where you have a location and somebody happened to walk by or this lamp is great... nothing is for free, nothing is for accident [in animation]. You have a blank screen, and so everything you see goes through a very intentional design process, both shape, surface, lighting, all of that stuff, and so to a fault we can control everything” (Any-Mation, Docter). In the realm of live-action, filmmakers are constrained by what they can capture on camera. In animation, filmmakers can put anything they want on the screen, but they must deliberately choose what appears onscreen and offscreen.

JEWISH THEMES

Earlier, I discussed how the setting went from Middle Earth parody to becoming a world with Eastern European and Jewish influences. At the beginning of the story development stage, I avoided having any of my Jewish cultural background in *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*. Incorporating aspects of Judaism and Eastern Europe into the movie's environment and setting in turn affected the overall story and its themes.

Unlike J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage* has Jewish-inspired characters who have agency and are more than just comedic sidekicks. The depicted fantasy races and ethnicities in Tolkien's stories are problematic and reflect outdated racial hierarchies and statuses. N.K. Jemisin has called attention to fantasy orcs being depicted as "human beings who can be slaughtered without conscience or apology" (Jemisin). Additionally, fantasy elves are often described as beautiful and handsome, but are depicted only as blue-eyed Europeans with long luscious blonde hair, like how Nazis imagined their fictional Aryans. In the Middle Earth books, Tolkien not only described his dwarven language as Semitic, but he also once wrote that he thought "of the "Dwarves" like Jews: at once native and alien in their habitations." It is possible that Tolkien was not trying to be hateful toward Jews, but his words imply that he thought of Jews as short hairy people with big noses. In Rebecca Brackmann's article "Dwarves Are Not Heroes": Antisemitism and the Dwarves in J.R.R. Tolkien's Writing, the author states that "the first mention of the Dwarves in *The Hobbit* refers to them as 'the bearded Dwarves' (1.2). This phrase has the ring of an epithet, which would indicate that their beards are racially characteristic; Jews in medieval art were commonly portrayed with beards" (Brackmann, 88-89). Brackmann does

acknowledge in her article that Tolkien's "portrayal [of Dwarves] shifts in his later work" (Brackmann, 85), by which she means The Lord of the Rings trilogy.

Tolkien's Dwarves call attention to the fact that Jews around the world are a diaspora. As a Jewish-American, this aspect of my identity was prevalent even though my parents and grandparents were born in the United States. Ancestors on both my mother's and father's sides of the family immigrated to New York from Eastern and Central Europe in the early 1900s, and they referred to the places they came from as "the old country." But their ancestors possibly came from somewhere else.

Furthermore, major studios have a history of creating animated cartoons depicting characters tainted with derogatory Jewish stereotypes. In their book, Carmen Fought and Karen Eisenhauer include a section on Jewish-coded characters in Disney and Pixar films (Fought, Eisenhauer, 68-70). Characters such as Iago from *Aladdin* and Rex from the *Toy Story* franchise "are characterized as *too* talkative" and "are portrayed as nervous over-thinkers who worry aloud" (Fought, Eisenhauer, 69). It is also worth noting that the filmmakers cast Jewish actors to play these characters. Iago might be the most egregious example of this, as he is also relegated to being Jafar's personal punching bag. As Fought and Eisenhauer point out, "Jafar silences Iago multiple times in *Aladdin* by kicking him, throwing him, or grabbing his beak or throat" (Fought, Eisenhauer, 70).

In the *Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*, the titular characters are never labeled as elves, dwarves, faeries, Jews, or even humans. However, Sage does look visibly different from Molly. Since Molly is the Princess of her nation, Sage's appearance implies that she comes from a family that may not originally be from Molly's country. It implies that Sage is part of a diaspora much

like the Jewish people and many other ethnic groups in our world. In this way, my thesis film touches on diaspora themes that Jews and people of other immigrant cultures can relate to.

MISS-ADVENTURES ANIMATION PIPELINE

The production pipeline for *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage* was derived from the type of production one would see for a hand-drawn animated series pilot. After writing the screenplay, I storyboarded the movie in Adobe Photoshop, animated the characters in Toon Boom Harmony, added effects animation using Toon Boom and Adobe After Effects, composited each scene with After Effects, and edited the final movie within Adobe Premiere. Additionally, I did some effects animation work in Blender. I used Toon Boom Storyboard Pro in the past and storyboarding with that program can allow for an easier transition when moving to character animation in Harmony. However, I chose to draw my storyboards in Photoshop because I had more experience with that program.

A benefit to storyboarding in Adobe Photoshop was that I could import whole Photoshop Documents or PSDs into another Adobe program such as Premiere for editing. I could also import the PSD into After Effects to create camera moves. While editing the storyboards into an animatic, I started inserting various sound effects into the Premiere Timeline.

For character animation, I used Toon Boom Harmony for digitally hand-drawn animation or Tradigital animation. Harmony also allows for rigged 2D puppet animation, which many 2D animated series make use of currently. While most of the animation for this film was hand-drawn Tradigitally, I did some animation tests with a rigged upper-body puppet for Sage. I had to learn a lot about rigging in Harmony to do this, but the tests were good enough that the rigged Sage puppet in a few scenes.

Some of the animation effects were hand-drawn, like the water splashes in the scene where Molly & Sage are running away from the Golem. Other effects, like the torch flames, were created

procedurally in After Effects. The falling crystal and falling pile of rocks were challenging due to the objects' 3-dimensional angularness. The solution was to do 3D procedural simulations of the objects falling in Blender, render the simulation as an image sequence, and then draw over each frame of the simulated 3D animation. This is like rotoscoping live-action footage, but I am rotoscoping 3D animation instead to make it fit stylistically with the 2D hand-drawn animation style.

DIRECTING ACTORS FOR ANIMATION

After writing the script, and while I was drawing storyboards in Photoshop, I also needed to start casting actresses to play Molly and Sage and record their dialogue. When it came time for casting, I was determined to find actresses who talked the way Molly and Sage sounded in my head. However, it is difficult for a student filmmaker to find talent when they do not have a lot to offer in terms of compensation. I posted casting calls everywhere I could; from social media to film job forums to university acting schools. Most of my searches were unsuccessful, but I eventually found the right actresses after much perseverance. During our first semester, my fellow animation students and I took a Research Methods course with several graduate students in the University of Central Florida's Film program. One of the students from the Film program was Sarah Holland, who is both a director and an actress. Sarah sent me her acting reel, which had a lot of roles that matched Sage's personality. However, Sarah has a somewhat deep voice that I felt lent itself to Molly's boisterousness. Eventually, I met with Stephanie Kirves for an audition, and at some point, I realized that Stephanie's voice was higher pitched than Sarah's, which fit with Sage's tall and slender design. Once again, the contrast in the actresses' vocal pitches created an interesting dynamic between the characters, plus it made it easier to distinguish which character was speaking.

After casting Sarah as Molly and Stephanie as Sage, we met up to record some reference footage. Then, we recorded all the dialogue at Castle Door Studios in Winter Park, Florida. While directing Sarah and Stephanie in the recording studio, I found myself using what I had learned from Judith Weston's book, Directing Actors, particularly when it came to avoiding what Weston calls "result-oriented direction" (Weston). Weston describes result-oriented direction as a method

of directing with adjectives that describe a character or their state of mind. The problem is these adjectives are not “specific” or “playable” (Weston). According to Weston, the goal should be “playable direction” (Weston) and she gives multiple methods as to how one achieves this such as using action verbs, facts about the script and character backstories, imagining sensory experiences, and talking about the main event of a particular scene.

Weston also talks about giving actors and actresses physical tasks to ground them in a scene, which Sarah and Stephanie did without me telling them. Sarah saw a drumstick lying around the recording studio and swung it around, pretending it was a sword while recording her lines. Stephanie recorded her lines barefoot. She said it would help her feel grounded and connected with the world in a similar way that Sage is connected to the magic in her world. Sarah and Stephanie had quite a bit of acting experience on live-action films, which is more physical than voice acting in a recording studio. Ultimately, their physical choices allowed them to feel more comfortable and looser while recording.

Along with recording reference footage of Sarah and Stephanie with my iPhone, I also recorded reference footage of members of UCF’s Historical European Martial Arts Club, also known as HEMA. I contacted the president of the HEMA club and arranged a time to meet with him and two other club members. The club president choreographed a sword fight which the other members safely acted out, and we recorded it with my iPhone camera from multiple angles. The reference footage of Sarah, Stephanie, and the choreographed HEMA club sword fight proved invaluable while editing my animatic and timing my character animation.

THE OUTSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE AND PERSONAL CONNECTION

One might wonder why an adult cis-gendered heterosexual male would make a film about two teenage girls. Personally, I find it easier to create stories about characters who are not like me. I have tried writing screenplays about characters who are alternate versions of myself, but they often come off as preachy and I do not get the emotional response that I desired. Between college and graduate school, I took a screenwriting workshop at New York University's School of Professional Studies. At the beginning of the workshop, I brought in pages for what I wanted to be a dark comedy with a socially awkward Jewish protagonist who resembled me in more ways than I would like to admit. However, the other people in this workshop did not find the character to be funny or relatable. I quickly realized this script was not going anywhere. A few weeks later, I brought in pages for a different screenplay. It was an urban-fantasy concept I had with a female protagonist. People enjoyed this script far more than my other idea.

One cannot truly know what it is like to go through life as someone significantly different from themselves. However, we can imbue a character with much of our own personality and emotions, even when those characters are different from the director, animator, or storyboard artist. Renowned animator Glen Keane does this in his work. In a behind-the-scenes video for *Tarzan*, Keane talked about the scene where Tarzan meets Jane for the first time and presses the palm of his hand against hers. Keane went on to say that he was thinking about the moment his daughter was born, and how he was meeting someone who resembled him (Mack, Animation Hustle). That is the emotion and feeling Keane imbued into the scene, and it is why it is so emotionally impactful.

Keane relates a similar moment while animating Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*. During a presentation, Keane discussed the moment during the "Part of Your World" sequence where Ariel

reaches towards the audience. Initially, Keane did not want to animate the scene that way, even though his intuition was telling him to do so. While animating that moment, Keane worried that “everybody will know what a sentimental guy I am” (Animation Hustle, Keane). In the end, he trusted his intuition and allowed himself to be vulnerable or as he put it, “I couldn’t stop Ariel. She did it anyways” (Animation Hustle, Keane).

When it came to figuring out the psychology and emotional states of an adolescent girl, I looked to Pete Docter and *Inside Out*. Riley, the main human character of *Inside Out*, was inspired by Docter’s eleven-year-old daughter’s personality change (Lessons from the Screenplay). Molly and Sage’s personalities were influenced by my experiences working in summer camps. I also remember what my older sister and her friends were like as adolescents. Back then, my sister used every chance she got to get out of the house and spend time with her friends.

When creating and developing characters, we draw from our experiences with other people to make those characters believable and imbue them with humanity. At the same time, it is important to remember to be vulnerable as Glen Keane discussed when he animated Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (Mack, Animation Hustle). Many cis-gender heterosexual men in today’s world are scared to do anything they consider to be feminine. However, animators need to be able to step into any character role, whether it is feminine, masculine, androgynous, non-gender conforming, etc. If a male animator is animating a feminine character, they should embrace that character’s femininity instead of resisting it.

Understanding concepts like the twelve principles of animation and narrative structure are important to making an animated film. However, learning to be vulnerable or take risks, and figuring out what makes a story personal to the storyteller, helps animation artists and filmmakers give their audiences the feeling of catharsis. For storytellers, catharsis is “a sudden release of

emotions that can be brought about by good entertainment, great art, or probing for psychological insight” (Vogler, 341). This feeling of catharsis is what audiences are looking for when they watch a movie.

CONCLUSION

Much of the animation that has inspired me was animation I watched on television as a kid. This included Looney Tunes reruns, *Pokémon*, *Digimon*, and shows on Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon. After studying live-action filmmaking for the first half of my undergraduate years, I started studying animation. At that time, shows such as *Adventure Time*, *Steven Universe*, *Gravity Falls*, and *The Amazing World of Gumball* were becoming popular. Seeing those shows in my early 20s helped me realize what sort of animation artist and filmmaker I want to become. In turn, I imagined *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage* as a short film that could potentially become an animated series.

However, I first plan on submitting and screening my film at film festivals, particularly ones that are favorable to animated shorts. While taking the *Guerilla Marketing and Models of Distribution* course as a graduate student, my classmates and I had to do research on film festivals that would be good fits for our films. For me and my peers in the Animation & Visual Effects MFA program, there are film festivals specifically tailored for animated films (Meroz, Bloop Animation). Many of these festivals are also Oscar Qualifiers, which is a plus.

Before I attend the film festivals that *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage* are accepted into, I will create a pitch deck for pitching the film as a series. There are industry professionals and producers who attend these film festivals, and I want to be ready to pitch my animated series to them.

Regardless of how my film does in the film festival circuit, I am immensely happy with the work I have done on *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage*. My art and animation skills have improved greatly since I made both *The Girl & the Ghoul* and *Out of Order* as an undergraduate at New York University. While I am proud of those films for other reasons, I feel that the

animation I did for *The Miss-Adventures of Molly & Sage* is of a much higher quality. I feel like I could confidently show my graduate thesis film to people in the animation industry as proof that I can do 2D animation, character design, and storyboarding at the professional level.

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