

*My Greatest Failure: An Animated Journey*

**An Honors Thesis (ART 490)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

This short film looks to bring the concept of failure as a catalyst for growth to light in a way that resonates with anyone who has thought about giving up on their career when something simply didn't meet their "perfect" expectations. Many people struggle to overcome disappointment when facing failure in their chosen career. They will either avoid confronting failure or may sink back into their "comfort zone" which offers stability and safety without the personal growth promoted by taking risks and overcoming failure. These individuals fail to see the benefits of failure.

While it is never encouraged to actively chase after failure, a lot can be said for those who have failed time and time again only to grow stronger by learning from what went wrong and applying a new set of skills and knowledge to overcome a later challenge. The short film travels through four animated mediums in about two minutes, acting as a sort of inspirational commercial—if you will—to encourage the audience to take on life as the main character does: by exploring all manner of their career and viewing any past failure or shortcoming of their expectations as a moment to help them grow and reflect on how far they have already come.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my advisor John Ludwick for helping me pursue this project and particularly the quick deadline of the Joe and Carol Trimmer Award. Students of the Animation department have rarely ever tried to achieve an entry into this scholarship, and without his enthusiasm and guidance I likely would not have even thought about taking on this challenge.

I would also like to thank my parents, Katie, Nikki, James, Nick, and all my friends for supporting me and critiquing my work along the way so that it could become the best it could be.

## **Process Analysis Statement**

Spring semester of senior year for an Animation major brings about immense stress coupled with creative freedom. Many students are discovering their specialties, where they'd like to live, what job opportunities exist, and overall how to successfully graduate college and transition to the working world.

For my particular senior thesis, I took things a little differently in order to truly experiment with the art form of animation and push myself to create a meaningful message to future animators and college students in general. The initial ideation for this project was in the works for nearly a year before it was time to finally execute the project. While the concept itself had several redesigns over the planning year, the final work retains the same message I initially desired. How exactly my short film came to be is therefore just as important as what the final product became.

### **Initial Planning Stage**

Coming into my junior year I knew I needed to seriously consider what exactly I wanted to accomplish for my senior thesis. This was when I first had a class with my enthusiastic professor and later senior thesis advisor John Ludwick. Over the course of the semester I reached out to him about my initial thoughts and aspirations based on what I had heard from the then-current senior animators. This was the first instance in which he mentioned to myself and another Honors College animators that there existed the Joe and Carol Trimmer Award. After learning of this award, I had to decide whether or not I wanted to include this challenge as part of my thesis plan or not. That required coming up with a concept that resonated with not only a large audience of people, but also shared a message that I was passionate about.

A few months went by as I toiled through the lessons of junior year, when more and more the topic of failure rose to my mind when it came to something I both struggled with, and was passionate about learning from. I know that the creation of animations is what I am certainly stronger at and compelled to pursue, so it was around this time that I first pitched the idea of a one to one-and-a-half minute short film to my advisor. I still had a very fuzzy idea of how exactly I wanted to tackle such a complex topic. Over the course of spring semester of junior year, that summer, and then fall of my senior year this idea was carved and smoothed out until I had a very clear goal and execution plan in mind.

I decided that I would be making a short film involving a character who is a young artist going through sequential “failures” in which her art simply does not meet her expectations. Because I have such a passion for numerous varieties of artwork, I also decided that this film would be mixed-media, including four different forms of animation. The software was narrowed down to Photoshop, Stop Motion, Toon Boom Harmony, and lastly After Effects. Each of these mediums would be vastly different stylistically, yet would have the same main character throughout, to keep the narrative consistent. As our collaborative senior films wrapped up at the end of fall semester, I knew it was time to fully prepare for and finally create my thesis upon our return from winter break.

## **The Creation Process**

### Concept Art and Storyboard

Before diving straight into creating my thesis, I knew it was not only smart but also important to the pre-production process for me to come up with concept art of how I wanted my singular character to look and feel throughout the short film. Because I was working with multiple

mediums in multiple styles, I also wanted to make sure I created a character whose appearance translated easily throughout all four. Thankfully, over winter break I hit a very useful patch of inspiration while shopping at a mall. I happened to see an outfit I was drawn to in a window display: a short light gray dress paired with a long-sleeve, bright red sweater layered underneath.

From there I began to dress up my character in my mind. I took the dress and sweater look from the display and combined it with black leggings, light yellow-brown riding boots, and purple-red ponytail hair. The display also solidified my already working idea of the character's age. I wanted her to appear to be a young college student around 18-20 years old—perhaps either in her freshman or sophomore year and therefore still with plenty of room to grow and learn before branching out into the professional realm.

Upon returning to Ball State for the spring semester of my senior year, I hit the ground running with my concept in mind. I used Photoshop to design the four different stylistic concepts of my one female character, one design per medium of the short film. Sticking with one character also allowed me to keep the storyline the shortest and simplest possible, as I was working with a limited time frame for storytelling already. At first I thought of using a second character to encourage the main female to keep creating art, but I decided against it for the sake of time, clarity, and impact to the story. This “second character” ended up being replaced by the flower which is a consistent element of the story as well.

Once I had my female character designed, I utilized Toon Boom Storyboard Pro to create the actual story which would guide both the general timing and narrative for my final short film. This process, once started, went rather quickly much to my delight. The ideas flowed much easier and soon enough I had a complete storyboard to guide the rest of my entire production. I had my classmates within my Thesis Animation class, ART 490, critique this piece along with

my advisor, and with their feedback I was able to refine my storyboard into a concise narrative that myself and my test audience were fairly satisfied with. Stories can always be continuously tweaked towards “perfection,” but with an important deadline and graduation on the horizon, it is almost always more important to have a clear, entertaining story over a perceived “perfect” one. With this process wrapped up in the first two weeks of classes, it was time to transition to the first medium of animation for my short film: Photoshop.

### Photoshop

I have been told before that college is the best place to experiment with art because it is one of the last chances an artist gets to make mistakes or discover new talents that otherwise would not be allowed in the traditional workplace. One of my professors warned me against the idea of using Photoshop as an animation program, as it simply is not entirely formatted for that purpose. Sure, it has the tools necessary to create animation, but as I learned throughout the creation process, it takes a lot of planning and patience.

This sequence is heavily inspired by two oil painting artists/works that encouraged me to create a work that resembled a moving painting. The first of the two was the visual source of inspiration. Last year I was introduced to the work of Indiana-based painter T.C. Steele, whose Impressionist work and vast control over color really stood out to me. Because of his use of the landscape of Indiana, I felt as though his paintings would be useful as reference for the look and feel of my compositions for this first sequence in a park.

The second work that drove me to pursue the moving painting concept is the 2017 animation film *Loving Vincent*. This film involved more than 100 artists and 65,000 frames of completely oil-painted animation. While this film was done as a tribute to the works of Vincent Van Gogh

and therefore mimics his signature style, it also inspired me to pursue this organic, messy, and “imperfect” approach to the first section of this short film.

The reason I chose to do this kind of animation in Photoshop, rather than on real canvas with oil paints, was due to the fact that while I could have created a stop motion piece like *Loving Vincent* capturing how the canvas changed over time, I truly wanted to push the limits of what kind of look could be accomplished digitally. Not only that, but I figured it would be far less expensive and time consuming to create with digital paints rather than real paints and canvases.

The first sequence is comprised of three different shots, each one building upon my understanding of Photoshop’s animation capabilities—and shortcomings. It is about 18 seconds long. After tweaking timing and adjusting for clarity, I finally completed this sequence of animation. It ended up being slightly longer than planned in the storyboard, but I think the extra time helps to ground the audience in exactly what environment I would like them to settle into. I believe it does in fact accomplish what I set out to achieve, which is an animation that looks like a painting or pastel portrait and shows the messiness as a key component of the work. After completing this sequence and having it critiqued and finalized, it was time to move on to the second medium of the short film: stop motion.

### Stop Motion

This form of animation has perhaps the widest stylistic range of any of the mediums I chose to use, as many feature-length animations done in this fashion are often “Claymation” features which utilize a mixture of clay or clay-like puppets with interchangeable faces manipulated over thousands of frames. I decided to go towards a paper doll style of stop motion animation as I believe it has a kind of child-like charm to it. This quality was preferable over using clay puppets due to its unique qualities and distance from the typical “professional” outlet for stop motion. It

highlights experimentation. I wanted to showcase how diverse this medium is rather than simply go with the most common use.

I ended up using a mixture of dense, textured watercolor paper and smooth mixed-media paper for the construction of all the assets, then I used ink and alcohol-based markers to color. I thought about painting with watercolor paints, but due to watercolor's tendency to make paper warp and bend, I went with the safer marker alternative which helped keep the paper flat. The only asset not made of paper was the cotton used as a dreamlike border to the girl's desired painting.

Using my paper cutouts I was able to assemble my scenes which ended up being rather simplistic yet effective compositionally. Also made in three shots like the first sequence, the first and third shots are compositionally weighted just slightly right of the screen, keeping attention to the character and the easel she is painting at. The open space makes it feel realistic in the sense that someone could occupy the space with her, rather than having her appear squished into the scene. The second scene is then weighted rather evenly to pull attention into the middle of the screen. The footage itself was shot using the app Stop Motion Studio. It is incredibly useful in lining up each frame to make sure the motion is smooth. The process of the animation itself took much less time than the creation of the paper assets themselves, thankfully. I made a few slight motion modifications that differed from my storyboard in order to take advantage of the unique stop motion medium, but the action itself was left unchanged. The most notable difference is that I used cotton to close in on the current painting the girl had made and move back out to reveal what she wished her work looked like, rather than just fade between the pieces.

Once the animation was complete, I exported the video and color corrected it in After Effects to make sure it looked as good as it could without having distracting shadows or other intrusions



that may happen by chance when working with stop motion animation. This then lead to the third sequence of the film, made in Toon Boom Harmony.

### Toon Boom Harmony

Toon Boom Harmony is quite the powerhouse of animated software, and I was eager to get back into it after not having utilized it in nearly a year. After re-learning the mechanics of the program, I integrated my storyboard into the program to use as a timing and style guide placed directly underneath the animation. Then came the tedious task of creating the actual animation, working to make it as smooth and entertaining as possible. Unlike my previous projects, this was the first time I really challenged myself to include shadows in my animation, coloring in a way that is much more reminiscent of traditional 1990s animation.

This sequence is meant to showcase this kind of style, where the hand-drawn quality of the work really shines through. Although fairly smooth, it in no way is meant to look mechanical, like an animated puppet. This medium instead is utilized to show just how unique a piece can look when many of the frames are drawn individually like traditional animation, rather than animated like a rig with several joints. Some frames have aspects of the character that are copied and pasted into other frames and modified or moved slightly, but overall this sequence is meant to feel very organic. Because of this approach, this sequence is even smoother than the previous stop motion work. Overall I found this sequence to be very rewarding to me as it gave me the opportunity to revisit the skills I had originally gained in my sophomore year of college and express how I have grown since then. Movements and timing in particular were much easier to understand and handle without falling apart, and through this process I learned a lot about color composition in Toon Boom.

## After Effects

Upon returning to campus after Spring Break, I had to dive quickly into the last section animated in After Effects in order to make sure the project was completed on time. As such I had to scramble to create assets in Illustrator and Photoshop which would populate the scenes and still animate well. After talking with my advisor we discussed the need for this last section to feel slower than the previous sections in order to highlight the fact that my main character has gone through some struggles. It also would allow for the audience to take a breath and fully absorb the story they have seen play out in front of them.

Thankfully in a program like After Effects this was much easier to accomplish than it would have been in other programs, as with After Effects I simply had to make sure keyframes and other timing indicators were spaced further apart. By making this section slower, the final runtime of the film came to be 1 minute and 55 seconds long. This section challenged me more than any other though, as I was truly pushing how far I could go with the knowledge I already had in After Effects and what more I could do. I taught myself how to make a complex puppet, animate the facial expressions, layer, add effects, transitions, and so much more.

I believe this section turned out to be strong because of my willingness to learn. What I enjoyed about creating this section is the style and way I composed the pieces showcases the harmonious blend of all the previous mediums I chose to incorporate into the film. Some of the assets such as the book, plants, and yellow flower were made in Photoshop, echoing the first sequence. However, these pieces were done with stark, cartoon-y outlines and nearly-flat color to mimic the style of the Toon Boom sequence. Finally, the pieces are all given subtle drop-shadow effects in order to push the 3D effect of the work as well as give it a subtle paper-cut-out quality like the stop motion sequence. Combining all of these effects together I believe I developed a

rather playful “infographic” look which has simplistic shapes and characters but conveys a lot of emotion and stylization.

### Premiere Compiling

Once all the sequences were completely animated, I was finally able to have all the sequences and transitions placed into Premiere to compile it with its final sounds and music. This was where I was really able to see the film come together as a finished product. Although it did in fact end up being nearly a minute over my original minimum time plan, I believe that this extra minute of footage really helps with the pacing and delivery of the message of the story, so that instead of feeling like a rushed commercial, it now feels like an enjoyable, though brief, short film. I challenged myself to do something that many fear and only a few accomplish, and regardless of the outcome I am extremely proud to have taken it upon myself to develop this film and the message which I find to be so important.

### **The Message**

All compositions are made for a reason, as is the case for my short film. While it has a surface level message, it also has a deeper dialogue created through the specific choices I made for each medium. The surface level message is one which is meant to be absorbed upon first viewing the piece; it is something easy for others to understand without prior knowledge of the work.

I want my work to convey that failure is a necessary building block to anyone’s progress as an individual. Creative careers are filled with stories of failure that later go on to build someone’s success. What remains consistent with these individuals is instead of collapsing inward and giving up when faced with a challenge or significant failure, they instead engage in a dialogue where they ask what exactly went wrong with their current project and how they can better

themselves in the next one. The moment someone in a creative field—or many other fields for that matter—becomes completely satisfied with their work is when they stop allowing themselves to improve. It is fine to be proud of any accomplished work, but it is also important to look critically at the work and assess: if it was a successful piece, what made it successful and why? The same is true for failed projects, where it is important to ask: what made it a failure and how can that be changed or improved in the future? Consistent self-hate is neither healthy nor productive, so it is critical that individuals who are assessing their creations and the creations of others look at it through the lens of an assistant, a friend. Offering yourself and others constructive criticism is the best way to go, and this practice will build upon professional skills that will allow anyone to be a better individual in a collaborative workplace. My short film is meant to speak not only to artists and other creative individuals, but to anyone in a career in which failures become a part of the process.

My classmates and I have had discussions about how some careers have little to no room for error, such as those in the medical or air transportation industries in which human lives are at stake. I however want to include them as part of my audience as before they can become doctors, pilots, etc. they must pass many tests along the way and undergo hours upon hours of hands-on training. This can lead to the same sense of dread and dismay if their test results or hands-on experiences do not meet their expectations. Therefore, I want them to see failure as a mere stepping stone in their pursuit of a fulfilling career, and that with enough practice and perseverance they will get better.

The main character of my film is an 18-20 year old female, as I am targeting young adults entering college primarily and targeting working adults in their 30s-70s as a secondary audience. I hate seeing friends and other individuals giving up on what they are passionate about simply

because they feel they are not good enough. That is why I want my female character to be seen as a young, relatable woman who is fearful of the career path ahead if she does not master each creative skill she tries immediately. I want seasoned adults to likewise relate as I hear of many stories where the older someone gets, the more regrets they tend to build up, and I want them to see that there is always time for improvement and excitement so long as one never loses the drive for personal growth.

While the overall message of the short film is to accept failures as necessary to personal growth, each individual medium has an underlying symbolism and use within my narrative to drive the concept further.

The first sequence, completed in Photoshop, is meant to symbolize the early stages of exploration of a career or passion, in this case a career in art. It is not a completely smooth animation. It has a certain messiness to it, emphasized by the constantly shifting paint-like quality of the frames. I wanted this sequence to relate to the first serious steps often taken by artists, which is to learn a traditional medium such as oil painting or chalk pastels. It can similarly relate to any career, where it all starts with the first signs of a passion for the topic. The individual will pursue a first step such as a book, a program, a drawing, etc. in order to gain more basic knowledge into the field. However, as happens with the main character of my film, individuals are often very harsh on themselves when at first they do not meet their own high expectations. This can lead to swift career decisions that may be premature.

What I hope to highlight with the introduction to this film is all careers start somewhere, and even if it's messy, as long as one continues to practice and work on that passion for the career, they will see personal and professional growth. The second sequence of my film especially portrays the importance of growth through the use of explorative practices.

Stop motion is one of the most experimental forms of animation that still permeates modern media. It is incredibly versatile and I took this opportunity to use the medium to illustrate how the journey of young adulthood is often a time of great experimentation. The first 20 years of someone's life are perhaps the most malleable of all, as individuals learn about their personalities, likes, dislikes, and skills that they would like to hone. This can also lead to much confusion and uncertainty as these young adults enter either college or the "real world" right out of high school. Many who enroll in college can see their major(s) change throughout their time studying, or others may simply have their passions reinforced. Regardless, I chose to use the organic medium of stop motion animation to portray the abstract concept of growth through experimentation, trial, and error.

The combination of paper and markers, while serving to give this sequence its illustrative look, is also a gentle nod towards my own personal style. Much of my traditionally-created artwork is made in a comic-book style with clear outlines and simplified yet smooth shading. This sequence shows that I have gone through my own experimentation phase as well, as a few years ago I actually refused to try markers as a medium until my mother suggested it.

Another connection to experimentation is that I first learned how to navigate the stop motion medium in a course I took at Ball State called Experimental Animation. I really enjoyed the lessons this course taught me as without this exposure to many different types of animation I likely wouldn't have realized the benefit of adding stop motion to my skillset.

This can likewise be applied to other careers as well, as part of growing and learning one's interests is experimenting with different facets of that career to see what may be a valuable addition or even a valuable subtraction when one learns they do not enjoy it.

Stop motion's connections to traditional media as well as its symbolism for experimentation made it a perfect choice to use as the second sequence of my short film as it forces my character to enter a questioning phase of their career. She moves from her drawings in the park to a still-life painting in her home, trying a different avenue of art in order to see if she can better herself in new way, while still holding onto her harmful self-deprecating expectations of what she wants to produce on her first attempt. By choosing to try a different medium and subject matter, the main character is showing that she is willing to continue pursuing a creative career and grow, although she is disregarding the possibility that this new skill could also teach her valuable lessons applicable to her park sketches. Thus the stop motion medium conveys this concept through both stylistic contrast from the previous sequence and narrative action detailing that the main character is still unhappy with her work.

The third sequence utilizes Toon Boom Harmony as a way to show refinement and greater understanding of the ways animation can push the boundaries of reality to create exaggerations. Once an individual passes through the phase of their life in which they question whether or not their passions are truly something they can use as a career, they often begin to refine their skills and learn exactly what makes their field so worthwhile to them. Even though the main female shows that she still has more to learn in her field, she also conveys she has enough knowledge to understand what exactly she wants to achieve, which takes dedication. She works on making a ball bounce across the screen in an animation, which is one of the first exercises which animators attempt when learning about this field.

The visuals here are meant to be much more cartoon-y as well, demonstrating that by learning the basics of a career and taking on this entirely digital medium, one can begin to bend the rules to accomplish unique understandings that may not be taught or learned until more investigation

is completed. This sequence makes use of this detailed animation program to reference the 1930s cartoon visual gags that interact with characters (the red line poking her in the eye) and combines it with a more updated visual style that resembles much of the work done for animated television in the 1990s.

Smooth 2D animation often takes a lot of hard work, and such is still the case here, where in order to achieve fluidity the characters or assets in motion often need to change position slightly every one or two frames. This is not always the case, but during major changes in position or pose in the animation this fluidity is much more apparent. This kind of animation therefore is meant to showcase just how much growth can occur if a career is pursued seriously, regardless of the length of time it takes to see substantial growth. This is different for every individual and should be treated as such.

Development can continue to happen by practicing and failing. The main female learns more about herself and becomes stronger as an artist just as anyone else refining their skills would become better in their respective field. This is the sequence when I hope to convey to the audience the importance of supporting friends and family in their careers as well.

We start to see progress in the mediums of the film and in the dedication of the female, which she cannot see herself. I want the audience to feel a certain need to tell her not to give up and that her work is not in vain. Even if she is pursuing different projects, she is still making sure she develops skills that will help her achieve her eventual goals of finding a creative career. Without the support she eventually finds in the flower character, she likely would have let her insecurities and self-deprecation win.

That is why the third sequence is crucial in setting up the tension of the finale as now our character has “failed” in her mind three separate times, attempting to accomplish three separate



creative tasks. It begs the question “How will she see the growth sprouting from each of her creations?”

The last sequence of the film in *After Effects* goes to explain the answer to that question in a way that works for the film but can also be applied to real life and towards a myriad of people. The main character is now mentally defeated, feeling as though all her work is terrible. She returns to the park where she first drew her sketch of the old lady feeding birds, and sadly sketches that same lady again. She writes self-deprecating words against herself, calling the sketch her greatest failure. This extreme low point is quite typical of almost any career, as it is hard not to compare the progress of one individual to another. However, what can truly make a difference is instead of fearing failure, playing it safe, and never challenging oneself to excel, they choose to accept the shortcomings they have today as something they can work past in the future. They can observe the work they have created previously, actively critique it and ask questions on how to improve, and realize that sometimes even compared to one year ago they have grown tremendously.

This is where the flower character becomes most important. The main character discovers her old drawing with the small glowing sprout and grimaces, showcasing that she still does not like the way it looks. However, what is different this time is that the flower character comforts her and encourages her to compare her first sketch of the old lady to her current one, which very closely resembles her original expectations which she envisioned in a thought bubble at the beginning of the film. The flower acts as the main female’s support, and a symbol for self-care as well as outward support systems. Artists are quite notorious for being their own worst critics, and they are often unable to say kind things about their own work. What does help though is looking at old work, as the flower encourages, and seeing that by actively engaging in activities that

revolve around important career skills, the female was able to produce a sketch that is much stronger than her original. This last section had the most thought put into it as it reveals not only the title, but also how the title is changed to be a beneficial take away for the viewing audience.

At first in the storyboard, I simply had the girl add “so far” after her large writing stating “My Greatest Failure.” However both my advisor and some of my family members felt that message left the wrong kind of implication, that this character would only go on to keep viewing her works as failures even though she showed improvement. I could not allow that to continue, so after a lot of careful thought and consideration I decided to have the flower erase the word “Failure” and subtly encourage the girl to fill in the blank with a new word: “Lesson.” Therefore the whole message at the end then read: “My Greatest Lesson So Far.”

I felt as though this kind of tone was much more fitting to my message, which is failures should be treated as life lessons that are important to individual development throughout life, and should not be viewed as roadblocks without value. It took away the negative connotations still hanging around the character, and made her emotional change towards hope at the end make more sense as well. The word “Failure” just turned out to be too much of a negative, ambiguous force to leave in for a piece that is meant to encourage a different perspective on failure.

After all my hard work writing, directing, animating, and producing an entire short film by myself with only an advisor to give me guidance and a classroom of peers to critique, I can say that although it may have its imperfections, I could not have asked for a better project to showcase my growth as an artist and animator during my time in college.

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## Digital Supplements

The final product of my senior thesis is an animated short film, and has been uploaded online to vimeo.com, protected by a password. The video link and password to view the video are below.

Link: <https://vimeo.com/399938658>

Password: Learn\_From\_Failure