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5 or 6 Amphibians: An Animated Short Film

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Running Title: 5 or 6 Amphibians

5 or 6 Amphibians:
An Animated Short Film

By

Nicholas Lockwood

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of Visual Arts

UNION COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

My art project, "5 or 6 Amphibians", explores a feeling I have had at Union - that of being split between too many things. It is six minutes of rotoscoped animation, presented on an array of nine screens. It is the culmination of my interest in time-based art, especially film and animation, as well as construction and technical knowledge.

5 or 6 Amphibians

My art thesis, available to view here: <http://www.nikolardo.com/p/art-thesis.html>, explores a feeling I have had at Union of being split between too many things. It is 6 minutes of rotoscoped animation, presented on an array of nine screens. It is the culmination of my interest in time-based art, especially film and animation, as well as construction and technical knowledge.

Before coming to school I had fewer tasks to accomplish, and my time was better laid out for me: I would get up, eat, go to work, work, come home, eat, have a little time in which to relax or do chores, and go to bed. Before that, when I was in highschool, I would eat, go to school, come home, do homework, have some leisure time, and go to bed. At Union, the lack of structure made it much more open in what order I did what things, but the number of things also grew. I have been in charge of when to do all the tasks that are my responsibility, and the result has been a feeling of being split between these tasks, rather than being a cohesive whole person accomplishing one task, and then another, and so on.

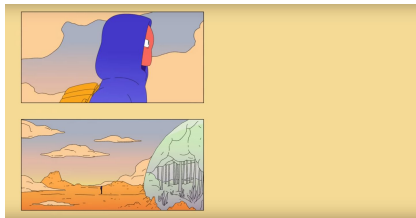
When I quit construction to work on a farm, I told people I was rapidly moving sideways in the world. I was referring, of course, to the common phrase “rapidly moving up in the world” which seems, as I look back on it now, to only refer to one’s employment status. I was joking because while I was happy for the change in coworkers from construction workers to gardeners, I had traded one skilled-labor job for another, and the new one required more of me and paid less. In my artist’s statement for this artwork, I talked about how easy it is to focus one’s energy sideways, rather than forward. One of the reasons I decided to attend college was that I felt I was not moving forward or progressing much as a human, that I’d gotten stuck in a rut and was only moving sideways. The new atmosphere of college felt great for a while and I felt like I made

some forward progress, but I got caught again in the tedium of life, and habits, and I've recently felt like I've only been going sideways again.

The title "5 or 6 Amphibians" comes from an essay by Aldous Huxley called "The Education of an Amphibian". It begins "Every human being is an amphibian—or, to be more accurate, every human being is five or six amphibians rolled into one." Huxley discusses grander ideas than I approach in my thesis - the amphibious nature of humans that he talks about is their nature both as a solitary individual and a member of a collective species, a flesh-and-blood physical creature and an untethered, infinite soul, and so forth. While I do not approach this level of metaphysical speculation in my thesis, the theme of being split seemed apparent here. While Huxley's humans are split between their contrasting natures, I showed the split in attention, time, and energy that I have experienced just in keeping up with everyday life. I've also aimed to show the split between the everyday tasks that keep us occupied and the potential we have as a single, cohesive person.

I have long been inspired by 2D animation. Classic Disney films certainly play a large part in this, though more recent animated series and films, both Western and Japanese (anime), have played a significant role in my artistic development. This project was inspired in particular by animated music videos. Personally, I find that good animation, set to appropriate music, is one of the most powerful media for conveying an idea, narrative, or an emotion, inside a short range of time. The webcomic *Homestuck* uses animation set to music for its most intense moments, and is the reason I like short animations set to instrumental, soundtrack music. More mainstream videos for mainstream music are also extremely powerful though, and some of the best - *The Wolf*, *Mr Fear*, *MEMEME* - are about various flaws in humans, or trials of the being a person. *The Wolf* is about addiction, *Mr Fear* about being connected, and *MEMEME* about falling too far into sexuality rather than human connection. Aside from content, the styles in

these videos also impacted the project. MEMEME is anime, Mr Fear is Western animation with entirely cel-shaded backgrounds (no painted backgrounds), but the most visually striking, The Wolf, is done with black lines on white, sometimes white lines on black, and a touch of red here and there. I initially considered having colored elements, but like the music, what I envisioned would have just added detail and noise at no narrative or emotional benefit, so I kept my project pared down to what was working.



Mr Fear



The Wolf



MEMEME

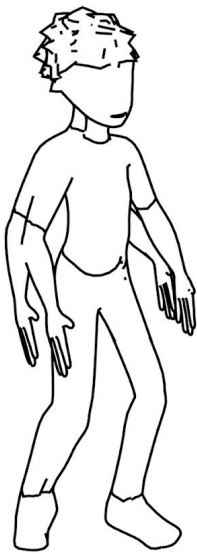
I wrote music for this project which was eventually scrapped. I had envisioned one instrument to represent each mundane activity, such that nine instruments could play together when the images were large, a cohesive whole, and that they could scatter, or stop matching each other's time, when the images were broken up on to individual screens. It turns out that nine different, recognizable instruments, at least in my hands, was overwhelming. It was too much noise. I am not unhappy with the music that I put together, but it did not match the clean visuals on the screen, and it seemed that it would distract from, rather than support, the rest of the project, and as such the music was not used. A later thought was to add piano-based music, but this was never compose, owing to time constraints and the piece not seeming to need music. I may compose music to back the video on YouTube, but in the gallery setting among other pieces it seemed unnecessary, and I did not want to disturb the experience of viewing the other pieces in the gallery.

My process for making this thesis differed from previous projects I have done. I initially intended to have my animation set to music, and when I set anything to music, I like to begin

with the music and time everything else to it. In this project, the music was not approached until late into the project and was eventually abandoned. I therefore storyboarded my animation, and produced nearly all the content, without as clear an idea of how it would fit together as I like to have. I began by working in 3D. I downloaded a model of a human which was fully rigged and easy to animate. What this means is that rather than just being describing the shape of a person, like a statue, it also described how the different body parts moved relative to each other. I played around a little with animating it, and I also spent time in Union's CROCHET lab, trying out the new motion capture space. I applied markers to my body and captured my movement through a wide variety of motions that were in my initial storyboard draft for this project. I then produced several animated loops of the 3D figure I had. Some animation was relatively simple and done purely by hand. Other sequences I imported my motion capture data and, rather than applying it directly to the figure, I used it as a reference for hand-animating the figure. In this way, I could see where all my body parts were as I moved through various motions, and I could match the figure's poses to my own, but I avoided the more technically difficult steps involved in driving the motion of a 3D figure with motion-capture data. I found that the animations I produced with motion-capture reference were superior to the ones I had animated purely by hand, but neither of them was actually that good. An image below illustrates what the 3D figure looked like. The general movements were fine, but the face was very static, and there was no movement in the hand or fingers. The hair and clothes looked wrong as well. I expected that once I finished all the general animation, I would have to go back and hand-animate the fingers. The amount of time this would take was unappealing, to say the least.

I had also had a thought that it would be nice, if I had time, to go back and trace all the 3D animation by hand, so I would have a more natural, hand-drawn line - but this also seemed out of reach timewise. I was unhappy with the look of the 3D animation, though, so I did a

different test - I took video of myself moving, and then traced the important contours, frame by frame, in a process known as rotoscoping. This looked far better than my 3D animation had, so I scrapped all the 3D work I had done, and in the last four or five weeks of my thesis, I shot video of everything I wanted in my final animation, and traced all of it. I shot video at 30 frames per second and only traced every other frame, as 15 fps is sufficient to be perceived as movement, and it took half as much time as tracing every frame. The last few days of work were spent splicing my content together and rendering out full videos for display on the installation.



3D



2D, as installed

In tandem with the content, I worked on my installation setup. When I initially described my idea to my advisor, he suggested I consider using multiple screens to portray the feeling of being split, and I considered that this would be extremely effective. I decided upon a 3x3 setup of screens, so that they could act both as a single large screen or as multiple smaller ones, as I desired. I submitted an Student Research Grant for the necessary hardware I would need to produce the installation: an additional graphics card, to be used in my personal computer, and nine HDMI cables. My advisor provided the screens. Once the SRG was granted and I had all

my components, I did initial testing to ensure that my computer could handle outputting to nine screens, and would play video smoothly over all of them, and I was delighted to find that this was the case. I painted a piece of plywood white and drilled holes in it such that I would be able to mount the screens directly to it, rather than to their mounts. The screens were mounted about three inches apart. With this set, I could make my content with this setup in mind. I set up a couple of files that would allow me to take my large rendered output and slice it up so it would appear correctly on the screens. This involved measuring the resolution of my entire setup as though the spaces between the screens were filled with more screen, rendering for a screen of that size, and then removing all the gaps and producing one video with elements missing. Another file I set up joined nine smaller videos into a single large one.

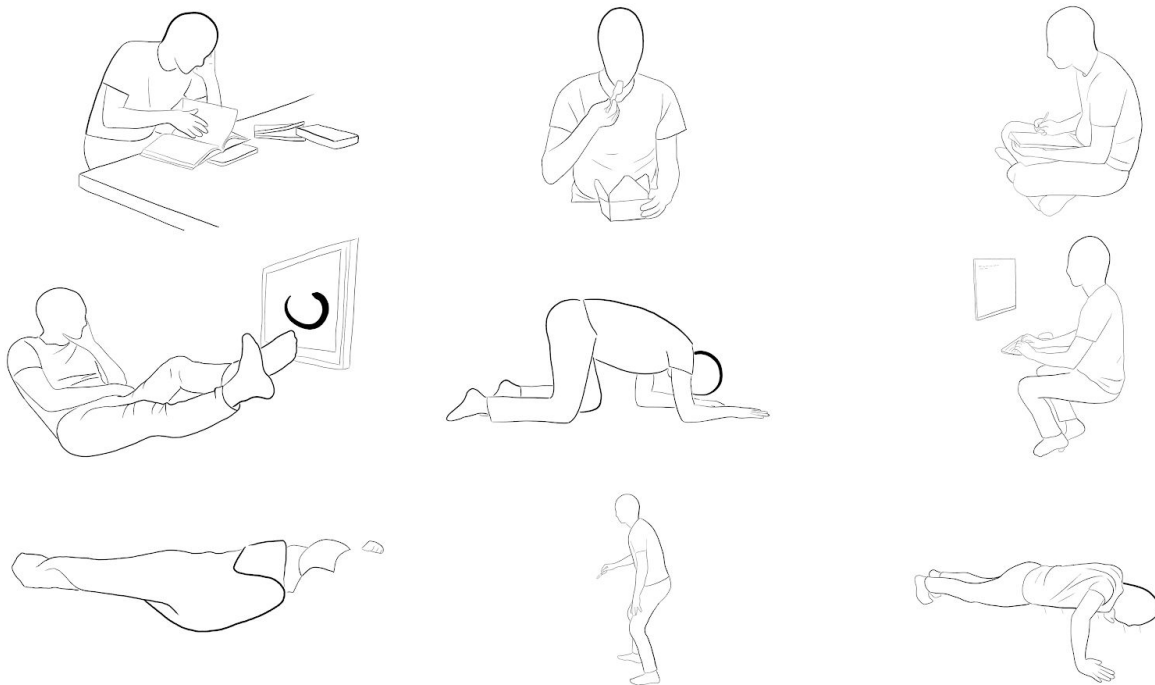
I attached the screens to the plywood, rather than their mounts, for several reasons. First, I could run all the cables behind the plywood, leaving a much cleaner look. Second, set the screens about half as far off the wall as they would have been if I had used their actual mounts, again keeping the look cleaner. Third, with all the holes drilled along the same lines, it was easy to ensure that the screens would all be approximately level and match each other. In addition to keeping the look clean, hiding the cables and keeping the screens as close to the wall as possible minimized the technical components of my piece. It would have been very easy for this project to be interpreted as being about the dangers of dealing with technology, or about how “always being plugged in” was difficult to cope with and caused problems, and this was something I wanted to avoid. Thus, while some of the scenes of my thesis include computers, they are not any more prominent than any other scene, and they are in the minority. This is also why all the cables are hidden in the final installation; despite several people saying they liked the aesthetic of the cables running all over the floor, it lent itself to a narrative that I specifically wanted to avoid. My computer remains exposed at the site of the installation, but only because

covering it caused it to overheat. It sits far enough to the side as to not really appear to be part of the installation; I think that it is very clear that it is necessary to run the installation, but is not an artistic component thereof. After installing my artwork, I dealt with a bug wherein the video would only play for an hour or less before the graphics card in my computer would freeze and stop updating six of the nine screens. I eventually found a solution that allowed my artwork to run for over a day before any problems occurred, and I set my computer up to reboot once daily.

The actual content is kept relatively generic in order to be as relatable as possible. While I could have had each activity I animated be something personal to me, what I wanted to communicate more than anything else was the feeling of being split, and I felt like using scenes that occurred in most people's lives would be the most appropriate. The animation starts out by showing each scene sequentially, filling the whole screen. The scenes are sleeping, eating, drawing, reading, typing, painting, exercising, and watching. While I do not think that most people relate directly to having to paint a wall, I think it is the best generically tedious, mundane task. These scenes play through again, at double the speed, and then again, with the speed quadrupled. Then, different animations of a person splitting play, and for each split, one of the scenes appears one of the screens. After nine splits, all eight scenes are on the screen, plus an additional one, crawling. These play for a while, with the crawling also overlaid large at one point. Then the crawler gathers themselves together, and animations of two people joining into one play as the individual scenes fade out. Then, all the scenes play individually one time through.

While I did drop some of the narrative elements I had initially considered, I still felt it was important to not just animate a problem, but to offer positive resolution. I have seen a lot of art about problems people have, and while it can be cathartic for the creator, and for viewers, I never felt like it offered much more than that. My project, in this form, would have been "I feel split". I kept a narrative where the individual scenes played, then they all played simultaneously,

then individually again, make this piece boil down to “I used to feel whole, but my inability to deal with the bombardment of tasks I have had thrust upon me has made me feel split; it is possible for me to gather myself and feel whole again.” A lot of very good art presents problems to the viewer and does not offer solutions, but I think it is important to offer hope where possible. I could have let my piece be depressing; “I used to feel whole but now I feel split”, but for what purpose? If I am creating a piece for public view and being careful to make it as relatable as possible, I also want to make it positive. If I had made the depressing version, the only positivity to be found is that people who relate to it know they are not the only ones feeling split. If I show a resolution, it offers the idea that the problem is fixable, that recovery is attainable.



The nine scenes I used, as displayed