

# **LOOK BEYOND THE VEIL: COPING WITH ANXIETY AND TRAUMA**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Submitted to the LAUNCH: Undergraduate Research office at  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by  
Faculty Research Advisor:

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May 2021

Major:

Visualization

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## **ABSTRACT**

Look Beyond the Veil: Coping with Anxiety and Trauma

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My project is a 2D animated short film following the journey of a cherry blossom petal named Petal. She desperately wants to be a part of the forest goddess's flower veil, just like all the other petals. It is the greatest honor of any petal's life. However, the petal soon becomes worried that she will be damaged as she is dragged across the forest floor. The other petals reassure her that she will be fine, but what will she do if her worst fear comes true? This short will illustrate how the petal's trauma and anxieties impact her life and how she deals with them as they take on a physical form.

When faced with anxiety, psychologists will often state that your fears are an overreaction. A lot of the time, they are right. However, if your worst fear comes true, all that advice shatters. Your overreactions now seem plausible, and it does not take long for those fears to consume your mind. It is important to let people know this can happen, and there is a path to recovery.

For this reason, I will explore the use of a metaphor for anxiety and trauma on a person's wellbeing. In doing this, I want to normalize reactions to suffering and show an instance of how

facing trauma can help one heal from their experiences. Trauma and anxiety take on many different forms, but they always intrude on life, making it hard to live normally. Starting a conversation about this validates the daily struggles of people with mental illness.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### Contributors

I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Prof. Samuel Woodfin, for his guidance and support throughout this thesis. Words cannot describe how much he has helped me grow creatively, and without his immense help and encouragement, this project would have never been completed.

I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues Emily Curtis, Cara Baxter, Cheryl Cruz, Kyle Rively, and the rest of the Aggie Creative Collective for their invaluable critique and suggestions.

Thanks to Becca Zabolio, whose beautiful voice acting really brought Petal to life. Thanks also to Cheryl Cruz, Jordan Stawski, and Lauren Sudak for the wonderful voices you provided for this project.

I would like to thank my DATA reviewer, Reagan McDonald, for the immense help they gave me in formulating and articulating ideas and concepts for my thesis. Thanks also to the department faculty and LAUNCH staff for their help and support throughout this whole process.

A special thanks to my family for their confidence in me and the incredible patience they showed during my ramblings.

Finally, thanks to my boyfriend, Jordan Stawski, for his unwavering support and for forcing me to keep working when I desperately wanted to give up. Your constant encouragement was like a blanket of kindness when I could not find any for myself.

## **Funding Sources**

This research was supported by The Aggie Creative Collective, a program supported by the University Writing Center, Department of English, and LAUNCH: Undergraduate Research at Texas A&M University.

## 1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

In my thesis, I want to explore themes of trauma, anxiety, and recovery. People, especially men, are taught to hold in their emotions and ‘just deal with it.’ Only “43.3% of U.S. adults with mental illness received treatment in 2018” (“Mental Health By The Numbers”). Teaching others to ignore their issues is a huge reason why we have so many untreated mental health disorders in the U.S. and why there is so much stigma around seeking out help. Even innocuous sayings like “keep calm and carry on” perpetuate the idea that needing to take a break or seeking help is weak and unproductive. These harmful ideas are perpetuated repeatedly in media and entertainment, silently backing up the idea that picking yourself up by your own bootstraps is the only way to succeed; however, these ideals create a system that not everyone fits into. For some, it takes the aid of others to cope with their immediate circumstance.

Growing up and subconsciously taking in this message caused a lot of problems for me. If I asked someone for help, it meant I was too weak or too emotional. Not seeing anyone with the same mental struggles as me in media caused me to think that I was the only one with these issues. Clearly, this is not the case. But, because there was a lack of representation of this, I felt estranged from my classmates and friends, too scared to ask for help. Once I began to find people talking online about their own anxieties and mental illness, citing explicit details that I also experienced, I realized how wrong I was and eventually began to seek help. So even when the thing I feared the most, losing my friends, happened, I had the resources, knowledge, and support from my family to not let that fear dominate my mind. Many other people are dealing with the same things as I was, feeling alone and scared, so I think it is important to show multiple stories of mental health and its effects.



Therefore, I chose to focus on the question, what if your worst fears came true? I especially wanted to utilize animation to accomplish this for two reasons: The first is that animations appeal to kids and young adults, so those who would be feeling most alone in their problems would be more likely to encounter it and be comforted. The second reason is that animation is unique in its ability to portray human problems by using distinctly non-human characters. In a cartoon world, the audience cannot have any preconceived bias because they do not know the systems the world operates within, so they must take the characters' perspectives at face value. In doing this, it can help the viewer see the perspectives of others in a more digestible manner than live-action media. Because I plan to do my project with a metaphor based on an inanimate object, a cherry blossom petal, I wanted to make sure I was able to make a compelling story that still characterized my goals, and that would cause the viewer to think differently about the people they know who act like my petal character.

My research question will be solved in my creative artifact by telling the audience that trauma can cause you to be unable to function, leaving you feeling stuck. Berating yourself and not knowing why can occur from mental illness. However, it is still important to be kind to yourself and let others help in accomplishing that.

In the field of animation, the portrayal of mental health is limited since the medium is usually aimed at children, so animated media rarely explores serious themes. However, there are some shows that effectively talk about meaningful topics. Some of this media does touch on anxiety and how it affects your ability to interact with others, such as Cartoon Network's *Infinity Train*. However, these TV shows and films immediately dispel those anxieties or try to tell the audience that there was nothing to be anxious about in the first place, which can be a very good message to children for the most part. When this happens, it is likely because the studio does not

have enough airtime to flesh out the anxieties, or the company worries they will lose viewership due to the more serious topics. However, this can cause a sense of detachment if an audience member has had their fears come true before; this can also tell children that there is something wrong with them if they are still anxious about those fears.

Through my research, I have found that people deal with and talk about anxiety in different ways. This makes the subject hard to write a story about because it will never encompass every person's experience with anxiety. However, I think there needs to be more media talking about differing aspects of anxiety in order to let people know there are others who feel and act the same way. I want to communicate to people dealing with trauma that their life is not dominated by tragedy. There are ways of coping with this, and people might find solace or even practical help while looking at media depicting it.

To properly convey this within the animation, it is important to study how film and animation affectively achieves an emotional tone without it coming off as shallow or forced. Just portraying events happening through a series of drawings is not enough to properly convey the more personal themes of my story. In order to encompass the feelings of anxiety, trauma, and fear, it is important to be abstract enough to allow for the audience to interject their own experiences and emotions. However, if the animation is too vague, then the audience will be confused and lose interest. Finding the line of ambiguity is something that I will attempt to accomplish with my creative artifact.

## 2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

In researching anxiety, I focused on how the psychological field approaches trauma and anxiety. Psychologists talk about how fixating too much on outcomes can prevent someone from being able to do anything about their given situation. When you want to have control over every aspect of your life, many times that means avoiding things that you believe have an unmanageable outcome. This can easily lead to someone being unable to function in society because life is often uncontrollable. It is important to help these people reintegrate by teaching them that their fears are not as life threatening as they seem. However, many of these sources, exemplified best in Dawn Huebner's "Rethinking Anxiety: Learning to face fear", are meant to educate people about anxiety but make assumptions that are problematic. The experts will tell you that because anxieties are overextensions of natural fears, "your fear is a false alarm" (Huebner, 00:16:31 - 00:16:32). However, I found a lot of the entry-level anxiety discourse fails to discuss situations in which an anxious person's worst fears do come true. Someone with anxiety who is taught solely that their fears are baseless or overblown will have a hard time coping if their fear ever does occur. I wanted to create something that acknowledges that this can happen, but at the same time, shows the audience that letting those situations fester rather than allowing yourself to heal and grow stronger can result in a loss of one's own identity. This happens primarily through isolation out of a fear that your anxieties will come true once again.

I looked to real life stories of mental health issues in order to see how people respond to their anxieties. I found a case in the documentary, *The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness*, which chronicles Hayao Miyazaki as he creates his final film before retirement. Even though it is not

the subject of the documentary, he does speak openly about his depression and anxiety. He dealt with his issues by burying them and hyper focusing on his work. He ended up isolating himself from his family and friends. In his old age, he realized the mistakes he had made and now tries to live as freely as he can, but some of those connections he believes have been permanently severed. Anxiety and depression have such a hold on his life, he cannot maintain relationships with people outside of work, much like the character I am portraying. His story is a good example of how untreated trauma bleeds into every facet of your life for years into the future.

I also delved into the TV show *Infinity Train* to see how it deals with serious topics such as divorce and anxiety while utilizing non-human characters to help tell its narrative. Although the main character is a young girl, many of the other characters are creatures or objects. I found it helpful to see how the creators chose to give emotion and personality to these inanimate objects. The show can properly address more serious topics, even with non-human characters, because of how they establish the tone of the show. They do this through the slightly eerie sound and backgrounds used throughout. They also make it clear early on that they are not afraid to tackle darker subjects than likely to be seen in regular children's programming. Because I have never attempted an animation of this scale before, it was important that I look at how other shows, like *Infinity Train*, treat movement, character and background design, lighting, and composition to establish tone. Each shot in an animation must have these elements in them, making it an especially difficult medium.

My story could only be told through a moving medium like animation because the characters are too simplistic and abstract to be understood without movement and sound. Animation also allows for crazy or outlandish stories that are not off-putting to the audience because it is "a cartoon." Audiences are more willing to accept weird characters, environments,

and plot details when they are looking at drawings rather than real footage. This medium also lets the audience connect more with inanimate objects than, say, a painting would because the inanimate objects have the ability to act and sound like people, while portraying very human-like problems and situations.

My animation specifically is heavily influenced by the film *Princess Mononoke*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki and many other Studio Ghibli films that are similar. The lush wilderness, charming forest creatures, and imposing forest spirit were the driving force behind the look and feel of my animation. However, my themes and ideology differ from the film as I focus more on the psychological aspects of trauma, while the film focuses largely on environmental issues.

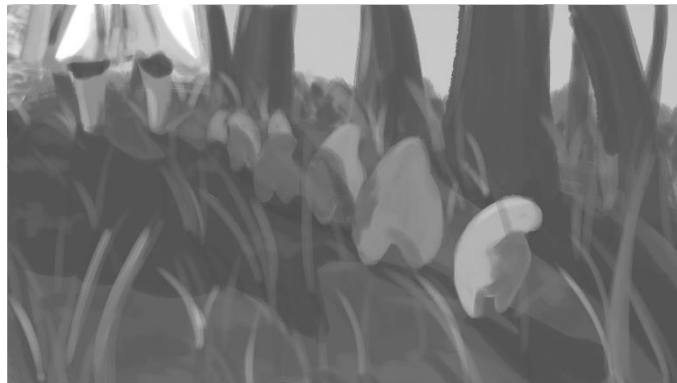
When I look for animation that talks about more serious topics, it can be hard to find many that are not primarily comedies or aimed at children. While there are a handful, like the TV show *Bojack Horseman*, the film *I Lost My Body*, and a couple of Studio Ghibli films, these are few and far between. I have yet to find an animation that talks about the trauma caused by anxieties becoming reality and the aftermath that follows. My animation differs because it is solely focused on the anxieties of a certain event coming true and the trauma in its wake.

I have always wanted to create a work of art about my feelings of anxiety because of how little I have seen it represented in the media I consume and enjoy. I think it is important to have an adequate representation of differing mental illnesses to show others that they are not alone. For this reason, I chose to make my animation about the topic of coping with anxiety and trauma.

### 3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT

#### 3.1 Creating and Uploading the Artifact

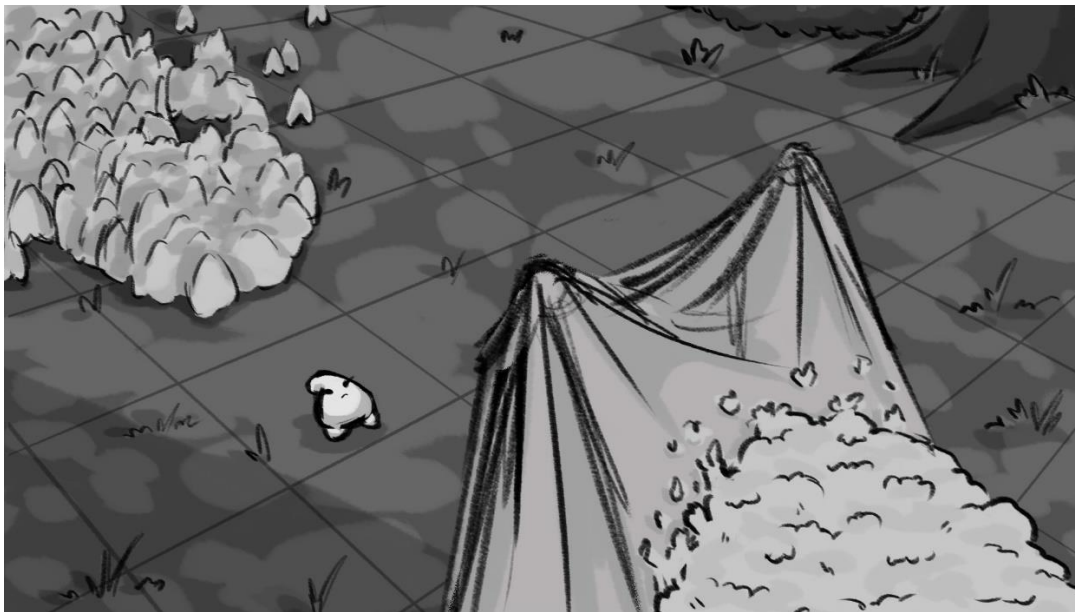
When I first started creating the storyboard for this project, I was not particularly well versed in creating sequential art, an art form that is ordered in a way to tell a story. Before I even started storyboarding, I drew some quick key scenes (an example can be seen in *figure 3.1*). Key scenes are a way to quickly identify what some of the most important and impactful parts of the story are and gauge what they should look like. When planning out the entire story, it is necessary for me to get my ideas down first in key scenes, even if it is hard to read. I then go back and redraw the scene when storyboarding, this time with a better understanding of what I wanted to emphasize and what things I wanted to add in.



*Figure 3.1: Key scene of Petal waiting in line for the veil*

Before a frame can be completed, it must be drafted in a storyboard first. It consists of rough drawings that are meant to resemble what the final product should look like. As I drew my boards, I began thinking of how the character will move in or out of any given scene, where they would be looking, and what composition best fits the tone of the shot. The focal point of each shot is generally the main character or something they are looking at, but how you show this

information greatly changes its perception. For example, in one scene pictured in *figure 3.2*, my petal character is standing in front of the goddess as she tells the petal where she will be placed. To show how little power the petal has here, I made her very small in comparison to the goddess. We are also looking down on her, showing the power imbalance between the two characters. It is important to be constantly thinking not only about what you want to portray in a shot but how you want to portray it.



*Figure 3.2: Petal standing in front of the goddess*

To create my animatic, I used Adobe Photoshop to draw each storyboard. I would then export the boards into Storyboard Pro where I would string them together, edit the clips, and add sound. I sourced the music and sounds from various websites around the internet, such as Incompetech, Soundsnap, and Freesound. I was looking for specific foley sounds and music that would come together to foster the tone I am trying to convey in my animatic. For the voice acting, I looked to people in the major of Visualization who have done amateur voice acting in the past and asked them if they would be willing to participate. In doing this, I acquired the

talents of Becca Zabolio, Cheryl Cruz, Jordan Stawski, Lauren Sudak, and myself to voice various characters. I utilized the sound booth within the department of Visualization to have the best sound quality possible. I then would take my recorded sounds into Storyboard Pro and place them in my animatic. Since an animatic is typically formatted as a video, I believe the most accessible medium to present it would be through YouTube.

In order to visualize the story as a whole, I needed to write a script. In the script, I detailed what aspects I would like the scene to focus on. For example, I wanted to showcase the worm characters before their main appearance in the scene where Petal gets torn off the veil. This was done so that the worms appearing suddenly in the scene would not feel so jarring, and so that the audience can start to be thinking about what the worms represent.

While writing the script it was also important to add where a shot would cut to a new view and what camera movement would be used. By doing this, it made the storyboarding process easier since I knew how many different backgrounds were needed based on how many cuts there were. It also helped me plan out compositions that require camera movements like panning and tilting. Like in one shot, seen in *figure 3.3*, that required a fast tilt up so the audience could see the goddess from Petal's perspective. In this case, the shot is extra long so the camera in Storyboard Pro can keep a fluid momentum. The red frame at the bottoms indicates where the shot starts, and the frame on top is where the shot ends. The camera tracks up while slightly zooming out. By zooming out, the two characters sizes are contrasted, showing their differences in power. There are smears along the middle to create a sense of speed.





*Figure 3.3: Petal looking up at Goddess as the camera tilts up*

### **3.2 Technical Inspirations**

While sourcing inspirations for my animatic, I was drawn to the technical features used in films such as *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Secret of NIMH*, and *Midsommar*. I also took inspiration from fashion designer, Alexander McQueen, and his Spring/Summer show in 2007 that featured a dress made of flowers that would fall off the model as they walked down the runway (see *figure 3.4*).

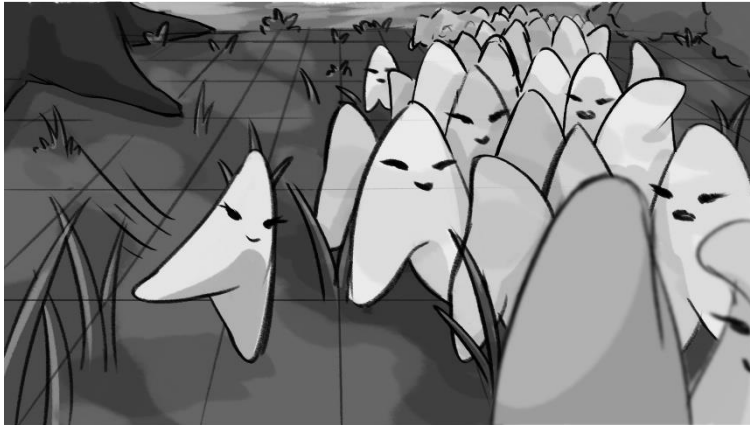


*Figure 3.4: Alexander McQueen's floral dress from his Spring/Summer 2007 show*

In *Sleeping Beauty*, I took inspiration from the hand-drawn forest backgrounds. Since my animatic is set in a forest scene, I used the backgrounds of *Sleeping Beauty* as style reference. When watching *The Secret of NIMH*, I focused on how the foreground and background elements interacted with the character to give the scene depth and make them feel grounded in their environment. For example, grass would be swaying in front of the characters, making it seem like the audience really is getting a look at them in a real space from a plausible perspective. I used this concept in many scenes, but it can most prominently be seen in the shot with the goddess walking by and the shot of Petal floating into the line for the veil, seen in *figure 3.5* and *3.6*.



*Figure 3.5: Goddess walking up to line of petals*



*Figure 3.6: Petal landing in the line for the flower veil*

Looking at *Midsommar*, I wanted to emulate the intense emotions the viewer feels when watching certain scenes where characters are crying and screaming. The film achieves such a strong reaction by overwhelming the audience with many layered sounds that create a sense of chaos. I also wanted to generate this feeling in my audience, so I used layered screams along with intense music and character foley at the peak of the mayhem.

### **3.3 Character and Story Choices**

When watching *Midsommar*, I was not only looking to implement how the film treats audio but also their visual costume design. There is a large dress covered in flowers to symbolize the main character's blossoming into this society of people and becoming their May Queen

(shown in *figure 3.7*). The striking visual not only influenced the flower veil in my creative artifact but is also the reason I came up with my story. While I was watching the scene with the gigantic flower dress, I was wondering how difficult it must be not only to make but also to maintain for the long hours of shooting that is necessary. Surely flowers were falling off, and the bottom of the dress was likely covered in dirt since they were shooting in a large field. Eventually, I started developing this idea around the fact that the flowers on the bottom of this dress were likely ruined, but the audience of the film may never know or even think about this aspect.



*Figure 3.7: Still from Midsommar; May Queen flower dress*

When coming up with the character Petal, I chose a cherry blossom petal in particular because of its round, tear drop shape as well as the cleft tip these petals have. This cleft tip gave me the opportunity to draw the characters' legs in a natural way so they could stand, jump, and emote. As for the name of the main character of my story, Petal, I chose such a simplistic name because she symbolizes the embodiment of an idea rather than a personal figure. I did this for

every character, i.e., the goddess being named Goddess and the other petal being named Peach for her peachy color.

## 4. REFLECTION

### 4.1 Reflection on the Process

I have never taken on an animation project of this scale before; I did not account for the enormous jump there is when taking a storyboard to a fully blown animation. Just a few seconds of animation can take months to get right, especially for a novice such as myself. My story is nearly at the three-minute mark, so I knew this would be an impossible task on my own. Therefore, I chose to create an animatic instead, which is essentially a moving storyboard that conveys the story without the constant movement of animation. Instead of drawing out each small change in movement, an animatic focuses on the bigger shifts in action and key camera movements. By doing this I can incorporate more story in a smaller amount of time.

At the beginning of this process, the method of thinking necessary for each frame was daunting, but as I progressed, figuring out what to emphasize and what to keep out of a shot became easier to determine. Knowing what frames are vital and which can be left out can help cut down the process time of creating all the boards necessary for an animatic.

Another thing I learned is that it is important to find a digital brush early on that can work for every step of the drawing process. I started out with multiple brushes that I had to switch through for different types of shading, which took up more time while not adding anything of importance to the readability of the storyboards. Once I found a brush I liked and adjusted its settings to fit my drawing style best, the process became much quicker and streamlined.

As I was drafting the script for my animatic, I had to decide who my target audience will be. I originally wanted it to be more child friendly, sitting around the 12-14 age range. While writing the story, I determined that some of the elements in my story would need to be darker in

tone to convey the emotion that trauma invokes. So, I changed my target audience to be around the young adult age range and above.

## **4.2 Public Presentations**

When presenting my creative artifact for the Undergraduate Research Scholars Symposium, I learned what parts of my story were necessary to explain in detail to an audience so that they can follow along and which parts could be left out. During the Question & Answer section, I learned that I needed to make certain parts of my story clearer in the animatic. I needed to make it more obvious that there was something not quite right with the petals at the edge of the veil as compared to the rest. I attempted to make this clearer, but I also wanted it to be a bit ambiguous otherwise it would not make sense why the other petals are not just as scared as her. I also needed to make it clearer that my character is a petal. I tried to remedy this by adding outlines to better define the character and establishing early on that she is in a tree with other blossoms on it. Doing this presentation also helped me to become more confident in my work and my ability to talk about my research. I do wish the presentation could have been live instead of a pre-recorded video so that I could get the full experience, but due to COVID-19, this could not happen.

## **4.3 What I Would Do Differently**

I mentioned earlier that I was trying to find a line of ambiguity that would allow the viewer to insert their own experiences into the story, while, at the same time, being clear enough that they can still understand what is happening. I think I partially accomplished this, but due to the extremely abstract and bizarre nature of the story and characters, I do think some of the animatic is still quite difficult to understand. If I were to do this project again, I would have

given more backstory to what the flower veil is, who the goddess is, and why the petals want to get on the veil.

Though I am happy with what I have accomplished, I wanted to do more. Initially, I had a story that fleshed out the world better and Petal a friend that more clearly portrays the theme of companionship and its necessity in the healing process. I had to change this character to a bird creature who gives Petal the opportunity to help herself. If given more time, I would have liked to have delved more into this aspect of the story.

If I were to do this process again, I would start out with more storyboards that are rough but still clearly describe what is happening in the scene. I would make the action happening in the shots more exaggerated and personality driven. Moreover, I would also have liked to spend more time on the sound design and music. Since I cannot compose music myself, I had to turn to outside alternatives that did not completely encompass the tone I was looking for. I also would have liked to add more effects to some of the voices, especially the goddess, whose voice I wanted to sound like Nyx from the video game *Hades* because of the imposing presence her voice gives off.

During the drawing process itself, it is important to limit the values used so that there is not time wasted trying to render out each shot. I did not start my final boards this way, though I wish I did. The linework in storyboards is generally very rough so that it is easy to get the artist's idea down. This also makes it so that it is easier to go back and quickly change elements of the drawing because the artist does not have to worry about the linework matching up perfectly with the older drawing. Because my lines and coloring were so clean, I felt as though I had to keep up the same level of detail throughout the rest of the boards, which I deeply regret due to how long this process took.



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## APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT

Look Beyond the Veil is a story about a petal as she desperately tries to get on the flower goddess's veil, but she soon realizes something is wrong with the petals at the bottom of the veil. They look dirty and ripped up. As she starts to panic, another petal reassures her that the goddess cares for them all. Once the petal meets the goddess, she places her near the edge, her worst nightmare. As she predicted, the petals on the edge get ripped up as they are raked across branches from the bushes in the forest. How will she react to her worst fear coming true?

My animatic, pictured in *figure A.1*, can be found on the OAKTrust website under my profile. I have also attached a QR code that links to the video.



*Figure A.1: Look Beyond the Veil animatic title shot*

