

I Think Life's Alright:
Incorporating Your Personal Story Makes You a Better Storyteller

A Thesis Presented

By

JONATHAN FLEMING

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies

Bridgewater State University

Bridgewater, Massachusetts

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Teaching

in Visual Arts

MAY 2023

COPYRIGHT PAGE

©2023
Jonathan Fleming
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

I Think Life's Alright is a fictional graphic novel I created which draws from the real-life experience of losing my father. In this thesis, I propose that incorporating one's personal story makes for more relatable and better storytelling. Talking about true elements from one's life is both the most relatable and unique thing about humans. In this thesis, I explore the various techniques involved in creating all successful stories that invoke emotional responses from the reader. This thesis includes examples of other artists who have inspired my work and have followed similar storytelling structures. From their influences, I have developed my own technique in writing emotionally engaging stories and have adapted those skills into my pedagogy, which in return is passed along to my students. No matter which class they choose to take and which medium they choose to create with, they will always be learning about how to use their personal experiences to enhance their storytelling.

DEDICATION

For

Andrew for drawing with me since we could pick up a crayon.

Bob for being my first and greatest photography teacher.

Christine for giving me the resources to start the best career I ever had.

And

Dad for teaching me that life is alright.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude towards the Graduate committee chair and my mentor for this whole thesis process, Amy Lovera. Amy and I spent more than half of my master's degree journey together and we really developed a strong teacher/student relationship. Having such a familiarity with how we both worked which certainly assisted in developing such a successful project.

I would also like to acknowledge the members of the graduate committee, Professors Jonathan Shirland, Mary Dondero, Luke Meeken, and Collin Asmus who gave me critiques and feedback. Professors Shirland and Dondero played a major role in solidifying my thesis statement and the project I wanted to create. They both challenged me far greater when considering my subject matter and what it was that ultimately ended up becoming my first published graphic novel. Professor Asmus made this whole experience feel like play and truly brought joy to every critique.

To anyone interested in reading a copy of my graphic novel, *I Think Life's Alright*, please reach out to me via email, jfleming3d@gmail.com, for details.

IMAGES

- Image 1: *Bucket*. 9" X 12" Graphite on Sketch Paper. Summer 2021
- Image 2: *Grief* (Series of 4 paintings). 18" X 24" Acrylic on Canvas. Spring 2022
- Image 3: *Movie Night*. Digital Photo and Digital Drawing. Fall 2022
- Image 4: *I Think Life's Alright* Cover Pages. Digital Drawing. Spring 2023
- Image 5: *I Think Life's Alright* Pages 22 and 23. Digital Drawing. Spring 2023
- Image 6: *I Think Life's Alright* Pages 28 and 29. Digital Drawing. Spring 2023
- Image 7: *Specktroscope*. Rotating Cake Decorator and Mirrors. Spring 2023
- Image 8: *Earthboy Jacobus* Cover and Page. Ink. 2005
- Image 9: *Digging*. Digital Photo and Digital Drawing. Fall 2022
- Image 10: *Syllabus*. Cover and Various Pages. Graphite and Paper. 2014
- Image 11: *I Think Life's Alright* Pages 42 and 43. Digital Drawing. Spring 2023
- Image 12: *World of Tomorrow Episode 2*. Animation. 2017
- Image 13: *I Think Life's Alright* Pages 54 and 55. Digital Drawing. Spring 2023
- Image 14: Page Samples from Final Printed Book. Spring 2023
- Image 15: *Exhibition Design Plan*. Pen and Paper. Spring 2023
- Image 16: *Specks*. Polymer Clay. Spring 2023
- Image 17: *Exhibition 1*. Anderson Gallery, BSU. Spring 2023
- Image 18: *Exhibition 2*. Anderson Gallery, BSU. Spring 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
BRIEF ARTIST STATEMENT	3
THE STORY'S BEGINNING	7
WHAT YOU KNOW AND WANT TO KNOW	15
DIFFERENT FROM ANYONE ELSE	18
INFLUENCES AND BEING WELL-READ	25
THE CREATIVE PROCESS TO <i>I THINK LIFE'S ALRIGHT</i>	32
THE EXHIBITION OF <i>I THINK LIFE'S ALRIGHT</i>	35
THE ART OF TEACHING STORYTELLING	38
CONCLUSION	41
REFERENCES	43

INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember, I have consciously recognized my ability to tell stories. Ever since I could pick up a pencil, I have been writing and drawing. As I got older, I consumed every resource I could on proper storytelling, and it is here where I noticed that the best storytellers in the world are all talking about the same thing - Incorporating your personal story makes you a better storyteller. By incorporating personal experiences into stories, what the creator finds interesting about themselves becomes an outlet to help make stories more interesting for the audience.

Incorporating true life events allows the artist to create believable characters who are flawed as well as situations that have the specificity of real life. This method of storytelling allows the audience to relate to the work more openly. For the creator, developing stories with these elements can be cathartic, or therapeutic, allowing for mental distance to observe their own experience. For my own practice, I have learned to keep this basic rule in my work.

When my personal experiences are built into a story, suddenly my writing has something simultaneously relatable and unique to the audience. On a basic human level, sharing our experiences is how we communicate in everyday life. When I meet someone new, the general rule of thumb is to tell them a little something about myself. Now, that story can change depending on the person I am meeting and the social situation, but I am telling a story I think would be interesting to them. I think when it comes to writing fiction, this is the part that can be forgotten by many fledgling creators. As a teacher, it is also my job to

make this connection for my students and make them notice this important narrative strategy.

Reflecting on memories can be difficult for students, either because they can be extra critical of their pasts, or they may not realize the things they have experienced are all that special. A key element to teaching this aspect of storytelling is for students to have a deep introspection on their lives thus far and make them realize what it is that is unique to them. At the heart of our personalities, our memories make up who we are as people. The animator, Don Hertzfeldt, has spent his multi-decade career on the subject of memory. “Our memories make us who we are. We are the sum of our experiences. If you were given the option of immortality, but were told you had to reset your memories every 100 years, would you do it?” (On Memories, 2021).

BRIEF ARTIST STATEMENT

I Think Life is Alright is a graphic novel presented as a series of journal entries in which my fictional self thinks he is (I am) going crazy due to hallucinations. As the story evolves, I figure out that the hallucinations I am seeing are not hallucinations at all, but living creatures whose purpose is to rebuild my most important memories. The underlying theme throughout the book explores elements of my grieving process from when my father passed away.

When I lost my dad to cancer, it was the hardest loss I had experienced in my life. At the same time, an artistic awakening occurred like I have never experienced before. Suddenly, I had a muse that helped channel my outpouring of emotion, a story was to be told through this. In Paul Fierlinger's film, *Drawn From Memory*, (1995) he recollects the feeling of animating Saul Steinberg's cartoons after his passing - "Now I have drawn him back to life and he must be drawn out of his heavenly drawer again and again wherever this film might be playing. . . Just remember those who died before you. There, in you, they live. Maybe this force reins over time, but it is never nothing." Everyone will experience loss in some way at some point in their life, but regardless of whether it has happened to the viewer, it is certainly something they anticipate with fear. While the concept of loss is not new to storytelling, I have found the experience is unique to each person through expression and circumstance. The idea of adding a powerful story beat based off something that has really happened to the creator is true for more than just death and loss, it carries on for any topic of interest people want to talk about. Most of my students have unique experiences that

they want to share, and I would not be doing my job if I was not helping them unlock their ability to express themselves.

High school students are particularly closed off to the world. At that age, they certainly feel like everything about themselves is vulnerable and needs to be covered up. Storytelling can help break these students out of their shell and give them an outlet to be more vulnerable with their audience. Perhaps their first story can be published anonymously, or they find a close friend or family member to share it with. Small strategies like this will build their confidence as they start to realize other people resonate with what they have created.

As a high school teacher, I have the opportunity to pass these narrative strategies along to my students. You can find storytelling in every facet of my curriculum - Game Design, Animation, Graphic Novels, Digital Photography, and even the Yearbook. While it is important for students to walk away with the technical application from a course, the more beneficial aspects to a class are the creative components that make each project feel unique from one student to the other. Allowing them to incorporate their own stories gives them that ownership to their learning, though the process on properly scaffolding stories is a technical skill on its own as well.

From what I have observed as an educator teaching storytelling, when a young child makes up a story, they tend to ramble on with these wondrous ideas that do not really compile into anything meaningful. I am not trying to put down the creativity of children, but rather if they are not taught to hone their creativity into a more focused purpose, they will only ramble for their entire storytelling

career. This is not to say that when they start telling more linear stories, they will not instinctually be pulling from experiences they already know, but if we bring it to their attention, then they can suddenly utilize that skill. I would go as far to say that students do not even realize that it is a good thing to copy from real life when storytelling. Many students think an artwork is original if it is derived from pure imagination or fantasy, when in fact, often fantastic tropes are repeated with little variation. Personal experiences, on the other hand, are the secret ingredient that takes those tropes and adds the creator's own unique developmental journey to familiar story beats.

The challenge of teaching students to use their experiences as building blocks to create stories is how much that may frighten them at first. When a student is starting out, the idea of telling their story in fiction could lead to moments of shyness or vulnerability. However, once they also understand that hiding their experiences amongst their writing will be invisible to the reader, that vulnerability can also be empowering in letting them express themselves in a way they may have never seen before. The goal of authentic storytelling is to have the reader not realize what is real and what is fiction.

What is it about vulnerability that makes storytelling better? One benefit students will gain is the ability to recognize when other creators utilize their work as well. Whether it is comics, film, video games, music, or any other media, suddenly students can understand other author's works from a deeper level once they can recognize the emotional approach. This leads to a more empathetic lens on the material they are consuming, and they now can see the person

behind the story that is written more clearly. Being able to make a reader empathetic to the story they are telling fully immerses the reader into the narrative.

Merriam-Webster defines empathy as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.” The earlier students can understand how to be empathetic towards other people, the sooner they will feel comfortable about opening about their own lives. When they walk in someone else’s shoes, they are presented with the opportunity to know everyone has unique experiences or go through hard times. There is something therapeutic about not having to bottle up every emotion, which is quite often what high schoolers end up doing. One of my favorite quotes from the photographer, Platon is “If I can harness the experience of the hurt that happened to me, that is a door to something you’ve never had before. That is empathy” (Abstract, 2017).

THE STORY'S BEGINNING

When I first set out on my master's degree program, I knew I was going to create a graphic novel. Graphic novels have always been a prominent part of my life due to them being the only form of reading I could really access. Though I never had an official diagnosis for a reading disability, I was never a strong reader in school without visual aids. I was even pulled out of regular English classes in elementary school to work on skills in a small group setting. At this time in my life, graphic novels were stigmatized as if there was something wrong with using, reading, or owning them. Happily, that stigma has since passed us, and they are a more useful tool than anyone even 15 years ago could have imagined. I am proud of myself for pushing through the white noise of "You are a teenager, why are you reading picture books?" and truly getting to see the medium for what it was really capable of. It has turned into a life-long love of art and storytelling, which has evolved into an essential part of my creative process.

Something readers of this thesis might even notice is the lack of citations used from books, but more references are found connected through visual media. I have been told that a thesis typically contains more pages of references than I have in this paper to back up what is claimed in the writing. This is in part to my reading disability and not having as many sources where I often find challenging to comprehend new information. It is not that I do not ever read books or for a lack of trying, but much of my learning often comes from media where the information is delivered as a visual narrative. I also have been a teacher for over seven years at this point and I have had the opportunity to

observe hundreds of students over multiple grade levels, including both elementary and high school levels. Most of my elementary students are now enrolling in my high school classes. I have evolved my own curriculum and watched how students are directly affected by visual storytelling as it has become a staple across the different classes I teach.

At the start of my master's program, I took a course on visual storytelling where I created several short comics. My advisor had challenged me with a couple of tasks as I was continuing to develop my technique, but the most important one I took away from all this was "how can we break your stories out of those squares?"

"Those squares" refer to the all-familiar boxes used to frame each moment in time on a comic page. Graphic writing can take a different visual approach than the traditional comic format. Some great examples of this are Emil Ferris' *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* and Lynda Barry's *Syllabus*. Something I found to be very profound in Lynda Barry's book was when she said, "When I start feeling too concerned that all the words I write be very smart and about something worthwhile, I find my urge to write replaced with an urge to draw monkeys" (Barry, *Syllabus*, 2020). What I take away from such a silly quote is that when you strive for structure and "the way things are supposed to be," just make it completely different from that. For the first time creating a personal project, I felt that way about *I Think Life's Alright*, I stopped trying to create smart words and just decided to draw some monkeys.

As an example of where I started before *I Think Life's Alright*, I want to analyze my short story, *Bucket* (shown on page 10). This four-page comic focused on a character I created based off my younger brother who has a reading disability but is still very much able to discover things on his own in other ways. The robot character, Bucket, was damaged on the assembly line, which leaves him to malfunction when trying to do other things that all other robots around him can. However, Bucket's ability to recognize structures and recreate them is something other robots cannot do as well.

Ultimately, this comic fell short in its goal when I completed writing it. While the character was interesting, it was still not as fully developed for the audience to empathize with Bucket's journey. This story was not as much of a tell-all when compared to *I Think Life's Alright*. Bucket's "flaws" or circumstances were not specific enough to make him relatable. If it had more time to develop the world Bucket inhabits and the goals he is trying to accomplish, the reader could have felt more empathy for Bucket's motives. As it currently stands, the story is only a starting point in studying the character in his most basic form.

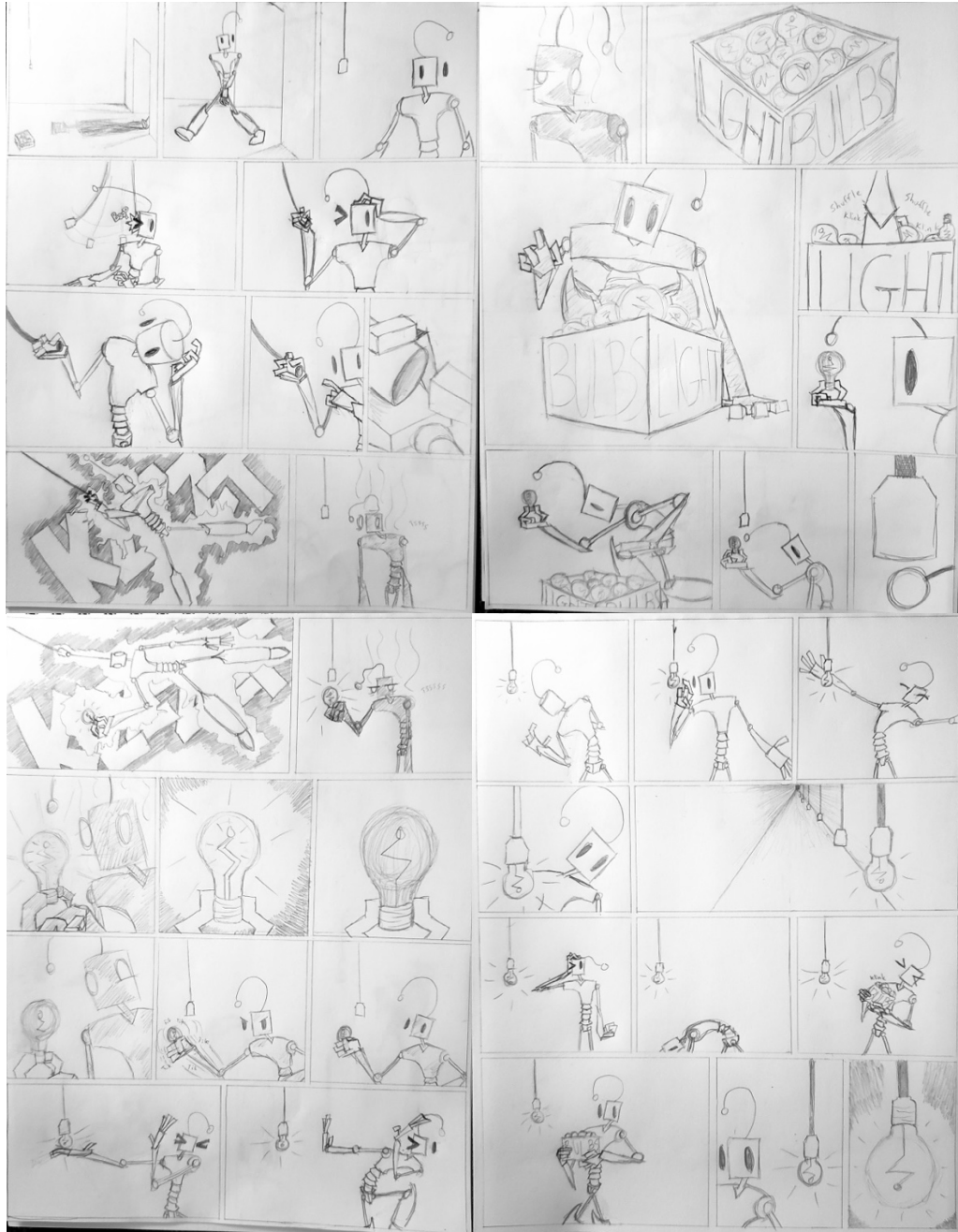


Image 1: *Bucket*. 9" X 12" Graphite on Sketch Paper. Summer 2021

My personal stories have recently been coming back to the same thing - the untimely death of my father. After losing my father a little over 5 years ago, it changed my whole world. My father taught me everything I know including the most important life lessons I will someday pass down to my children. Not to mention, when he passed away, he also left my six-year-old brother with a father

figure role to fill. Being able to be more involved in his life like attending his IEP meetings, organizing birthday parties with friends, and being there to discover his newest interests and talents gave me a deep enough understanding of his ability to create a comic like *Bucket*. This muse has been stuck in my mind for so long that it was just begging for a way to get out.

Before *I Think Life is Alright*, I explored several approaches to using storytelling in my work. As I had mentioned earlier, I spent a semester writing and drawing short comics, but something was not clicking just right at this point. The one constant that remained was this overwhelming outpour of emotion surrounding my father's death. Combining that with the idea of breaking out of those squares on the comic book page, I focused my attention to a different kind of square in the form of canvas.

Painting felt like a viable option as I suddenly had all these ideas that seemed to fit the medium. Painting was never a part of my background and still to this day, I suppose I do not really consider myself much of a painter. That being said, when I started thinking about each canvas as a comic panel, there were suddenly all these ideas coming to life. My first series was a set of four paintings titled, *Grief*. The idea behind each individual painting was one of my passing thoughts as my father was sick from cancer. My grieving process really started before my father died. Anyone who has had a sick family member may be able to relate to this - you see the person you once knew swiftly turn into someone unrecognizable before your eyes. You suddenly start to wonder if that person is even there anymore.



Image 2: *Grief* (Series of 4 paintings). 18" X 24" Acrylic on Canvas. Spring 2022

All these paintings came together to create a sequence expressing my thoughts on death, which invites the viewer to also experience those same thoughts. I find that my work often uses juxtaposition to create a mental dissonance between the subject matter and the imagery. In this case, the bright colors and rounded edges of my work is set in contrast to the real questions asked myself as I saw my father fade into his illness. While I feel the project did

not successfully communicate my message to the audience, it influenced future projects in both the aesthetics and storytelling approach I was looking for. Future projects in painting included overlapping canvases to combine different images into one continuous story, almost like the way a series of comic book panels would be creatively laid out. While projects remained interesting, they were not getting the message across in the way I had hoped. This led to major burn-out in painting. I liked what I was doing, but not being able to answer that question of what my work was trying to portray through the work only led to thinking about different approaches.

Photography was the next step in my approach and where the true vision of *I Think Life's Alright* was born. I was feeling creatively burnt out after seven straight years of studio art courses. On the verge of wanting to tap out, I got a real good night of sleep where I dreamt of these creatures running around on the shelves in my living room and physically reorganizing the movies on them. The creatures' designs were simple, yet full of life and I remember being filled with joy over them keeping me company and picking out a movie to watch. It is not often I have vivid dreams, but the stress from this week may have triggered some extra motivation and inspiration. Ever since my adolescence, I have gotten my best story ideas from dreams. I am glad to know that it is still a trend.

WHAT YOU KNOW AND WANT TO KNOW

Incorporating your personal story also means knowing what makes it interesting. What makes any story interesting is the sequence of events that will hook your audience on the main character's journey. When telling your story, this also means you must know HOW to tell it. In the approach to telling my story, I rely on two simple questions I ask myself before starting:

1. What do I want my audience to walk away knowing?
2. What do I want to walk away knowing?

Picking one of these two questions helps me decide the approach to how my story is going to fit into the narrative.

When the audience walks away from a story learning something new, there is typically some form of moral or something I have experienced in my life I would like to share with my audience. In his reflective series, *The Sketchbook Archives*, Doug TenNapel (2013) describes this very model in how he writes all his graphic novels. "I start with the ending, where the main character learns the lesson I also want my audience to learn. After picking the ending, I create the beginning where the main character has the exact opposite ideals from how they feel at the end of the story. From there the midpoints of the adventure are created to get from point A to point B."

When I want to walk away knowing something in my story, this process is a little more abstract. I start with a question my main character wants to know at the beginning of the story and the journey is to find the answer to that question. Pete Docter, the creative director over at Pixar, followed this formula

when creating *Inside Out*. The screenwriter on the film, Meg LeFauve, recalled in an interview with *Lessons from the Screenplay*, “[Pete Doctor] had a daughter. And she was so happy all the time, she was so joyful. And then she turned eleven. And suddenly, she wasn’t smiling . . . and he sat at breakfast, and he asked himself, ‘What happened to joy?’ And then he thought, ‘I’m gonna make a movie about that!’” (Tucker, *Telling*, 2017).

To revisit a thought I mentioned earlier - Breaking out of those squares. Why create a graphic novel that does not follow the traditional format? First, finding new and innovative ways to present my work increases the reader’s attention as they will not be able to guess what each page is going to bring them. Building from that, the second reason is to immerse the reader in the work. If this story was told in traditional panel layouts, while the story may still be interesting, every panel would remind the reader that they are in a fiction. The approach I took to this story hooks the reader with its realistic form as a research journal. I did this in the same way other media, like movies and video games have other characters discover research journals to push along the narrative. Now the reader of my story is put into that role.

The entire process of creating the pages of *I Think Life’s Alright* started with the purpose of the creatures found in the story, which I lovingly refer to them as Specks. Ultimately, this also develops the questions I am trying to answer for myself in the journals as well. Act one of the book asks, “Am I going crazy?” Act two asks, “If I am not going crazy, then what are these creatures?” Finally, the third act seeks to answer the question, “What is their purpose?” While the

Specks certainly do not exist, this form gives me the opportunity to then tell the audience about my life experiences through these creatures. The story would be far less exciting if it were presented as an autobiography, but all those elements still exist within the pages.

The whole idea for the story originated from the photographic series. Their purpose of rebuilding memories came second as the concept became clearer when I realized I was taking photos in places that were familiar to me. As the whole backstory came to life, that is when the script started coming together. The original outline only had 60 pages, but as I started filling in the gaps to connect the story beats, it ended up at 80 pages. I knew I wanted to continue using the muse of my dad and the lessons I learned from him, so the story had to be pushed in a direction which would reveal that. Still, I wanted the writing to feel like I was experiencing it in real time, so began writing the journal entries in sequential order.

The basic structure of each page is broken down into digestible writing and imagery. When I was designing the book, I based it around my own reading capabilities and struggles. The bite-sized text blocks were influenced by Max Brooks' novels, *The Zombie Survival Guide* and *World War Z*. His short chapters which only lasted between one and two paged along with some drawings really helped me digest the details. I always appreciated how it was easy to grasp and it made me consider how I could do the same.

DIFFERENT FROM ANYONE ELSE

When it comes to comics and visual storytelling, Scott McCloud is probably one of the most prolific voices on the medium. In his book, *Understanding Comics* (1993), he breaks down the craft to its individual parts and allows the reader to see the working underside of what makes the comic genre so great. In Chapter seven, “The Six Steps,” he tells us about the formula that creates a unique experience for creators to achieve originality. At one point he says “No work of art can be without ‘content’ any more than it can exist without a form! But it does help to set some priorities . . . even if we take life’s distractions into account, it is still amazing how much time and effort is spent by comics creators trying to get what they want out of comics before they even know WHAT they want!” (McCloud, *Understanding*, 1993).

While there is quite a bit to unpack in his whole chapter, which was just condensed into a couple of sentences, a storyteller’s medium needs to have a distinct purpose. For instance, I chose to make *I Think Life’s Alright* as a graphic novel, but why not a video game? I teach Game Design, and some could argue I know that form better than comics. The way the audience reacts to a story is based on the perspective they get from the medium’s deliverance. Graphic novels are a great way to view a story from someone else’s perspective, while video games often have the players feel as if they are experiencing something first-hand. If we consider the journey the reader follows in *I Think Life’s Alright*, there are distinct choices I make within the pages specifically challenging the reader to see from my perspective.

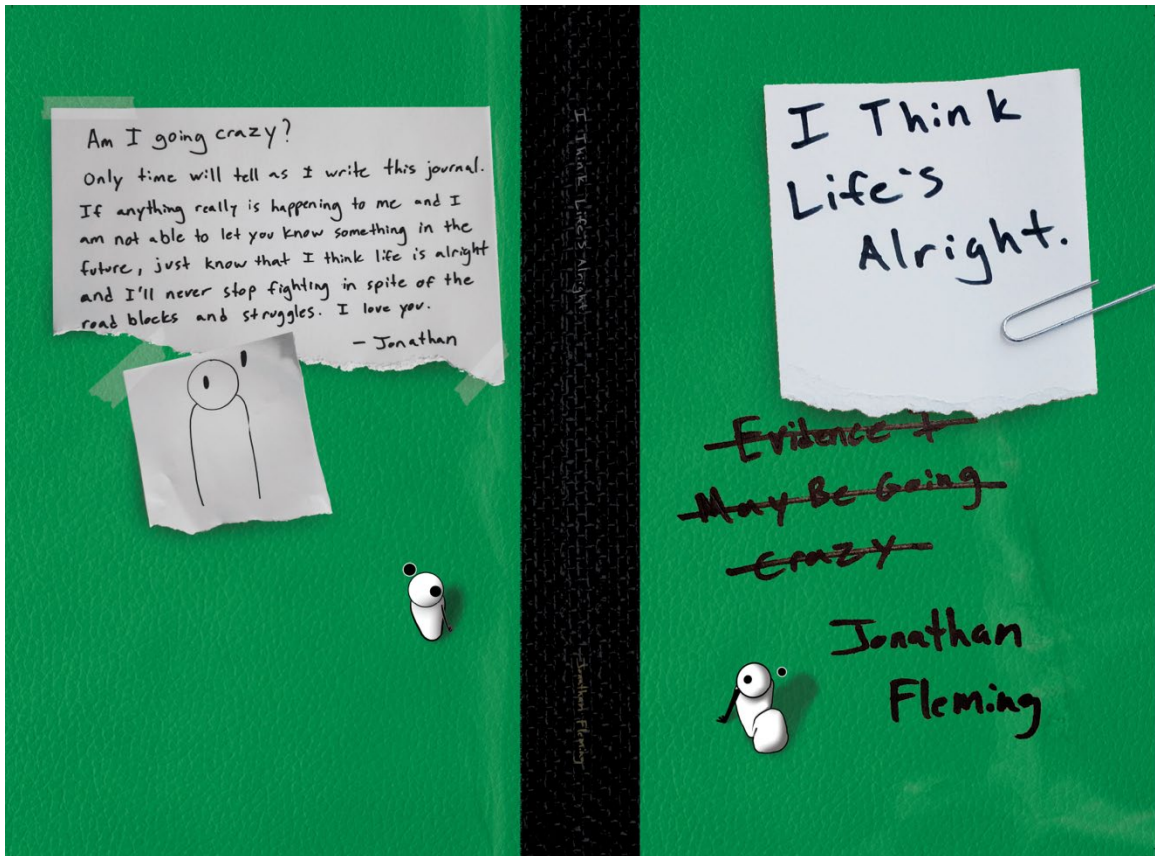


Image 4: *I Think Life's Alright* Cover Pages. Digital Drawing. Spring 2023

Consider the cover of *I Think Life's Alright*. A cover to any novel is supposed to give a hint into the story and entice the reader to explore, but for my cover, I wanted to push that a little further. The elements show off the hand-made feeling of the book, along with the digitally drawn characters which reflects the format of how the story will be presented on the inside pages. The back cover reveals the first small piece of a puzzle which the readers will be seemingly discovering alongside the author of the journal. This gives the reader the perspective the story will be presented to them. They are not going to know all the details at first, but the juxtaposition of the words crossed out on the front of the book show evidence of the journey from beginning to end.

The cover is also supposed to introduce the reader to the three-act structure. The presence of the Specks sitting on the cover shows off the fantastical elements which will hopefully be inviting the reader into a fun atmosphere making the crossed-out text of “Evidence I’m Going Crazy” turn less serious and more into a humorous statement. All these elements working together put all three acts on display. Act 1 is the text on the front and back stating my state of mind at the beginning. The Specks sitting on the cover introduce act 2, which should clue the reader in that because they can also see the Specks on the cover, I am not going crazy and therefore will cross out the beginning statement. And the final element is the actual title to the book itself. “I Think Life’s Alright” set as an amendment to the front of the book showing my state of mind has changes over the course of the journal gives us act 3, what is the purpose of the Specks?

McCloud’s statement also has to do with using real life elements in the book as well. If I were to just try and make something up out of thin air, the story would most likely fall flat. If I do not know what I want out of the comic, it would certainly end up being much more difficult to write because I have not personally experienced any end results. By adding in elements directly connected to my personal life experiences, my direction in writing a meaningful ending is clear because I already know the ending was impactful to me. What is most convincing to the reader is that they can never tell the difference between what parts of the book are real and fiction. The ambiguity of my true story is more powerful if they are not able to tell the difference.

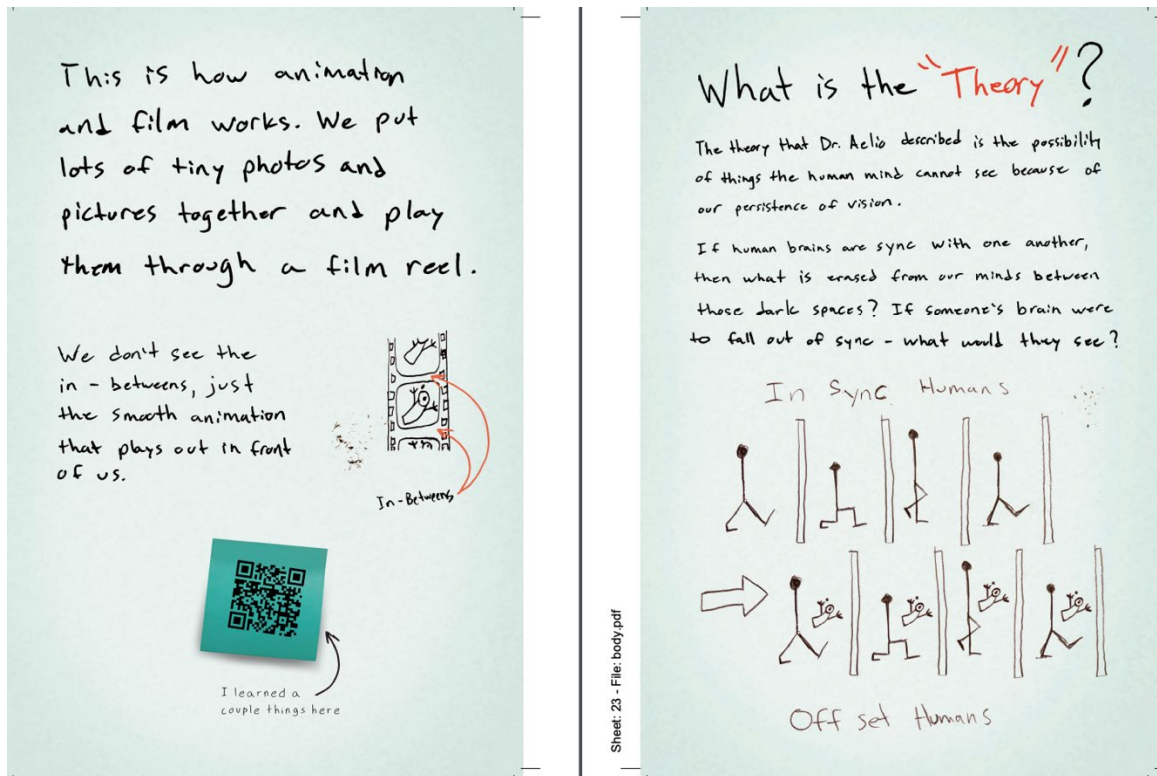


Image 5: *I Think Life's Alright* Pages 22 and 23. Digital Drawing. Spring 2023

This leads into content that starts to experiment with materials found beyond the pages of the book. To get the fullest understanding of the story, there are places where you can scan a QR code leading to this additional information. While the reader can understand the story just fine without scanning them, it broadens the reader's horizon by directly connecting them to my interests as they read. As an example, on page 22 of the book (shown above), readers will find a music video to Blue Man Group's performance of *Rods and Cones* (2009). Not only does the reader understand where I get my information on persistence of vision mentioned noted on the previous pages in the book, but it also makes the reader an active participant in the research. The reader earns their way to the following pages.

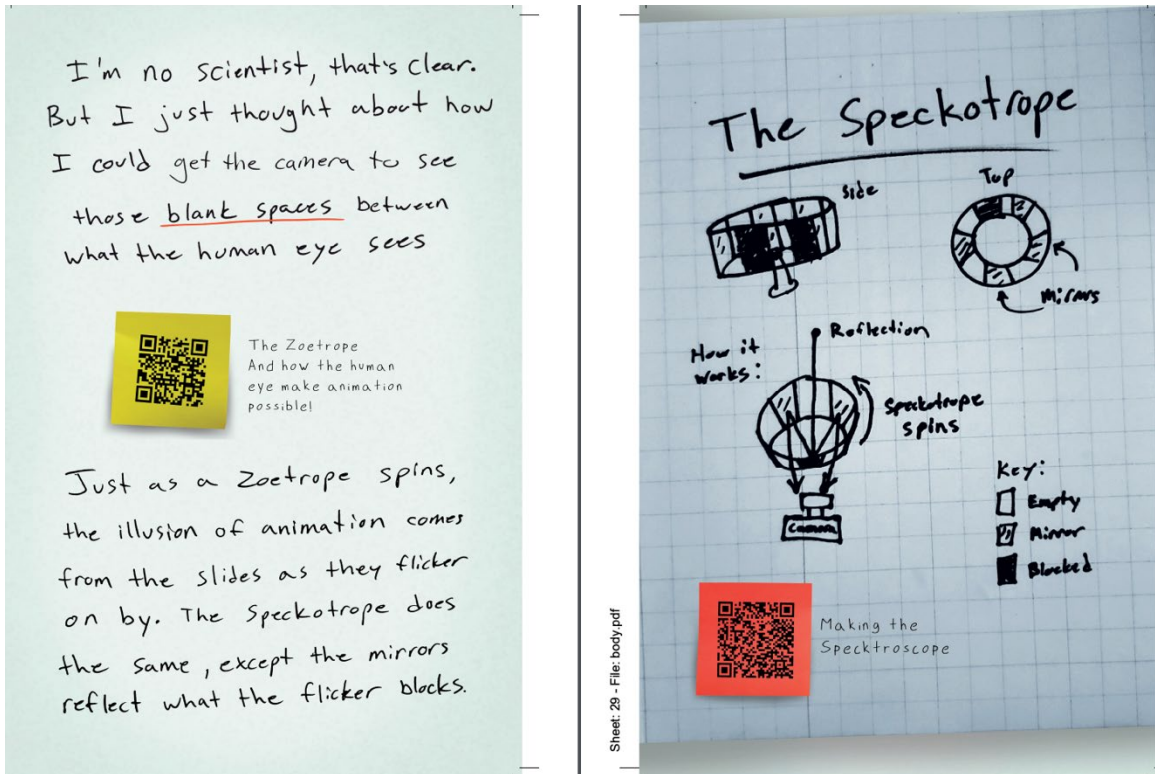


Image 6: *I Think Life's Alright* Pages 28 and 29. Digital Drawing. Spring 2023

The section of the book between pages 21 and 29 contain quite a bit of reading involving animation. At the very beginning of the story, I specifically mention my position as an animation teacher and leave out the four other subjects I teach because I wanted to spotlight this particular knowledge I have within the book to truly make sure the reader understood where my sources of information were coming from. I could have mentioned my other subjects, like Game Design, and Graphic Novels, but in this instance, that would only serve to confuse the audience when those subjects never come up in the journals ever again.

Pages 28 and 29 are two of the pages that demonstrate the importance of my knowledge as an animation teacher in the storyline. A key element to photographing the Specks clear is to use an animation apparatus from the past

century known as a zoetrope. Getting into the full history would certainly be a large undertaking, so instead, I referred to a video titled *Pixar's Zoetrope* (2010), where readers can discover more on their own by scanning the QR code. To make the story more believable, I built my own version of the zoetrope. In the story, I use this to capture discernible photographs of the specks, so that others may see what I am seeing. Page 29 of the book (found on page 22) has a QR code the reader can scan to watch me build, what I call, the "Specktroscope" based off the blueprints and diagram on how it works displayed on the same page.



Image 7: *Specktroscope*. Rotating Cake Decorator and Mirrors. Spring 2023

The final act of the book utilizes more QR codes leading to content created by me. These QRs help the reader pace themselves from one story beat to the next. On page 64 and 65, the only content on the page is a QR code.

This is a moment of quiet allowing the reader to breathe from the chaos of the pages just before it. The other reason it is there is to encourage the reader to scan this one most of all. The audio clip that plays leads the reader into the final events of the story where I realize material things are not what keep our memories. This is solidified a couple of pages later where the reader can scan a QR code of me sitting in front of the camera delivering what I learned directly to the viewer. While each of these story beats could have been their own written pages, this multimedia approach invites the reader to get excited about not knowing what the content is on the other side of the QR. The purpose is to not only give the reader pause in the pacing of the story, but to also make them feel adventurous as they explore every little detail the book has to offer as opposed to just what they are able to read and look at on a static page.

Each of these individual elements can easily be done by other artists. However, what bringing all these individual features together into one place does is create a unique experience not often found in graphic novels. A new way of storytelling is born through a multimedia adventure the reader must take to get the full vision. This helps create that connected experience between the me and the reader as they can listen in on my phone calls and sit face to face with me.

INFLUENCES AND BEING WELL-READ

My drive to study the craft of storytelling evolved over years of finding artists with similar interests to my own. This is not limited to graphic novels. I would say much of the works that influenced my craft have come from a different spectrum of media.

Comic books and graphic novels came rather late in my life, sometime around high school was when I started to seriously understand how I can better comprehend reading in general with the visual aid of the artwork. Too often growing up, I was told that comics and graphic novels were not considered “real reading,” which I was happy to go against the grain and push out all that white noise. It was not until I started finding artists whose stories stood out to me that I realized I could do this myself.

Before graphic novels, I was obsessed with video games. I played my first game on the Sega Genesis at the age of 3 and the rest was history. The reason why I bring this up is because in 1994, there was a game which changed my life. That game was called *Earthworm Jim*. The concept of the game itself was as ridiculous as the title, the player controls an earthworm who gains super powers from a suit that falls from space. Jim, the earthworm, then flies across the galaxy fighting evil things to worms, like cats, birds, and more! Years later, I found out the creator of Jim, also the animator and voice, wrote graphic novels as well. My love of his game inspired me to gather and read all his books as well. This author was Doug TenNapel, who continues to inspire both my visual and written work to this day.

One such book of TenNapel's was *Earthboy Jacobus*, the story of a man named Chief who discovers a young boy, Jacobus, from another dimension and protects him from other-worldly creatures. In the process, he also adopts and raises the boy as his own son. All the life lessons TenNapel learned from his own father are in this book as Chief raises Jacobus. The kicker tying the whole book together comes on the last page, where the dedication is placed, "For my dad, Ed. For my son, Ed." (TenNapel, *Earthboy Jacobus*, 2005).

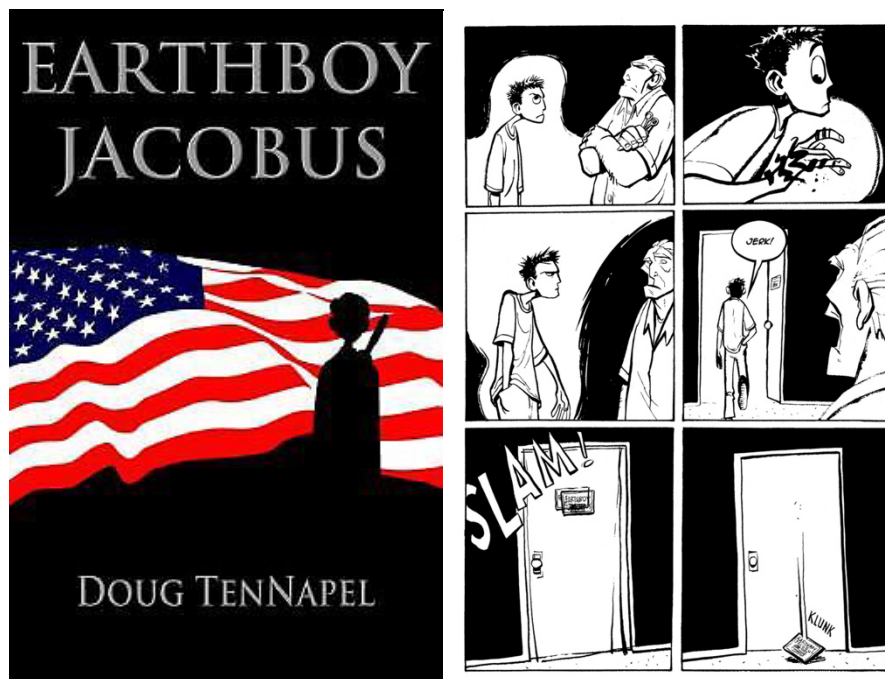


Image 8: *Earthboy Jacobus* Cover and Page. Ink. 2005

This may be the single most important story that helped me understand what it means to incorporate a personal experience into a story. What drew me into TenNapel's stories is the importance he puts on the lesson he teaches within his books. The art of teaching down-to-Earth life lessons amid sci-fi and fantasy is what really made realize the human and personal aspect of a story can be present in any setting. Art-wise, my art style started to emerge from emulating

TenNapel's cartoonist style of character design and use of simple geometric shapes that assist in telegraphing personality types for characters.

My stories depart from TenNapel in the way they are formatted on the page, mainly. TenNapel's work emulates the more traditional graphic novel with panel and page setups. I have always loved the use of his contrasting black and white ink shading with very few mid tones. I traditionally love the use of bold colors to help my visuals jump off the page. The biggest difference in how TenNapel and I tell our stories is the use of the characters we create. The characters in my story are the real people they are based off. While I use fantasy settings and situations, the characters that inhabit the story are the actual people who have experienced what I am trying to drive home in the story.

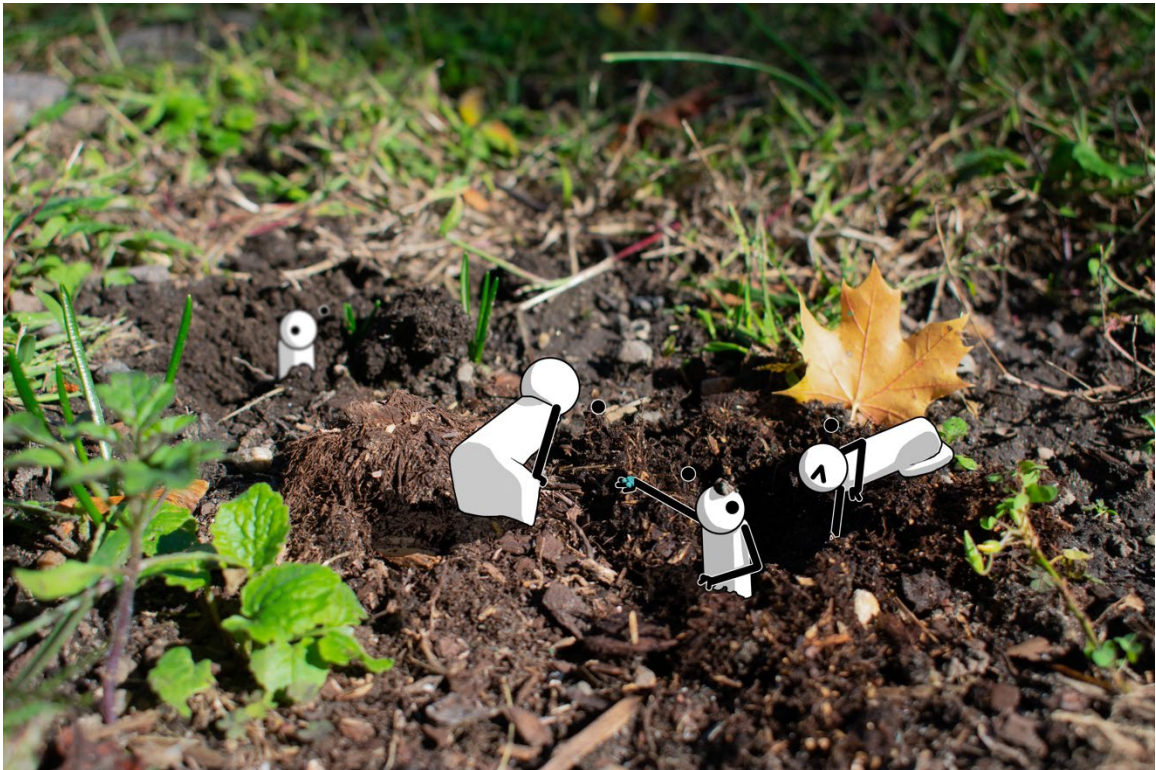


Image 9: *Digging*. Digital Photo and Digital Drawing. Fall 2022

The stylistic choices in the look of *I Think Life's Alright* are inspired by the scrapbook-like style of Lynda Barry, who is the author of such books as *What It Is*, *Making Comics*, and *Syllabus*. Out of all the books Barry has published, *Syllabus* is stylistically the closest to how I developed my book. This journal is a collection of Barry's work as a teacher and the actual curriculum she used throughout her career. At first glance, there does not seem to be much story to the book, as the reader flip through what looks like a composition notebook filled with scrap pieces of paper haphazardly thrown in between the pages. However, when the reader gets the chance to analyze every page, it is suddenly clear that the entire book is a journey on growth and personal experience. Each page is fun to explore with opportunities to catch something new on each revisiting of the story.



Image 10: *Syllabus*. Cover and Various Pages. Graphite and Paper. 2014

When I was designing *I Think Life's Alright*, I wanted to capture that similar feeling of discovery and give the reader the opportunity to look back and explore. I made the choice to create the book in chronological order to give the readers the feeling they are going on this adventure with me. Unlike Barry, my book is

fiction, which means I must make up the chronology of the events. While I had the ending in mind for the story, I still needed to create that stream of consciousness feeling to each journal entry. All my pages were scripted as bullet points, where I would then write them out in permanent marker to capture the feeling of writing a journal entry. That seemingly random note-taking feel of a journal helps with the believability of the character's experience in the same way Barry's own journey is reflected in *Syllabus*.

This also goes into the transcripts, drawings, sticky notes, and scrap paper found throughout the book. The way each page is put together conveys the mood, situation, and type of information the reader will find on the page. Additional elements on the page, like the stains, wrinkles, and folds are meant to create a unique atmosphere for the pages they are on. When the reader sees a page stained with chili sauce on the dinner page, it conveys how the pages were written in real time to when I experienced the event being written about. In a similar fashion, Barry collects her notes on scrap paper as if she wrote her ideas down on anything she could find the moment it entered her mind. When I read her thoughts scattered across each page in her book, I cannot help but wonder how she keeps herself organized, and yet each page is clear in its storytelling objective.

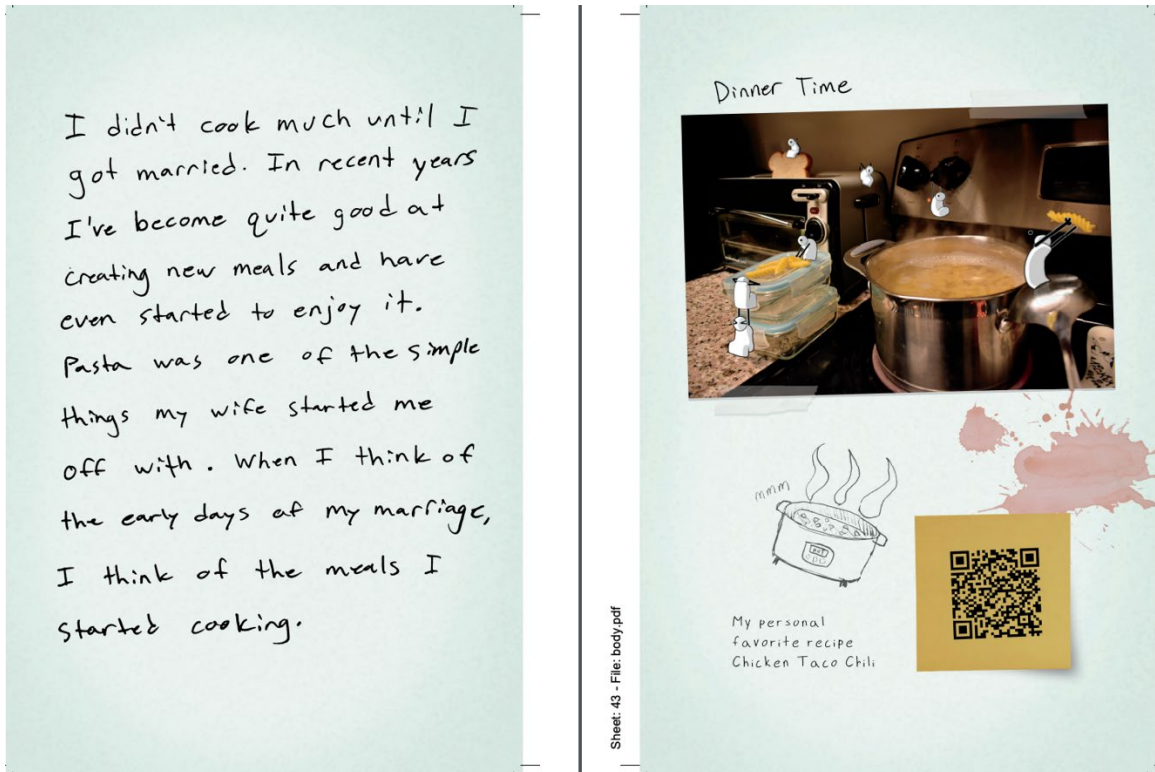


Image 11: *I Think Life's Alright* Pages 42 and 43. Digital Drawing. Spring 2023

As for the multimedia aspect of *I Think Life's Alright*, this is easily the most unique part of the project which helps it stand out. I knew this was going to be a part of its design when I started, especially animation, because I had a strong urge to show off everything I have learned in my growth as an artist. The animator who is reflected in most of my work is Don Hertzfeldt. His simple stick figure drawings come to life through gesture and expression, but it is how he creates his stories which really captures the imagination. In 1997, he created an Oscar-winning short called *Rejected*, which was a collection of short animations about his journey in being a failed animator. The story is set in the reality of his actual career, though the animations he showcases are completely made up. His most recent work is *The World of Tomorrow*, which was fully created based

off of having conversations with his 4-year-old niece and building a developing story as she gave answers to his questions.



Image 12: *World of Tomorrow Episode 2*. Animation. 2017

Hertzfeldt focuses quite a bit on memories in his work and how we keep them. This is where I resonated with him in creating my book and how we preserve our memories. The animation I included in *I Think Life's Alright* reflects Hertzfeldt's animation. I would be remiss to not include animation in the book, as I mention my career as an animator. Though my animation workflow is a bit different from Hertzfeldt, our character designs are not too far off. I think my work has a bit more of a traditional snap to the character's movements while Hertzfeldt's are slower and methodical. Searching for these elements in a book is what makes the experience unique for the reader. It brings the whole experience beyond just being a book.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS TO *I THINK LIFE'S ALRIGHT*

On its surface, *I Think Life's Alright* is a playful mystery where readers uncover the motivations of its fictional author, but the underlying message of the story is a glimpse into the grieving process I personally went through after losing my dad. My conscious design behind the book was for many of the pages to be easy to read and have large storytelling visuals to assist with the unfolding narrative. Though the reader will be captivated by the feel-good imagery in the book, they will ultimately walk away with an idea of what it feels like to go through losing someone important and preserving their memory.

When starting out in this storytelling process, one thing has remained constant – how do I get the widest range of accessibility to my materials? I often think of my younger brother, who still cannot read very well due to a ocular motor disability which prevents him from comprehending reading words and connecting their meaning in his brain. I use this as a base for figuring out how to make the information most accessible to anyone who picks up the book. This can be done by highlighting or changing the color and size of certain words or making sure there is always a picture to assist what is written. Sometimes nothing needs to be written at all.

My work has always had this stylistically friendlier tone, which I have always felt was fit for a more all-ages audience. All my public work has often stayed away from horrific imagery, hyper sexualization, and profanity. Works of art that can capture every demographic of viewer is a lot more challenging and impressive to accomplish because there must be something there for everyone

to enjoy. In the same way Pixar delivers heavier topics through this lens, it allows me the opportunity to introduce topics like grieving and loss throughout the work with a better way for the audience to settle into the idea of the content the book really intends to focus on.



Sheet: 55 - File: body.pdf

Anyone who has ever lost someone understands how this goes. You think you've had your time and healed, then suddenly you wish you could pick up the phone and call them with exciting news.



Dr. Aelio may have been onto something when he mentioned Specks actively reminding you of past events



Image 13: *I Think Life's Alright* Pages 54 and 55. Digital Drawing. Spring 2023

Take pages 54 and 55 (shown on page 33) for instance. By this point in the book, I have been setting up the idea of my father's involvement as a story beat since page 12 and this is when the idea finally drops into place for myself, and therefore, the reader. Suddenly, everything clicks into place as to what the purpose of the Specks are doing for me. This also reaches the climax of the story as I now know what it is I am seeking to fully discover. Everything after this discovery is a final puzzle piece falling into place. While this means there are also sudden hardships coming along with this discovery, the reader can now be empathetic towards this realization because of the connection they are now sharing with me. Slowly building the reader up to these more emotional moments will make them more empathetic when they finally realize these moments along with me.

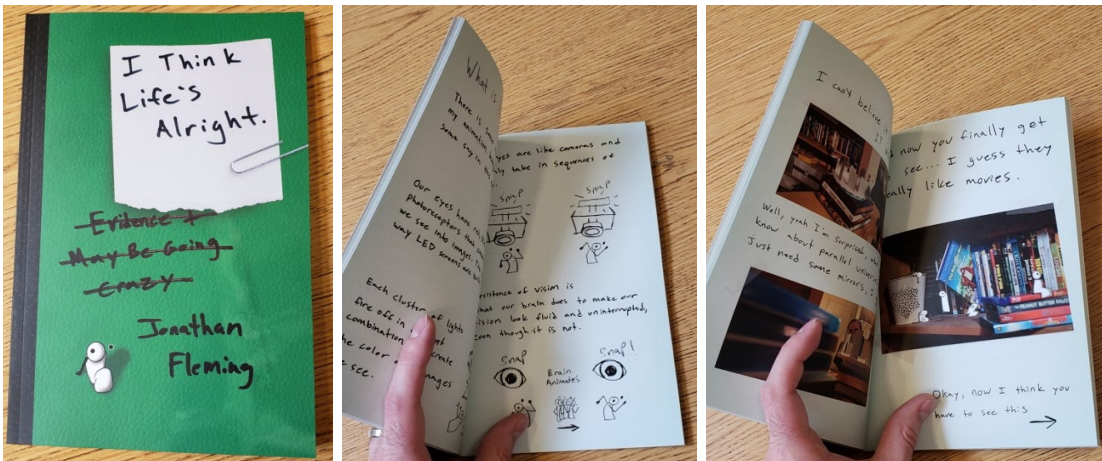


Image 14: Page Samples from Final Printed Book. Spring 2023

THE EXHIBITION OF *I THINK LIFE'S ALRIGHT*

While the book itself is an art piece on its own, the way it can be presented in an exhibition is another opportunity to immerse the audience in the world I create in my book. The exhibition space emulates that of the workspace I used to write *I Think Life's Alright*. The viewer will find a table at the center of the exhibit. On top of the table, the original journal entries I wrote on white paper are scattered across the top of the table. The book sits in the center of the table on top of the stacks of pages my character has presumably written, illuminated by a single desk lamp.

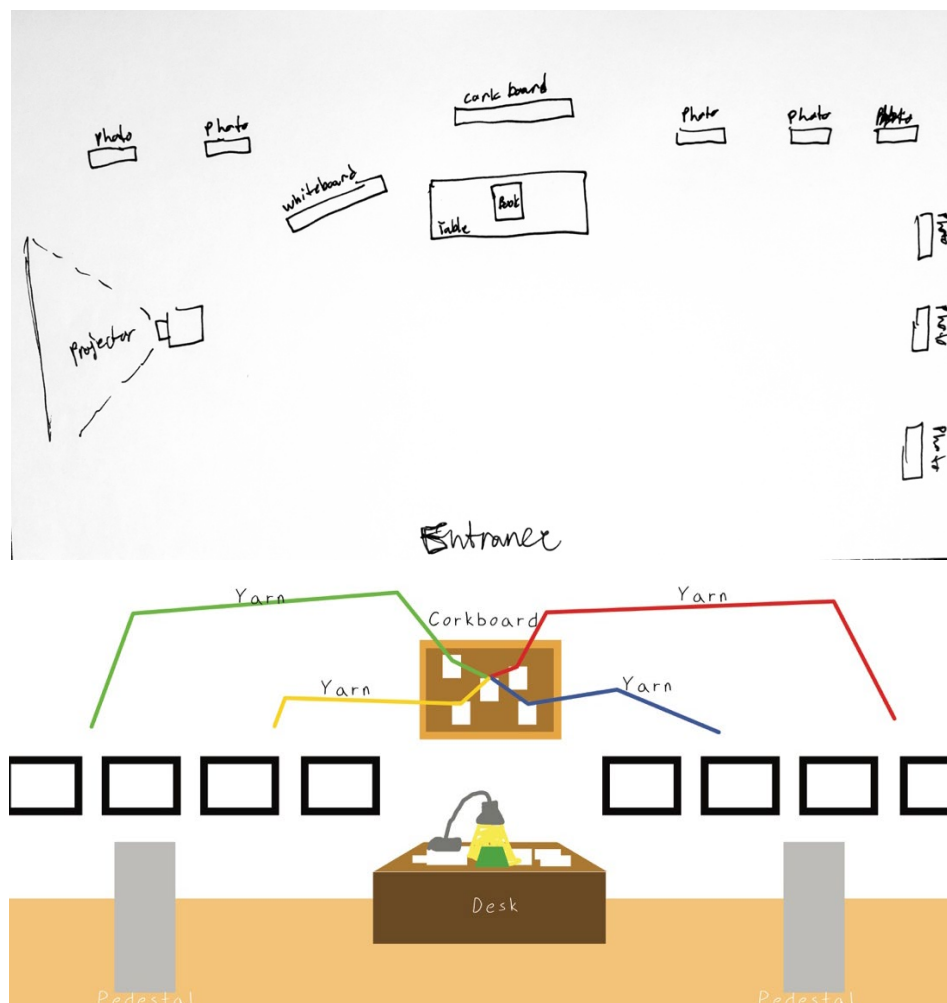


Image 15: Exhibition Design Plan. Pen and Paper. Spring 2023

Around the table are a multitude of items found in the book: the whiteboard, the Spektroscope, and the photographic evidence of the Specks. This sets the reality and physicality of the items found in the book. The photographs set around the gallery space encourages exploration and gives the opportunity for viewers to get a larger, closer look at the images within the journal entries. At the end of the gallery on the wall is a projection of the animation I created along with other videos and media found in the journal. The space creates a multimedia experience like that inside the book, but the tangibility of everything present in the gallery is just another way of showing everything I say in the journals has that much more truth behind it. The viewer is led to believe that the journey I went on actually happened, that it lives beyond the pages of the book.



Image 16: *Specks*. Polymer Clay. Spring 2023



Image 17: *Exhibition 1. Anderson Gallery, BSU. Spring 2023*

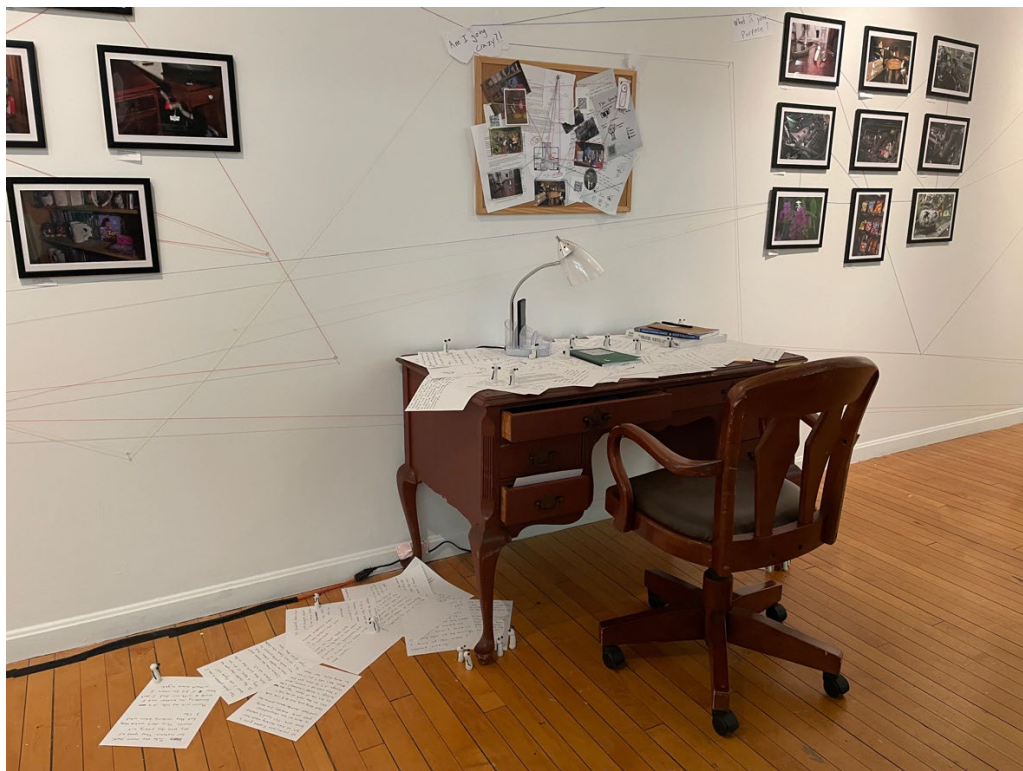


Image 18: *Exhibition 2. Anderson Gallery, BSU. Spring 2023*

THE ART OF TEACHING STORYTELLING

Storytelling is a key element to every part of my career as an educator. Whether I am teaching classes like Graphic Novels, Animation, Game Design, or even classes like Digital Photography and Yearbook, there will always be opportunities to teach students how they can tell their own story through their work. This allows them to break down their walls and be vulnerable with their audience. *I Think Life's Alright* will not only serve as a great stand-alone story, but a perfect teaching tool in showing students how to tell their story.

At the core of *I Think Life's Alright*, I am demonstrating the challenge I not only set out for myself, but for my students as well. Incorporating your personal story makes you a better storyteller. If we want to tell successful stories, our real experiences must also be a part of it. Our individual lives - our families, upbringing, the joys, pains and embarrassments make us unique individuals. Others can relate to hearing someone else's story, even if they have not experienced it themselves. My goal is to teach my students this concept and be able to tell their own personal stories confidently and bravely within their own work. Students will often assume that better storytelling is completely made up, but what they do not often realize is they cannot tell an interesting story if they do not have the experience of what makes that story interesting in the first place.

When I started teaching, I did not have as much focus on the storytelling as much as the technical application. Once I opened up to the idea of allowing students to tell their stories through their projects, it allowed them more creativity and freedom to express themselves while still utilizing the technical skills I

wanted them to learn. I see the same changes in the way I do my own work. A project like this really inspires a practice what you preach approach. More than anything, the one thing every teacher runs into is that they often stop working on personal projects. I love being able to show my students that I am continuously doing the same work they are. I do believe it is a motivating factor to students to see their teachers on the same level and meeting them at their own workload.

I am going to use my Game Design class as an example where more storytelling comes into students being inspired to explore their work more. At the beginning of the semester, students need to make a maze. The project shows fundamentals of 3D programs and how to implement them into a game engine. What I did is, before they start modeling, I made them think about the game they are making and what gameplay elements they would want to see in their level. Even if they do not have dialogue, animation, or even text in the game, their game design documentation should be able to tell me things like, who are their characters? What is the world they live in? Why are they doing their main objective in this game? Even if their personal story is they know what it is like to be afraid of the dark, they suddenly know what it would take to create an effective horror game. Though the students may never get to put what they wrote into their games during an entry level course, if they consciously consider all these questions, they know what makes their game separate from all the other games out there. More heart and soul effortlessly come out of the students when they have the driving force of a story that is their own.

Animation is all about storytelling but is often expressed in a different manner. It is also one of my most favorite classes to teach because students are free to express themselves through other characters of their own creation. Animated characters will often express themselves through movement rather than words and conversation, so students need to think of authentic experiences they may have with the way they move. Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston wrote the quintessential book on animation, *The Illusion of Life*, where the foundational animation techniques are available for all to learn. When it comes to expression through movement, the principle of secondary action is often the most difficult to grasp. After teaching for seven years, I have found my students forget this rule the most. To teach them how to properly use it, I have them do a little acting. I would say, "Without using any words, how would you behave if I had you stand up in front of the class to do a presentation? Some of you might think of a time where you were completely unprepared, perhaps some of you feel confident about your presentation." Students start to pull from their own experiences to know how they would react in a certain situation, therefore, can put those same expressions and poses into their character drawings.

CONCLUSION

We all have our own stories which allow us to connect with one another on an emotional level. Even if we do not share the same exact life experiences, we can tap into the most basic emotional response all humans have, which is empathy, the ability to share an emotional response. Not only can we do this in our daily lives through conversation, but also through art and storytelling.

I Think Life's Alright is not only a successful story that allows the audience to emotionally connect with the ideas I share from my own life, but it is also a unique piece of art on its own merits in how it explores the graphic novel medium in a new and engaging way. The use of QR codes inspires the reader become an active participant and tap into more of what I have found inspiring. This book puts some of my most challenging emotions on display by incorporating my own real-life events to facilitate engaging story beats, taking the audience on an emotional journey that is equally entertaining through its fantastical elements.

Over many years of practice, my artistic vocabulary has evolved into a comforting style which invites readers into a calmer world. The children's book aesthetic of simple geometric shapes and rounded edges makes the harder subjects I cover, like loss, more approachable. I also do not like a lot of words on my pages, the less to read the better. What I have learned from my own troubles with reading is if information is both short spoken and assisted by visuals, those two things married together makes both avid and struggling readers able to access my work much easier. In some cases, the challenge of using no words at all is a welcome one for myself.

No matter whether I was painting, animating, sketching, or taking photographs, the story always came first. Naturally, I found myself going towards places of familiarity and exploring my experiences, which always turned out better work overall. The most affective projects were always when I reflected on my feelings and reached deep enough to elicit an emotional reaction out of myself. In return, my audience would feel the same.

I will always be a storyteller. My future only holds the stories I have imagine, but just have not written yet. I would love to keep writing and printing along with my students so they may always see me improving alongside them.

By creating this book, I have also created an affective learning tool that my students can also learn how to incorporate their own stories into their work. Following the techniques I teach them in class will allow them to be more vulnerable and introspective on what makes their lives unique and how they can share it with the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barry, Lynda. *Syllabus*. Drawn & Quarterly, 2021
- Dong, Lan. *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy and Practice*. McFarland & Company, 2012.
- Goldman, Matt, Phil Stanton and Chris Wink. "Rods and Cones Live at the Venetian." Blue Man Group, Virgin Label, 2009.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-yLfm5HsHc>
- Ferris, Emil. *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*. Fantagraphics Books, 2017.
- Fierlinger, Paul. *Drawn From Memory*. October, 1995.
- Hertzfeldt, Don. *World Of Tomorrow*. Bitter Films, 2015.
- Hertzfeldt, Don. *World Of Tomorrow Episode 2*. Bitter Films, 2017.
- Homolka, Gina. "Crock Pot Chicken Taco Chili Recipe." Skinnytaste, February, 2020. <https://www.skinnytaste.com/crock-pot-chicken-taco-chili-4-pts/>
- Horstkotte, Silke and Nancy Pedri. *Experiencing Visual Storyworlds: Focalization in Comics*. Ohio State University Press, 2022.
- Hosoda, Mamoru. *Summer Wars*. Madhouse, 2009.
- Hosoda, Mamoru. *Wolf Children*. Studio Chizu, 2012.
- Johnston, Ollie, and Frank Thomas. *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation*. Disney Editions, 1981.
- Kelly, Joe, and Niimura J M Ken. *I Kill Giants*. Image Comics, 2009.
- MasterClass. *Persistence of Vision Explained: What is Persistence of Vision?*
<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/persistence-of-vision-explained>.
MasterClass, 2021
- McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics*. Harper, 2008.
- McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2002.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. William Morrow Paperbacks, 1993.
- Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "empathy," accessed May 7, 2023,
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>.

Pixar. "Pixar's Zoetrope." Pixar, May 2010.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5khDGKGv088>

Press, Richard. *Abstract: The Art Of Design, Episode 7, Platon: Photography*. Netflix, 2017

Prince, Liz. *Tomboy: A Graphic Memoir*. Zest Books, 2014.

Sousanis, Nickell. *Unflattering*. Harvard University Press, 2015.

TenNapel, Doug. *Earthboy Jacobus*. Image Comics, 2005.

TenNapel, Doug. *The Sketchbook Archives, Vol. 1*. Self-Published, 2013.

Tucker, Michael. *Telling a Story from the Inside Out*. Lessons from the Screenplay, June 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulm7bcB2xvY>

Wells, Paul. *Understanding Animation*. Routledge, 2016.

Woodring, Jim. *Jim*. Fantagraphics Books, 2014.

Williams, Richard. *The Animator's Survival Kit*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.