

***Welcome to Ghoulsville***

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

This project follows the process for creating a miniature pitch for my cartoon series concept, "Welcome to Ghoulsville". The work for this project included initial research for inspiration on the story, development of the world and characters within it, writing a script for a storyboard sequence, drawing the final storyboard, and timing the resulting panels out into an animatic. The goal for creating this project was to add relevant personal work to my storyboard portfolio and to improve upon my skills as an aspiring story artist for TV. The resulting work featured in this project are a title card, character designs, and the final animatic as a playable video.

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I would also like to thank my fellow peers for providing me with additional feedback on my project throughout the entire process, and I wish them the best in their future animation endeavors.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner for encouraging me throughout the semester and for transporting me around Muncie as we searched for the mysterious shack that inspired this project. I hope to find it again someday.

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## Process Analysis Statement

### Introduction

When I was very young, I used to spend the weekends at my grandparents' country home, where the only activities available were the pool and the TV. I was too young to go exploring the fields behind their home, and a busy highway stretched along the front of the house, so I spent most of my time watching cartoons and drawing what I saw. One of my favorite tasks to assign my grandmother was ordering her to take the drawings I had made and cut around them to create paper dolls. Felt board "playsets" were very popular at this time in the early 2000s, but they were often expensive and hard to obtain, so my grandmother obliged to help me create my own sets with printer paper and kiddie scissors. With her help, I was able to take the drawings I had made and turn them into an ever-changing scenario: a story I could write and rewrite as I pleased. While I was certainly watching plenty of cartoons at this age, I think that my first introduction to animation was really this elaborate paper-cutting routine I put my grandmother through; these characters were given life and made to move in real time, which was something I was missing from the static drawings alone.

That being said, there were lots of cartoons that molded the tastes and aesthetics I currently have in regards to my own style and work. For example, I watched Scooby-Doo faster than it seems the studio could create new episodes, and eventually I had seen all the spin-offs as well. I also watched a plethora of old cartoons from "Boomerang", which was Cartoon Network's dedicated series rerun channel (the channel slogan was "it's all coming back to you", and I still find that rather endearing). I was always fascinated by gags and goofy archetypes, but also by compelling stories and the character-driven worlds within them. Storytelling is one of

the most important aspects of any culture, and while many people view animation as a genre, I would argue that it is merely a medium through which we tell stories. To this day, I am still inspired by the animation industry and the films and shows that have pushed me to draw more effectively and write more profoundly.

My thesis is a miniature pitch for an animated comedy-drama cartoon series titled “Welcome to Ghoulsville”, and the work I have created is a two-and-a-half minute animatic excerpt from what would be the pilot episode of the series, as well as some developmental work such as character designs and worldbuilding.

### **The Purpose of Storyboarding**

The bulk of my thesis work was done on the creation of the episode animatic, which is a series of storyboard drawings stitched together and timed with captions to represent the rough version of what the cartoon would look like. A storyboard, or the untimed version of an animatic, typically features little to no color, and is filled with loose drawings instead of very clean linework like you would see in the actual episode. Storyboards are used by the animators to provide a rough guideline for visual gags and timing, as well as facial expressions and key poses or movements. Complicated movements such as fluid dancing or fighting are occasionally drawn in storyboards, but it is much more common in the fast-paced world of the animation industry to leave the actual “animation” to the animators, and let storyboard artists provide the groundwork. While at first it may seem that the primary goal of a storyboard artist is to be someone who is technically skilled in drawing, that is not always the case. Although it can be very useful for storyboard artists to have a background and solid foundation in animation or

illustration, a story artist's main job is to act as a camera. Just as a video camera operator or film director would decide how a movie is shot, a story artist takes command over the imaginary (drawn) "camera" of the cartoon. Hand-drawn animation does not utilize actual cameras, and instead we rely on optical illusions, framing shots in specific ways, and background or character movements to create a sense of space and camerawork. When given a script, a good storyboard artist interprets what is provided, and must translate what is written into a drawn space. Often, story artists must also draw the characters and even some environments and props with 100% accuracy to the original designs so that the animators know what a character would look like when doing a specific thing. Without the work of a story artist, there would be nothing to bridge the gap between script-writer and animator, and the animators would be flying blind to try and create a cohesive story while also drawing character movements and special effects. This would lead to a very confusing cartoon that ultimately lacks a crucial step in the animation production process.

### **The Process**

The first step in this creative project was to decide on the world the story would take place in. There are many ways people come up with ideas for cartoons; some people carry ideas with them from childhood, and others travel or take vacations to try and develop a unique world of characters and stories. For me, inspiration hit while running errands. My partner and I were driving around Muncie one day in the fall when, all too quickly, we passed what would end up being the launching point for my project. Along the side of the main road, there was an old shack- too old to live in, but it didn't seem fully abandoned. What was most intriguing to me

about this structure was what lay next to it: a small, unkempt graveyard, with maybe 10 headstones total. What was a miniature graveyard doing fenced in next to a shack like that, and why was it so close to the road? The shack seemed almost like an old house, too, with a sloped roof and windows, a front door, and a patio. I had never seen something that felt so out of place before, even in a city like Muncie where unique abandoned buildings are everywhere. The leaves on the trees surrounding it had all fallen, and the scene felt quite unnatural. I tried to imagine what kind of person could have made their home there, tending to their graveyard during the day and sitting on their little porch in the evening.

Unfortunately, that was the first and last time I ever saw the shack and its little cemetery; despite many trips up and down that same road on 67 over different days and on different times, I never did see the shack again. It's possible that the leaves on the bushes and trees grew back, and hid the area from view. Or perhaps it was never really there.

Either way, it inspired me to develop a story around a city much like Muncie- a distinctly midwest town with fields of wheat and corn, and at the very edge of one, a shack with an attached cemetery. I imagined that this space was a portal to the supernatural, an entrance into a purgatory where all the lost souls in the greater midwestern region are collected; I called this place "Ghoulsville".

From this vision, I began developing a set of characters to be my main cast. First I created Bailey "Bales", a self-proclaimed "not-college-dropout" taking a year off from university to figure out what they want to do with their life. Then I needed a narrative foil for Bales, who I considered to be more of a downtrodden young adult just trying to fit in with the rest of the world. From this, Dani was created: the much younger cousin of Bales with a spark for life and

an interest in the odd. Dani loves bugs, ghosts, and all things creepy or otherwise weird to other girls her age. She also acts more mature than the other kids in her class, which pushes her even further from being allowed to fit in with her peers. Dani and Bales share this particular struggle, in their own ways. Next, I needed a reason for the two protagonists to enter Ghoulsville, and thus setting off the story. From this Harley was designed, the supernatural caretaker of Ghoulsville who is really bad at his job. Harley typically takes the form of a large, anthropomorphic possum-cat, an imaginary animal that I feel best represents the local wildlife of any midwestern state. He tricks (or as he puts it, “recruits”) Dani and Bales into helping him with the workload of running a halfway point for restless souls. Every spirit that enters Ghoulsville is only meant to stay there temporarily until Harley can assist in attending to last wishes and unfinished business on their behalf. However, due to his poor leadership and lack of drive, he has let Ghoulsville become overrun with ghosts, and now the Powers Beyond are on his case about it. Enter Dani and Bales, lured into Ghoulsville and manipulated into helping Harley fix his mess.

The last main character I decided on was the spirit of a mysterious, largely unspeaking young woman named Josie, who haunts the Pumpkin Hills- an otherwise uninhabited area on the outskirts of Ghoulsville. Josie works as the subplot for the story, driving Dani and Bales to question who she is and why she seems to want their attention, leading to the finale when her true motives are revealed, and she escapes Ghoulsville to enact revenge on those in the human world responsible for her untimely demise.

With the world largely built and the characters developed, I began writing a script for a pilot. This on its own was challenging to me, as I have always fancied myself a better artist than

writer. I took about a week of writing and rewriting until I came with a script that I felt was capable of dealing with morose subjects like death and spirits while still being funny, but not quite stepping into dark humor. I eventually came up with a solid sequence split into two scenes, and so I moved onto the storyboarding itself.

Using the Toon Boom software “StoryboardPro” and my Cintiq drawing tablet, I was able to draw my boards panel by panel digitally, and then “flip” between drawings using the back and forth options that the software provides. Drawing digitally refers to me using my tablet-specific pen to physically draw on the screen of the tablet, and by using a magnet in the pen and pressure sensors, the Cintiq registers what I am doing and displays my drawings in real time. This is important to note, because while I may be drawing using a computer, the computer is not doing all the work for me. Drawing digitally merely allows me to save and backup my work safely, as well as provide keyboard shortcuts for drawing faster and more efficiently. For example, if I make a mistake in my drawing, I can either turn my pen backwards and use the “eraser” function, or I can hit command+z on my keyboard, and the software will undo the last action I made. This is extremely convenient for drawing with speed, but it does not necessarily make the actual drawing process easier, as it is still important that I know how to draw.

The last step in this process was to time all the panels out so that I could play my sequence as a video with captions, and the viewer would be able to preview my scenes in an animatic format. Doing this allows me to play the animatic all at once instead of displaying every panel in a large PDF or clicking through them like a slideshow. Those formats have their use, but exporting my thesis work as a video allows any viewer to be able to watch the sequence with my intended timing.

## **The Result**

To work in the animation industry full-time, it is crucial to move out west to California or potentially north to Canada. New York is also an option, although most studios prefer the west coast. That being said, next year I will be moving out to California having spent my entire life in Indiana. Welcome to Ghoulsville is my love letter to the midwest; I never really appreciated its quirks and appeal until this past year when I realized I might be experiencing my last year living in it. No more fall festivals or snowy winters, no more fields for miles or winding country roads.

The end result for my thesis work includes a title card, character designs, and the final animatic as a playable video. The work I did for my thesis this semester provided me with an opportunity to really appreciate the midwest for what it is, and to be able to create a story that hopefully evokes this appreciation in others as well.

## **Link to Materials**

<https://ballstate.box.com/s/9mpvpw4vp7u8hhziceo6sjg9rb4q18yy>