

IF FOUND:
EXPLORING DEATH THROUGH ANIMATED MEDIA

by

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ABSTRACT

If Found is a narrative 2D animated short film that explores our connection with death. The film makes use of the conventions of a Western fairy tale setting to make this difficult topic more digestible. This works in conjunction with the East Asian storytelling format of Kishotenketsu, a narrative convention focused on a conflict-less plot. Death is not something we can defeat; rather, it is a natural force with which we all must make peace. By following this traditional format, the film also explores and shows appreciation for the impacts of East Asian thought, storytelling, and animation on Western culture. The themes of this film, which were being explored starting in 2019, became more relevant with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. As our country, and the world, continue past the uncertainty of the last two years, it is necessary to come to terms with the loss of countless lives worldwide. No one in their life has escaped grief or loss, however, the extent of loss felt worldwide by the pandemic is something not seen for a generation. The themes of loss, grief, growth, and acceptance stand to be ever more relevant than when this project initially began. By following the natural progression of the seasons, *If Found* illustrates to viewers that after every winter, comes spring, and after every death, comes the opportunity for new life. The accompanying film to this paper can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/770578363>

For my grandmother Mary Lou who taught me how to die with grace

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CHAPTER 1: DISCUSSING DEATH

The looming unknown that awaits us all at the end of life is an important facet of religions, beliefs, and stories throughout the world. Yet, when death comes up in casual conversation, the subject is often pushed aside in favor of less morbid discussion, especially in the contemporary culture of the United States. *New Yorker* cartoonist Roz Chast's memoir *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?* sums up the issue neatly in its title. The memoir explores the familiar scenes of aging American parents and their staunch refusal to entertain the mere thought of mortality. Whether pleasant or morbid, death is a universal truth of life that all must face in one way or another. The purpose of *If Found* is to explore death's place in our lives as a natural conclusion, to find peace in the room it creates for the life yet to come, and to encourage more open discussion of the end of life.

At the time of this writing, it is yet to be seen how far-reaching the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will be on culture, history, and society. As countless lives have been lost worldwide, renewed discussions about death are ever more relevant. By not shying away from the conversation of death as the transition to end of life can be made less painful for both the dying person and their loved ones. *If Found* uses the appeal of animation and the familiarity of a fairy tale to lead viewers toward questioning their expectations about death and leaves viewers with the tools to find their own sense of peace in a truth that we all must face.

The following paper will discuss the story context of *If Found* and how it compares to depictions of death in other animated media. Key creative decisions as well as the importance of

the fairy tale genre and the narrative structure of *Kishotenketsu* are also elaborated upon, along with their relevance to the theme of accepting death.

Story Context

Originally plotted as a coming-of-age story about the death of childhood, *If Found's* themes have matured alongside my artistic journey. The sudden death of my childhood dog during a time of major life changes inspired the story's original concept. The original story beats followed real-life events, the loss of my dog and the rescue of an injured bird, but with time and distance I began to explore the concept through a wider lens. How could my experience inform a more compelling story with a more impactful theme? Despite the many changes to the story, *If Found* has always been about death, connection with nature, and healing.



Figure 1: Character Art from 2019

The final shift in my understanding of *If Found's* themes came with the death of my grandmother, who was my closest friend. Through my work on this film, I have found a healing path through grief and a greater acceptance of the natural seasons of life, especially as other loved ones grow older. To say this work has changed my outlook on life would be an understatement. As such, it is my sincerest hope that viewers of *If Found* will find similar comfort. A more open and respectful discussion about death would provide comfort, peace, and acceptance to all peoples, regardless of faith, age, religion, or creed. Through my artwork, and through the storytelling and themes of *If Found*, I provide constructive tools for more candid dialogue on the seasons of life and death, and to effectuate positive change in this space.

This story is very much filtered through my personal beliefs. As death is a universal part of life, it would be impossible to touch on every interpretation of it in the world. The film's main purpose is to inspire more comfortable conversation about this difficult topic. As discussed in Anita Hannig's article, "Talking About Death in America: An Anthropologist's View," more open discussion on death is desperately needed in the culture of the United States. There has been a shift in American culture over the last century as fewer people die at home and dying has become an event largely associated with hospitals, machines, and the medical field in general. Hannig's studies show that there is "far greater acceptance of and preparation for death in many societies outside the United States."

Many Americans have come to see death as an enemy to be defeated (Hannig). *If Found* challenges this idea by showing the possibility of living peacefully alongside death. The Forest Dweller character does not turn away from the Crow, a representative of death. Instead, the

Dweller aids the Crow during its time of need. In return, the Forest Dweller and their Dog learn to live with death by their sides, deepening their connection with the nature that surrounds them. Like Hannig states, “we need to give them (young Americans) the space and tools to explore their own relationship to death.”

Though culture and religion attempt to attach meaning to death to process the associated grief, it does not always come with a reason, there is not always logic or meaning. The only objective truth that exists around death is that it is unavoidable. An acceptance of death’s place in our lives provides its own meaning: so that the dying may have comfort and dignity while their loved ones learn to grieve. While we all may hope to lose loved ones to old age, realistically that will not always be the case. I have traveled the long journey of watching an elderly relative slowly fade away and I have felt the sharp sting of a sudden loss. There is an extra layer to the grief when someone dies unexpectedly. With the Dog's sudden death in *If Found*, I show there is a path to healing after the shock. Stories like *If Found* are created so that viewers can explore difficult subjects without experiencing the hardships of reality.

Anita Hannig’s experience teaching a course on death and dying at Brandeis University has shown positive effects on the students. Data from the course conclusion showed students felt less nervous about death and more prepared to handle it. Personally, working on *If Found* has helped me to conquer my fears of death. Where before I worried often about suddenly losing loved ones, I am more accepting of life's twists and turns. I have had more open discussions with my parents about their wishes and feel better prepared to care for them at the end of life. Each day I try to be appreciative of the time spent with loved ones and of life's natural cycles. *If Found*'s goal is to inspire similar sentiments in others.

CHAPTER 2: DEATH IN OTHER ANIMATED MEDIA

Death has played a key role in animations since the beginning of the art form. As discussed in my previous paper and presentation for the Society of Animation Studies, how death is handled in popular animated American media has changed dramatically in recent years. This change can most easily be seen within the library of Disney and Pixar films. Films have evolved since the 1929 Silly Symphony short “*The Skeleton Dance*”.

Initially reserved as a consequence for evil, only villains died while the heroes lived happily ever after (Castillo). Death acted as a punishment in such classic examples as the Evil Queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*. When the “good guys” died, the death happened before the story began (Windling). Both Snow White’s and Cinderella’s mothers are absent to make room for evil stepmothers. In this way, death is a simple tool to serve the story, not a major driving theme. Unlike these earlier films, death is neither a negative consequence nor the backdrop for humorous dancing in *If Found*. Instead, it is a very present force throughout the narrative.

Only one death scene from these early films stands out in its devastating rawness: the sudden killing of Bambi’s mother in the 1942 feature film. The sequence was so shocking to viewers that, though the action occurred off screen, many would insist they saw Bambi’s mother shot (Lutts). Though the death of Bambi’s mother is the one scene in the film that seems the most memorable for audiences long after the credits, it has little impact or mention throughout the rest of the film. Death in *Bambi* illustrates Man’s potential threat to nature, serving as another narrative tool.

It is the unexpected tragedy of Bambi's mother that makes her death linger in viewers' memories. *If Found* similarly shows that death does not always arrive for those who deserve it; to even discuss death as retribution for wrongdoing seems to attach more meaning to this natural conclusion to life than is logical. Whether someone is good or bad, or rather if they "deserve it", is irrelevant. Death is as natural and common as the passing of a summer rain in the afternoon. What *Bambi* was able to achieve, regarding the discourse on death, is a cultural narrative shift on the discussion of death away from villains perishing for purpose, and towards films which celebrate life for its finality, as well as the use of fictional narrative to facilitate the process of internalization of death as a natural conclusion to life. It would take more than fifty years for another Disney film to handle death so openly on screen in *The Lion King* in 1994.

While death is not the subject of *The Lion King*, it and the natural cycle of life play key parts in the film's themes. I have often thought of Mufasa's explanation of the circle of life when developing the Dog character in *If Found*. Like Mufasa's description of a deceased lion becoming grass that feeds the antelope, the deceased Dog is returned to nature and grows anew in the garden.

Following *The Lion King*, death moves closer to the main narrative subject in films like Pixar's *Toy Story* series and *WALL-E*. These films show the true value of animation beyond simple children's entertainment as they tackle very core human fears. For example, the toys of *Toy Story* constantly battle the metaphorical death that comes once their children no longer want to play with them. Despite Andy growing older, new life is found for the toys as Andy shares them with Bonnie in *Toy Story 3*. The toys also quite literally escape death when they are rescued from the trash incinerator.

WALL-E handles similar themes of purpose and belonging as the abandoned titular robot finds new life after being left behind on the trash filled Earth. Like Andy's toys, *WALL-E* experiences a metaphorical death in being left behind and forgotten. Despite the innocent surface interpretations of *Toy Story* and *WALL-E* as the fun adventures of anthropomorphic objects, their main conflicts address the anxieties of death, decay, and meaninglessness (Scott, 150).

More recent films have accepted death as a main subject rather than a narrative tool and have begun to build upon the precedents set by *Bambi*, *The Lion King*, and the *Toy Story* series, specifically Pixar's *Up* and *Coco*. In *Up* death is shown in a positive light as the natural conclusion to a life well-lived. The elderly character of Ellie passes away and leaves behind her husband Carl, who fears that he never fulfilled her lifelong dreams. But, through Ellie's notebook, Carl learns that every big and small moment they shared together was what truly made for life's greatest adventure. Through this, he can accept her passing and start a new chapter of his life alongside Russell and Dug the dog.

Up is an especially important influence for *If Found*. The film's honest exploration of life, death, and grief is what initially inspired me to become an animator. At a time where every animation seemed to my teenage self to be silly nonsense made for children, *Up* reignited my love for the art form. *Up* touches upon what I consider to be a key facet of impactful storytelling in how it shows the value of everyday life. Ellie never made it on that dream trip to South America, but what mattered to her was her connection to those she loved. It reminded me of the depth of the animated medium and showed me that many of the stories made for children are the most important ones of all.

This inspires the entire body of my artistic work, including *If Found*, as I aim to make meaningful stories for audiences of all ages. Like *Up*, *If Found* gives viewers hope for the

continuation of life after death through the characters' new connection with the Crow and the growth of a new Dog in spring. When life changes, opportunities for new connections may arise and breathe new energy. The winters of grief will not last forever and spring will always come again.

After beautifully, in my opinion, handling death and grief in *Up*, Pixar makes an even greater impact with *Coco*. Finally, death has metaphorical breathing room as a neutral storytelling element. Death is everywhere in *Coco* and serves as the subject of the film, rather than a plot tool to punish villains (Castillo). Most of the film takes place in the afterlife, where loved ones are both celebrated and mourned. *Coco* is a thoughtful illustration of how another culture finds celebration in death instead of avoiding it as many Americans do.

Its depiction of Mexico's Día de Muertos is lovingly rendered with many small details specific to Mexican culture. According to Mexican film editor Vanessa Erazo, *Coco* gets things right "From the little strips of corn husk lovingly tied around Abuelita's tamales, to the bright embroidered flowers on the blusas bordadas worn by Miguel's mom and sister (all signaling indigenous influences), and the zapateado...that Gael García Bernal's character Héctor performs...– Mexican culture is treated with dignity, honor, respect, and the utmost reverence. It is not exotic or seen as foreign, in fact it's normalized."

There is much to be learned from *Coco*'s honest exploration of cultural belief, the long-term effects of grief, and the importance of celebrating life. In *Coco*, "death is the point" and love and closure can be found (Castillo). *If Found* follows *Coco* and *Up* in challenging the legacy of avoiding death by placing it at the forefront of its story and showing viewers how to live in harmony with it.

CHAPTER 3: THE FAIRY TALE GENRE

If Found serves many hallmarks of the fairy tale genre: it has non-human characters in a mysterious forest with magical elements. Like many fairy tales, *If Found* also teaches its viewers a lesson about connecting with nature and accepting death. As defined by Greenhill and Matrix, fairy tales are “fictional narratives that combine human and nonhuman protagonists with elements of wonder and the supernatural” (1). Fairy tales are a far-reaching narrative genre across many cultures. As such, choosing the fairy tale genre made sense in making *If Found* both more appealing and more relatable to a broader audience.

The initial setting of *If Found* was based in the dusty neighborhoods and windy plains of my Wyoming childhood. As I delved deeper into the film’s message and developed its themes, this setting no longer fit the broader audience I sought to reach. Of course, genre is more than the setting of a story, but by narrowing *If Found* to the familiar trappings of a fairy tale’s mysterious forest with non-human characters, I found that the setting and genre worked in tandem to enhance the film’s themes. As forests are common in many fairy tale stories such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, this setting lends a sense of familiarity to the film’s viewers. Very few people can relate to life in Wyoming, but they can recognize the setting of a deep forest in a fairy tale. Stylistically, this setting also made the film more enjoyable to work on. It has ignited a new love of environment and background design that I plan to build my future career upon.

Fairy tales have also had a long history in animated film. Famous creators like Walt Disney and Lotte Reiniger built their careers upon fairy tale films (Greenhill and Matrix, xii). Many of my childhood Disney favorites, like *Sleeping Beauty*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan*, were based

on fairy tales. *If Found* proudly continues this long tradition by weaving its own unique tale. Animated media provides a safe distance for viewers to contemplate real life fears (Scott) and, combined with how the fairy tale lends itself to open interpretation (Ellis Davidson and Chaudhri, Introduction), this is an ideal match for a difficult topic. Through this, *If Found* depicts an upsetting event without overwhelming viewers.

The magical nature of fairy tales also allows for the more mystical parts of *If Found*'s story. The Crow leading the Dog's spirit home feels more appropriate within the magical realm of the fairy tale when compared to the mundane reality of the story's inspiration. Compared to the original ending where a new dog is adopted from the shelter, the growth of the new dog in the garden feels more poignant as it reinforces death's connection to nature and shows viewers how death can create new life.

While there are many similarities between *If Found* and traditional fairy tales as explored above, the film also has some unique differences. The main difference, which will also be discussed in the upcoming Design and Creative Decisions chapter, is the lack of gender and ethnic identity of the characters. Traditionally, fairy tales reflect the social norms of the culture that creates them, and they often reinforce gender norms. For example, consider the changing role and agency of princess characters in Disney films, from *Sleeping Beauty* to *Cinderella* to *Tangled*.

With my focus on the Forest Dweller character, I aimed to diverge from the gendered history of fairy tales. If the Forest Dweller was specifically male or female, the concept of binary opposites would arise, meaning that the presence of one binary part (i.e., male) would then conjure the thought of its (female) opposite (Collington, 67). I worried that the presence of one gender would distract viewers in the absence of the other. Given that so many fairy tales are

heavily gendered stories, I opted to avoid gender in this case as such discussions are outside the scope of *If Found*'s message. I may return to the concept of gender in future stories, as the topic interests me greatly and I have great respect for other stories that explore it.

Similarly, the Forest Dweller has no race or ethnicity. As death is a universal fact of life, I did not want to exclude any one group of people from the story's message. Nor would I, as a white creator, want to treat the concept of whiteness as default by thoughtlessly throwing a white character into a story that is meant to be so far-reaching. I believe there is absolutely room in the current canon of animation for more stories about the intersections of race, gender, and death. The complexities of these topics are far beyond *If Found*'s scope at this time.

What I chose to focus on in *If Found* is the connection that every living creature has to death. From the changing seasons to the lives and deaths of Forest Dwellers, dogs, and crows, death is universal. I have carefully chosen the tenants of the fairy tale genre that best serve this goal while also shifting the lens away from gender, ethnicity, and identity to broaden the story's focus.

Making Sense of the Natural World

Death, and the consequences of meddling with it, makes frequent appearances in myths and fairy tales worldwide. Mark Collington helps to break down the far reach of the fairy tale genre through the lens of structuralism. Structuralist theories, which explore how humans use language to construct ideas and then express and interpret them through images (21), recognized that deeper narrative structures found in many different civilizations were essentially the same. These narratives are "central to how the mind makes sense of the world" (24). One example of these recurring tales is "*Godfather Death*" in the German folk tales of the Brothers Grimm. The

story has many other forms such as “*The Three Diseases*” in Greece, “*The Just Man*” in Italy, and “*Dr. Urssenbeck*” in Austria, to name a few (Windling).

Collington defines the fairy tale as “a more fictional and magical equivalent of the folk tale,” with the folk tale defined as “a fictional moral story” used to teach lessons and share knowledge, often verbally (59). For centuries humans have shared these tales to explain natural phenomena and to pass on important lessons. The purpose of fairy tales is to help in coping “with the traumas of growing up” with stories where rites of passage and death are key components (62). As folklorist and author Midori Snyder explains, “death...in folk and fairy tales allow us to personalize our contact with death long enough to confront it, to argue with it, to pit our wits against it...and perhaps, if we are lucky, to finally make peace with it” (Windling).

These stories are central to how humans attempt to understand the great mystery awaiting us all at the end of life. As time has progressed, these fairy tales have grown into contemporary entertainment, notably playing a large role in early animated films. While in the world of Disney many may see fairy tale films as commodified husks of their former cultural treasures, scholars recognize that fairy tale films are as genuine as their telling in a bedtime story or anthology. This is not a break from tradition but a continuation of it (Greenhill and Matrix, 4). Like many tales before it, *If Found* encourages the audience to engage with the existential question of death. With the growth of the new Dog in springtime, *If Found* highlights that “in fairy tales..., death is not always an ending, or...not just an ending. It can have the seeds of new life, of change, of transformation – which is what these tales, at their most basic level, are so often all about” (Windling).

Making Reality Magical

The story of *If Found* is a deeply personal one. As stated earlier, it is based on real events. Just days before I would leave home for college, I returned from work one summer afternoon to find my parents searching frantically. Our beloved dog, Emma Lou, had escaped when our lawn service had left the back gate open. Tensions were high as we searched our quiet neighborhood, hoping desperately she had not made it to the nearby highway. As the sun set, we reluctantly returned home without any sign of Emma.

I set out the next day armed with tape and lost posters, ready to affix Emma's picture to every mailbox and streetlight in the neighborhood. As I worked my way down the street, I noticed an older woman kneeling in her front garden. I approached, ready to ask if she had seen a dog running loose, when she asked me to come closer. In her hands was a small bird feeder. Curious, I knelt in the grass next to her. As she handed the bird feeder to me, I saw the problem. A small bird, one of the small, round, generic brown ones seen all over the Midwest, had its head stuck in the feeder. The poor thing was shaking and exhausted with its neck rubbed raw from trying to break free.

This moment was like the eye of the storm for me. At a time when it felt like everything was out of my control, here was a problem I could solve. And I did solve it! It was nerve-racking to gingerly pull and prod while turning the feeder around, but I eventually figured out how the bird's head was wedged inside. Gently pushing it through another hole in the feeder, I suddenly had a dazed but intact little bird in my hand.

My neighbor thanked me as she threw away the bird feeder. She set up a little box with some water for the bird and left it to rest on her porch. Feeling more hopeful, I left the old woman with a lost dog poster and carried on down the road.

So far, this has not made for the most magical of stories. Part of why I changed the setting of *If Found* is to give it a more interesting environment with more lively characters. Another part of this change was to remove myself as a character in this painful moment. This was a deeply stressful time in my life at the end of a very difficult summer. Despite *If Found* taking on much larger themes as time has passed, a core part of it will always be about that desperate search for Emma and the little bird who brought me a bit of hope. It will always be about accepting, from a safer distance, that the story will never change. The Dog is always going to die.

However, there was a little magic, or something like it, that happened after I saved the bird. That night, both my parents and I dreamt of Emma coming home. Later my grandmother, who lived in another state and did not know Emma was missing, would tell me that on the same night she dreamt of her mother sitting peacefully on the front porch with Emma at her side. The two were at rest together.

The next day we received the call. My principal had found Emma's remains by the side of the highway. He buried her on his farm in a quiet spot.

I spent the rest of the afternoon slowly removing the lost posters I had so hopefully taped up the day before. When the old woman's house neared, I nervously eyed the box on the porch. I was not sure if I could handle more bad news, but I had to know and so I approached. The box was empty, not even a feather left behind. The bird had flown away. I went home, feeling just a little bit better and thinking of the words on my posters.



Figure 2: *Lost Dog Poster: Storyboard from original pitch*

Here all the pieces of *If Found* come together. In a way, the original story is the folk tale to the animation's fairy tale. It is a story I have told verbally many times. In its retelling, I share a bit of my belief in grateful birds that lead home the spirits of lost dogs. And, like any verbal

story, I am sure it is a bit different each time I tell it. After all, this happened nearly ten years ago. Despite the time and distance from then to now, the story is still a difficult one for me.

This is where the fairy tale helps me. As Greenhill and Matrix put it, fairy tales provide “innovative, imaginative, and even magical ways of dealing with the crises of everyday life” (8). The fairy tale has let the story grow beyond those troubled days and freed me from the circling “what-ifs”. Working on *If Found* has been a unique act of both grief and healing, as it has helped me to accept the things I cannot change. The story serves as a bittersweet reminder of the dog I loved very much, the last days of childhood, and the importance of helping others.

CHAPTER 4: DESIGN AND CREATIVE DECISIONS

As discussed in the previous chapter, choosing the fairy tale genre for *If Found* greatly influenced its environmental design and overall aesthetics. Creating an animated short is not a simple undertaking and careful thought must be given to the film's appeal. Inspired by the iterative process shown in *The Skillful Huntsman* by Scott Robinson and his students at the Art Center College of Design, I initially began exploration of character design with the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* in mind. My main goal was to capture the same appealing spookiness in *If Found*'s aesthetics that can be seen in Cartoon Network's "*Over the Garden Wall*". Other visual influences include "*Steven Universe*", "*The Owl House*", and "*Gravity Falls*".



Figure 3: Example of silhouette exploration, as shown in The Skillful Huntsman

Though *If Found*'s story has little in common with *Little Red Riding Hood*, I made the setting familiar by capturing the aesthetics of this well-known tale. After playing with various silhouettes, the red-hooded character of the Forest Dweller came to be. As fairy tales allow audiences to "identify themselves with the heroes of the tales", I specifically created the Forest Dweller to be non-descript and genderless so that the audience may better project a bit of

themselves onto the character (Greenhill and Matrix, 4).



Figure 4: Initial Design of the Forest Dweller

There is also a classic issue within fairy tales of depicting most heroes as men who rise valiantly to save princesses in distress. These design decisions, to remove the gender and ethnicity of the character, are tied directly to the previous discussion in the Fairy Tale Genre chapter above on gender, ethnicity, and identity. Key aspects of the Forest Dweller's design were tailored to support this deviation from identity. The Forest Dweller's non-human design facilitated greater ease and speed of animating the character. The character's curved edges, top-heavy body, and skinny little legs create an appeal similar to that of a toddler. With their rounded form and oval face, the Forest Dweller is soft and approachable while their triangle silhouette lends a certain level of sturdiness. They are a hardy little character. The stylized nature of the character also allowed for more liberal use of squash and stretch in my animations.



Figure 5: Reference Sheet for the Forest Dweller

Developing the Dog's design was more challenging. Continuing the thread of "*Little Red Riding Hood*", I experimented with several wolfish iterations but none of them had the right impact. Often in fairy tales, the wolf is an antagonistic figure such as in *Little Red Riding Hood* as well as in other tales like *The Three Little Pigs* and *The Wolf and The Fox*. I wanted to avoid the long history of negative associations with wolves that are found in Western stories (Bukowick, 26). A wolf would carry too much symbolic baggage for this story.



Figure 6: First Pass of the Dog's Design

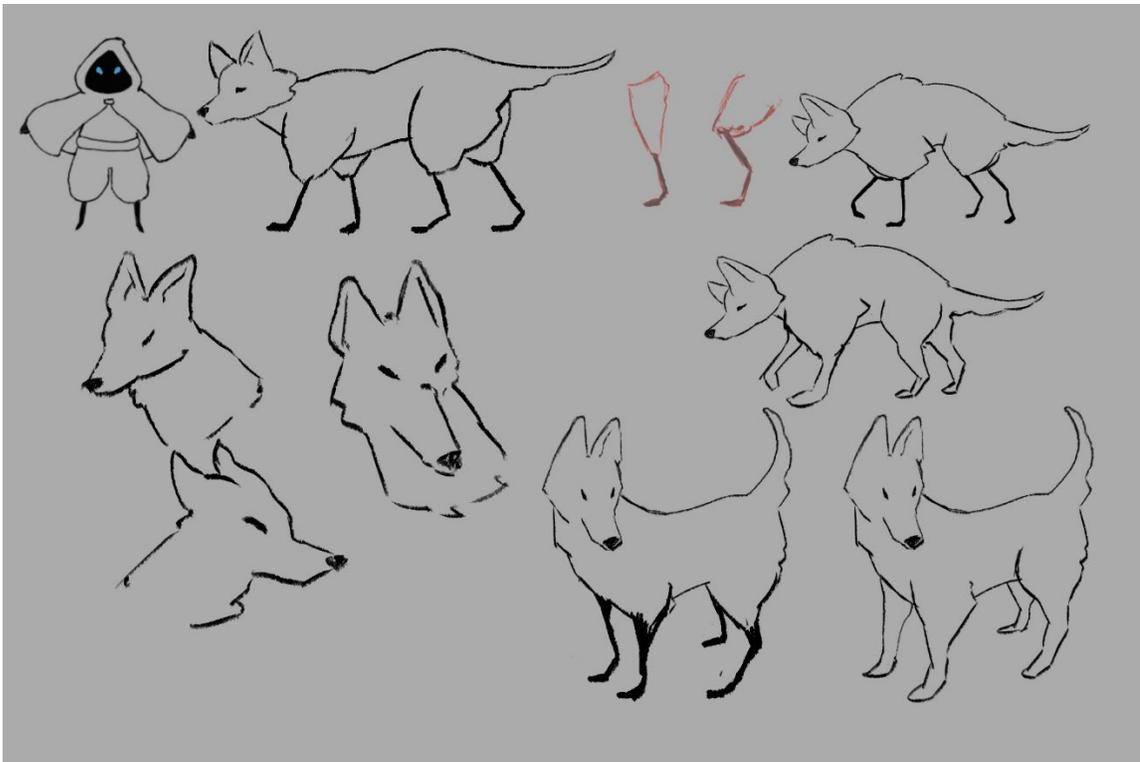


Figure 7: Second Pass of the Dog's Design

However, more traditional dog designs of man's best friend felt too tame for the setting. A Labrador Retriever would seem very out of place next to the Forest Dweller. As I studied less common dog breeds, such as the Irish Wolfhound, I learned of the Maned Wolf. The Maned Wolf is neither a dog nor, despite its name, a wolf, but rather a unique canine.

The overall lanky proportions and triangular ears of the Maned Wolf provided a nice compliment to the rounded triangles of the Forest Dweller. Inspired by the animal's split coloring, a fluffy red body with long dark legs, I incorporated a similar design into the Dog. With its leaf covered body and thin wooden legs, the Dog is closely tied to the forest around it. This design is meant to reinforce that death is a natural condition and not an evil force.

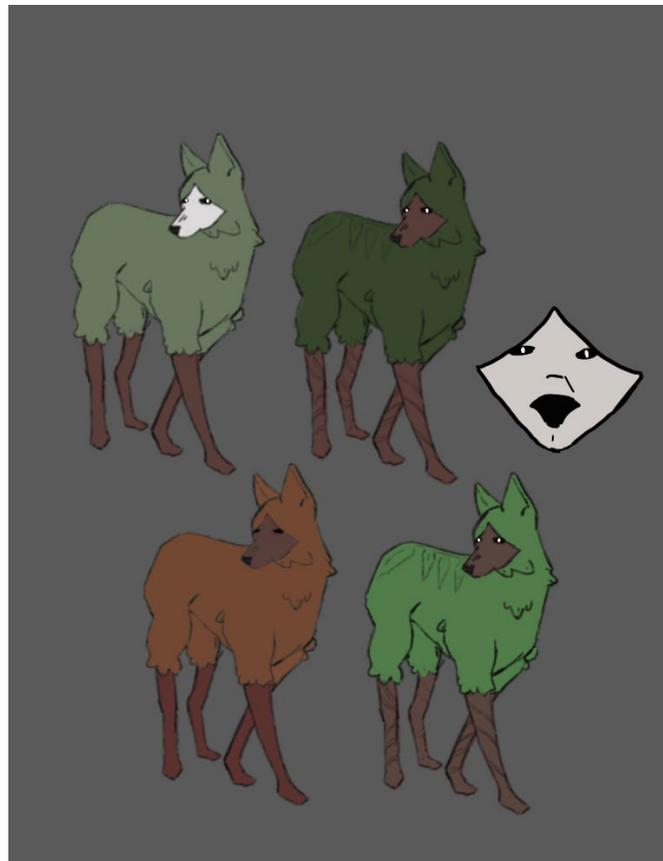


Figure 8: Dog Design Inspired by the Maned Wolf

Contrary to the Maned Wolf's pinched facial features, I rounded out the Dog's face to the more familiar proportions of a beloved pet. It was a careful balance to maintain between an unrecognizable forest beast and a friendly companion. The Dog's wooden "mask," where its fur fades away to show the wood skull beneath, was a detail that took several iterations to perfect. I knew the mask was the right design when it helped to solve one of the biggest narrative questions in earlier versions of the script: where does the new dog come from?

Originally, the new Dog was implied to be a rescue from the town shelter. When the setting changed from Wyoming to the fairy tale woods, a more fitting explanation was needed. I initially entertained the idea of the Forest Dweller receiving a puppy from a nearby farm, but this idea felt clunky and added the complication of designing a farmer character and extra environment. The solution finally came to me as I more deeply contemplated the film's themes of death leading to new life and the repeating cycles of nature. Like a dandelion seed on the wind, the Dog's mask could return home with its spirit, and it is the Crow, as a representative of death, who leads it.

As the new Dog grows from the planted mask, the themes of *If Found* come full circle with the spring season. It is not unusual in other tales for dead characters to return to nature in similar fashion. For example, Cinderella's mother returns as a fish in the Chinese version and as a wise tree in the Brothers Grimm tale (Windling). The Dog's growth reinforces death's role in change and transformation.

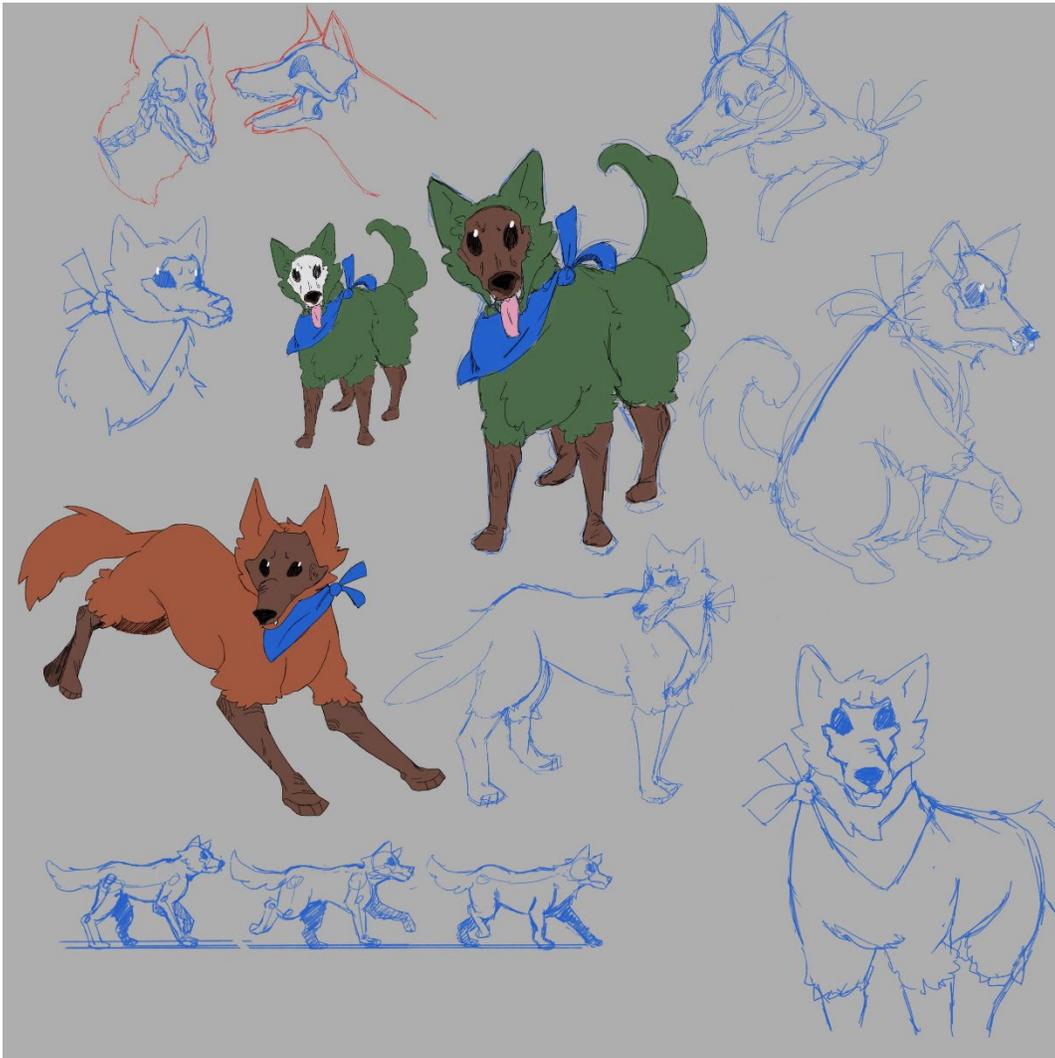


Figure 9: Final Dog Exploration

The Crow completes *If Found*'s trio of characters. Unlike the negative associations with wolves, I specifically chose a crow because of its symbolic status for death. The crow has been a symbol of death for thousands of years in the Western world (Bukowick, 18). In many cases, such as Medieval Europe, the crow has also been associated with evil and dark superstitions. Because they are scavengers, crows are often reviled as they feed on the dead (Bukowick, 18-19). Much of this contempt stems from fear of the unknown and of death as a cruel entity. *If Found* challenges these associations by illustrating that the crow is as deserving of kindness as

any other creature. In return, the Crow shows that death can be kind when it leads the Dog's spirit home.

As a creature of the forest, the Crow illustrates death's close connection with nature. It is common to see this relationship represented in other art forms and cultures as well. Diana Spoge, a Latvian student studying in the United Kingdom, discusses how death and nature are represented in her article "Thinking Differently About Death Through Art: Nāve (Death)" where she deconstructs the painting *Nāve (Death)* by Janis Rozentāls. The painting depicts a Latvian peasant woman holding her dead child, wrapped in white, while the female figure of death, also clad in white and holding a sickle, emerges from the forest. Spoge writes "Death also has bare feet because she is in very close relationship with nature. She comes from nature. The path death stands on belongs to her..."

Viewers of the painting may also note the summertime setting. In Latvian culture, nature is a key feature for the Mother of Death. (Spoge) Through this connection to nature, death joins the never-ending cycle of birth and rebirth as plants wilt and grow. Therefore, the Mother of Death is also the Mother of Nature (Spoge). While the color symbolism for death is different between Latvian culture and American, white instead of black, *If Found* otherwise similarly emphasizes the natural connection to death through the Crow.

I emphasize the unknowable depths of death by treating the Crow as mostly a silhouette, with the occasional white line for pose clarity. This made the Crow the simplest character of the three to design and animate. With its large white eyes, the Crow's design achieves a similar spooky aura to that of the Beast in "*Over the Garden Wall.*" The story of *If Found* then shows that, despite its frightening appearance, the Crow, and therefore death, is a kind creature that can live peacefully alongside the Forest Dweller and the Dog.



Figure 10: Reference Sheet for the Crow



Figure 11: The Characters of If Found

Film Symbolism

As animation is a visual medium, careful attention is given to the design of important details within animated films. The theory of structuralism and its exploration of how abstract symbols, environments, and compositions create narrative meaning in an image plays a large part in the design process (Collington, 21). These visual codes are very common in Western folklore, fairy tales, and religion (28). One major example is the red apple of temptation such as the apple in the Garden of Eden or the poisoned apple offered to Snow White by the Evil Queen. Through careful planning, deeper narrative meaning can be created by using familiar cultural symbolism and through contextual repetition of a symbol to introduce story symbolism.

For example, *If Found* uses the cultural symbolism of a black crow to represent death and contrasts it with the repetitive use of blue throughout the film to represent life. The Dog's blue bandana is used to carry the injured Crow to safety. When the Forest Dweller nurses the Crow back to health, they feed it blueberries, illustrating how death is sustained by life. In return, death brings new life when the Crow carries the bandana to the Forest Dweller, guiding the lost Dog's blue spirit home. At the end of the film, as the newly grown puppy emerges from the garden, the Crow sits next to its nest; within it is a clutch of pale blue eggs.



Figure 12: The Crow Leads The Spirit Home



Figure 13: The Crow's Nest of Pale Blue Eggs

Similarly, the narrative is purposefully set to coincide with the seasons to reinforce death's place in nature. As the seasons in *If Found* change, so too does the coloring of the Dog to match the trees. The Dog dies when fall turns into winter but a new one grows from the spring-time garden. Similar to the earlier breakdown of *Nāve (Death)* by Janis Rozentāls, this is another way to reinforce death's place in the repeating cycle of wilt and growth amongst plants. The Dog is a part of the forest; therefore, it is natural for it to die and to grow anew with the changing seasons.



Figure 14: The Four Seasons in If Found



Figure 15: The Dog in Fall

The newly grown puppy is similar in design to the previous Dog with a richer green color to match the springtime setting and a different tail. I purposefully leave it open to the viewer to decide if this is the same Dog reborn or a new one entirely. I encourage viewers to contemplate this as an entryway into deeper reflection on personal beliefs related to death. While I have a personal answer to this question, encouraging more discussion of death and rebirth better serves *If Found's* goals.



Figure 16: The Spring Puppy in the Garden

CHAPTER 5: KISHOTENKETSU

There is much that goes into the creation of a new story. Often in the Western world, fledgling writers are taught to define their stories by the main conflict. Is it man versus man? Man versus nature? Or man versus society? Yet so much more goes into the storytelling process. The act of storytelling is “traditionally used to describe a series of events, held together by a narrative structure with a clear beginning, middle, and end” (Collington, 21). Conflict is not necessarily a required ingredient for a successfully told story. What is important, however, is the story structure. How the plot is organized can determine almost everything that the viewer experiences (Barrett, “Japanese Horror Fiction”).

Even in its earliest development, defining *If Found* by a centralized conflict felt incorrect. The film’s message is not about fighting against death, but rather how to learn to live with it. The popular Western format of Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey” where the protagonist master’s their own destiny also did not fit here (Collington, 69). There is no need to overcome or to master death in *If Found*. Frustration with these structures led to further research into storytelling conventions and discussion with my peers that led to Kishotenketsu.

Kishotenketsu is a traditional plot structure found in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean literature that is derived from four-act poetry. Unlike the conflict-focused Western three-act structure, Kishotenketsu builds its narrative tension through a twist, or “complication”, in the third act (Shah). The key to this narrative structure is the contrast between the first two acts with the third, and the resulting reconciliation of the complication in the fourth act (tvtropes.org).

Given that Western storytelling conventions evolved from early Greek and Roman rhetoric, with its definitive statement of the main idea early on followed by supporting details, it may feel wrong to some viewers to see a key detail added at the end of the story. Because of its roots in poetry, Kishotenketsu introduces the later twist as a way to add a final, dramatic flair to the narrative, just as the final lines of a poem can breathe new meaning into the whole piece. (Barrett, “Japanese Arguments”).

The four acts are divided as follows:

Ki: Introduces the characters and setting

Sho: Develops the audience’s emotional connection to the characters. Information from act one is elaborated upon

Ten: A major twist occurs that changes the characters’ lives. A new perspective is offered to the audience.

Ketsu: The conclusion reconciles the first two acts with the twist in the third. The audience and the characters learn to accept a new normal (Barrett, “Mindset of Japanese Arguments”).

The story of *If Found* falls neatly into this format.

Ki: The audience is introduced to the Crow who is injured during a summer thunderstorm. The Forest Dweller and their Dog stumble upon the Crow and rescue it.

Sho: The Dweller and their Dog nurse the Crow back to health over a long period of time. The grateful Crow bows to them both before returning to the forest.

Ten: Fall arrives. The Crow watches as the Dweller searches desperately for something in the forest. Realizing the Dog is lost, the Crow joins the search only to find the Dog’s remains. The Crow frees the dead Dog’s spirit and leads it home as winter creeps in.

Ketsu: Winter turns to spring. The Forest Dweller tearfully buries part of the Dog. As the snow melts, a new puppy is reborn and emerges from the garden. From death comes new life. The trio is happily reunited and life in the forest continues.

Despite the lack of driving conflict in Kishotenketsu's structure, there can be conflicts within these stories. Characters may face many different adversities, but the key point of this structure is that the conflict is not the driving force of the entire narrative. Everything in the story is defined by the perspective flip created by the third act (tvtropes.org). A common trope in Kishotenketsu stories is the rescue of a powerful god or creature. Rather than setting out with the goal of earning a powerful being's favor, the protagonists of these stories incidentally happen upon the injured entity and go out of their way to help. In return, they are rewarded for their genuine kindness (Barrett, "Horror Fiction"). The importance of such acts of kindness is a key feature of *If Found's* structure. When the Forest Dweller and their Dog go out of their way to help the Crow, they learn to live with death as a part of life and benefit from the relationship in springtime.



Figure 17: *The Crow Gives Thanks*

Learning from Anime

Despite there being no Western equivalent to the style of Kishotenketsu (Shah), it felt natural to adapt it to this film thanks to the great influence of East Asian art and culture on contemporary Western animation, especially regarding Japanese anime. As Mark Collington writes, “anime is an example of a field of animation that has important things to say about the world we live in...but is often poorly copied on its visual style alone - in particular the work of Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli” (7). Despite the many imitations of the anime style, it is not unheard of to create a genuine story inspired by its themes and narrative structures. In fact, there exists a long history of cultural exchange between the West and Japan. The realistic paintings by Johannes Vermeer fascinated Japanese scholars and influenced the realistic style seen in anime today. In return, ukiyo-e woodblock prints influenced Western artists like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, the impact of which can be seen in the bold colors and simplified designs in French animation (73).

Even Miyazaki builds upon this rich history through the complex combination of Western and Japanese style and narrative in his works. *Laputa, Castle in the Sky* is a key example of this, with its setting inspired by the mines of South Wales and the floating world of the Japanese Edo period’s art (73). Given this precedence, I felt comfortable adapting my story to the Kishotenketsu format, always with the goal of showing appreciation for the impact of other cultures instead of pure appropriation. *If Found* fits neatly into the canon of contemporary animation with its setting of a Western fairy tale wrapped within the structure of Kishotenketsu.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Fairy tales have been used for centuries in human culture to teach important lessons about death. Combined with the nonconfrontational structure of Kishotenketsu, *If Found* uses the fairy tale genre to teach viewers how to accept death's place in life. In the film, the forest setting and its symbolism, such as relating the Crow, the Dog, and the changing seasons to the cycle of rebirth, closely connect death to nature. Death has often appeared in animated films, but only recently has it been depicted as a neutral force, rather than a negative consequence. Reflection on death in American culture, and our avoidance of the subject, is especially important as the country faces the outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic. While *If Found* leaves interpretation behind the growth of a new dog to viewers, it opens a gateway for more open discussion of death. I predict more art and stories in the coming years will focus heavily on the many lives lost.

I created *If Found* with the goal of confronting my past grief. Creating this film has broadened my understanding of death and lessened my anxieties related to it. Like the changing seasons, death is inevitable in creating winters of grief and springs of new opportunity. With the completion of *If Found*, I feel better equipped to face the changing seasons of my life. I plan to further explore themes of regrowth and new life in future projects, largely inspired by my growing family.

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