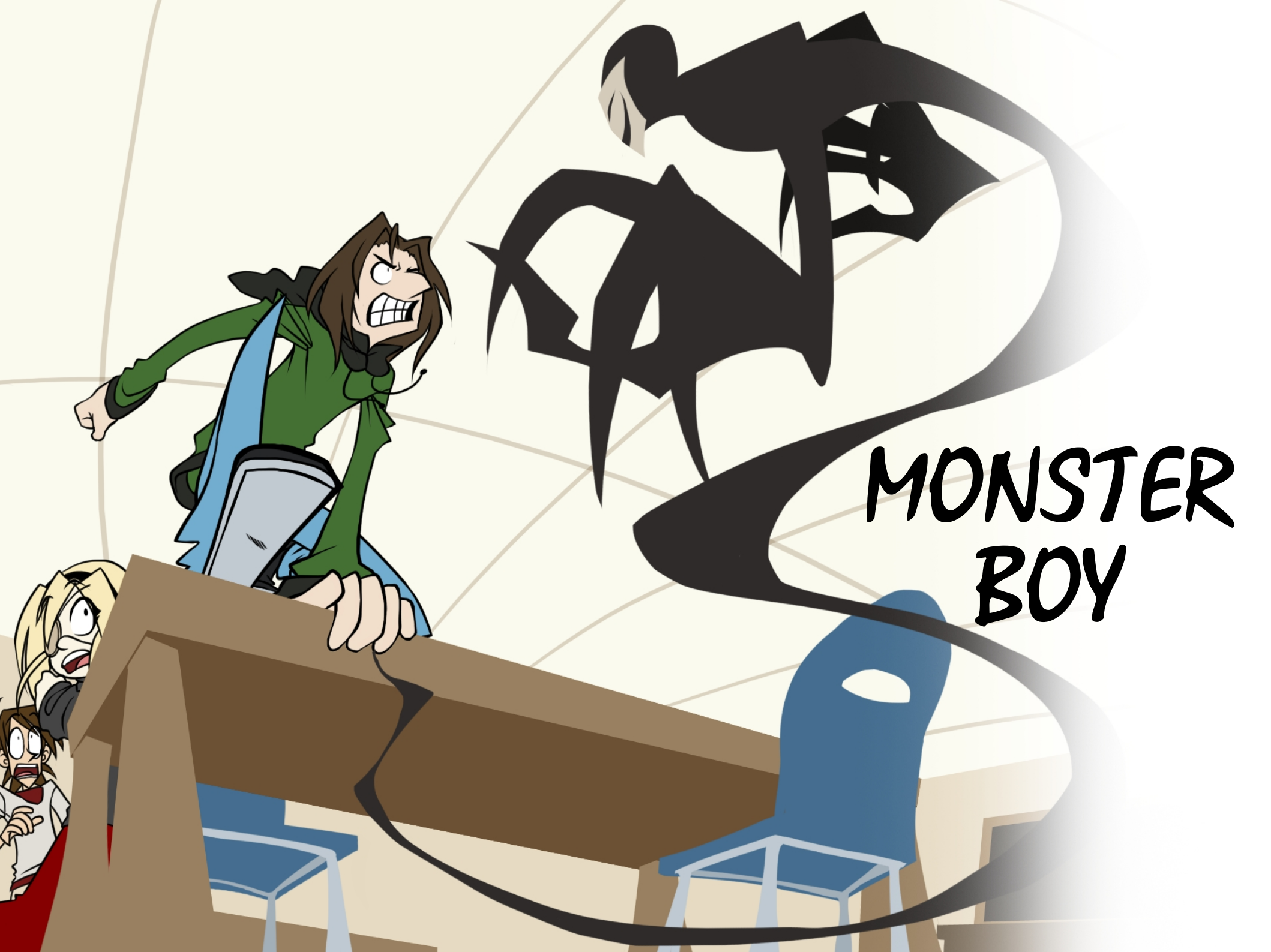Monster Boy

Shaping the Villain:
An Investigation Into Mature Themes in Animation

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This project investigates into mature themes in animated feature films and series, particularly looking at how villain characters are portrayed. This information will be used to aid in the design of the antagonist Nex-Chris from my animation and comic project "Monster Boy". I also want to learn about 3D character modelling; Nex-Chris is two characters joined together, so I will have to research how to make conjoined models. I will work closely with fellow student Matt Robinson, who will create a conjoined rig for the characters, which I will use to pose them and create turnaround videos.

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Monster Boy

Monster Boy is a project I started when I was studying at art college. The concept was very simple: it focused on a young boy who had the ability to see "monsters": creatures that are spawned from humans' misery and negative traits. The version of the story that I later developed for the Specialist Project at my second year at Bournemouth University remained very similar, though the cast and story was greatly expanded.

I thoroughly enjoyed working on the project, and, indeed, I still do. I continued to work on *Monster Boy* even after the project was complete. It has received positive reception by my peers and tutors, amassed a decent fan following online, and has also been featured on numerous websites. I am passionate about the project, and intend to write the story as a comic, to be printed and sold online and at conventions.

As such, I felt it would be useful to work on an element of this project that has concerned me since I started it: **the villain, and how the story should handle mature themes in its narrative,** considering that it's aimed at 13 year olds and up. To be clear, the villain character, Nex-Chris, is a combination of two characters: Chris and his monster Nexus. However, Nexus is using Chris' body as a puppet and vessel to cause destruction; **he is the villain**, not Chris.

It is my intention to use this project to research how mature themes and villains are handled and portrayed in popular animated feature films and animated series, so that I may have a better understanding of the subject, and thus come to a conclusion as to **how I want to handle the villain in *Monster Boy***, and **how to address mature themes in the story in general**. I am especially interested into **looking into themes such as violence, depression, death, and the psychology of villains**, as I feel insight into these themes will help me the most.

I also intend to **create a 3D character model of the villain**, which, it should be noted, is a monster latched onto a human, which will require the two models to be conjoined. Considering that I have very little experience in 3D modelling, I am hoping to learn a lot while working on this project.

Notes on Nex-Chris' Design

It should be made clear that I am mostly happy with the character design as it is now; it is the *portrayal* of the character that I am concerned with. The look of Nex-Chris was influenced by video games such as *Heart of Darkness, Psychonauts*, and characters such as Hexadecimal from the TV series *ReBoot*, and Hexxus from the animated feature *Fern Gully*. His face references the comedy and tragedy masks associated with drama and the creative arts (representational of Chris' love of the arts).

Something that also influenced its look was *Monster Boy*'s audience. Since I released it online, it has received a lot of positive feedback. Having released minimal information online about Nex-Chris, fans have been free to create interpretations of their own, and have practically done the design process for me.

Please refer to the image FanResponse, included in the project folder.

Here are a few selected images drawn by fans. Some I approve of, some I find far too scary, considering my intended audience. But overall I find it very exciting that these people would want to explore the idea of the character and create their own designs for him. I especially like Nexus' tendency to shape-shift and the black tendrils. It's served as very useful reference material.

However, it would be more beneficial to me to research examples of cartoon villains already in existence, and to study the topic more wholly, before I finalize his design.

What Is A Villain?

What is a Villain?

What defines a villain? What personality traits does a character need to be classified as one? It would be prudent to start at the beginning: with Disney, and how he chose to shape his villains, and why.

"There may be a morbid fascination that captures us momentarily, but **no one wants to look at ugly, repulsive, heavy evil.** On the screen we preferred to depict our examples of vileness through a **strong design which eliminated realism** and **kept the audience from getting too close to the character.**" (Johnston, Ollie; Thomas, Frank (1993). The Disney Villain. Disney Press. 15.)

There is a lot of truth in this quote. Watching a Disney villain is a lot more entertaining than watching realistic evil, such violent acts like mugging. This is because the Disney villain is a *caricature* of evil. For example, if the audience ever saw Cruella DeVille killing one of the puppies she intended to skin, she'd suddenly be a lot less entertaining.

Nexus fits this definition quite literally: he is a representation of his host's negative traits, and the problems that he struggles to face. This, coupled with his non-human, exaggerated design, completely eliminates all realism, and makes him a pure caricature of evil. This is good, as it prevents him from becoming too frightening to a young audience.

But what defines these characters as villains in the first place?

"All of us are potential villains. In spite of ethics, morals, codes of conduct and a general respect for laws, if we are pushed far enough… **our self-preservation system takes over and we are capable of terrible villainy.**" (Johnston, Ollie; Thomas, Frank (1993). The Disney Villain. Disney Press. 15.)

In *Monster Boy*, monsters represent their human host's negative traits and misery, and they feed off of negative emotion. If they eat enough, they can grow stronger and even gain power over their host (known as "possession"), and that's what Nexus has done to Chris. All is not well in Nexus' home world, and so he is driven to do this terrible thing to Chris, so that he may open a portal to the monster world and return home to help. To achieve his goals, he has been driven to put his host's life at risk, and as such, he fits into this definition of villainy.

Ed Hooks' Acting for Animation defines villains as: "A regular person with a **fatal flaw**," and that "**villains never think they're villains**." (Hooks, Ed (2003). Acting For Animators. N/A: Heinemann Educational Books,U.S.. 44.) Nexus is a common monster with a strong hatred for humans. It is this hatred that makes him think he's just in putting Chris' life in danger in order to save his own kind; **he thinks he's doing the right thing**, what other monsters didn't dare to do. In this respect, he may even see himself as a hero.

So Nexus seems to fit in with these definitions of what makes a character a villain, but how do we prevent him from becoming *too* villainous?

Mature Themes in Animation

THQ

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Mature Themes in Animated Series

Chris' transformation into Nex-Chris comes about due to his poor psychological state: the monsters in Monster Boy are personifications of their hosts' negative traits, and Nexus stands for Chris' self-destructive nature. Nexus is quick to remind him that's a failure, useless - he is, essentially, the personification of Chris' self-deprecating thoughts.

Is such a topic too heavy for a story intended for young teens? The following shows examples of episodes of animated series that address topics such as depression and psychological struggle/illness.

Hey Arnold!, Helga on the Couch, 2001 [online video], available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kw-ewlXZgYY

Hey Arnold! - Helga on the Couch - Season 4, Episode 78

This episode features some very interesting and upfront examples of a character forced to face their difficulties. The character Helga is made to see a child psychologist due to her violent and anti-social behaviour at school.

As Helga explains her problems to Dr. Bliss, the imagery is very strong: a child Helga is shown walking through dangerous looking alleyways, populated by some shady characters, alone. Her parents preferred to stay at home to watch Helga's prodigal older sister Olga play piano, rather than take Helga to pre-school.

Bullying is one of the main topics that *Monster Boy* addresses in its narrative, though the bullies will not be written as villains. Rather, it is intended that they will be written as children who, like their victims, also have problems, and need help just as much as they do, much like how this episode does. **It never paints Helga as a bad person, but as a child that needs help.** And once she receives it, she starts to show signs of improvement: a running joke in Hey Arnold! features Helga privately monologuing about her undying love for Arnold, and when she is finished, she discovers the character Brainy stood behind her, and punches him. The same joke happens at the end of this episode, but **she does not hit him.**

This episode is relevant to the *Monster Boy* story, as it is intended that similar topics will be approached, and treated in a similar way. I find it interesting and inspiring that child psychology would be approached in such an honest way, and has extinguished my fears of doing something similar.

Batman: The Animated Series - Baby Doll - Season 2, Episode 76

Batman:TAS was known for being darker, and more daring in terms of how it addressed mature themes than most animated series at the time. It, too, was aimed at a teenage audience, though it often featured a lot of violence and a big cast of terrifying villains. This episode, however, does not feature any of the famous Batman villains, introducing an all new character, and a lot of interesting mature themes in tow.

Batman: The Animated Series, Baby Doll, October 1 1994 [online video], available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUtLTxBYZHw

Batman chases after an out of work actress named Mary Dahl, who has hired armed bodyguards to capture the cast members of a show she used to star in called "Love That Baby." Mary suffers from a condition that stunts her growth, causing her to look like a child though she is in her mid-thirties, and she has struggled to find acting work because of it. For most of the episode, she is completely in character as Baby Doll, the small child character she played on the show. But periodically she slips back to her normal self: a depressed, haggard woman whose dreams of being an actress have been shattered. **Her transformations are usually quite sudden and frightening.**

The imagery in the episode is also very daring: Mary uses a gun hidden within her doll, and is often seen being violent, or even getting hurt herself. Later in the episode, Batman pursues her to a carnival, and, in her attempts to get away, Mary gets lost in a hall of mirrors. There, she discovers a mirror that reflects her "true" adult self. She is **forced out of her denial**, out of her character, to face her condition, and the fact that she'll have it for the rest of her life.

This is very deep for a show aimed at teenagers, but because of this, I really respect it. It is very intelligent, and does not question whether or not young audiences would be able to understand the topics that this episode addresses. I would like to approach the themes presented in *Monster Boy* in a similar way.

Furthermore, Mary is good reference for Nex-Chris due to her split personality aspect: her evil side is vicious, as Nexus should be. Also, Mary uses her Baby Doll personality to put up a facade; I intend for Nexus to do something similar, using Chris' voice to fool other characters. She also appears as a child who is put mortal danger, as is Chris. These aspects make this episode vital reference for when I begin to write *Monster Boy*, and I no longer feel fearful of approaching these aforementioned topics.

Compare and Contrast: Mature Themes in Eastern and Western Animation

Hayao Miyazaki

Hayao Miyazaki, creator of classic titles such as *Spirited Away*, makes films aimed at children, but, interestingly, these movies tend to feature stronger imagery than Dreamworks or Pixar's films. Ed Hooks stated in his lecture on 14th February "in *Spirited Away*, a scene depicts Chihiro about to descend a precarious flight of stairs, hanging over a very high drop, to get to the boiler room. The stairs are old and broken, and there is no railing. **If this movie had been made by Pixar, there would have been a railing.**"

Why is this? Pixar's work has featured some strong imagery, such as the scene in *Ratatouille* where Remy is shown the bodies of numerous dead rats, and the emotional first ten minutes of *Up,* yet Miyazaki's work seems to be braver in terms of its imagery. *Princess Mononoke*, for example, features many scenes of war, death and violence. Ed Hooks said in his lecture on 15th February "don't be afraid to scare children. Pixar will not scare children because **they're afraid of losing a ticket sale.**"

I feel inclined to agree; *Monster Boy f*eatures some frightening imagery, especially where Nex-Chris is concerned, but since studying Miyazaki, I feel that this isn't such a bad thing. I am in a position where the story matters more to me than the profit I make from it, so Pixar's fear of "losing a ticket sale" is not one that I share. I want to tell a strong story with a strong moral, so I will need strong imagery in order to do it. I do not intend on including the railing. Same for Nex-Chris: Chris is a child in mortal danger, but both Pixar and Miyazaki have featured children in trouble (Chihiro *Spirited Away,* Dash in *The Incredibles*), so I do not feel afraid to depict something similar.

Princess Mononoke. Miyazaki, Hayao (2006). Studio Ghibli.

The Incredibles Compared to Summer Wars

In order to learn the differences between eastern and western animation in terms of how they handle mature themes, it would be effective to compare the feature films *Summer Wars* (directed by Mamoru Hasoda, created by Madhouse studios) and *The Incredibles* (directed by Brad Bird, created by Pixar studios). They are both films that tell the story of a family that is thrown into extraordinary circumstances, and must come together in order to save the day, but their villains are very different, and that is what I want to examine.

Syndrome, The Incredibles (2003). Pixar Studios.

The main "villains" of *Summer Wars* and *The Incredibles* are similar: their main reason for resorting to villainous intentions is to impress the person that meant the most to them. However, they go about it in very different ways. Syndrome (*The Incredibles*) created machines and tools that would give him super powers, after Mr. Incredible, his role-model, refused to acknowledge him. What really defines him as a villain is that he tested his new weapon, the Omnibot, by having it kill many supers. He plans to use the Omnibot to stage an attack on the city, which he will then stop, so that he will have the same fame that supers do.

Wabisuke (*Summer Wars*), however, is a very different type of antagonist. In fact, he barely qualifies as one. He is the adopted son of the head of the Jinnouchi family, Sakae, and was outcasted from the family after he sold what little property Sakae owned to fund his studies in America. Upon his return, he is proud to announce to his mother that he has created an AI (codenamed Love Machine) that was designed for hacking, and is causing serious damage to the digital world OZ. He intends to sell Love Machine to the United States Armed Forces, so that the family will have money again. He did it all to make Sakae proud, and never wanted to hurt anyone.


Wabisuke, Summer Wars. Hasoda, Mamoru (2009). Madhouse.

Comparing these characters, I feel that Wabisuke is more interesting since he defies the typical definitions of a villain. Both characters wanted to impress the person they respected the most, but Wabisuke's approach seems much more realistic and sympathetic. Futhermore, Wabisuke is given a chance to redeem himself by helping to defeat the AI, whereas Syndrome dies horribly in a jet turbine. I would prefer to use Wabisuke as an example of "villainy", as Syndrome seems rather typical in comparison. His reasons are also completely selfish, whereas Nexus' aren't entirely, so he's a poor reference for the character. I like that Wabisuke is given a chance to redeem himself, and I would like for something similar to happen to Nex-Chris, as I certainly don't want them to be killed.

MODELLING
NEX-CHRIS
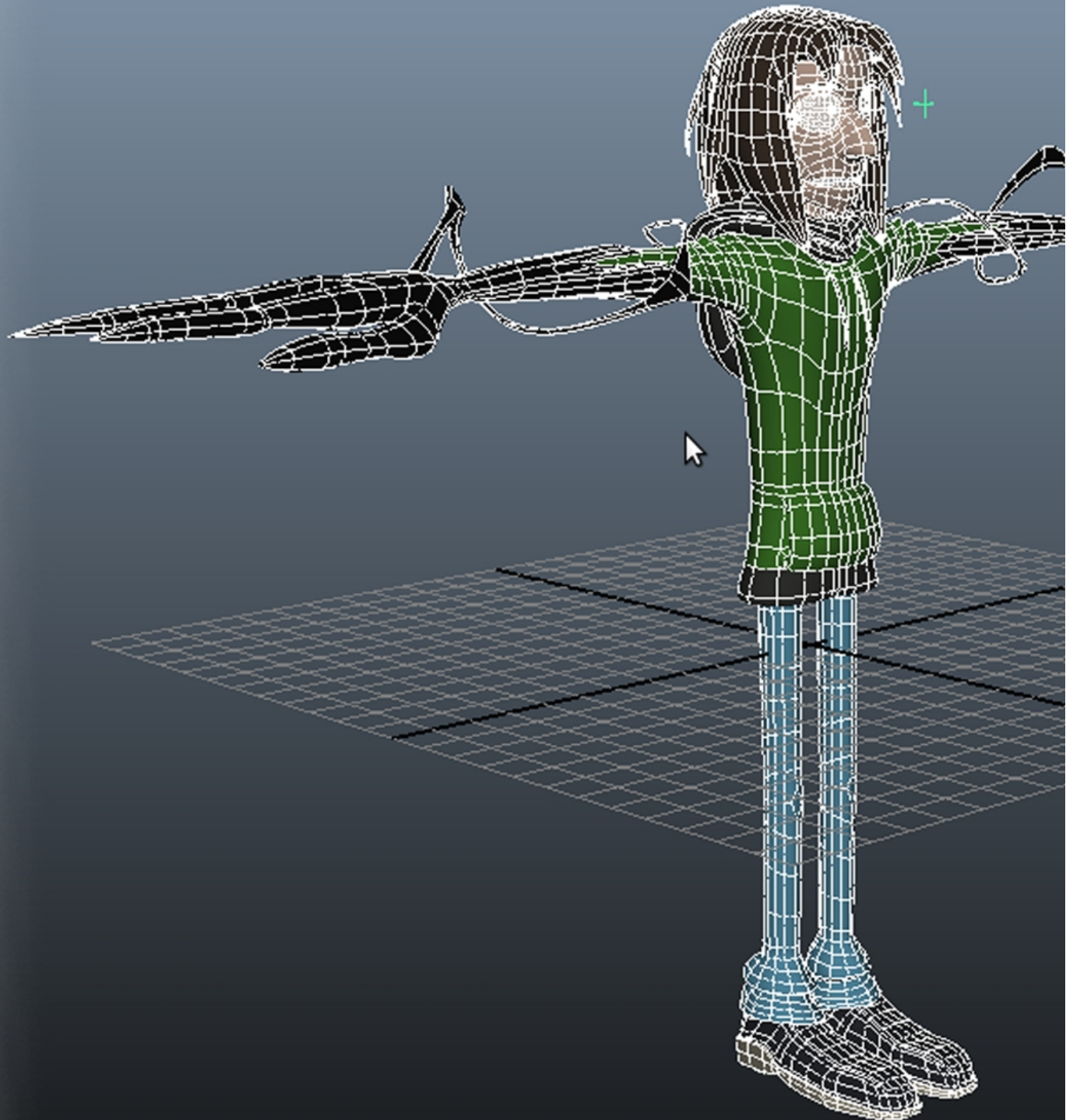
The character Nex-Chris is a combination of two characters from the MB storyline: the human Chris, and his monster Nexus. The following recounts how I created their conjoined model.
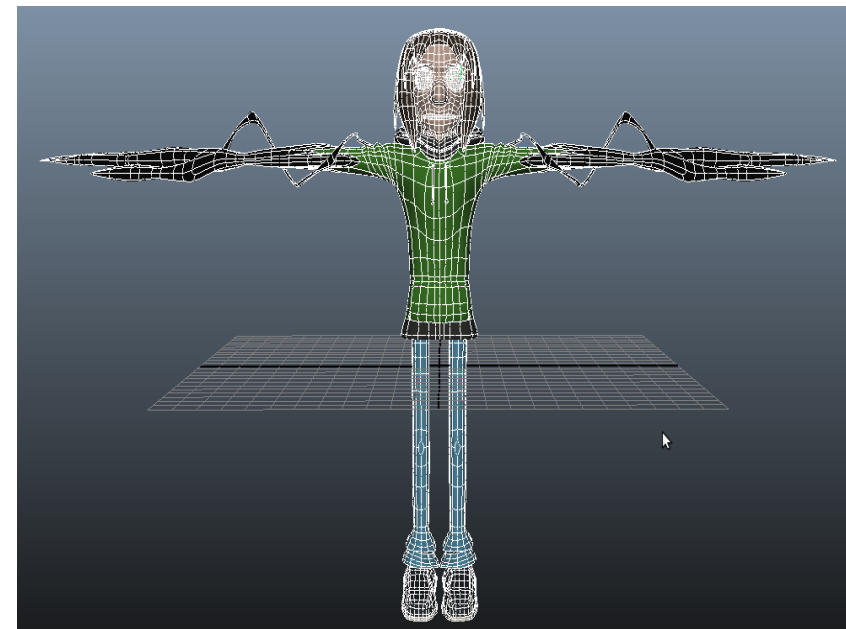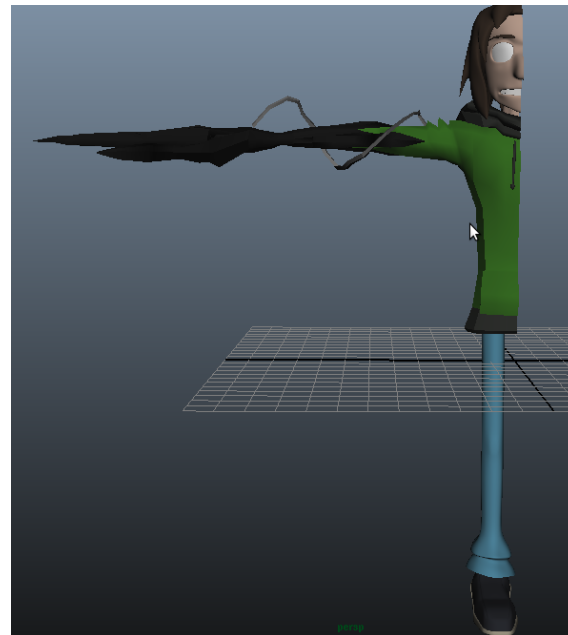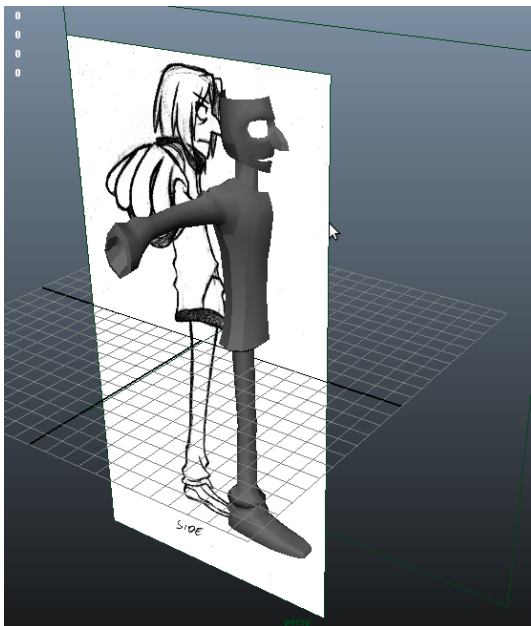
Modelling Chris

Something that had to be taken into account when modelling Chris and Nexus was the angular cartoon style that the characters are drawn in. In order to replicate this style in 3D, it was necessary to pay close attention to the characters' turnarounds and reference sheets. Care should be taken when modelling the angular shapes of Chris' face, especially around his jawline, chin and nose. Creating extra edgeloops that grouped closely to these edges helped to create a sharper look. For more information on geometry sculpting, I referenced the book 3-D Human Modelling and Animation, the site Digital Tutors, and facial topology guides.

The claws were directly taken from Nexus' model (created by Paul Robson) and attached to Chris' model for sake of ease. With the claw attached, the fingers were extended, and the black line connecting it to the top of Chris' arm was added to make the claw reflect how it looks in the concept art.

Ideal Character Topology - Luis Antonio 2010
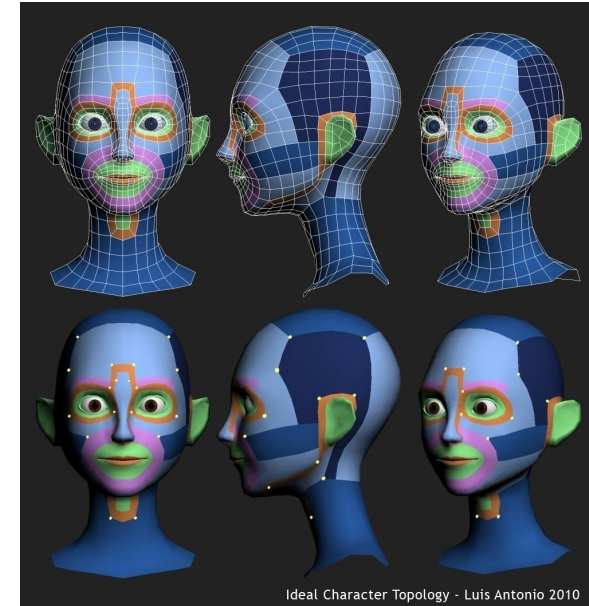
Polycount Wiki. (2011). Face Topology. Available: http://wiki.polycount.com/FaceTopology?action=show&redirect=Face+Topology. Last accessed 01.03.2012.

Chris' eye geometry and rig was also created by Ginny Hessler. The eyes were made using eye constraints made for non-spherical objects. The pupils are constrained to the geometry of the eyes, with the normals set to aim in the z axis, then the eyes are point constrained to the locators. This enables both pupils to be controlled separately, without them ever leaving the eye geometry.

All of this was done with the intention of trying to make the models reflect the concept art as much as possible, but there are still some aspects that don't quite match. Chris' hair does not look as it does in his design: it is not as angular, and the style was hard to capture. Due to lack of texture around the eyes, he's lacking in the stark black outline he has in the concept art, as well as the dark circles. If these were included, I feel he would have reflected his original design a lot more.


A comparison of the model and the concept art. The art is a lot more faithful
to my idea, and has a stronger visual impact.

Modelling Nexus

With Chris complete, Nexus also needed to be sculpted to suit the Nex-Chris design. His basic model had already been completed by fellow student Paul Robson, so all that remained was to fix some elements of his topology and reshape him to suit the new design. His mask was widened and the edges made to be sharper; teeth, a tongue, and eyes were added, and his claws were also reshaped. The eyes were, again, made using Ginny Hessler's eye rig, but reshaped and recoloured to fit the character.
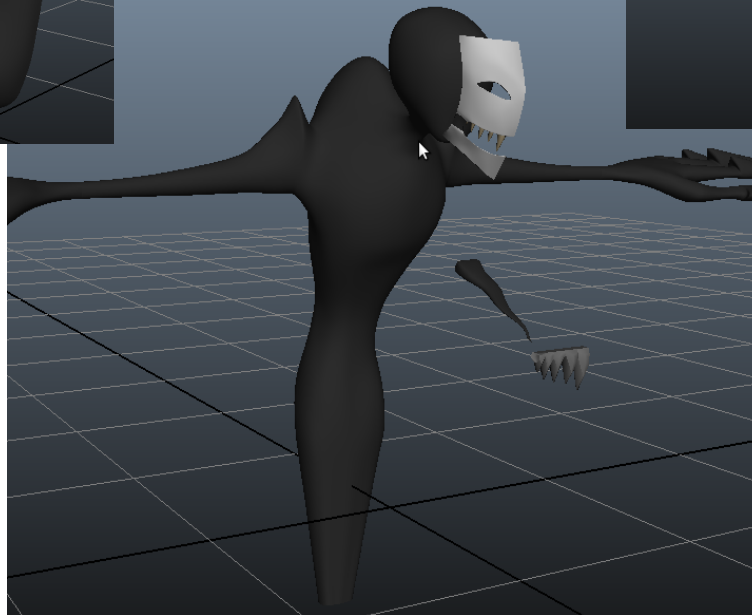
His "tail" was also remodelled so that it may be attached to Chris' back. However, Matt Robinson and I decided it would be easier to just have Nexus' tail intersect with Chris' back, rather than combine the two, to prevent any geometry issues. I was happy with this, as it still looked good and didn't betray the design.
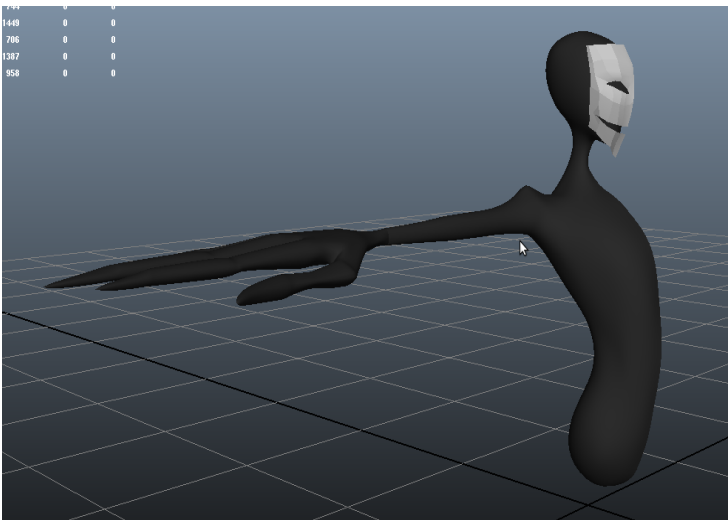
The original model by Paul Robson.

The final look.

Nexus I was more pleased with, particularly with how the mask turned out - it looks as sharp as I wanted it to. My research gave me confidence when it came to making Nexus seem threatening and evil, so I altered his look slightly to reflect this: I gave him a hunched back, and curved his claws to make them seem sharper.

I am happy with how he looks, but there is an aspect of his design that 3D would struggle to recreate: his shape-shifting ability. As is shown in my concept art, Nexus often takes up different forms and sizes; this is something I did not dare approach during this project, as it would be very difficult to do. But this ability of Nexus' is one of the main things that makes him so frightening, and I feel it's a shame that his 3D version would lack that. As such, I prefer his traditionally drawn version, as it is not limited by 3D controls, and I have full freedom to make him any shape, and as frightening as I want.

In Conclusion...

I am glad I took the time to learn how to use Maya to create character models, as I rather enjoyed it, and for the most part, I think the work I produced is of quite high quality. It may not have completely reflected my designs, but I want to produce Monster Boy as a drawn comic rather than using 3D anyway; more than anything, this was an interesting experiment to see how the characters would translate into 3D. It also posed a challenge, which forced me to learn good modelling techniques. My research into mature themes in animation allowed me to have more freedom when it came to modelling, especially with Nexus' creation; I am most pleased with how vicious he looks, especially with the extended claws. I would like to go back to improve the models: some of the geometry isn't quite right and affected the rigging stage, and Chris' model would have looked better if textures had been applied to his eyes. But, considering I started this project with little to no knowledge of how to model, and managed to create models that have a good likeness to their source material, I am pleased with the work I have produced.

Self-Analysis

I was wrong to be so fearful of doing something different.

This project has allowed me to explore new animated series and films, and to see familiar series and films in a new light. What I have discovered is that "mature themes in animation" is a very broad subject, and it can be found in most any animated production. So it makes no sense for me to be afraid of following suit, or even pushing the boundaries of the matter.

I am even more excited to get started on *Monster Boy*, and, thanks to this project, I can write it with a much better idea of how to handle the mature themes it addresses, and its villain.

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