

THE FATALIS PROJECT: A CREATIVE RESPONSE TO
LGBTQIA+ REPRESENTATION IN ANIMATION

by

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A THESIS

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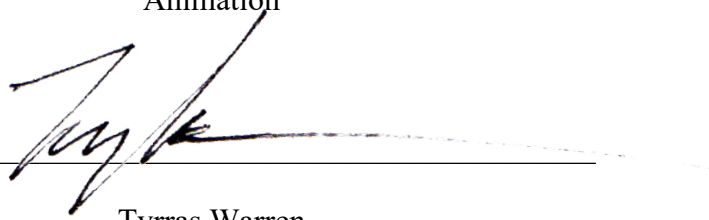
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tyrras Warren', is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized and cursive.

Tyrras Warren

“The Fatalis Project: A Creative Response to LGBTQIA+ Representation in Animation” aims to analyze two animated shows’ LGBTQIA+ representation utilizing a variety of film history and queer theories, including abjection, intersectionality, and recognition of problematic tropes and stereotypes. The two shows in question are *Steven Universe* and *Voltron: Legendary Defender*. While representation in animation has seen some increase over the last few years, it is still exceedingly rare, and often solely focuses on a white perspective when tackling issues such as diversity and colonialism. As a solution, I propose my own pitch for an animated show with positive images of LGBTQIA+ characters using character designs, scripts, and storyboards. This show aims to tackle the problems of LGBTQIA+ representation using an intersectional framework while explicitly discussing characters’ salient identities.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction and Theory	1
Introduction	1
Theory	5
Chapter 2: Analyzing <i>Steven Universe</i> and <i>Voltron: Legendary Defender</i>	11
Steven Universe	11
Anti-Blackness	12
Forgiving Colonizers	17
Conclusion	19
Voltron: Legendary Defender	20
Racism, Fatphobia, and Antisemitism	21
Queerbaiting and the “Bury Your Gays” Trope	26
Conclusion	30
Chapter 3: The <i>Fatalis</i> Project	32
Concept	32
Character Designs	33
Main Character - Alex	34
Primary Characters – Jace and Mel	37
Secondary Characters – Zarek, Damon, Iggie, and Nailah	43
Story Beats and Scripts	50
Story Beats	51
Scripts	54
Storyboards	55
Conclusion	57
Supplemental Materials	59
Bibliography	88

List of Accompanying Materials

1. Script snippets from *Fatalis*
2. Storyboard from *Fatalis*

List of Figures

Figure 1: A fusion tree breakdown of the main characters.	13
Figure 2: Screenshots of Sugilite's transformation sequence.	15
Figure 3: A screenshot from Steven's fight against Bismuth.	16
Figure 4: A screenshot of a tweet by Lauren Montgomery from Election Day.	27
Figure 5: Shiro mourning his partner, Adam, in Episode 61, "Know Your Enemy."	29
Figure 6: Alex's character design	36
Figure 7: Melanie's character design	39
Figure 8: Jace's design	42
Figure 9: Zarek's character design	45
Figure 10: Damon's character design	46
Figure 11: Iggie's character design	48
Figure 12: Nailah's character design	49
Figure 13: Screenshot of my work in Causality.	51

List of Tables

Table 1. GLAAD Media Analysis of Primetime Scripted Broadcasting TV	2
Table 2: Five-act structure of Fatalis	53

Chapter 1: Introduction and Theory

Introduction

Like many millennials, I grew up in the 90s and early 2000s. I spent many of my days watching PBS cartoons like *Cyberchase*, *Dragon Tales*, and *Sagwa the Siamese Cat*. When we finally could afford cable, I became hooked on a number of shows on Nickelodeon, Disney Channel, and Cartoon Network. I distinctly remember throwing a fit at the dinner table during a family reunion because I absolutely needed to watch the *Kim Possible* movie the second it aired and record it on VHS. I continued to watch cartoons into my adulthood.

I distinctly remember watching the final episode of the *Legend of Korra* on my phone, huddled in a chair, during a visit home from college. I had recently figured out I wasn't straight, and sobbed as the finale showed Korra and Asami, two of the main female characters, holding hands and looking into each other's eyes as the show ended. Indeed, the creators confirmed that the ending was meant to be read as romantic, meaning that a queer relationship had been established and aired on TV on a show for adolescents.

This kind of representation, even as subtle as Korra and Asami's relationship, is rare. As someone who identifies as asexual, aromantic, and transgender, I am often left bereft of representation of someone like me in media. According to annual media analyses created by GLAAD, an LGBTQIA+ media advocacy group, transgender characters rarely appear on television, let alone asexual and aromantic characters. In addition, few of these characters are people of color, and even fewer have disabilities.

Representation in media offers a way to see oneself, or even potential possibilities for oneself—and this is all the more important for children, adolescents, and young adults who are in crucial stages of identity formation. If I had seen an asexual character on TV during my youth, I likely would have discovered my identity much earlier in life, saving myself from struggling to fit in with heteronormative ideals.

	2014-2015	2015-2016**	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
Percent of LGBTQIA+ Regular Characters	4%	4%	4.8%	6.4%	8.8%
Percent of Bisexual Characters	10%	18%	30%	28%	27%
Number of Transgender Characters	0	7	16	17	26
Number of Asexual Characters	0	0	0	2*	0
Percent of People of Color	27%	33%	36%	40%	44%
Percent of People with Disabilities	1.4%	0.9%	1.7%	1.8%	2.1%

Table 1. GLAAD Media Analysis of Primetime Scripted Broadcasting TV

The single asterisk on the instance of “asexual characters” in 2017-2018 marks the first instance of asexual characters being shown in television since the study’s inception in 2005. 2015-2016’s analysis marks the first year of including television shows on streaming services, such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon.

Through visibility, representation provides assurance to audiences that LGBTQIA+ people can thrive. It also offers up LGBTQIA+ identities to those who might be struggling with finding a term or identity that fits them, and can normalize identities to a viewership unfamiliar with those terms, identities, or experiences.

Animation has recently seen an increase in LGBTQIA+ characters, especially in shows aimed for children. *The Legend of Korra*, as noted earlier, ended with a relationship between two women of color. *Steven Universe* has a multitude of LGBTQIA+ representation of feminine-presenting non-binary characters, as well as a prominent gay relationship between two characters, Sapphire and Ruby. The recently-released reboot of an 80s cartoon, *She-Ra: Princess of Power*, already has portrayed a lesbian couple and promises to have more LGBTQIA+ representation as the seasons progress. Another 80s reboot, *Voltron: Legendary Defenders*, features Shiro, a gay Japanese man with PTSD, a prosthetic arm, and a degenerative muscle disease—not only offering representation for gay men, but for those with disabilities and neurodivergence as well. *Arthur* featured an episode where Mr. Ratburn, Arthur’s teacher, gets married to another man.

As monumental as these representations are, many of these shows face backlash for their representation, or tokenize LGBTQIA+ characters through harmful stereotypes. The *Arthur* episode in question was banned from airing in Alabama; *Steven Universe* never calls the gems non-binary in the show and suffers from a systemic racism problem in its coding of characters; and *Voltron: Legendary Defender* offered Shiro up as representation and proceeded to kill his partner, an unfortunate instance of the incredibly homophobic trope of “bury your gays.” The lesbian couple in *She-Ra* did

not speak until the final episode of the first season, and only had a few seconds' worth of screen time. *The Legend of Korra* has been criticized for its lack of explicit representation as the relationship had little build-up and was only confirmed as official by showrunners after the series ended.

Essentially, while LGBTQIA+ representation in cartoons has been increasing, struggles of the past still occur. When representation gets through censors, creators of cartoons often do not create these characters with an intersectional framework in mind—namely, being aware that having multiple marginalized identities produce different experiences, and that not being cognizant of those different experiences can lead to harmful portrayals. More often than not, these representations feel like creators want to mark off a diversity check-list to garner more viewers, rather than accurately, carefully, and holistically represent diversity. While blame can certainly be placed on the lack of diverse creators in the animation industry, these problems still occur even when creators have LGBTQIA+ identities. For instance, Rebecca Sugar identifies as non-binary and bisexual, yet her show, *Steven Universe*, has been heavily criticized for anti-black racism.

My project aims to offer a creative solution to the problem of representation in animation by producing a pitch for an animated show that follows an intersectional framework and creates positive images of representation. As cartoons tend to be a medium marketed towards children, holistically and respectfully representing LGBTQIA+ characters will have a large impact not only in the animation industry, but culturally as well. Media is a prominent part of pop culture, and having more representation will lead to more discussions about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality,

ability, neurodivergence, and more. As Vito Russo notes in his book *The Celluloid Closet*, “integration of a variety of gay and lesbian characters into motion pictures should challenge the sexual values of society and change them... [and] allow that portion of the population who is gay to live more openly.”¹ Animation often targets adolescents and children, and having positive representation at such a crucial stage of identity development will aid in challenging heteronormative ideologies.

Theory

Creating representation in media, especially in regards to LGBTQIA+ identities, can be an arduous process. Dominant identities tend to hold sway in production rooms, resulting in media that often features straight, white, cisgender, able-bodied, and neurotypical men. The same holds true for animation. While not many studies exist on LGBTQIA+ representation in animation, many researchers have attempted to analyze race and gender representation. Two such studies focused on Cartoon Network specifically, one on its advertising and one on its programming. In the first study, researchers found that “television commercials that target children present race and gender as stable categories.... The ‘performative aspects’ of race, ethnicity, and gender [as defined by Judith Butler], promote the telling and repetition of particular cultural stories about how to be and become a part of mainstream society, mapping dominant ideologies.”² The second study confirms these suspicions, as it found that Cartoon Network produced more “male-oriented animated cartoons” in which “male characters

¹ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, Revised Edition* (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, Inc., 1995): 296-297.

² Debra L. Merskin. “Race and Gender Representations in Advertising in Cable Cartoon Programming.” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2008), 4.

are more in number than female characters” and “male characters are physically more powerful and strong as well as dominating while the female characters have been shown intelligent but less powerful.”³

Noting that Cartoon Network’s programming targets an audience of children and adolescents, development during these stages about one’s own identities might very well be affected, according to social learning theory. This theory indicates that “early learning about race [and other identities] contributes not only to children’s present conception of self and others, but also provides the foundation for the construction of stereotypes that persist throughout their lifetimes.”⁴ In addition, watching shows and absorbing content “is considered crucial in contributing and shaping human behaviors.”⁵ What happens, then, when there is little to no representation of identities outside the perpetuated norm?

Obvious representation of LGBTQIA+ characters has been a source of contention since the days of the Hays Production Code, put in place in 1932 and only removed in 1962. The code prevented “the representation of ‘sex perversion’ and insisted that ‘no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.’”⁶ Subtext meant everything, however, and producers still were able to produce queer films without explicit representation. Even so, the

³ Shumaila Ahmed and Juliana Abdul Wahab. “Animation and Socialization Process: Gender Role Portrayal on Cartoon Network.” *Asian Social Science* 10 no. 3 (2014), 52.

⁴ Merskin, “Race and Gender,” 3.

⁵ Ahmed and Wahab, “Animation and Socialization,” 46.

⁶ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998.

lifting of this ban has resulted in little change in the industry, especially when it comes to media meant for children and adolescents.

While some have argued that animation is inherently a queer medium and that, as Sam Abel writes in “The Rabbit in Drag: Camp and Gender Construction in the American Animated Cartoon,” “the animated cartoon [provides] greater access to the American sensibility than almost any other similar critique,” these arguments do not explain the lack of explicit LGBTQIA+ representation in these programs.⁷ In addition, while Abel claims that Bugs Bunny’s “drag” is a good example of exploring gender, the piece fails to recognize how Bugs Bunny’s performance is meant to ridicule, not uplift, non-normative gender expression. This illustrates the term abjection, “the vague sense of horror that permeates the boundary between the self and the other... the process by which identificatory regimes exclude subjects that they render unintelligible or beyond classification... [which] serves to maintain or reinforce boundaries that are threatened.”⁸ In an instances of supposed representation, transphobic attitudes and a desire to silence the marginalized present themselves to maintain hegemonic order. While some characters may seem to break the mold of heteronormativity, their status as marginalized is often reinforced through harmful tropes and stereotypes, “used only as a sign of that character’s failure to assimilate.”⁹ “Otherness” still prevails as a dominant attitude towards LGBTQIA+ representation.

⁷ Sam Abel. “The rabbit in drag: Camp and gender construction in the American animated cartoon.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 29, no. 3 (Winter 1995), 184; Sean Griffin. “Pronoun Trouble: The Queerness of Animation.” In *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, edited by Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, 105-118. New York: Routledge, 2004.

⁸ Robert Phillips, “Abjection,” part of “Keywords,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 no. 1–2 (2014), 19.

⁹ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 180.

A lack of intersectionality also plays a role in the fraught LGBTQIA+ representation in cartoons. Queer characters' other salient identities, like race, ethnicity, gender, disability, or neurodivergence, may be ignored or written in an inconsiderate fashion, not taking into account how these identities overlap and affect one another. Researchers Warner and Shields define an intersectional framework as one which "serves as a reminder... that any consideration of a single identity, such as gender, must incorporate an analysis of the ways that other identities interact with, and therefore qualitatively change, the experience of gender."¹⁰ For instance, characters of color who have LGBTQIA+ identities are often written solely from a white perspective. Cartoon creators may fail to fully represent other aspects of those characters' identities, and subsequently may fall into harmful tropes. For instance, creators might not recognize the specific way that a character's ethnic and sexual identities interact and how that interaction produces a different experience of queerness than the mainstream, white perspective. Oftentimes, creators cannot even achieve intersectional standards, as their basic attempts to create queer characters relies solely on tokenization and the formulation of one or two aspects of stereotypical behavior.

The solution seems to lay in providing positive representations of LGBTQIA+ characters that do not adhere to harmful stereotypes and that are conceptualized in an intersectional framework. The notion of "positive images," however, has been contested by many theorists. Jude Davies and Carol S. Smith claim that "the strategies of positive images... have failed to challenge the dominant construction of space dominated by

¹⁰ Leah Warner and Stephanie Shields. "The intersections of Sexuality, Gender, and Race: Identity Research at the Crossroads." *Sex Roles* 68 no. 11-12 (Jun 2013), 804.

white power.”¹¹ In addition, queer theorist Halberstam notes that “positive images... too often depend on thoroughly ideological conceptions of positive (white, middle-class, clean, law-abiding, monogamous, coupled, etc.)”¹² While this may be true, I aim to redefine “queer positive images” as those which encapsulate a realistic and holistic experience of being LGBTQIA+ and do not rely on harmful stereotypes.

Of course, given that I have privileged identities, I will never be able to create the “perfect” show. It is likely impossible to create anything truly “perfect,” as everyone has been raised with hegemonic societal expectations, whether about ableism, race, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexuality. While I have done my research, there are still areas where I may flounder and produce something less than ideal. I approach the topic, as well as each creative piece of work I create, as an experiment, putting theory into practice. Many of the pieces and designs underwent several changes, some being scrapped and redone completely. By using my research and the pitfalls of other shows’ representation, this project will provide what I believe to be one answer to the problems of LGBTQIA+ representation in animation. I aim to produce work that takes into account the complexity of intersecting identities and experiences, as well as provide a plot formula that does not hinge on dominant ideologies.

An animated television show is unique inasmuch that it combines visual design, digital art, narrative, sound, and traditional film techniques over time, allowing for more complex character development and an evolving plot. This allows for LGBTQIA+ representation on a variety of levels, each with its own considerations. I created my

¹¹ Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Keele University Press, 1997): 58.

¹² Halberstam, 185.

conception of “positive images” through character designs, storyboards, and scripts, but found the most success through character designs and scripts. I struggled with storyboards as they proved to be a task more difficult than I anticipated, as they utilize much different techniques—timing, framing, and environmental design—than scripts and character design. The latter offered me a much more direct way to provide counters to the problematic areas of representation that I describe in my analysis. Namely, I use visual signifiers, description, and dialogue to portray these characters, careful of how I choose to represent each given the tropes and stereotypes I have researched. Ideally, this kind of project would be created with a team of people, but I have done my best to provide a solution to the problems of representation within this limited capacity.

In order to more accurately define the types of problems present in current attempts at positive images that lack intersectional frameworks, I will closely analyze two recently-aired shows which both claimed to be diverse and have positive LGBTQIA+ representation: *Steven Universe* and *Voltron: Legendary Defender*.

Chapter 2: Analyzing *Steven Universe* and *Voltron: Legendary*

Defender

Steven Universe

Steven Universe has provided a plethora of queer characters in an industry that severely lacks such representation. Rebecca Sugar, the showrunner, based the show on characters who represent different gemstones. These feminine-presenting, non-binary “gem”¹³ characters flirt, kiss, and fall in love with each other, and have even held a gay wedding between two main characters, Sapphire and Ruby. Pearl, another main character, spends many episodes dealing with her unreciprocated love for another gem, and has also had an episode dedicated to getting a girl’s number. It is no surprise that this show has propelled the discussion of LGBTQIA+ representation forward, as few other shows have even attempted to portray queer relationships in such detail.

The problem, however, lies in its stark racism problem. It appears that the show’s main creator, Rebecca Sugar, a white, bisexual, nonbinary artist and musician, did not plan the narrative with an intersectional framework in mind. The show struggles with abjection, especially as it relates to race and abuse. In addition, the show does not fully acknowledge the pain and suffering colonization causes, and instead treats the issue as if it can be solved with a heart-to-heart conversation. As researcher Moore notes in a paper dedicated to analyzing the white-centric “queer utopia” that *Steven*

¹³ The story of Steven Universe centers around characters based on gemstones. The main cast features Pearl, Garnet, and Amethyst, along with Steven, who is half-human and half-diamond. The gems are an alien species, and can combine with each other through “fusion” dances to form different kinds of gems with their combined personalities. For instance, Garnet is a “fusion” of the characters Sapphire and Ruby. The conflict revolves around the other “gems” from Homeworld, namely the Diamonds, who rule a fascist empire and want to colonize Earth.

Universe promotes, “the show attempts to celebrate diversity but ultimately perpetuates dangerous narratives about colonization and people of color.”¹⁴

Anti-Blackness

Two prominent examples showcase the show’s struggle with racial abjection: the fusion of Garnet and Amethyst and the treatment of Bismuth.

Steven Universe also used racist stereotypes in the episode “Coach Steven” with its featuring of the character Sugilite, voiced by Nicki Minaj.¹⁵ Sugilite is a fusion gem—a combination of the characters Garnet and Amethyst, both black-coded, who combine via a dance. The dance itself contains problematic material, including Garnet opening her legs for Amethyst. During the fusion, Pearl, who is white-coded, covers Steven’s eyes, a sign that the dance is heavily sexualized. Sugilite’s character is built out of three racist stereotypes: the Jezebel, the black brute, and the Sapphire.¹⁶

¹⁴ Mandy Elizabeth Moore, “Future Visions: Queer Utopia in Steven Universe,” *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* 2, no. 1 (June 2019): 3-4.

¹⁵ *Steven Universe*, episode 20, “Coach Steven,” directed by Ian Jones-Quartey and Elle Michalka, aired August 21, 2014, on Cartoon Network, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/c8363f37-e833-471f-befd-cba004028ce8>.

¹⁶ This final stereotype is incredibly ironic, as Garnet’s character is herself a fusion of two gems, Ruby and Sapphire.

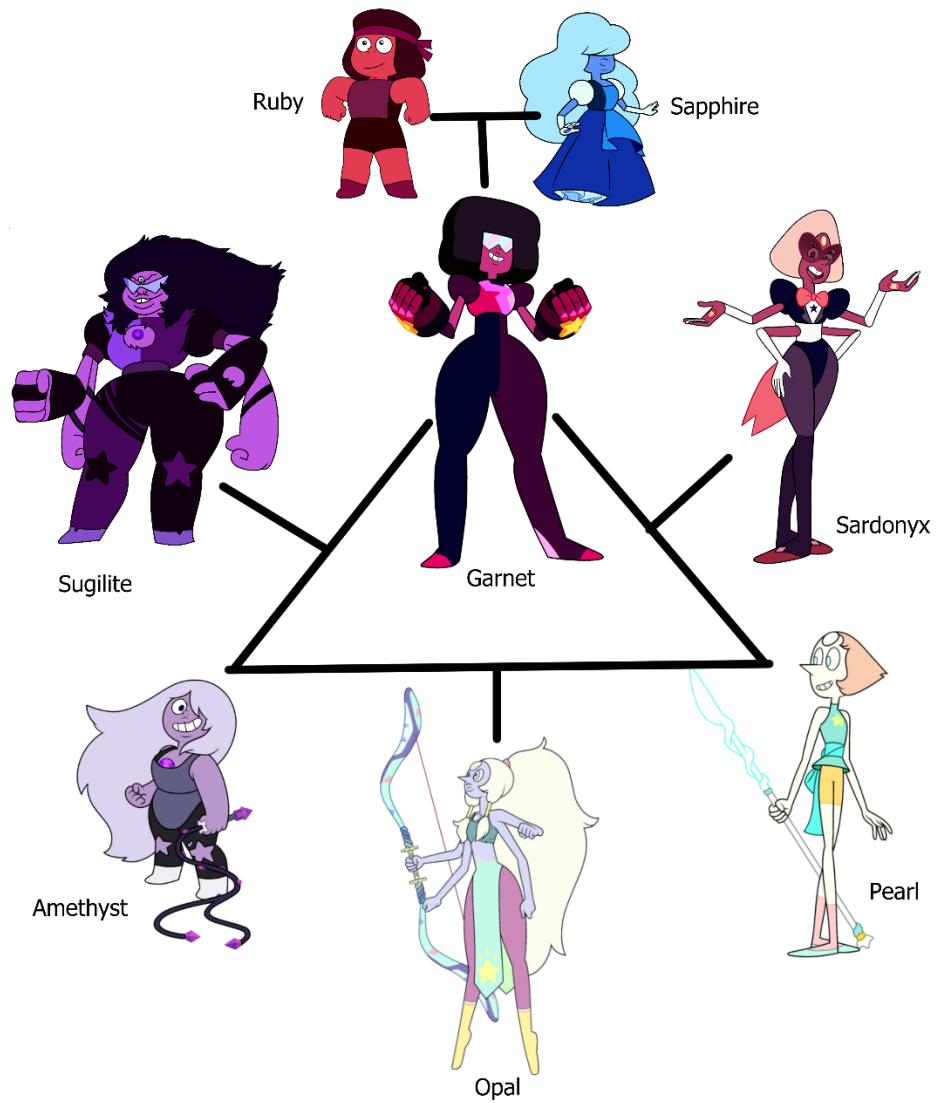


Figure 1: A fusion tree breakdown of the main characters.

Note that the fusions associated with Pearl (white-coded) are much slimmer, have more pastel tones, and have visible eyes. Although I do not discuss Amethyst in detail in this paper, she also is coded as non-white, potentially Latina or black. Thus, the combination of two non-white characters produces Sugilite, whose design is much darker and more “monstrous” than the others. This is a clear visual example of abjection as it relates to race.

The Jezebel is coded as “seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd. Historically, white women, as a category, were portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, and modesty - even sexual purity, but black women were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory.”¹⁷ The Sapphire stereotype, which “popularly portrayed black women as sassy, emasculating and domineering... aggressive, loud, and angry - in direct violation of social norms,” and the black brute stereotype, which typically referred to black men but stereotyped them as “animalistic and brutish.”¹⁸ Note that Sugilite’s outfit is ripped and also reveals a large amount of her chest. She also has four arms and three eyes, making her seem more monstrous compared to Pearl. Pearl is continuously irritated by Sugilite and even sings a song about how she’s strong “in the real way,” compared to Sugilite’s uncontrollable strength. The plot of the episode revolves around Sugilite going out of control, needing Pearl to “tame” her. All of these propel a narrative that black women are “just too much,” as Pearl states in the episode, and that they need a white presence to “behave.” As another analyst, Riley H., notes, “The most blatantly daunting part about this episode is that this subduing of a large Black woman is considered a way to make Pearl better as a character and a person. Pearl’s growth in this episode hinged on Pearl’s ability to tear apart a large, unrepentant Black woman.”¹⁹

¹⁷ “The Jezebel Stereotype,” *Ferris University’s Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/jezebel/index.htm>.

¹⁸ “Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African-Americans,” *Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture*, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/popular-and-pervasive-stereotypes-african-americans>.

¹⁹ Riley H. “All These Black Characters and 0 Done Right — How Steven Universe Fails Its Black Fanbase, Part I,” *Medium*, last modified 5 August, 2016, <https://medium.com/@dtwps/all-these-black-characters-and-0-done-right-how-steven-universe-fails-its-black-fanbase-part-i-81e0b0b8c3fe>.



Figure 2: Screenshots of Sugilite’s transformation sequence.

This trend continues with the introduction of the character Bismuth, which is perhaps one of the most prominent displays of anti-blackness in the show.²⁰ Like Amethyst, Garnet, and Pearl, she participated in the war against the fascist Diamond rulers of their home planet. She acted as a blacksmith and made many of the weapons the gems use. Later, Bismuth reveals she had created a weapon to shatter gems,

²⁰ *Steven Universe*, episodes 98-99, “Bismuth,” directed by Joe Johnston and Jasmin Lai, aired 4 August 2016, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/34f5b58d-4b85-4411-8622-d3970e8ed80d>.

effectively killing them. She urges Steven to use this on the Diamonds. Steven reacts negatively, rejecting Bismuth's proposal, fighting her, and entrapping her in a prison. She does not reappear until the final episodes of the series.



Figure 3: A screenshot from Steven's fight against Bismuth.

Note how aggressive and depersonalized Bismuth is drawn. Her hand is a bladed weapon, and her eyes are covered in shadow so viewers cannot see them. She has dreadlocks, which would be a positive if her character had not been villainized.

Bismuth's design should be noted here. She has dreadlocks and is muscular and tall. As Kingston relays, "the choice of physique plus the same less evolved cast to Bismuth's features displays a stunning failure to consider intersectionality.... The large body and those features paint a literal picture of 'black woman as unfeminine' and 'black person as subhuman' that is impossible to ignore and painful to see."²¹ On top of this, she follows the "black brute" trope mentioned earlier. She loves fighting, and is depicted as more violent than the other gems in her desire to kill the Diamonds. The narrative of the episode claims that it is wrong for oppressed people to rise up against

²¹ Jamie Kingston, "'Bismuth' and Steven Universe's Racial Coding Problem."

their oppressors. As Kingston again notes, “Through ‘respectability politics,’ black people have been told for centuries not to fight for our rights, not to demand them, but to gently and respectfully ask for them. This is a disingenuous dodge on the part of the existing power structure or institution who, when asked politely, can appear sympathetic and concerned but ultimately give lip service to change.”²²

Forgiving Colonizers

Steven Universe lacks nuance in its depiction of colonization. The first quarter of the series implies that gems originally intended to colonize earth, sapping the life from the planet and subsequently destroying humans. The main characters tell of a superweapon reminiscent of a nuclear device used by the Diamonds on the gem rebels who attempted to protect earth. Later, another superweapon called the Cluster, again planted by the Diamonds, has to be stopped before it destroys earth. This weapon is especially disturbing, as it is made up of shattered gem pieces, essentially body parts of dead characters. In addition, the Diamonds use Pearls as personal slaves.

The Diamonds are depicted as imperialist fascists, yet, by the end of the series, however, the tone of the piece has completely shifted. The narrative instead depicts the Diamond as a family who needs forgiveness. Steven turns to “talking things out” with the very villains who wanted to colonize earth and who committed genocide against rebels. Three major factors contribute to the series’ strange shift in attitude: the showcasing of a “human zoo,” the reveal that Steven’s mother was one of the original

²² Ibid.

colonizers, and the ending of the series in which the Diamonds are forgiven for their actions.

After Steven's father, Greg, is kidnapped by Blue Diamond and taken to space, Steven and his allies go to save him. Steven finds his father who's been placed in a "human zoo" which was created by Pink Diamond.²³ Here, humans are kept as pets and are forced into mating rituals. The humans in the zoo are shown to act naively and enjoy their captivity. Steven doesn't go out of his way to save these people, either, instead only taking his father with him when he escapes. Such imagery is incredibly racist considering that human zoos actually existed. As Shoshi Parks, anthropologist and historian, writes, colonialists kidnapped and took indigenous people from Africa, Asia, and North and South America "to perform their 'backwards,' 'primitive' culture for eager American masses who could leave feeling a renewed sense of racial superiority."²⁴ Rebecca Sugar also does not use the human zoo to show the Diamond's villainy. It is framed to show how "kind" Pink Diamond was by "saving" humans in case earth was destroyed. Pink Diamond is white-coded, making her a "white savior" towards the poor human zoo captives, many of whom have dark skin. Not only does this display a distinct lack of intersectionality, it also showcases Rebecca Sugar's continued abjection towards people of color. As Fariha Róisín writes in a Teen Vogue article on the topic of the "white savior" trend in Hollywood,

"they perpetuate an idea that is essentially a historical banner of colonialism: people of color need white people to save them. To this day,

²³ *Steven Universe*, episode 117, "The Zoo," directed by Joe Johnston, Ricky Cometa, and Elle Michalka, aired February 1, 2017, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/088302bf-ba17-48b5-b124-a0ce2c64eeac>.

²⁴ Shoshi Parks, "These horrifying 'human zoos' delighted American audiences at the turn of the 20th century," *Timeline*, last modified 19 March, 2018, <https://timeline.com/human-zoo-worlds-fair-7ef0d0951035>.

some people still latently believe what imperialists such as Rudyard Kipling said, that colonialism was important for everyone: the conqueror and, most importantly, the conquered. That without the colonizers, the colonized had no hope of survival.²⁵

As if that is not egregious enough, the ending of *Steven Universe* emphasizes the pro-colonialist standpoint. The final episode, “Change Your Mind,” is an hour-long finale dedicated to redeeming the main villains of the show, the Diamonds.²⁶ The episode attempts to frame the conflict as interpersonal—the Diamonds have a problematic family dynamic—yet still uses the language of colonialism. For instance, Yellow Diamond complains that she’s conquered so much for the “empire,” but feels unappreciated. The show’s previous seasons had set up the Diamonds as controlling colonialists who wanted to expand their empire throughout the galaxy. They attempted to destroy earth, even creating a superweapon made out of gems that they killed. The finale does not address the human zoo, nor the superweapon, nor the fact that they tried to colonize earth. The Diamonds do not even promise to dismantle the empire. A show that ignores the repercussions of colonialism and systemic violence cannot hope to be intersectional or positive in its depiction of LGBTQIA+ characters.

Conclusion

In an interview with Eric Thurm, Rebecca Sugar is asked whether any characters on her show are evil. She claims that *Steven Universe* is “a fantasy show... I think it’s a fantasy that no one is truly evil. I don’t know if that’s true in reality, but it’s certainly

²⁵ Fariha Róisín, “Why Hollywood’s White Savior Obsession Is an Extension of Colonialism,” *Teen Vogue*, last modified 14 September, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/hollywoods-white-savior-obsession-colonialism>.

²⁶ *Steven Universe*, episode 157, “Change Your Mind,” directed by Joe Johnston, Kat Morris, and Liz Artinian, aired January 21, 2019, on Cartoon Network, <https://www.cartoonnetwork.com/video/steven-universe/change-your-mind-episode.html>.

true in my fantasy. Why wouldn't it be?"²⁷ This perspective screams of white privilege. Fiction always incorporates elements of the real world into its narrative structures. *Steven Universe* is no different. There are corollaries to real-world problems within the show, yet the show never addresses them with the gravitas they deserve. As noted earlier, the show attempts to create a queer, white utopia, ignoring the impacts of white supremacy, racism, and colonialism. The character designs follow suit, layering problematic imagery with hurtful, stereotypical personalities. Overall, Rebecca Sugar's magnum opus fails to deliver holistic representation, instead recycling racist tropes and ignoring the implications of colonialism.

Voltron: Legendary Defender

Voltron: Legendary Defender, or *VLD* as shortened by the fandom, produced by DreamWorks and Netflix, is one of many reboots of a Japanese anime from the 1980s called *Beast King GoLion*. The plot revolves around fighting space imperialists, the Galra, who have committed genocide against the Alteans. Allura, the princess of the Alteans, and Coran, her guard, are the only two survivors. They utilize mechanical lion robots to fight, and these lions combine to form a giant robot man called Voltron. This general plotline holds through most of the series, but besides its higher budget and its famed cast of voice actors, *VLD* separated itself from the rest of the pride by purporting to be more diverse than its predecessors. The creators of the show, Lauren Montgomery and Joaquim Dos Santos, indicated the series would have both racial and LGBTQIA+

²⁷ Eric Thurm, "'Steven Universe': How Rebecca Sugar Turned TV's Most Empathetic Cartoon Into an Empire," *Rolling Stone*, last modified 7 June, 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/steven-universe-how-rebecca-sugar-turned-tvs-most-empathetic-cartoon-into-an-empire-205732>.

representation in interviews and tweets.²⁸ With this, younger queer audiences who had no prior experience with the previous incarnations of *Beast King GoLion* flocked to *VLD*. Unfortunately, this proved to only be marketing tactic, as *VLD* perpetuated racist and homophobic tropes while lauding itself for strides in representation.

Racism, Fatphobia, and Antisemitism

The show suffered from racial and weight-based stereotyping, especially in its depiction of the characters Lance and Hunk. Lance is Cuban, and Hunk is Samoan and black. This was confirmed not through the show itself, but through outside materials such as guidebooks.²⁹ The topic of their ethnicities rarely took up actual screen time. Even so, the show often relegated the two characters to comic relief, and even disproportionately minimized them in promotional materials. On top of all this, the two characters' personalities were relegated to stereotypical, racist caricatures.

Lance, for instance, flirts with women at every possible venture. This behavior only stops when he begins dating Allura, the leader of the main cast, in the final season. One of his primary traits appears to be his desire to date women; his other trait is that he is less intelligent than the rest of the cast. He has aspirations of being an adventurous space pilot, but by the end of the series he becomes a farmer and “magically” has his

²⁸ Eric Francisco, “How Voltron is Defending Diversity,” last modified 3 June, 2016, <https://www.inverse.com/article/16497-voltron-is-defending-diversity-with-a-reimagined-princess-allura>; Lauren Montgomery, Twitter Post, 8 November, 2016, 10:57 PM, <https://twitter.com/ArtOfLaurenM/status/796245419688738818>.

²⁹ R. J. Cregg, *The Paladin's Handbook: Official Guidebook of Voltron Legendary Defender*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017; Cala Spinner, *The Voltron Coalition Handbook*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018.

race changed to Altean when Allura dies.³⁰ While the “magical race change” is a problem in and of itself, Lance’s character follows stereotypes of Latinos to an unnerving degree. As researchers Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi note in their analysis of racial stereotyping, “what the small number of studies examining Latinos on television has revealed is that Latino characters have been relegated to a restricted set of roles including criminals, exotic lovers/sex objects, servants/blue-collar workers, and unintelligent objects of ridicule.”³¹ Lance’s narrative arc follows three of these four damaging stereotypes.

Hunk’s treatment also follows racial stereotypes attributed to both black and Pacific Islander characters. Hunk is an engineer and one of the strongest main characters, but is constantly written as comic relief. The show pokes fun at his weight constantly, and his hobby just so happens to be cooking. This is a stereotype of fat characters seen time and time again in media, and is considered fatphobic. He is also the only major character in the show who has a larger body type than the others. In addition, he is portrayed as bumbling despite being a mechanical genius. At one point in the show, he is even whipped by a “friendly” Galra character who attempts to teach him “manners.”³² This is seen as character development, as it supposedly makes him more assertive. While he sometimes argues back against this treatment, he usually follows the

³⁰ *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, episode 78, “The End Is the Beginning,” directed by Michael Chang, released 14 December, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80990219?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C12%2C503d9e05-b070-4f66-92a8-02f1f45e5e3d-131200230%2C%2C>.

³¹ Riva Tukachinsky, Dana Mastro, and Moran Yarchi, “The Effect of Prime Time Television Ethnic/Racial Stereotypes on Latino and Black Americans: A Longitudinal National Level Study,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 61, no. 3 (8 Aug 2017), 540-541.

³² *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, episode 46, “Omega Shield,” directed by Chris Palmer, released June 15, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80177314?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2Ca808ea24-8585-4afe-84d9-d4ccd964ca3f-130354248%2C%2C>.

“Uncle Tom” stereotype, wherein a “large, broad-chested, powerfully made” black man “is innately submissive, obedient and in constant desire of white approval.”³³ His Pacific Islander identity is not treated with respect, either. As author Tom Brislin notes in an article in *Images That Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, Pacific Islander characters often act “pleasant but basically ignorant... in subsistence social structures” and are “easily fooled by superior Western intelligence—often played comically.”³⁴ Despite being one of the best engineers and one of the most intelligent characters on the show, he often acts clumsily, or is depicted as more cowardly than the other characters. The aforementioned example of being whipped ties into this stereotype as well, as the other characters seem to get that “learning manners” from the enemy will result in punishment. He also does not get a fulfilling ending—much like Lance’s space dreams were dashed for farming, the show continues on with the offensive, fatphobic trope of Hunk’s obsession with cooking, and makes him a chef.³⁵

Allura, however, received one of the worst treatments from the show, despite not having a personality made up entirely of racist tropes. One of the last survivors of the Altean genocide, Allura is a black princess who leads the main cast. In earlier renditions of *Beast King GoLion*, Allura always was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, white damsel in distress, so the design of *VLD*’s Allura felt like a breath of fresh air. As the series progressed, however, it became apparent that this identity felt more like tokenization than an actual positive change.

³³ “Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African-Americans.”

³⁴ Tom Brislin, “Exotics, Erotics, and Coconuts: Stereotypes of Pacific Islanders,” in *Images That Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, eds. Paul Martin Lester and Susan Dente Ross (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 106.

³⁵ *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, episode 78, “The End Is the Beginning.”

During the second season of the show, Allura and the team find out that Keith, the main character, is half-Galra, related to a rebel offshoot group of the Galra Empire. Allura feels upset by this revelation, as the Galra Empire and their leaders, Zarkon and his wife Honerva, are responsible for the genocide of her race, the Alteans. Instead of dissecting the complexity of working with someone of the same descent as genocidal imperialists, writers frame her as being unreasonable and rude to Keith.³⁶ Saffron Alexander, writer for *The Mary Sue*, explains it best:

We have a character, who would likely be on the receiving end of racist remarks and discrimination in a real-life situation, portrayed as the ignorant aggressor, guilty of perpetrating this prejudice. *VLD* even goes so far as to have Allura apologize and forgive her oppressors with little to no consideration for her own feelings and trauma. I also think it's interesting to note that Coran, a white-coded male and the other sole Altean survivor, is not given the same treatment. He is portrayed as rational and doesn't have any lingering prejudice towards the Galra, despite going through the exact same things as Allura.³⁷

Black-coded characters who are victims of colonization, genocide, and racism have to apologize or repent for their distrust of the very groups who made them suffer.

The audience expected the final villain of the series to be Zarkon, emperor of the Galra Empire. Instead, Honerva, an Altean, becomes the lead antagonist, and other surviving Alteans work with her. It is revealed that the Alteans, including Allura, have been corrupted by “dark spirits” that Honerva can control. In order to save the universe, both Honerva and Allura have to die.³⁸ This already sits sorely considering the fact that

³⁶ *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, episode 22, “The Belly of the Weblum,” directed by Chris Palmer, released January 20, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80075865?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C8%2C503d9e05-b070-4f66-92a8-02f1f45e5e3d-131200230%2C%2C>.

³⁷ Saffron Alexander, “Why the ‘Space Racist’ Trope Is Bad for Women of Color,” *The Mary Sue*, last edited on 27 June, 2017, <https://www.themarysue.com/space-racist-trope-needs-to-go-away>.

³⁸ *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, episode 78, “The End Is the Beginning.”

black characters are killed more often than white characters.³⁹ Critics of the show have noted that “the decision to make her darker-skinned was confirmed to be so non-white viewers would have a lead heroine with whom to identify. This makes her death in the series finale extremely tone deaf — the only black Allura in the entire Voltron franchise is also the only one who dies.”⁴⁰

On top of the anti-black racism, this victim-to-perpetrator plot perpetuates an anti-Semitic ideology, minimalizing genocide and blaming its victims for their own deaths. Meanwhile, the actual perpetrators get narratively excused for mass murder. The show refuses to blame the Galra for genocide, and then forces the victim, Allura, to repent through self-sacrifice. In an article detailing the United States’ and Sudan’s refusal to intervene in the Darfur crisis, Gregory H. Stanton makes note of Israel Charny’s “Twelve Ways to Deny a Genocide.” VLD’s narrative follows a few of these tactics, including “6. Blame ‘out of control’ forces for committing the killings,” “11. Blame the victims,” and “12. Say that peace and reconciliation are more important than blaming people for genocide.”⁴¹ By refusing to acknowledge the reality of the Altean genocide and then blaming the Alteans for their continued demise, Montgomery and Dos Santos perpetuate white supremacist ideals, whether inadvertent or not. The result pushes non-white and Jewish viewers away, and teaches white audiences to accept complacency when it comes to white supremacist groups.

³⁹ Monika Bartyzel, “TV needs to stop treating black characters as expendable,” *The Week*, last edited 12 December, 2014, <https://theweek.com/articles/441580/tv-needs-stop-treating-black-characters-expendable>.

⁴⁰ Curt Smith, “The Harmful Utilization of Trauma, Disability, and Death in Voltron Legendary Defender,” *Medium*, last edited 2 March, 2019, <https://medium.com/@curt.words/the-harmful-utilization-of-trauma-disability-and-death-in-voltron-legendary-defender-18cc70f6ea7e>.

⁴¹ Gregory H. Stanton, “The 12 Ways to Deny a Genocide,” *Genocide Watch*, last edited on 15 June, 2005, <http://www.genocidewatch.org/genocide/12waystodenygenocide.html>.

Queerbaiting and the “Bury Your Gays” Trope

Queerbaiting is defined as “a marketing ploy that celebrities, TV and film writers and authors use to appeal to an LGBTQ+ audience... [as it] refrains from embracing the minority while using queerness as a way to get more viewers and money.”⁴² In TV fandom culture, this often specifically refers to the queer-coding of certain characters who never have a romantic relationship within the show. Instead, the writers “hint” at the possibility to keep their audience guessing, but never committing in the end. Sometimes showrunners or cast members will pander to queer audiences at conventions or in interviews to ensure they retain LGBTQIA+ viewership. While not the only example, the prime queerbaiting in the show stemmed from the character Shiro, also utilizing the “bury your gays” trope, killing off Shiro’s vague love interest in about thirty seconds’ worth of screen time.

⁴² Chelsea Ritschel, “Queer-Baiting: What Is It and Why Is It Harmful?” *Independent*, last edited 9 April, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/queerbaiting-lgbtq-ariana-grande-celebrities-james-franco-jk-rowling-a8862351.html>.



Figure 4: A screenshot of a tweet by Lauren Montgomery from Election Day.

During a panel at a comic convention, which occurred just before season seven released, fans were told that Shiro was a gay man who had a partner named Adam, who had been conflicted by Shiro's departure to space. Shiro was also revealed to have some sort of terminal degenerative muscle disease on top of his prosthetic arm and PTSD. Fans felt elated to have such representation in their show, and after a short preview aired at the convention, expected Shiro and Adam's relationship to be further explored during the season. Instead, the only actual "discussion" of Shiro's identity—the show never explicitly said Adam and Shiro were in a relationship, or used the term "gay" to describe Shiro in any episode—was the already-seen preview and then a death scene of

Adam, followed up with a less-than-ten-second mourning scene which only included Shiro saying Adam's name by his grave.⁴³ Fans were reasonably upset.

Queer viewers are all too familiar with the “bury your gays” trope, wherein an LGBTQIA+ character—often a character who isn't white, like Adam—is killed for seemingly no reason. When a reason is given by showrunners, it typically fails to address the concerns of LGBTQIA+ viewers. The death of a queer character will sometimes aid the development of a white, heterosexual character, or another white queer character. Another fan-turned-critic of the show defines the trope as “the idea that LGBT+ characters are essentially not allowed to have happy endings and are instead often killed off in a way that ensures the relationship or the queerness of the character or their partner is minimized or even removed from the story.”⁴⁴

⁴³ *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, episode 53, “A Little Adventure,” directed by Eugene Lee, released 10 August, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80178481?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C503d9e05-b070-4f66-92a8-02f1f45e5e3d-131200230%2C%2C>; *Voltron: Legend Defender*, episode 60, “The Last Stand, Part 2,” directed by Michael Chang, released 10 August, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80178488?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C7%2C503d9e05-b070-4f66-92a8-02f1f45e5e3d-131200230%2C%2C>; *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, episode 61, “Know Your Enemy,” directed by Rie Koga, released 10 August, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80178489?trackId=14277281&tctx=0%2C0%2C2a909543-bc33-4c78-bf90-d908483ab8b0-6053074%2C%2C>.

⁴⁴ Whammy, “Voltron: Legendary Defender and the Ethics of LGBT+ Representation,” last edited 11 August, 2018, <https://analysisismagic.wordpress.com/2018/08/11/voltron-legendary-defender-and-the-ethics-of-lgbt-representation>.

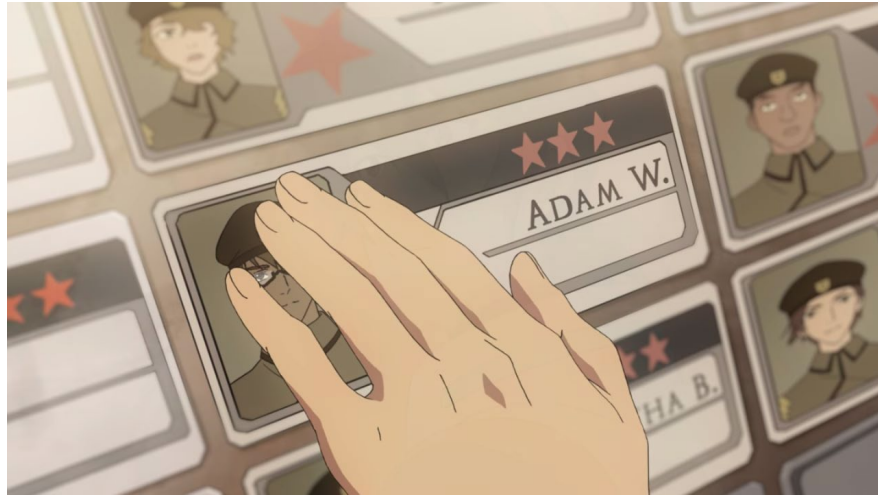


Figure 5: Shiro mourning his partner, Adam, in Episode 61, “Know Your Enemy.”

This felt all too true with Shiro, as fans immediately began demanding an explanation and took to social media to express their disappointment and hurt. A petition which now has over 30,000 signatures pleaded that DreamWorks, the producing company for *VLD*, allow the show to correct its mistake and give LGBTQIA+ characters more visibility and “happy endings.” “This is 2018; children deserve to see themselves represented in shows,” the petition creator, Evelin Gomez, wrote. “Children should be able to feel normal, no matter their sexuality. It's not fair for them to see that only heterosexuals live happily ever after and homosexuals get killed off.”⁴⁵ After half-hearted “apologies” to fans and some angry defenses that turned into memes from voice actors, the final season attempted to redeem itself by having Shiro get married to a man—in the epilogue, to a random character who had no development or introduction in the series. Again, this was queer-baiting at its finest, a pallid attempt

⁴⁵ Evelin Gomez, “Dreamworks: GIVE THE VOLTRON WRITERS THE GREEN LIGHT! Give us LGBT Representation!” *Change.org*, August 2018, www.change.org/p/dreamworks-dreamworks-give-the-voltron-writers-the-green-light-give-us-lgbt-representation.

to keep the few LGBTQIA+ fans who didn't boycott the series finale. As other critics have noted:

Rather than be treated with the same dimension and nuance he received when presumed to be straight, Takashi 'Shiro' Shirogane had his role reduced, his friendships removed, and his sexuality exploited in a last-ditch publicity stunt to 'win back' the LGBT fans hurt and alienated by Voltron's divisive seventh season... Shiro's premature retirement and marriage are an obvious attempt to put him out of sight, out of mind. We are told that in order to be happy as a character and 'count' as gay enough representation for viewers, he must give up on his dream and all his accomplishments to instead enter a relationship with a random nobody.⁴⁶

The same author also noted the ableism in Shiro's arc, as he notes that his "only value to the series is in his losses, not from any of his gains.... the message... is that anyone who struggles with trauma is trapped in our pain. We don't deserve to keep our jobs, we don't deserve to remain close to our friends and loved ones, and we don't even deserve to live."⁴⁷ The writers could have treated a queer, disabled, and neurodivergent Japanese man with the respect he deserved, but instead they used him to tokenize LGBTQIA+ identities.

Conclusion

The problems with *VLD* lie in its promise of representation without following through. The show has diversity, but only for the sake of enticing more viewers. It does not respectfully portray characters who are not white and not straight. Furthermore, the characters' identities are rarely discussed on screen, being relegated to fan books.

⁴⁶ Curt Smith, "Voltron Legendary Defender: The Fine Line Between LGBT Representation and Exploitation," *Medium*, last edited 28 March, 2019, <https://medium.com/@curt.words/voltron-legendary-defender-the-fine-line-between-lgbt-representation-and-exploitation-740efe573ca8>.

⁴⁷ Curt Smith, "The Harmful Utilization of Trauma."

Shiro's queer identity is further silenced by the "bury your gays" trope. Rather than actually portraying his relationships with men, the writers showed clear signs of abjection in regards to Shiro's identity. The same can be true of Allura. Rather than committing to condemning genocide, the show instead forces Allura to suffer further and sacrifice herself for everyone else's sake. In essence, the show does not create positive imagery through its diversity, instead relying on racist, homophobic, and fatphobic tropes to propel the narrative.

Chapter 3: The *Fatalis* Project

The previous chapter detailed the primary problems with two major shows who promised representation but ultimately undelivered. Namely, both shows suffered from stereotypical representations of people of color, narratives which shifted or removed blame from colonizers, and queerbaiting. Both shows also claimed they had diverse representation yet ultimately gave the majority of screen time to white-coded characters: Steven from *Steven Universe*, and Keith from *VLD*. From my research, I have surmised that a solution lies in a show which does not rely on tokenization, but holistically and positively represents queer people of color with an intersectional framework in mind. As someone who wants to enter the industry, I have decided to present this solution in the form of a pitch for a show of my own which tackles these concepts. Of course, this is an evolving work, and I do not expect to create anything perfect, especially given my privileged identities as white and able-bodied. The *Fatalis* Project, however, has been handled with care and I hope reflects the research I have conducted.

Concept

The premise of *Fatalis* pulls from my interest in ancient history and mythology. I set the story in a world where the Roman Empire never fell, and where the gods and goddesses of Greek and Roman mythology are real.⁴⁸ The entire main cast is made up of queer characters of color, while the villains—the Roman Empire, namely—are white-coded. I felt the Greco-Roman setting to be appropriate, as I attended a lecture by

⁴⁸ I also made a creative decision to ignore Constantine's conversion of the Roman Empire to Catholicism, as I focus on depicting ancient polytheistic religions.

Denise McCoskey, entitled “Ancient Race Matters: Unraveling the ‘Whiteness’ of Western Civilization,” held by the University of Oregon Classics Department on March 9th, 2017, which discussed how ancient history is often viewed as a “white” history despite its diversity. Professor McCoskey also referred to a three-part compilation of research entitled *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, written by Martin Bernal, which also served as inspiration for the setting and narrative. In addition, I found inspiration in the classes I took for my Classical Civilization minor, which all taught me how much more interconnected and diverse the ancient world was.

The main conflict of the narrative will centralize around combating imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchy. The first season will be set in Athens, Greece, around the time of the Dionysia festival. Although demigods will certainly be present in the story, the plot largely revolves around the concept of “divine contracts” formed with specific gods. Those with these contracts are drafted into the Roman Legion, unless they manage to keep their powers a secret. This gives characters a chance to reflect on their roles in the perpetuation of harmful systems of power.

Character Designs

Visual signifiers are key in an intersectional design process, and thus I took extra care by compiling research and analysis of designs that did not work. I wanted to make sure I did not fall into stereotypes. Most of these designs have gone through multiple iterations in order to continually improve them. I also utilize campy, late eighties and early nineties aesthetics, as I envision the story to take place around this time. In addition, I wanted to include brief descriptions of characters’ narrative arcs and

personalities, as I want to avoid harmful tropes and stereotypes that can present themselves through the writing of characters as well.

Main Character - Alex

Alex, full name Alexandria Soulis, is the protagonist of *Fatalis*. They are Afro-Hispanic, genderfluid, demisexual, and panromantic. Alex uses he/him/his, they/them/their, and she/her/her pronouns. Their mother, Photine, is originally from Alexandria, Egypt—hence Alex’s name—and their father, Ignatius, whose family claims descendance from the ancient Carthaginians, is from Hispania (Spain). Sometimes Alex goes by the nickname “Xan,” but this is usually only with their father and older brother, Zarek. Alex also deals with depression, which will be discussed within the show.

Alex forms a divine contract with Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. Athena’s powers allow Alex to use the aegis, which will take the form of a shield in this iteration. Alex utilizes a kopis, a Greek short sword, and the aegis shield when fighting. During the course of the show, Alex will help Athena realize that she also is genderfluid. Alex discusses their gender identity confidently throughout the narrative, and corrects people when they refer to Alex with gendered terminology, such as “Madam” or “Sir.” *Steven Universe* purports to have non-binary characters, yet never refers to them as such within the show itself. *Fatalis* will do the opposite and proudly and openly discuss characters’ gender identities.

Alex’s parents, Iggie and Photine, are divorced, but are still friendly with each other. Photine moved back to Alexandria, while Iggie has full custody over the kids. At the beginning of the narrative, Alex will discuss their complicated relationship with

their mother. Alex worries that they caused their parents' divorce, as Photine and Iggie separated a few years after Alex was born. Over the course of the show, this worry will be discussed, and the relationship between Alex and Photine will improve. I wanted to ensure that I did not portray the relationships with Alex's parents as negative, as this often occurs with black characters. I had also originally planned for Photine to have passed away during childbirth, but I realized I was falling into the same tropes that plagued Allura from *VLD*. I find discussing family dynamics and dealing with worries about self-worth to be a much more interesting and much less problematic narrative choice.

Alex likes playing video games and reading—their favorite book is the *Iliad*, and they've even been known to use the library's dial-up internet to scourge the internet for Patroclus/Achilles fanfiction. They sometimes like to work out with Damon, a family friend, while also teasing Damon about his huge crush on their older brother. They occasionally watch pankration—an ancient Greek sport that was essentially no-rules boxing—and chariot racing with their dad, Iggie. They hate doing chores and often leave their side of the bedroom a complete mess, although some of that comes with the executive dysfunction piece of their depression. They also form a big crush on Jace, who is in line to become the next emperor. Alex's panromantic identity is brought up frequently throughout the show. Unlike *VLD*, characters' identities will not be surprises, nor used to draw in viewership. These characters, like Alex, will acknowledge their identities and romantic interests on-screen from the beginning of the narrative until the end.



Figure 6: Alex's character design

On top of making sure Alex's design did not fall into any problematic tropes, I wanted to make sure that their outfit worked with a ninety's aesthetic. Alex's hair is held up with a bright gold scrunchie. She also wears ornate winged sandals with a star, a pastiche of gladiator sandals, Converse high-tops, and Nike shoes. I also included a bit of grunge with the light-washed denim shorts that are frayed at the edges, paired with black leggings underneath. She also wears black fingerless gloves with fishnet accents. I also used portrait statues of Queen Nefertiti as reference for Alex's design.

Primary Characters – Jace and Mel

Two other characters make up the primary cast: Melanie Terzi and Jace Nikolas.

Melanie Terzi, or Mel, is the younger sister of Damon Terzi. She is also Alex's best friend. She is a transgender woman who identifies as asexual and aromantic.

Neither *Steven Universe* nor *VLD* attempt to portray transgender identities openly in their narratives. Mel, however, is open about confronting transphobia, and talks about her trans identity with her friends and family. Her father, Ehmet, is Turkic, specifically from central Asia.⁴⁹ He moved to Pergamon with his family in his youth, and became friends with Alex's father, Iggie, during his time in the Roman Legion. Her mother, Olympia, is Greek, and grew up with Alex's mother, Photine, in Alexandria.

Mel is outgoing, intelligent, and intensely interested in politics and social justice. She often can be found reading the texts of ancient philosophers like Plato and Cicero. Originally, she wanted to become the first trans woman Senator in the Roman Empire, but after becoming embroiled in a rebel plot, she encourages Alex and Jace to aid her in overthrowing the corrupt government altogether and establishing a better system. Eventually, she becomes the leader of the rebellion.

She also knows about her brother's, Damon's, crush on Zarek, Alex's older brother. She and Damon are close, but Damon does not try to parent or discipline Mel like Zarek does with Alex. He is much more laid-back and leaves Mel to her own devices for the most part. He sees her as the more responsible sibling, and often goes to her for advice. Mel believes she is the more responsible sibling as well, and often

⁴⁹ Originally, he was intended to be of Uyghur descent, but upon receiving feedback, I decided that I will need to conduct more research into the history of ancient central Asia before choosing a specific ethnic identity.

reminds him of it. Mel takes this further by giving advice to her friends, especially Alex, as well, sometimes unsolicited.

Her patron goddess is Hera, and through Hera's patronage, Mel is able to summon storms. She keeps her powers a secret, however, as the Roman Legion would recruit her otherwise. Mel's favorite weapon was a gift from Hera, an ornate dagger with a blade shaped like a peacock feather.

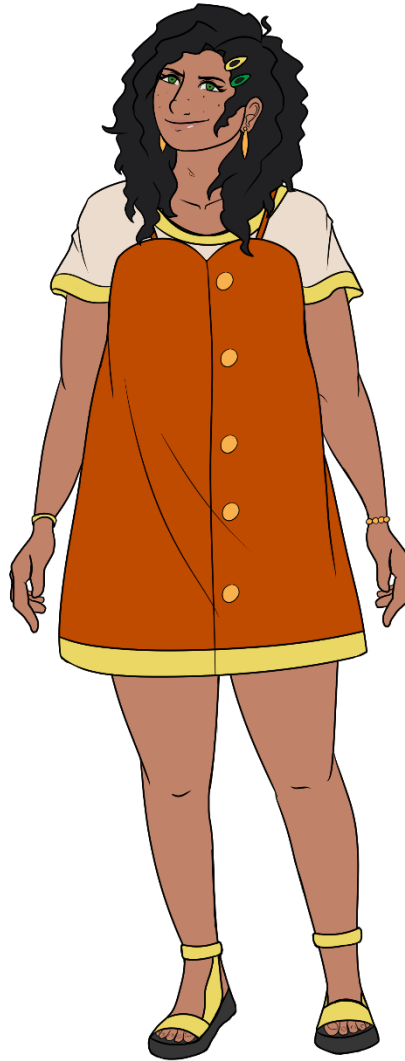


Figure 7: Melanie's character design

Designing Melanie was the most difficult of all character designs. I wanted to create a look that embodied the nineties while also paying homage to ancient clothes, like the tunic. I also had to teach myself how to draw Melanie's body type, as most drawing tutorials online only teach how to draw skinny cisgender figures. I took a lot of inspiration from *She-Ra: Princesses of Power*'s Glimmer.

Jace Nikolas, full name Jason Nikolas Julius Claudius, is Alex's love interest. He also happens to be in line for the throne, as the current emperor adopted him after being unable to produce a male heir. Jace left his family and home back in Pella when

he was fourteen to move to Rome and join the imperial family. He wanted to change the Roman Empire for the better by eventually becoming its ruler, but by the time the first season ends, he has fled the imperial family and has committed to overthrowing the empire altogether. This choice was inspired by the ending of *Steven Universe*, wherein Steven does not actively challenge the Diamonds' imperialist ways. Unlike Steven's arc, I wanted to ensure that Jace, in a privileged position, acknowledges the hurt that the Roman Empire is causing and leaves that privilege in order to dismantle it.

His family in Pella is Romani. His father, unbeknownst to him, is the god Dionysus, allowing him to use thyrsus, a pinecone-tipped staff, and create grape vines at will. He also has the power of hypnotism, but this is not discovered until later. He believes his powers are the result of a divine contract formed when he was very young, and will not learn the truth until much later in the story.

Jace was born intersex and identifies as male.⁵⁰ He wears binders and compression shirts typically, but wants to get top surgery. I include discussion about this in my third script. I wanted characters to discuss the ways in which they present their gender identity, and topics like binders and gender-affirmation procedures are never tackled in shows like *Steven Universe* or *VLD*. He also identifies as pansexual and panromantic, is on the autism spectrum, and has mild anxiety. Much like the other characters, he is open about all of these things. In particular, I made sure to include him

⁵⁰ I wanted to have intersex representation in my story, but am open to change and am myself continually changing Jace as I continue to research. I feel it's also important to note that intersex representation, like the identity itself, is different from transgender representation. Oftentimes, intersex identities are categorized with transgender identities. While some who are intersex may identify as trans, others may not. Some in the intersex community even debate whether intersex should be included in the LGBTQIA+ acronym, as their needs are not often considered within the community as a whole. This is all important to keep in mind when writing an intersex character.

using stim devices to combat anxiety in one of my scripts. I use visual cues along with open dialogue to ensure that his salient identities are present in the show. For instance, the color palette of his outfit, which is Tyrian purple—the color of Roman royalty and Senators—and gold, is inspired by the intersex pride flag, which is purple and yellow.

Jace's main interest is writing. He loves both poetry and prose, and has a large collection of Sappho's work. He has multiple bookcases filled with novels, non-fiction, and poems, and he writes enough to fill plenty of journals as well. He also enjoys theater and music.

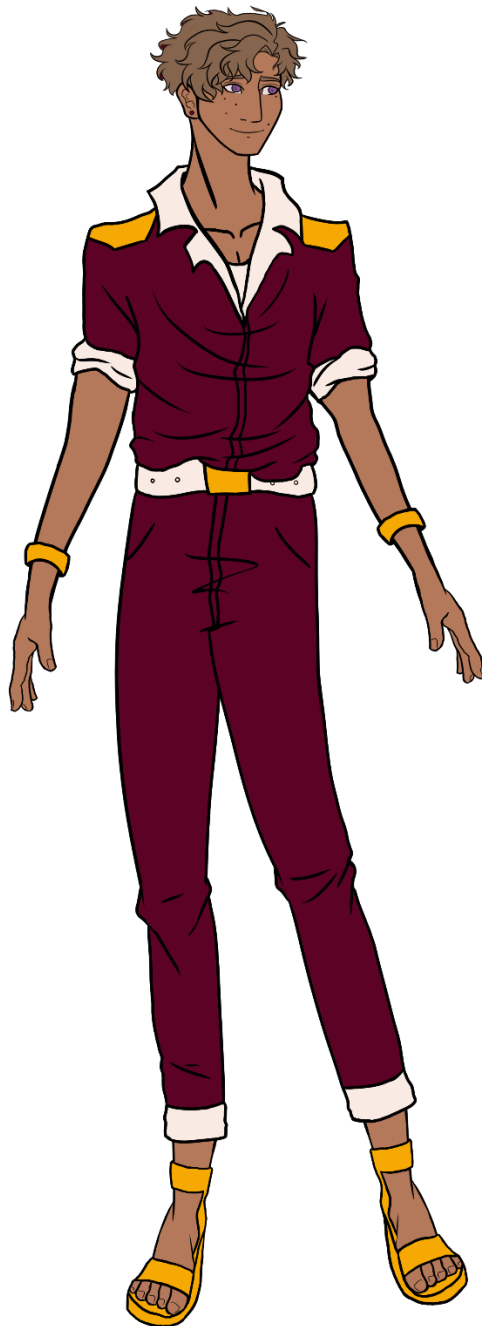


Figure 8: Jace's design

This is the most recent iteration of Jace's design, which has undergone a multitude of changes over the course of writing this thesis. In this design, I highlighted his royal status by using a copious amount of "Tyrian purple," a color used exclusively used by the imperial family and Senators which is actually more of a maroon. Jace's natural hair color is brown, but he bleaches and dyes his hair.

Secondary Characters – Zarek, Damon, Iggie, and Nailah

Zarek and Damon are the older brothers of Alex and Melanie, respectively. Zarek identifies as bi, while Damon identifies as gay. These two are best friends, but Damon secretly—or not-so-secretly, if you ask Mel or Alex—has had a crush on Zarek for an entire decade. While Jace, Mel, and Alex are all seventeen, Zarek and Damon are both twenty-four.

Zarek is a family man who works a variety of odd jobs to help pay for rent and food, as his and Alex's father, Iggie, is disabled and has a difficult time finding an accommodating workplace. He works as a baker and an assistant with loading cargo at the docks in Piraeus, among other side gigs like babysitting or walking dogs. He originally wanted to be a marine biologist, but gave it up in his late teens. Sometimes he still wishes that he could drop everything and become one anyways, but he worries about leaving Alex and Iggie alone, as he is overprotective of the two. He tends to act more like a parent to Alex than a brother, enforcing curfews and chores as Iggie spoils Alex since they're the baby. He also tries to keep in touch with his mother, Photine, as he had a closer relationship to her growing up than Alex did.

Damon is a jock, through and through. He often hits the gym and spends most of his time outdoors, jogging, hiking, swimming, or going for long, contemplative walks. When he's not exercising, he likes to play the komuz, an ancient Turkic stringed instrument that his uncle gave to him for his seventh birthday. He also is very good friends with Alex as well, and has confided in them about his crush on Zarek. He considers Alex to be like another younger sibling. Like Melanie, he becomes involved

in a rebel plot to overthrow the empire, and he has a secret divine contract with Ares, which grants him great physical strength.

Unlike *VLD*, I plan to have the relationship between Zarek and Damon develop during the course of the show. Both characters' sexuality will not be a surprise, and both will openly talk about their feelings.



Figure 9: Zarek's character design

When creating Zarek's design, I wanted to utilize a lot of blues to reflect his interest in the ocean. Eventually, he'll end up with a divine contract with a sea god, potentially Poseidon or a nymph. I also gave him frosted tips with his hairstyle to evoke a nineties style.

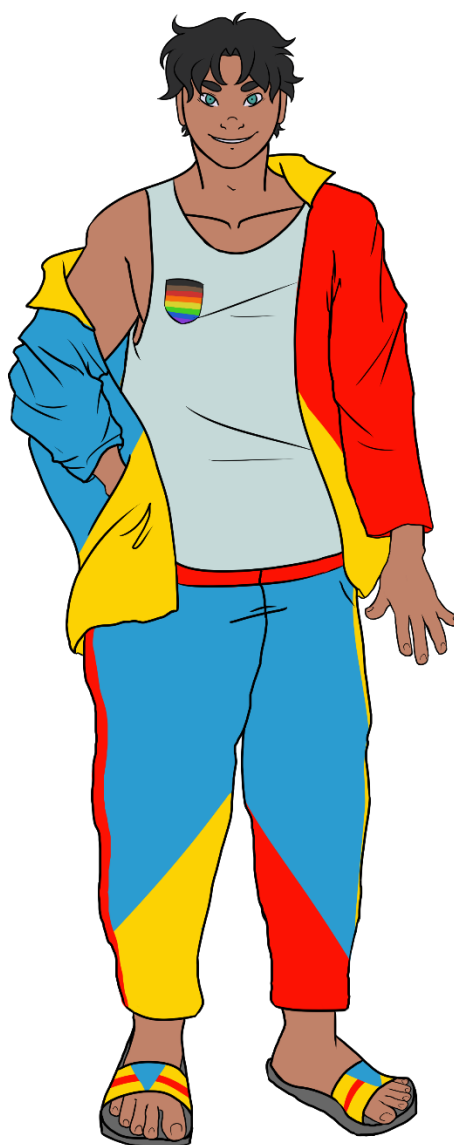


Figure 10: Damon's character design

Damon's design includes the newer pride flag design with the black and brown stripes on top. I also wanted his clothing to emulate the colorful tracksuits of the eighties and nineties. As with Melanie, I went through many designs before finally resting on this one, as I wanted to make sure I diversified the body types I presented.

Iggie, full name Quintus Marinus Ignatius, is the father of Alex and Zarek, and was previously the partner of Photine Soulis. He has a congenital condition which caused him to not grow one of his lower limbs. Although he has tried prosthetics, he

prefers to use his forearm braces, as his other prosthetics cause some discomfort over extended use. People often assume that he lost a limb during his time serving in the Roman Legion, which prompts him to make up long-winded battle stories or make sarcastic remarks to those that “thank him for his service.” Iggie’s character is a direct response to the ableism present in *VLD* in regards to Shiro, who does not discuss his prosthetic arm or medical condition at all.

He met his ex-wife, Photine, her best friend Olympia, and the Terzi twin brothers, Ehmet and Zordun, while in the Legion. While he and Photine took strong anti-war stances after their service, Iggie wanted to focus on raising their family rather than fighting back. This ultimately led to his and Photine’s split, although Alex tends to blame himself for it, as they separated only a few years after Alex was born.

Iggie is the only straight character in the main cast. Characters will joke about him being the “token straight guy” in the group, a fourth-wall-breaking commentary about the tokenization of LGBTQIA+ characters. He is romantically interested in Nailah, Zarek’s part-time boss over in Piraeus.

Nailah is a transgender woman who identifies as bisexual. She is Egyptian and Nubian. She helps run a shipping company, but also secretly aids rebels by sending supplies their way. She ends up helping the rest of the cast in their fight against the Roman Empire. She also served in the Legion and has a divine contract with Nephthys, an Egyptian river goddess, who gives her the power to control currents. She sometimes acts as a mentor figure to Zarek, who tends to overwork himself, and tells stories about her many travels to Alex. She is also romantically interested in Iggie, and even goes on a few dates with him during the course of the first season.

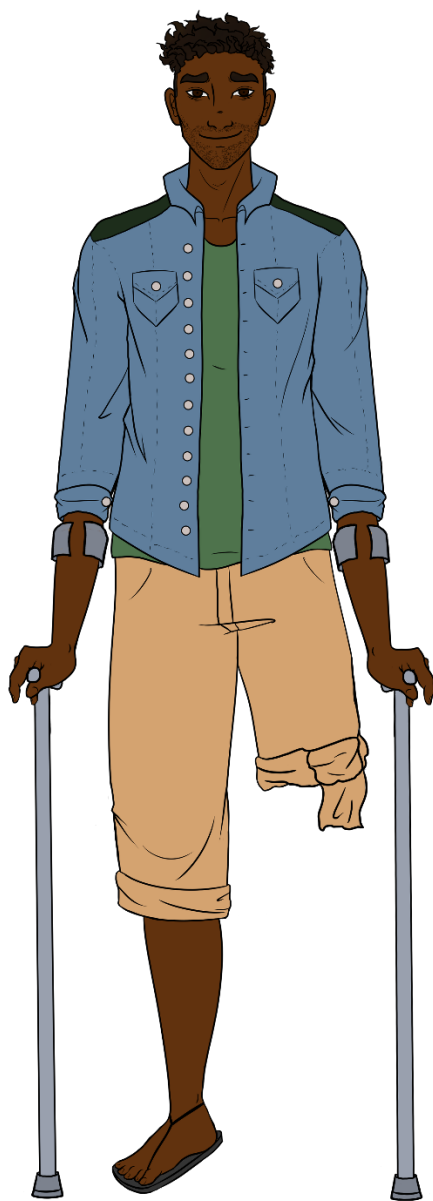


Figure 11: Iggie's character design

Iggie's design and personality has changed drastically over the course of writing this thesis. Originally, he and Alex did not have a good relationship, and rather than a congenital condition, he had lost a limb in the war and also had PTSD. After doing more research and consulting friends for advice, however, I realized that I had fallen into some of the same tropes that plagued *VLD*'s characterization of Shiro. I also wanted to make Alex and Iggie's relationship much more positive, as I felt that not doing so could lead to problematic content as well. As I wrote scripts, I developed Iggie's character and did much more research about prosthesis and mobility aids.



Figure 12: Nailah's character design

Nailah's design uses the colors of the transgender pride flag with gold accents. This design also went through a variety of changes, but I am ultimately happy with the final product.

Story Beats and Scripts

A pitch for a show often includes general descriptions of episodes and even entire scripts for pilots. While I did not choose to write a script for a pilot episode, I instead chose to plan out the first season of the show and write snippets of scripts that encapsulate intersectionality and holistic representation. I primarily used the program Causality to plan out story elements, while I used Word to write and format scripts.

My first attempt at writing scripts through Causality alone did not work well, as I had trouble separating the overarching narrative from the small, daily lives of my characters. I found that writing small snippets of scenes worked better in portraying how *Fatalis* would differ from *Steven Universe* and *VLD* in its characterization of LGBTQIA+ characters. Planning out the main story beats with Causality aided more in showing how my piece would actively avoid the pitfalls of the aforementioned shows in regards to its depiction of colonialism and imperialism.

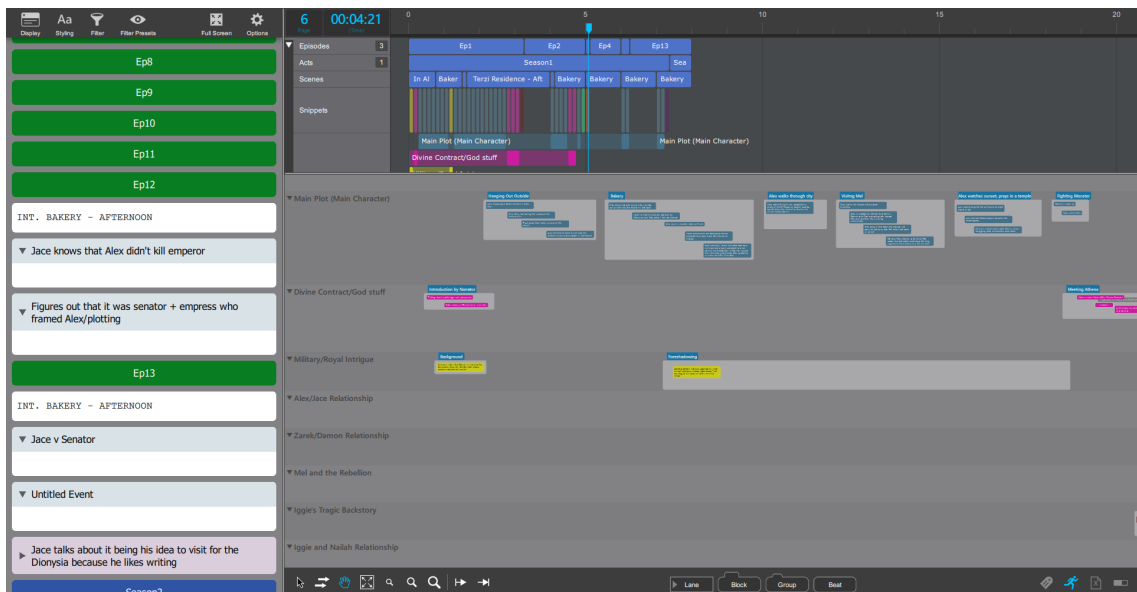


Figure 13: Screenshot of my work in Causality.

Causality allows writers to plan small scenes as well as overarching narratives, but I quickly found myself overwhelmed with the task of clearly presenting representation in this format. I wanted to create a plan for each episode of the first season, but this also turned out to be too large of a task to complete. I turned to writing small scenes in Word without specific guidelines or placement plans, which allowed for more creativity and freedom in what I wrote.

Story Beats

I chose to structure the narrative around a five-act structure, a framework which is often used to analyze ancient Greek tragedies. I also wanted to incorporate elements of tragic playwrights' stories and interpretations of myths into the structure of the narrative. For instance, I've taken inspiration from *The Eumenides*, the third play of Aeschylus's Orestian trilogy, in the fourth act of *Fatalis* via a trial involving Alex. The emperor is assassinated by his own wife and her lover, which is meant to evoke the Orestian trilogy's *Agamemnon*, but through a queer lens, having the Empress act not as a tragic hero, but as a direct antagonist to Jace through her unchallenged white, cisgender, heterosexual privilege. Jace's powers as a demigod stem from Euripides'

Bacchae. I also pull from the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*, often directly as I make Alex a fan of the *Iliad*. Mythological creatures and gods will make appearances in the story, pulled from a variety of Greek and Roman sources like Hesiod and Ovid.

Earlier in the thesis's conception, I had planned on including ancient mythology from around the world. Upon discussing this with friends, however, I realized two important factors that made me reconsider: how increasing the scope of the story to the entire world's history would make me lose focus in developing LGBTQIA+ identities, and how I might run into problems by representing mythologies that I had not studied intensively myself. With this in mind, I made the decision to only include ancient mythology from the Mediterranean region, as I have studied this area through my Classical Civilization minor. Part of responsible development of a narrative like this is to recognize one's own limits and privilege, and step away from depicting cultures, histories, and identities that you have not studied. I imagine that the creators of *VLD*, Montgomery and Dos Santos, did not do this when deciding to build a diverse cast. If they had put more research into the identities of Hunk, Lance, Shiro, and Allura, I expect, given my experience, that the result would have been much less fraught with problematic tropes.

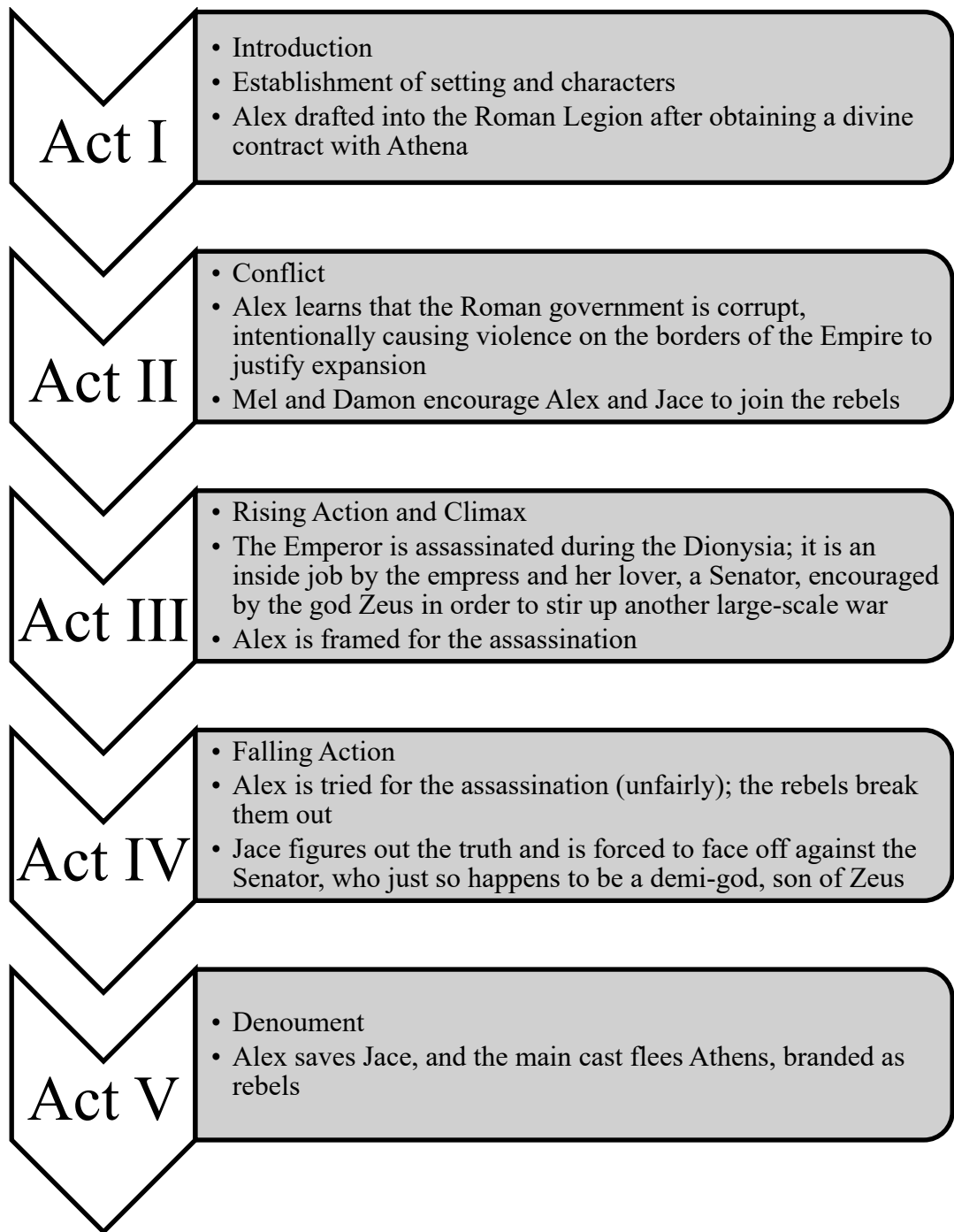


Table 2: Five-act structure of Fatalis

This act takes inspiration from ancient epics and tragedies, but also never makes the Roman Empire seem redeemable in any way. The actions that the emperor, empress, and her Senator lover take are very intentional and meant to vilify them, as well as echo how imperialism and colonialism often work in reality.

Scripts

While the overarching narrative focuses on fighting against imperialism and colonialism, I also wanted to make sure that I included scenes which discussed the characters' salient identities. This was particularly important when discussing their LGBTQIA+ identities, as this should not be a surprise like the treatment of Shiro in *VLD*. Transgender characters should also talk about their experiences and not be relegated to vague hints and off-screen interviews.

The first script snippet I've included involves Damon discussing his crush on Zarek with Alex and Iggy. The second involves Jace, Mel, and Alex hanging out and Jace talking about his life. The third revolves around Alex meeting the Emperor and his family, including Jace, for the first time. Again, these will likely undergo more changes the more I learn, but I have done my best to be as inclusive as possible.

In each script, I made sure to include references to each character's LGBTQIA+ identity. I had to ensure that doing so did not feel forced, nor that it felt ingenuine. I wrote like I was having a conversation with one of my other trans, queer friends. This tactic turned out surprisingly well, and likely worked because I am trans and queer myself. For instance, in the first script, Damon talks about his crush, Zarek, openly with Alex and their parent, wondering if he is Zarek's "type." In the second script, Alex and Jace have a discussion about Jace's collection of binders and compression shirts. I would imagine that straight, cisgender writers might struggle with realistically depicting dialogue about being LGBTQIA+ due to a lack of experience talking about relevant topics, which is perhaps a factor in the lack of open discussion about Shiro's gay identity in *VLD*.

I also went over the pitfalls of *Steven Universe* when writing dialogue and actions for my characters, as none of them, besides the villains, are white. While I think I have been successful in my endeavors, I feel there is always room to improve. For instance, I feel that I may revisit the third script, as I had difficulties writing a confrontation between Alex and the Emperor about Alex's pronouns and gender identity. I wanted Alex to showcase their frustration about being misgendered through titles, but worried about Alex unrealistically challenging the highest authority in the entire Empire, falling into the Sapphire stereotype. I decided to keep the pronoun discussion in the script, as I feel it is important to showcase a failed attempt and my analysis of it as well. I plan to remove or rewrite it later, as I am not happy with it.

Overall, however, I am pleased with these small snippets of scripts, as I feel they act as concrete examples of LGBTQIA+ characters discussing their identities positively. *Steven Universe* has some discussion of gay identities, but *VLD* does not. Neither *Steven Universe* nor *VLD* takes the time to have characters chat, complain, or correct others about their transgender identities. I feel these scripts are prime examples of the kind of writing that would be present in an intersectional, positive LGBTQIA+ animated show.

Storyboards

Although the University of Oregon does not teach a class explicitly on storyboarding techniques for animation, I attempted to teach myself through a variety of online tutorials and studying storyboards from other shows. I had previously only done storyboards for my Intro to Animation class and for my Intro to Narrative Production class, so the storyboards I've produced are rather rough and likely not formatted in an

industry-standard fashion, although I found from my research that there isn't a specific standard for storyboard artists. Even so, I felt it would be helpful to visualize some scenes.

The first scene I storyboarded involves a dialogue-free scene of Alex witnessing a protest and walking through town. I took inspiration from the *Cowboy Bebop* movie's opening credits. I wanted to showcase life in Athens, including some of the political strife that is occurring in the city during the show. I also wanted to establish Alex's ambivalence and feeling of being unable to help at the beginning of the narrative, as I imagine this scene would take place during the pilot episode. Alex puts headphones in and walks through the city, looking but not interacting with the problems that they encounter. As the story progresses, Alex's growth will allow them to feel more confident in fighting against systems of oppression and injustice.

As I worked on this storyboard, however, I came to realize that the process of scripting a scene versus imagining it shot-by-shot were incredibly different. Creating visuals for cartoons often involves a whole team working on each scene, but I was attempting to do everything on my own. I had to consider the scenery behind Alex and how that impacted the narrative, how framing each shot contributed to the tone of the scene, how timing affected the narrative and its weight. I also used new software, Storyboarder, to create each shot, then individually exported many of them and added more detail in Photoshop and Clip Studio Paint. The process was intensive, taking much longer than writing my scripts, and other storyboards I attempted to create felt haphazard and strained. For instance, I began to storyboard a shopping montage to

follow my second script, but found this did not add much to the premise of my thesis in regards to furthering positive, intersectional LGBTQIA+ representation.

This was an important distinction to make, as I realized that the bulk of responsibility in creating holistic, positive images laid in the hands of the screenwriters, character designers, and directors even more so than the storyboard artists and animators themselves. Of course, animation is created from the digitally-rendered or hand-drawn art that is painstakingly created, frame-by-frame, and I believe that representation can be beautifully depicted in this way. In my own process, however, I found that a television production spanning over many episodes and season relies heavily on the writers and character designers. These are the basic building blocks upon which storyboards are built. I decided to create a “scriptless” storyboard, but even then, I still had to write out some details for each frame after I had drawn them, as I felt the narrative of the storyboarded shots I had created was unclear and jumbled without them. In addition, I decided that the artistic elements are best left to a team. Perhaps if I had hired a small crew to help storyboard and create an animatic for *Fatalis*, I would have been better able to develop visual signifiers other than character designs.

Conclusion

In the end, I produced three scripts, one completed storyboard, an unfinished Causality document, a completed roadmap of story beats, and seven character designs complete with details about their identities and personalities. The scripts and character designs seemed to be the best way for me to depict my thesis’s premise: that in order to succeed in creating LGBTQIA+ representation in children’s animation, showrunners need to focus on creating intersectional frameworks and positive images that do not rely

on problematic stereotypes and tropes. My storyboard attempted to do the same, but I personally feel that it was less successful than the other two methods.

This thesis is not the end of this project. I plan to continue working on *Fatalis*, hopefully putting this pitch into production and creating an animated show from it. As I noted in my discussion of my creative work, I would need an entire team to produce this work in its entirety. I am just one individual, and this is just one potential solution to the problem of LGBTQIA+ representation. I hope that others continue to research this topic and present their own solutions to this problem, but for now, I feel that I have successfully presented an approach that showrunners can take through my creative work and analysis.

Supplemental Materials

SCRIPT 1

Notes:

- scene between Alex, Damon, Zarek
- Damon flirts a bit with Zarek who leaves for work
- Alex tells Damon to ask him out already

FATALIS

INT. SOULIS APARTMENT - DAY

ALEXANDRIA SOULIS sits in chair watching flirtatious banter between their brother, ZAREK SOULIS, and DAMON TERZI, ZAREK's best friend. ALEX sips on a drink with a straw and raises their eyebrows at the two boys' antics. Nearby, ALEX and ZAREK's father, IGGIE, sits on a worn-down couch and watches a pankration match on a tiny TV. He sips on a drink too, but does not use a straw.

DAMON leans on the kitchen counter, propping his head up with his hands, while ZAREK washes dishes. The two boys giggle at each other, and ZAREK splashes water at DAMON. Eventually ZAREK looks at the clock and realizes he has to leave.

ZAREK

Oh shoot, it's that late already?

DAMON frowns, looks at the clock, and sighs.

DAMON

Work, huh?

ZAREK

Yeah, gotta get down to the docks.

(looks over and shouts to IGGIE, and winks)
I'll tell Nailah you say hi!

IGGIE splutters and nearly chokes on his soda.

ZAREK dries hands and throws on a coat. He gives DAMON a hug, ALEX a pat on the head, and IGGIE a wave before leaving the apartment. ALEX takes a long, loud slurp from their drink before speaking.

ALEX

Wooooooooooooow.

DAMON

Oh, shut up, it wasn't *that* bad.

IGGIE turns so that he is facing both of them.

IGGIE

I wasn't even in the room and I could tell.

ALEX

See? Even Dad noticed.

DAMON

With all due respect, Mr. Soulis, please stay out of it.

ALEX

Hey, that's your future father-in-law. Be nice.

IGGIE

Yeah, be nice, future stepson.

ALEX

(whispered to Damon)

You ought to introduce yourself to future Mrs. Soulis sometime.

IGGIE

(points to Alex and raises voice slightly)

Hey! Knock it off.

ALEX

How come Zarek gets to tease you about your big hetero crush on Nailah but I can't?

IGGIE

Because he's my favorite son.

(to Damon)

No offense.

DAMON groans at plops down across from ALEX.

DAMON

You two are the worst, but you're right.

ALEX

I know. I usually am.

DAMON is skeptical. He sighs and rests his head on the kitchen table. ALEX shakes their head.

ALEX

How long have you liked him? Like, twenty years?

DAMON

Practically.

ALEX

I feel like he'd say yes if you asked him out.

DAMON

Did he tell you that?

ALEX

Well, no, Zarek doesn't really talk to me about his "feelings" or whatever, but-

IGGIE

He is pretty cutesy with you.

DAMON

Mr. Soulis, *please*-

ALEX

It's true though. He totally digs you.

DAMON

Yeah, sure.

ALEX

Seriously, dude! He wants to take you out to a fancy restaurant and buy you hors d'oeuvres. He wants to snuggle while you watch bad rom-coms. He wants to serenade you on the bus at 7 AM while you're on the way home from the hospital because you got food poisoning from chugging expired milk on a dare-

IGGIE

Your experiences are not universal.

ALEX

Anyways, what I'm trying to say is, he really likes being around you and I think you should just tell him that you've had a big, gay crush on him for years.

DAMON sighs and looks up at ALEX.

DAMON

What if I, like, tell him and he doesn't take it well, and I totally ruin our friendship forever and then I *die*?

ALEX

You won't die, geez.

IGGIE

I mean, statistically speaking he could die.

ALEX

Dad! Don't encourage him.

DAMON

Plus I don't even think I'm his type? I'm all buff and muscular and stuff, but I'm way shorter than him. How would I even reach his face if I wanted to, like, kiss him, huh?

IGGIE

Get a stepstool.

ALEX

Dad!

IGGIE

What? It's a practical solution.

ALEX

Damon, ignore my dad and stop worrying. You'll be fine.

SCRIPT 2

Notes:

-Jace, Mel, and Alex hang out together in Jace's room
-The three talk about hobbies, gender, social justice, and clothes; they end up going shopping in a 90s-style montage

FATALIS

INT. JACE'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

The scene begins in JACE's luxury bedroom suite. The room is decorated lavishly in gold, red, and purple. There are two large bookcases filled with books, and a desk filled with notepads and loose pieces of scribbled-on paper. The walls have elaborate paintings and some hanging plants dangle from the ceiling by the windows. JACE's bed has a large purple-and-gold canopy made of expensive fabric, and the sheets are similarly patterned and expensive.

ALEX is rifling through the clothes in the huge walk-in closet, while MEL sits on the bed near JACE and peruses some books and journals. JACE sits crisscross on the bed, fiddling with a fidget toy and watching ALEX through the doorway.

ALEX

You have so many clothes in here, oh my gosh.

JACE

Yeah, perks of being adopted by the emperor, I guess. Did you see the two drawers with all the binders and compression tops?

ALEX

(gasps)

You have two whole drawers full? I'm in love.

JACE

(blushes)

Oh, well, you know...

ALEX

I usually stick with sports bras or I just wear baggy shirts, but I have one binder

that's like, super old and grungy.

JACE

Yeah, they're pretty expensive to replace.

ALEX

I know right? I would steal some of yours if we were the same size.

JACE

You can definitely still steal something. Take anything you want. I don't mind.

ALEX sticks their head out of the door, slightly embarrassed but also clearly pleased.

ALEX

I will definitely take you up on that.

MEL rolls her eyes, and shifts to talk to JACE. ALEX continues to dig through the closet, now trying on different jackets and sweatshirts.

MEL

Your writing is really good, by the way. Especially the poetry. I really liked this one.

(MEL points to one of the poems in a journal)

JACE

(rubs arm nervously)

Thanks. I actually wrote that when I still lived in Pella with my mom.

JACE frowns a little and becomes somewhat wistful. ALEX pokes their head out of the closet and frowns, too.

ALEX

(softly)

Do you miss your mom?

JACE

Yeah, a lot. I get to see her sometimes, but...

MEL

Not enough?

JACE

(sniffles)

Yeah, definitely not enough.

ALEX comes out of the closet wearing one of Jace's jackets and sits on the bed, on the other side of JACE. JACE now sits between MEL (on the left) and ALEX (on the right).

ALEX

If it's not too personal, why did you end up deciding to go with the emperor's family?

MEL tenses up at this question and pays close attention.

JACE

It is kind of personal—

ALEX

Oh, sorry. Just ignore that then—

JACE

No, no, I don't mind.

(rubs the back of his head sheepishly)

I mean, you two are my best friends, after all, so...

MEL smiles softly at this and relaxes a bit, while ALEX reaches over and squeezes JACE's hand and smiles at him. JACE blushes a bit but continues talking.

JACE

So I was about fourteen when the emperor's entourage showed up at our house. I guess my mom's mom is somehow related to the royal family, like a cousin twice removed or something like that. Anyways, they pretty much said that the emperor couldn't have kids, and that he needed an heir and I was the closest male relative they had. I guess having a woman lead is out of the question.

MEL and ALEX both roll their eyes and act irritated. The Roman Empire is not a fan of solo female rulers because of their patriarchal beliefs.

JACE

But my mom was super mad at them and not-so-politely told them to get lost. We had a family talk after, and one of my aunts mentioned that maybe it would be good to have someone who was Romani in charge. Like, maybe I could make some real positive changes. But my mom was worried, because she didn't know if they would treat me alright, cause of, well, me being me-

ALEX

Which is stupid, because you're awesome.

JACE smiles shyly.

JACE

Thank you. But the Empire isn't a big fan of being born intersex, or being Romani, or being autistic... so yeah, I was worried too. But I think what my aunt said really stuck with me, and I kept thinking about it for like a week. And I thought about all the stuff my family had to deal with on a daily basis, and all the stuff I had gone through at school and I just... I felt like I had to take the opportunity. To fix things.

MEL sighs and flops backwards, sprawling out on the bed.

MEL

That's super noble, but at the same time, you have to dismantle the whole system that made all that happen in the first place, you know? You have to eliminate the idea of Rome as an empire, you have to give people their land back, you have to install fair elections of representatives, you have to make laws that protect people... you pretty much have to get rid of all the old stuff and put in new stuff.

JACE

(also flops back on the bed)

That makes sense. Maybe you should be the one in charge.

ALEX

(also flops back on bed)

Mel wants to be the first trans woman Senator.

MEL

Not "wants to," I *will be*.

ALEX

True, cause you're super smart about all that stuff.

MEL

(smirks proudly)

I am.

JACE

(laughs, then pauses and sighs)

I guess my mom was right about some things, though. The empress really doesn't seem to like me at all.

ALEX

Say the word, and I will throw hands at that woman.

MEL

Me too.

(rolls onto side)

You know what? When I first met you, I thought you'd be a stuck-up jerk like the emperor and his goonies, but you're actually pretty cool.

JACE

Oh, well, uh, thank you.

(sits up and stands, stretches)

I'm gonna go grab some tea if you'd like some too.

MEL

That sounds lovely, thank you.

JACE leaves the room.

ALEX

(whispers)

I told you he was chill.

MEL

(whispers)

I figured you were just biased because you thought he was cute—

ALEX grabs a throw pillow and smacks MEL in the face with it.

MEL

(whispers but louder)

Rude!

ALEX

(whispers but even louder)

Shut up, it's not like that.

MEL

(imitates ALEX poorly)

"Oh Jace, you're so cool and nice and cute, wait you're sad? Let me hold your hand and wear your shirt and console you."

MEL makes kissy sounds at ALEX who continues to become more and more embarrassed. ALEX hits MEL with the throw pillow a few more times. MEL just laughs.

MEL

(while being hit with a pillow)

I bet you're not even gonna wash that thing.

ALEX

(stops the pillow fight briefly, disgusted)

Ew, Mel! I'm gonna wash it. I'm not gross.

MEL

Yeah, you're definitely not gonna wash it.

ALEX

(continues hitting Mel with pillow)

I. Am. Too!

JACE returns which abruptly stops the one-sided pillow fight. He looks a little bit upset but is trying to hide it with a smile.

JACE

Welp, the empress is in the kitchen and I really don't want to go in there while she's there. How about we go do something far, far away from here? Like shopping or-

ALEX sits up abruptly, still somewhat embarrassed.

ALEX

I love shopping.

MEL snickers and takes the opportunity to hit ALEX with the pillow once as she sits up as well.

MEL

As nice as that sounds, I don't really have the budget for that right now.

ALEX deflates a little.

ALEX

Oh, yeah... money... the bane of my existence.

JACE

No worries, I've got it.

MEL and ALEX both look at each other in surprise.

ALEX

No way, dude, that's like... way too much.

JACE

No worries. I mean technically it isn't *my* money; it's the emperor's.

SCRIPT 3

Notes:

-After being drafted into the Roman Legion on account of their new divine contract with Athena, Alex meets Jace, the emperor-to-be, for the first time, and is assigned to study under him

-Jace is learning how to be a military leader, as experience in the military is incredibly important to status in Roman society; he has had a few more years of training than Alex, however, who has never even gotten in a fight before

FATALIS

EX. STRATEGEION, AGORA - EARLY MORNING

The scene begins with some establishing shots of the agora, a large square area filled with buildings and shops. It is mostly empty, save for a few vendors setting up shop and some patrolling Legionnaires. Cut to a close-up of ALEX, who yawns loudly and looks incredibly sleepy. An attending LEGIONNAIRE stands with them outside the strategeion, an ancient building used by ancient Greek generals.

ALEX

(half-yawn, half-spoken)

's early.

LEGIONNAIRE

You better get used to it. Most soldiers are already up training at this hour.

ALEX groans and stretches. As the two stand next to each other awkwardly, the sound of marching begins and gets louder.

LEGIONNAIRE

(looks up and nods)

Ah, here we are.

ALEX looks and is startled, as they see the EMPEROR and his entourage parading towards them with a large group of guards in tow. The EMPEROR approaches with his wife on one

side, and a younger boy on the other. The younger boy is JACE.

The EMPEROR leans in close to ALEX and inspects them. ALEX sniffs and rubs their nose.

ALEX

\Sup.

The EMPEROR is not impressed. JACE looks amused, while the rest of the entourage is taken aback by ALEX's casualness in front of the EMPEROR.

EMPEROR

(leans back, addressing the LEGIONNAIRE)
Out of all the humans in this lousy city and Minerva choses *this* one?

ALEX

(annoyed)
I'm right here, you know.

LEGIONNAIRE

That's correct, Sir. Three patrolling soldiers saw this one-

(gestures to ALEX)
form a divine contract with Minerva near the Parthenon at approximately two AM. The aegis was summoned to defeat a band of hellhounds that appeared suddenly near the premises.

EMPEROR

Hm...
(raises an eyebrow and crosses arms)
And what should we call you, miss...?

ALEX

Not a miss!

EMPEROR

Ah, apologies. Mister...

ALEX

(imitates the sound of a buzzer)
Aaaa, nope, try again.

The EMPEROR, LEGIONNAIRE, and entourage all exchange wary glances, while JACE suppresses a smile. ALEX notices and almost smiles back.

EMPEROR

I don't appreciate the snark, child.

ALEX

(sighs)

Genderfluid. Try "mx."

EMPEROR

Your name is... mix?

ALEX

(exasperated)

Wha-? No, no, that's just my title... ugh, whatever, my name is Alex, ok? Alex Soulis-Marinus, pronouns she/her, they/them, he/him. I don't want to explain how gender works to you, alright? We'll be here all day.

EMPRESS

(whispered into EMPEROR's ear)

I don't like this one.

JACE is clearly smiling at this point and lets out a small giggle. The EMPRESS glares at him and he stiffens and resumes being formal.

EMPEROR

(sternly)

I'd watch your tone. You may be the first human that Minerva has taken an interest in recently, but that doesn't mean I won't take disciplinary measures against you.

(turns towards JACE)

Jason!

JACE

(stands in attention)

Yes, sir?

EMPEROR

I'm putting this one under your charge.

ALEX and JACE

(in unison)

What?!

EMPEROR

You'll be training with the troops here anyways, won't you? I'm sure handling one more won't trouble you too much.

JACE

A-are you sure? I mean, I feel like someone with more experience should-

EMPEROR

You need to get that experience yourself. A good ruler must have military prowess. Simply studying philosophy and literature like you do won't amount to a successful rule. What will you do if the enemies on our borders attack our lands? Read them to sleep? No, you need to lead, to march soldiers into battle and fight alongside them.

JACE

I... yes, sir.

EMPEROR

Excellent! Then it's settled. When you feel your new charge is ready, we'll enroll them into the advanced ranks of the Legion.

(pats Jace's shoulder)

I'll leave you to it.

The EMPEROR, EMPRESS, LEGIONNAIRE, and entourage leave. JACE and ALEX stand alone at the entrance to the strategeion. ALEX shuffles their feet.

ALEX

So, uh... didn't expect to meet the Emperor today.

JACE looks a bit anxious, but returns his attention to ALEX.

JACE

Ah, yes, well, we're here visiting for a few

months and leaving after the Dionysia, so...

ALEX

Oh. Cool.

JACE clasps his hands behind his back; ALEX sticks theirs in their pockets and looks around.

JACE

So, uh. Divine contract, huh? That's cool.

ALEX

I uh, guess so? I mean I didn't really wanna be in the Legion.

JACE

Having Minerva be your patron goddess is pretty neat though. Or, uh, Athena, I guess. You probably call her Athena, since we're in Athens and all.

ALEX

Yup.

The awkward silence continues for a few seconds longer.

JACE

My patron god is Dionysus. Not as cool as, uh, Athena, but still. I can uh, do stuff like this.

In a flash of light, JACE summons the thyrsus, a golden staff tipped with a silver pinecone. He slams it on the ground and a few grape vines begin to grow rapidly out of the dirt. ALEX finally seems interested.

ALEX

Woah, dude! How did you do that?!

JACE

A lot of practice.

(rolls the staff in his hands)

I've had this contract since I was little. I can't really teach you how to grow grapes or anything, but I can help you learn how Athena's powers work.

(tosses staff into air, staff disappears)
If you want, that is.

ALEX crosses their arms across their chest and thinks for a moment, tapping their foot on the ground.

ALEX

Well, I guess I have to learn at some point. I don't think joining the Legion is really a choice.

JACE

Unfortunately, no. Everyone with a divine contract is forced to join.

ALEX uncrosses arms and holds out hand to JACE.

ALEX

Jason, right?

JACE

(hesitantly shakes hand)
I prefer Jace, actually.

ALEX

Gotcha. Well then, Jace, I guess we're in this together.

JACE

(smiles a little)
I guess so.

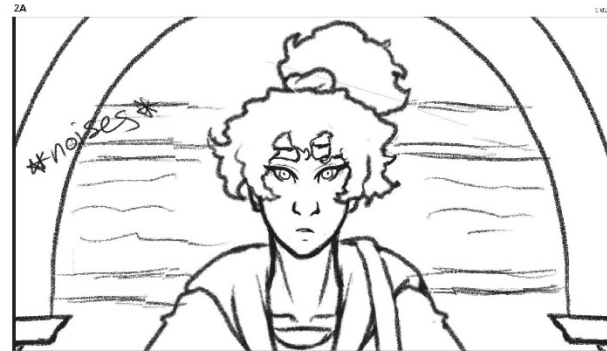
STORYBOARD

STORYBOARD 1 - ALEX INTRO

Boards: 27 | Shots: 26 | Duration: 06 | Aspect Ratio: 0.9
1800 | 1.181 | 75.217%



1A Alex walks out of pastry shop, slightly annoyed; the noises from the next shot are already present



2A Alex notices noises to their right and opens their eyes in surprise; the noises are the sounds of people chanting and yelling angrily



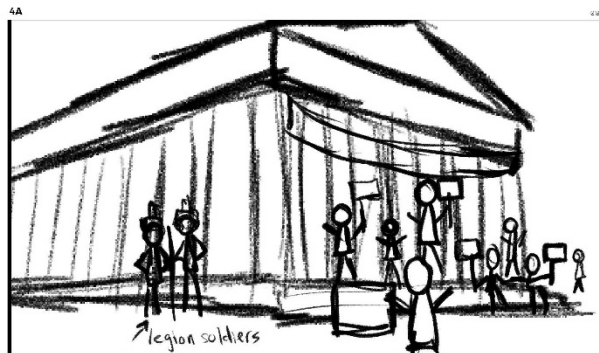
2B Alex turns their head to see what all the commotion is about



3A Alex sees a protest on the agora; others have turned to watch as well

STORYBOARD 1 - ALEX INTRO

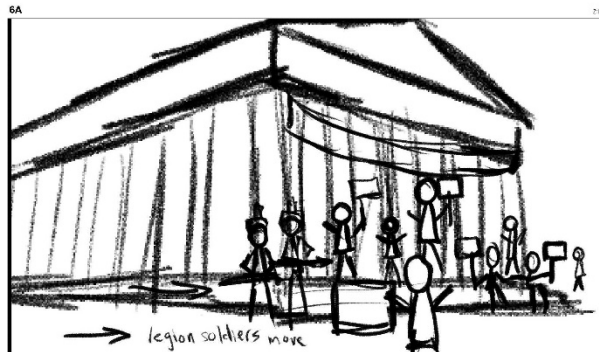
Boards: 27 | Shots: 26 | Director: 16 | Asset Role: 0:9
186: 1: 1.8.17 26.7079



Camera cuts to closer shot of protestors; they are protesting the wars on the Roman Empire's borders; we hear some of their chants against imperialism; two legion soldiers wait on the sidelines



The legion soldiers are clearly bored and have seen this sort of protest plenty before; one checks his watch to see how long the protest has gone on for (not very long)



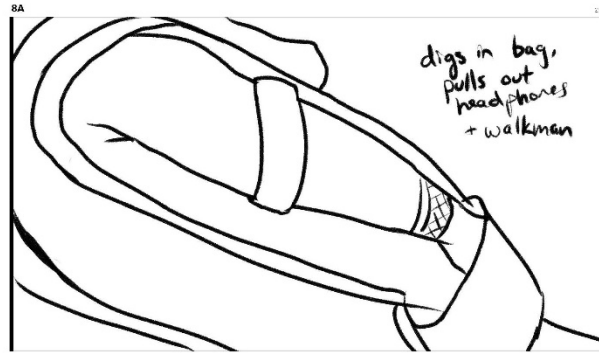
The two legion soldiers raise their spears and decide to break up the protest; we even see some protestors running and some challenging the soldiers



Alex sighs and scratches head, then looks down to left toward their bag

STORYBOARD 1 - ALEX INTRO

Boards: 27 | Shots: 26 | Duration: 14 | Aspect Ratio: 0.9
18A 1. A4 + 2x 91%



Alex shuffles through bag and pulls out a walkman and headphones (shot angled down from shoulder)



Alex puts on headphones to block out the sounds; the sounds get muffled when they put on the headphones as if the audience has just done the same thing



Alex brings walkman up



Alex presses play; a song starts; as Alex presses play, all the background music disappears and the audience can only hear the song Alex is listening to

STORYBOARD 1 - ALEX INTRO

Boards: 27 | Shots: 26 | Duration: 16 | Aspect Ratio: 16:9
1800 | 1.48 | 76.707%



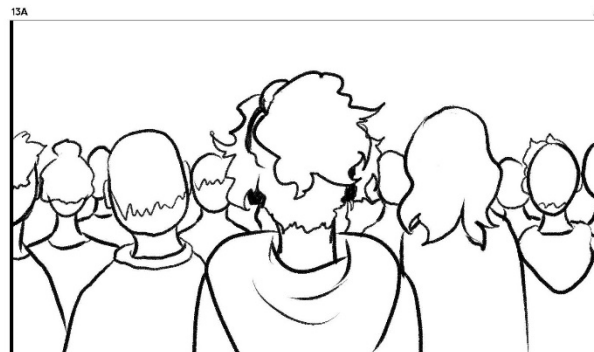
Alex turns to left and starts walking off-screen



Alex walks forward (tracking shot on feet)



Cont.



Cont. (tracking shot from behind)

STORYBOARD 1 - ALEX INTRO

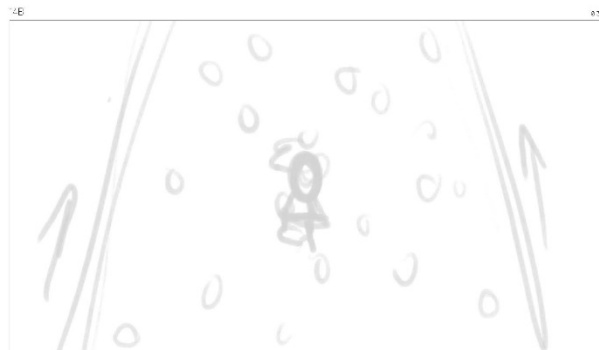
Boards: 27 | Shots: 26 | Duration: 1:16 | Asset: Role: 0:9
186: 1: 1.8.17 76.707%



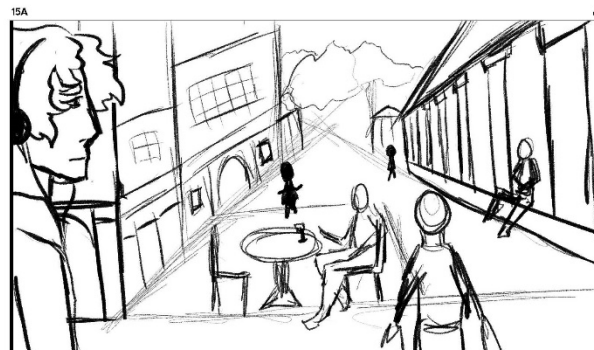
13B
Cont.



14A
Cont. (high-angle shot, still tracking movement)



14B
Cont.



15A
Alex walks past a crowded street (include the close-ups featured in the next few shots in the background: Alex is looking at these people as they walk by)

STORYBOARD 1 - ALEX INTRO

Board: 27 | Shots: 26 | Director: 14 | Aspect Ratio: 16:9
RAW: 1_Alex_26_019



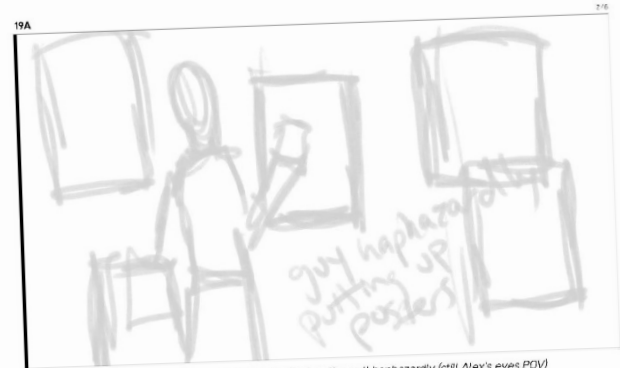
We see a shot of someone selling a few goods on a rug while sitting on the ground (POV camera, slightly shaky as if we're looking out from Alex's eyes)



We see a beggar on the steps (same POV camera from Alex's eyes)



We see a shrine to Athena and a few people praying at it, giving offerings of meat (still POV Alex's eyes)



We see a worker pasting flyers for the Dionysia Festival on the wall haphazardly (still Alex's eyes POV)

STORYBOARD 1 - ALEX INTRO

Boards: 27 | Shots: 26 | Director: 16 | Asset Role: 10:9
180s: 1: 1.88 76.707%



Alex walks and stops at a trolley stop, standing in front of graffiti which says "Veni Vidi Cenavi" (I came I saw I ate) with the Athenian owl symbol in the jaws of a wolf (symbol of Rome)



Trolley pulls forward and Alex turns to look and get on



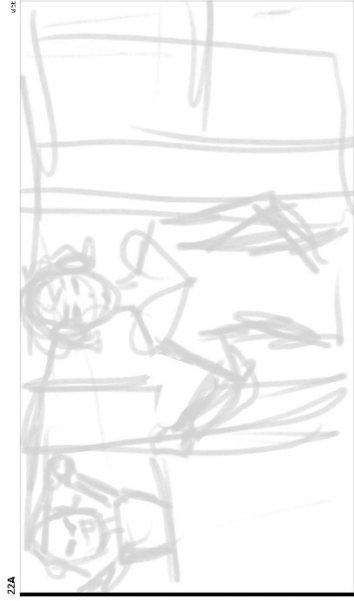
Alex holds onto pole on trolley; annoying child in background causes a scene and makes ruckus



Alex notices child who is now standing up and sticking tongue out at passersby

STORYBOARD 1 - ALEX INTRO

Boards: 37 | Sheets: 24 | Columns: 4 | AspectRatio: 0.9
194.1 x 131.25 (75%)



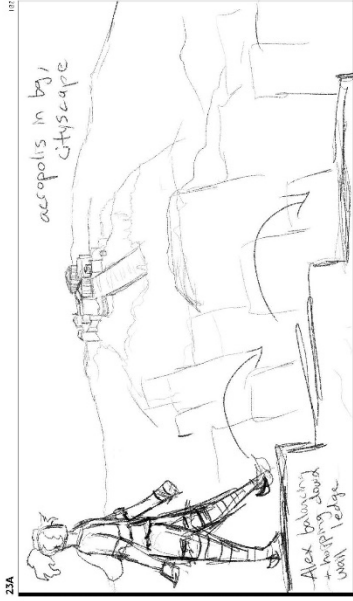
22A

Alex gets off bus; child sticks tongue out in background



22B

Bus leaves, revealing a more run-down area of town



23A

Alex hangs along a retaining wall up on a hill far away from the agora and acropolis where they were before
Alex balances + keeps back wall ledge



23B

Alex stops and looks out at acropolis in distance
acropolis in by cityscape
Stops + turns on last step!

STORYBOARD 1 - ALEX INTRO

Storyboard 1 - Alex Intro
1. Alex is in the car



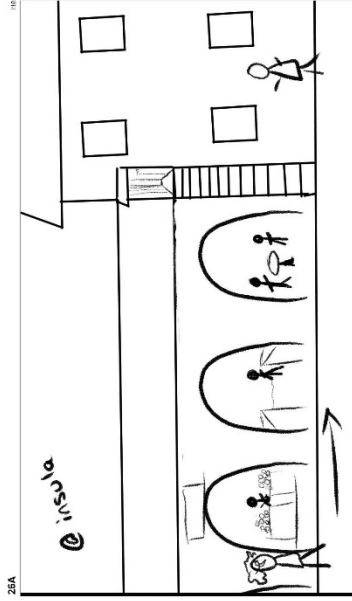
Close-up on acropolis



Alex looks at acropolis



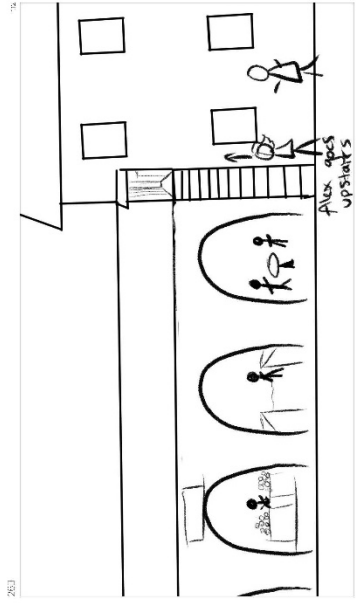
Alex smiles sorry, a bit of sadness still present



Alex walks into scene of an insular, businesses are on the bottom, while apartments are to the right and above

STORYBOARD 1 - ALEX INTRO

Boards: 27 | Story: 26 | Location: 4 | Assets/Boards: 0/2
File: 1_Alex Intro 25.7879



Alex begins climb upstairs to visit Terzi family where their friends Melanie and Damon live

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