Death Bakes Pies: An Exploration of Creative Burnout and Procrastination

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Death Bakes Pies
(and other reasons I’m procrastinating)

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What is this?

This is Death Bakes Pies! Death Bakes Pies is a series of short webcomics hosted on the Instagram @deathbakespies. The comics follow our protagonist, Alexis, and her dear friend, Death, as Alexis finds increasingly ridiculous ways of procrastinating on her thesis project. Death, who works as a part time grim reaper, is always there to give her a reality check and try and keep her on track.
Over the course of the last 4 or 5 years my life has gotten busier and busier, and I began to always feel like I was trailing behind, both in my course work, and in life, and its led to me feeling burnt out and depressed about things that would normally excite me.

I wanted use this series to explore those feelings and help work through them. I’ve tried my best to look at the bright side in these stories and say something funny about the ways people avoid work, or at the very least, how I avoid work.

Why am I doing this?
MAKE THE PROBLEM THE PROJECT

One of biggest contributing factors to my feelings of burnout was my procrastination on school work. External factors aren’t the only factors to affect mental health negatively, but a person’s environment and habits are certainly powerful. I had procrastinated so habitually that it felt like every project was under a time crunch with no room to read more deeply into topics I found interesting and no time to ask for more help if I needed it.

This problem was beginning to affect this project as well and I made the decision to focus my energy into exploring my procrastination and mental health and building up healthier work habits to support my progress on this project.

I started by giving myself a prompt “Why aren’t you working on your thesis?” and the goal of writing 20 answers to the prompt. I tried writing a new answer every time I caught myself procrastinating. The answers became the basic for all of the comic strips in the final body of work.

I supported my work with scheduled meetings with my committee members and a detailed schedule to (try) to stick to.
Alongside writing outlines according to the prompt “Why aren’t I working on my thesis?” I drew dozens of short comics without prompts on post-it notes.
I then chose the strongest concepts from the original answers to the question “Why aren’t you working on your thesis?” and concepts that came from my rough sketches. I wrote storyboards for them with the text underneath to get feedback from others at this stage.
I received feedback from my committee about what I could improve in each strip to make them funnier or more easy to read. Above with this strip you can see that my first two panels were too similar to each other and thus, weren’t interesting enough. Additionally I mentioned a Mech (a giant robot you can pilot from inside) in the comic, and that term was confusing for almost everyone who critiqued the rough drafts.
Next I made adjustments according to the feedback I got. You can see I changed the middle panel to contrast more with the first panel.

I’ve used a Photoshop brush to line my comics. This brush is the “Kyle’s Inkbox Fountain of Yoots” brush. I feel that this brush strikes a good balance between clean, and the rougher line work in my pencil sketches. I wanted to maintain that raw quality in the illustrations since they’re coming from such a raw place. Additionally I’ve decided to keep the line work simple to avoid over complicating the drawings since they’ll be viewed on a small format.
I also wanted to keep the rawness in my coloration so I layered up multiple effects to create a realistic watercolor texture.

I’m using digital brushes on Photoshop for coloring. This brush is the Kyle’s Real Watercolors 2.40 brush. It has fairly realistic paper texture, blending and transparency. I feel it gives a reliable watercolor on paper effect.
I’m using sunny, exciting, and cheery spots of citrusy yellows (and a couple chromatic grays to calm the palette down). I decided to use yellows because they’re such an immediately cheery color. Additionally, these cooler toned yellows remind me of the phrase “when life hands you lemons, make lemonade” which is apt for this series. I’m trying to create something out my obstacles.
At this point the comics are almost completed. It was important to me to consider the flow of each character’s speech to not only make it legible but to make it feel natural, with pauses and interjections in the right places to feel like a real conversation.
Thank You for Reading!

I want this series to be relatable to others who might be going through the same thing. The project has helped me rebuild healthy work habits and avoid the feeling of burnout. I’ve also better been able to make light of inconveniences in my life by approaching my flaws in a light hearted, humorous manner. I just hope that other people can have their moods lifted, even just a little, by my comics.