MANIFEST: CONCEPT ART, WORLD BUILDING, AND REALISM IN FICTIONAL SETTINGS

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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RESEARCH COMPLIANCE CERTIFICATION

Research activities involving the use of human subjects, vertebrate animals, and/or biohazards must be reviewed and approved by the appropriate Texas A&M University regulatory research committee (i.e., IRB, IACUC, IBC) before the activity can commence. This requirement applies to activities conducted at Texas A&M and to activities conducted at non-Texas A&M facilities or institutions. In both cases, students are responsible for working with the relevant Texas A&M research compliance program to ensure and document that all Texas A&M compliance obligations are met before the study begins.

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This project did not require approval from the Texas A&M University Research Compliance & Biosafety office.

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Fiction often mirrors real life, taking inspiration from personal or historical events. These influences in creative works provide viewers with a clear vision of a fictional world, helping them place themselves more easily within it. Through my research, I showcase how realism is captured in fictional works, specifically concept art. I explore the field of concept art and determine how realistic visuals in art can be used to make it more believable. Research into this topic is necessary to understand how history can affect an audience's perception of art. Within my research, I discuss how images that evoke historical similarities connect viewers more genuinely to a work of art. I will be creating a series of character designs inspired by the American West and Lovecraftian aesthetics as a visual demonstration of my research. While the workflow and processes of concept art are considered established, the artwork that I created offers a novel scope of the western genre. Tying the visual language between Western history and 20th Century horror via historical and authentic clothing, as well as utilizing western movie archetypes, makes my art both visually unique and believable to an audience.

DEDICATION

To my family for supporting my passions without a second thought. To my instructors and peers who supported me throughout the research process. To my friends for being my cheerleaders and sitting through my weekly Western rambles.

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Contributors

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1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

1.1 Introduction

For me, art has always been a way to transport myself into the worlds in my mind and experience lives apart from my own. When I grew older and consumed more media, I began to question how I could place myself so easily into these fictional worlds. As I began to have these thoughts, I participated in a mentorship program in high school. This led me to discover concept art, which is the visual planning that goes into creating creative media. I continued to look into this field and found that concept artists would use references from history, such as buildings, machinery, and people, to create their artwork. Was this why the fantastical stories I watched seemed so tangible? Understanding this process has driven the direction of my research.

Fiction often mirrors real life, taking inspiration from personal or historical events. These influences in creative works provide viewers with a clear vision of a fictional world, helping them place themselves more easily within it. Through my research, I showcase how realism is captured in fictional works, specifically concept art. I explore the field of concept art and determine how realistic visuals in art can be used to make it more believable. Research into this topic is necessary to understand how history can affect an audience's perception of art, as well as understanding pre-production and the field of concept art functions as a whole (Omernick). Within my research, I discuss how images that evoke historical similarities connect viewers more genuinely to a work of art.

1.2   Artifact Overview

To fully demonstrate what I learned through my research, I produced a series of character designs inspired by westerns and Lovecraftian horror as my creative artifact. My interest in cowboy aesthetics has existed long before I was a student at Texas A&M; as someone who has spent their entire life in Texas, I have always been interested in the culture of the 1800s West. American cowboy culture has always been a part of my life in some shape or form, and I wanted to find a way to visually incorporate this familiarity into my artwork. To enrich the visuals of my character designs beyond the cowboy aesthetic, I also devoted a portion of my research into Lovecraftian aesthetics. The unknown and macabre nature of Lovecraftian literature has also always intrigued me; strange eldritch forms, distorted humans, and dark unknowns add a strange layer to familiar scenes. Combining the two distinct aesthetics adds a unique flavor to an otherwise standard historical setting, so I decided to use them as the visual constraints of my character designs. Melding the aesthetics of the American West and 20th Century horror provided me with the opportunity to test whether implementing historical elements can ground a piece of fictional artwork.

In order to produce character designs that accurately portray both aspects of my setting, I conducted research pertaining to the American West and its portrayals in other media. Beyond research into the events of this time period, I also gathered images from the 1800s Western era from online databases and museums. Beyond westerns, I also reference media that encapsulates the Lovecraftian aesthetic and use their work as an example on how to approach my own eldritch inspired designs. The research I conducted ultimately aided my design process and shaped the character designs as whole; my character designs are a visual representation of my research.
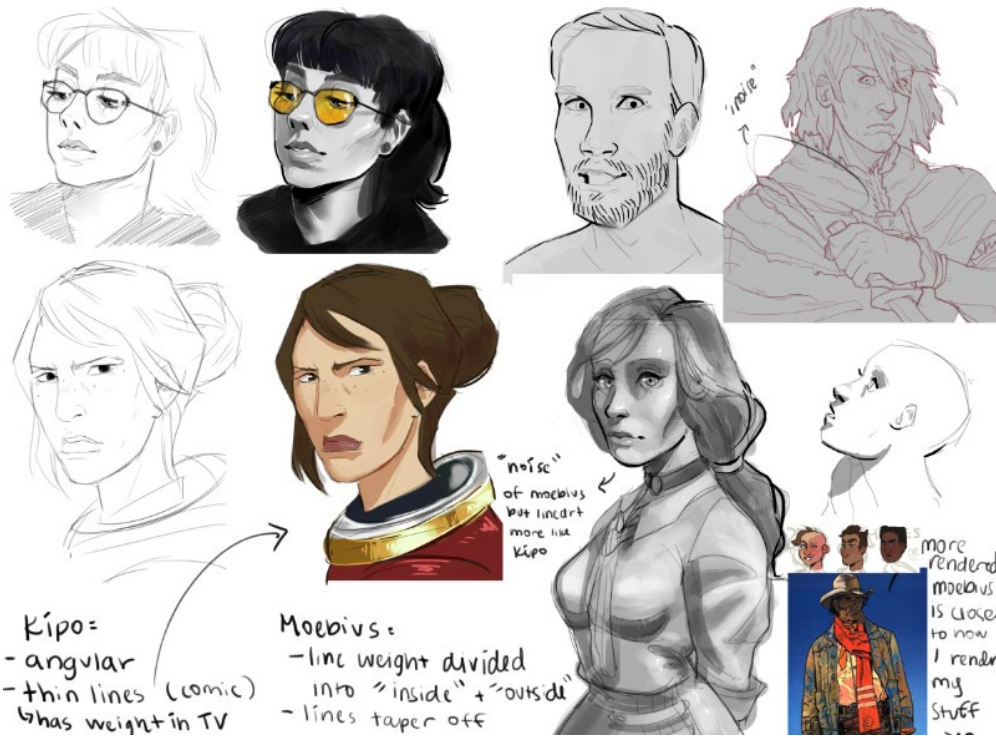
Figure 1.2.1: My preliminary work exploring the art style that I wanted to capture in my art. Specifically, I was examining how line weight is used within Blueberry and how I could combine that with my personal art style.

Additionally, I will use archetypes and costumes from western movies to help mold the appearance of my characters. I will make five of these character designs, and will discuss the characteristics of each individual design and how they relate to the research I conducted. Specifically, I provide reasoning behind each major visual decision made for my characters and how they relate to their historical context, archetype, and personality. The art style I will be using as my inspiration is the work of Moebius, primarily his comic series *Blueberry*, which follows a group of characters in the American West during the late 1800s. Although I will not directly imitate his work, I will be referencing how *Blueberry* depicts its subject matter in its shapes and varied line weight (Charlier and Giraud).

2.   HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

2.1   The Role of Concept Art

To better understand how one achieves visual realism, we must first start at understanding concept art's purpose within the entertainment industry. Concept art, at its core, is the visual planning during pre-production, whether it be for an animation, video game, or another form of visual entertainment (Heikkinen). It can depict anything that will appear in a project, ranging from characters to environments. Ultimately, the goal of concept art is to produce artwork that visually articulates ideas without explanation in writing. In works such as Shadowline: the Art of Iain McCaig, the illustrations of characters and the setting communicate their relationship to each other without any additional text or commentary from the author. This demonstrates the ideology that artwork should be able to stand alone without verbal support. The focus of my research pertaining to concept art discusses how to use historical visuals to suspend the viewer's disbelief and make the artwork appear grounded in realism.

2.2   Applying History to Art

Human beings naturally gravitate towards visuals that are more familiar to them, as seen in the writings of Lopez-Chao. Their research specifically highlights the effect of architectural designs on an individual, which supports the idea that history, and by extension heritage, has an impact on those who view them (Lopez-Chao). Humans are constantly affected by visual stimulus and are innately inspired by the events we experience. Utilizing these experiences in art, whether historical or personal, allows viewers to more profoundly connect to it. This familiarity

directly engages with those who engage with it, demonstrating the powerful impact of using history within visual arts.

An instance where this idea of historical similarities being used in works of art is fully realized is in the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The series takes place in a world of four nations whose people are able to control the four major elements - fire, earth, water, and air – with a technique known as bending. The Avatar is an individual who can control all of the elements and, when born, takes on the reincarnated spirit of all previous Avatars. The story takes place once hundred years after the Fire Nation declared war, seeking to conquer all other people under their banner. It is up to the new Avatar, Aang, and his group of friends to fight back and restore peace to the world. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has a fantastical premise with powerful magical characters and spiritual abilities. Despite it being entirely fictional, the strong worldbuilding used by creators Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko makes the world appear believable and aesthetically clear to viewers. First, the nations are based on real life. Even the most fictional and fantastical element of the series, bending, is rooted in different martial art styles that capture the essence of the element's culture.

By using a piece of history that an audience is able to identify and familiarize themselves with, the authors lay a solid foundation for their worldbuilding. This approach gives the viewer the opportunity to fill in the gaps themselves; not all aspects of the world need to be fully explained to them, because they can make educated assumptions based on the similarities to real life things. This fundamental concept is what I wish to emulate in my own world building and subsequent character designs. In order to create a realistic and believable world, I need to have a clear understanding of the part of history that I will be referencing in my designs.

2.2.1   The Growing West

Before approaching Western history, I had to narrow the scope of my research. Since fashion is a direct response to the technological, social, and economic changes of a time period, clothing styles can shift very radically within a short time. This is especially true during the American West during the 1800s. With this in mind, I constrained the scope of my research to the late 1800s with the majority being from the 1880s. This was not just to ensure historical accuracy, but also to create a strong visual cohesion between my character designs.

One of the most profitable parts of this time period that shaped the technology, and by extension the visuals and aesthetics, was the rise in oil production. Improved drilling techniques and an overall increase in the use of petroleum launched the United States into the beginnings of the age of oil. With demand created by the introduction of the internal combustion engine, oil became more prevalent than ever through railroads, construction, and other industrial advancements (History). Late 1800's expansion into the West via railroads was fueled by the abundance of oil for mechanical production by giving people a faster and more accessible mode of transportation. This allowed people from all over the United States to travel west, bringing their fashion in tow. Railroads even impacted the functionality-centered fashion of cowboys as they began to incorporate buffalo hides into their clothing after hunting and clearing land for railroads (Kiger). The idea of industrial transcendence and subsequent mass migration is a concept that I found very intriguing, so I spent my time accumulating a visual library pertaining to oil production. I wanted to capture an overwhelming feeling of impressive mass and all-encompassing destruction that steadily covered the West. Oil mining, industrialization, and the effects it had on the environment were all aspects I implemented into my world building. I implemented these concepts by making oil production the primary economic drive of the West.

Beyond environmental aspects, the railroads and production of oil also drove many to move west in search of work. While mass migration encouraged growth in the West, it also brought challenges. Where there was great profit, there was also great conflict; many of these groups competed with each other in order to establish stability within the West, whether that be monetary, social, or cultural means. Rising tensions eventually resulted in the passing of exclusionary laws preventing minorities such as Chinese workers from entering the United States (Kiger).

2.2.2 *The American Cowboy*

Over the years, the depiction of the American cowboy has deviated from its historic counterpart. In the late 19th century, popular culture often displayed the cowboy as a white, heroic man who lived a life of honor and adventure. Stories were crafted to show these figures as paragons fighting against injustice with their fellow Americans. In reality, the cowboys were not a single homogenous group of people. The first instance of these roaming cattlemen were Spanish vaqueros who had brought cattle to Mexico centuries before the 1800s (*The American West*). Early *vaqueros* clothing such as the sombrero, ponchos, and leather boots paved the way for the attire of American cowboys. Although not a perfectly equal or democratic environment, the end of Reconstruction brought opportunities for African Americans for work; to what extent is still fairly under researched by historians (Goldstein-Shirley). A skilled cattle hand from any walk of life could find opportunity among each other while facing the dangers of the West. With this in mind, I found it extremely important to include a wide range of characters for my designs; there isn't just one kind of cowboy.

I also found it important to capture the economic struggle of being a cowboy. Large cattle drives were mostly obsolete by the 1880s, leaving many to find work on a lower scale (Kiger). However, this did not decrease the severity of the work; to be a cowboy was a job, first and foremost, and any semblance of adventure that came with it carried equal amounts of danger. Although I created a level of grandeur within my world building for the sake of entertaining viewers, I also recognize the importance of acknowledging where facts deviate from fiction within my story. Ultimately, this process pushed me to capture the essence and ideals of the Western frontier while still making something fun and memorable. I preserved the struggle of personal pursuits during times of hardships through the setting of my world and created adventure through the interactions between characters who live in it.

2.2.3   Western Archetypes

The TV western rose to prominence during the 1950s as television became more accessible and replaced radio as a highly popular form of entertainment (Kiss). These shows consisted of main characters who strove to do good in a world filled with bad and succeeding in the face of great difficulty. It reflected a desire to capture aspects and reflect them into present day culture with modern beliefs. However, it did not serve as an exact replication of the past. Although it preached the importance of civil responsibility and the inherent goodness that lied within people's hearts, it also viewed the past through rose-tinted glasses and rebranded the historical Old West into the Wild West.

There was a shift in tone and how westerns were approached with the of movies known as spaghetti westerns. These films, whose name originates from being filmed in Italy, were often made with a small budget and showed the grittiness of life in the West (Fridlund). No longer was

the cowboy idealized as the same moral compass depicted in old westerns; grittier stories were led by morally gray characters. Nuance was added to the cowboy formula in that they were depicted to have their own drives and motivations that lied outside of being a good citizen, and that meant they did not have to inherently do good or act kindly. This was commonly depicted through unstable partnerships and blunt violence, or as complicated through morally gray characters (Fridlund). These characters were still idealized in the sense that they were viewed as strong masculine figures, but they were no longer the same ethical paragons they used to be. Spaghetti westerns took previous ideas crafted for the genre and modified them to fit differently within the same context of Western life. In a way, the rise in popularity of spaghetti westerns spoke to being aware of what lenses we use to view the events of the past. It questioned how far we should deviate from history within art, especially within the context of entertainment.

This is the concept I explored in my in my own world building and character designs. Although these movies and stories weren't rooted in total historical accuracy, they can still be used to get ideas across to an audience. Common elements and archetypes emerged from these westerns, and these types of characters became common enough for viewers to easily identify them and understand their role in the story. Spaghetti westerns can be split into two categories; *syntactic*, which is the "certain constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable placeholders" and *semantic*, which is a "list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots…' and others (Fridlund). I created my character designs with a semantic approach by having the characters serve as direct reflections of traits and archetypes seen in westerns. The archetypes that I used as the basis for my character designs were the Shopkeeper, Undertaker, Drifter, Kid, and Determined Widow. By using these established archetypes, my artwork communicates clear ideas about my characters' personalities through their appearance. Although using archetypes are

not historical in a realistic way, they still create a familiarity a viewer can easily rationalize. Western archetypes present the driving forces within this time period; self-actualization, determination, and independence. Where implementing historical visuals makes the appearances of my characters look realistic, the archetype visuals that guided my designs and show their personalities to make them feel like real people.

While it is the job of the artist to play on preconceptions the viewer has to create believable artwork, relying on viewer expectations should be approached with caution (Gurney). Using visual archetypes can communicate surface level information about a character, it should not be the sole defining factor in their creation. Archetypes provide the viewer with the ability to assess aspects of a character at a glance, not be the sole definition of who the character is. Playing solely on familiar visual language will result in a bland character design. Artistic liberties should be used to elevate familiar content into something more visually engaging. Creativity and originality cannot be created from preexisting material alone; making an iconic or unique character relies on outside ideas.

2.2.4   Lovecraftian Influences

While researching Lovecraft themes to gather references for my visual library, I had a difficult time finding images that represented the themes I wanted in my art. One of the major aspects of eldritch horror is the concept of something existing beyond human comprehension. With this in mind, I had to seek out examples beyond Lovecraft's novels in order to determine how to visualize the incomprehensible. One of the most successful and appealing examples I discovered in my research was FromSoftware's game *Bloodborne*. Published in 2015, *Bloodborne* combines aspects of eldritch horror into a Gothic European setting, ultimately

providing a unique visual twist to something historically grounded in appearance. The approach *Bloodborne* uses in order to visualize Lovecraftian elements alongside historical visuals is near identical to my creative artifact. By analyzing the art direction of *Bloodborne*, I learned how to use history and fiction to mold a realistic setting and subsequently play with the viewer's expectations. This is seen primarily in the use of religious imagery; traditional Gothic churches are perverted with stark images of blood and ancient, otherworldly beings, reimagining European history under a monstrous lens. It leaves the viewer with a sense of unease as they are forced to see history painted in a different light.

As previously mentioned, *Bloodborne* takes a historical time period and remakes it to fit within a new context. This allows the player to more easily understand the inner workings of the world and how they can relate themselves to the events that unfold around them. The story is centered within Yharnam, a city established on the long-dead corpses of ancient gods. Cathedrals loom over the player with architectural elements reminiscent of Gothic architecture (Kiara and Sato). This recognizable environment, that being a European Gothic city, allows the player to understand the time period and setting that they are in. To fit within the setting, the clothing worn by the main character and NPCs take inspiration from Victorian Era fashion. Women are generally seen wearing bonnets and lace, while male characters are dressed in long waistcoats, high-collared dress shirts, and top hats (Kiara and Sato). However, it also includes elements that aren't necessarily historically accurate, but have strong associations with the Catholic influence of the time period, such as long priestly robes or cloaks, nun-like uniforms, and ornate masks that bear a similar appearance to religious statues. Ultimately, Bloodborne evokes the Victorian Era through the use of historical imagery and playing upon the player's preconceived ideas of this time period.

Figure 2.2.4.1: Concept art in the Bloodborne Art Book showcases the Victorian influence in clothing designs, especially in the top right illustration (Kiara and Sato).

Although highly rooted in the visuals from the Victorian Era, *Bloodborne's* visual direction simply would not exist without discussing the influence of H.P Lovecraft. From his stories, he concocted tales of unseen horrors too incomprehensible for the human mind to understand. If one were to attempt to look at such monstrosities, it would leave the viewer broken and bodied, their minds becoming riddled with madness. Lovecraft especially pushed this idea, almost stating that in the pursuit of understanding this forbidden knowledge, it is inevitable that madness would surely follow. This idea of seeking knowledge and its negative connotations can be seen in the attire of the inhabitants of Yharnam. Although there are designs in *Bloodborne* that more blatantly depict Lovecraft's work in the form of enormous tentacled monstrosities, the focus of my research was on the human designs since I intended on making characters who were humanoid. The human designs in *Bloodborne* demonstrate an understated approach to the

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Lovecraftian aesthetic. They are clearly dressed in Victorian clothing, but their forms and clothing embody the fear that Lovecraft held in regards to forbidden knowledge. Many of these human characters incorporate covered eyes into their designs, hiding their gaze from forbidden knowledge lest they allow madness to fester in their lives. The ideology and terror of Lovecraft is reflected in the character designs instead of directly adapting the visuals described within his work.

Figure 2.2.4.2: Concept art in the Bloodborne Art Book showcases how the eyes of the characters are covered using their clothing (Kiara and Sato).

The approach *Bloodborne* uses in order to visualize Lovecraftian elements in tandem with established historically inspired visuals will be very similar to my own. Although I'm not creating characters within a Gothic European setting, I used this approach as the basis for approaching my western designs. The majority of my characters, save for the Undertaker, are not

monstrous in nature. Each character was made to express the ideological elements and feelings within Lovecraft's writings. With this in mind, the implementation of Lovecraftian features will not be nearly as apparent as *Bloodborne*'s approach. Eldritch edits to the characters were implemented primarily through their clothing or other elements worn on the body rather than the character's body itself. The Lovecraftian elements enrich the setting of *Manifest* rather than being a direct focus on its own. The humans are merely vessels to experience the eldritch elements of the setting.

2.3   Research and Worldbuilding

"When the west wind blows, the first thing you notice is the smell."

The story of my world, titled *Manifest*, functions around the oil boom of the West. With people flocking to the West in pursuit of economic gain, oil production is the lifeblood of *Manifest*. However, oil isn't found underground like in our world. Instead, gigantic eldritch beings made of oil and tar roam land, leaving thick black liquid in their wake. These creatures, referred to as *spills*, are effectively living and breathing goldmines that are tracked down and harvested for profit. Where these giant monsters originated from and their purpose is completely unknown, but being made of one of the most profitable materials during the late 1800's makes civilians overlook the mystery and focus on the wealth *spills* can provide. While they bring the promise of great wealth wherever they migrate, they also have potential for great destruction. The black, thick liquid that falls beneath them can erupt with just one small spark, igniting an entire herd into a miles long wall of flame and death. These monsters elicit Lovecraftian horror

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in their enormous, bulbous forms. Beyond the environmental hazards, the appearance of *spills* has also brought out the worst in humanity. Many folks have migrated to the West chasing their greed and, although not all of them are unsavory, crime has increased over the years. Whether of good or bad intentions, these individuals have come from all across the state to form caravans and hunt down these creatures for the potential to bring about a new life for themselves – if they survive the journey.
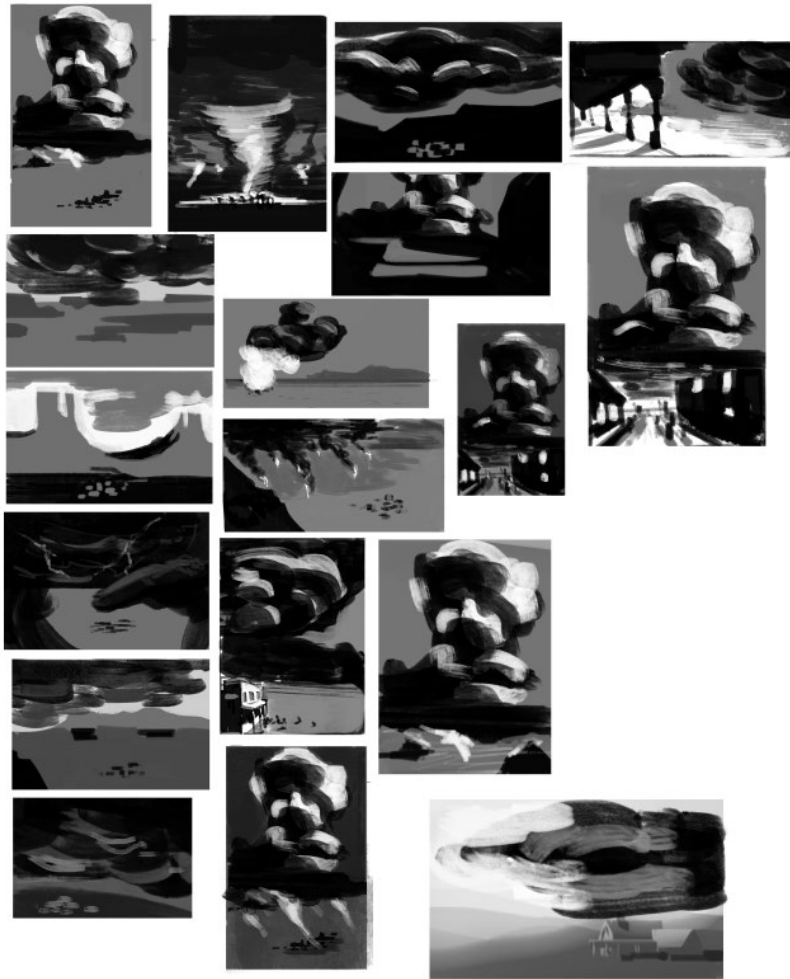

Figure 2.3.1: Thumbnails of my setting. Large, dark clouds can be seen rolling over the desolate landscape. Although I did not end up creating environment pieces as a part of my final artifact, these thumbnails helped me visualize the world and assess how my character designs would be influenced by the environment.

The economy of the West relies on excursions to hunt down *spills*. These workers, often referred to as slicks due to their oil-soaked appearance, manage caravans ranging in size and funding. Just like the twenty mule teams that traversed Death Valley in the late 19th century, they are made up of four major roles; drovers, people who tend to the animals, traders, and guards (Faye). Drovers control the animals who pull the caravan, and keep them moving at a pace that is both sustainable for the animals and fast enough to make quick deliveries. Others are in charge of the animals' well-being, taking on jobs such grooming, feeding, bedding, and watering. Traders conduct the business side of caravan work, acting either as merchants or simply funding the caravan itself. Guards are in charge of protecting the animals as well as the other workers. Caravans in *Manifest* function very similarly, with slicks taking on one of these four jobs when signing onto an excursion. Drawing upon visual similarities to the historical twenty mule team and applying them to my character designs is important, since this economic role is vital to my worldbuilding. The purpose of concept art is to visually articulate an idea, so it is important that this level of understanding is achieved. The realistic references provide a guideline to follow that makes sense and, ultimately, demonstrates how history can be used to help connect an audience to a work of art.

Figure 2.3.2: More environment thumbnails that depict caravans tracking spills. I focused on capture the size difference between the slicks and the looming clouds above them, emphasizing danger that comes with hunting these gigantic, otherworldly beasts.

With a better understanding of how caravans function within *Manifest*, equipment and other items that are common in the western genre must be reviewed to determine whether or not they work within my world. With the prevalence of oil through *spills*, and the uncertainty surrounding them, fire has been made illegal. This presents one of the first major changes from historical events. Changes to history require the viewer to see results that are explainable within the context of the world, so the impact of fire being banned would need to be blatantly apparent. Where cowboys used firearms in the 1800s, cowboys in *Manifest* are forced to use crossbows, harpoons, or bows. Equipment such as holsters have been modified to accommodate these new

weapons, and other equipment such as quivers are the second most common tool used by cowboys. Ultimately, a world gains legitimacy when there are clear reasons behind historical inaccuracies.

2.3.1 Application of Research in Character Designs

Figure 2.3.1.1: An example of implementing references into a character design and applying shapes through clothing to the Shopkeeper archetype.

The primary goal of character concept art is to capture the essence of a character in their appearance alone. To start creating concept art, generally you begin with creating a mood board. These are reference boards that contain images of aesthetics, hairstyles, outfits, or any other major visuals that can be easily referenced when designing a character. This portion of the concept art process directly showcases the importance of using historical references to create artwork; mood boards provide an artist with the visual means to create a realistic and believable piece of artwork.
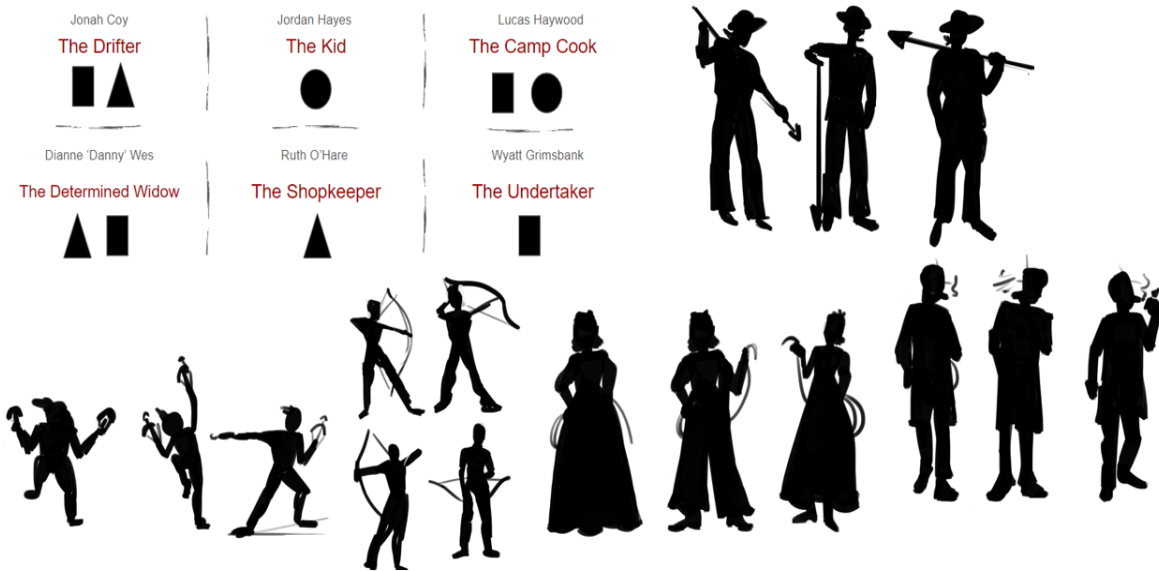
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Figure 2.3.1.2: Here, I planned out which shapes I wanted to use within my designs. By placing them onto a chart with simple visuals, I always had a place to reference the overall ideas and shapes I wanted to utilize. The silhouettes are direct results of the planning I did prior to drawing.

After accumulating references, an artist can begin to draw out simple concepts for a character. During this stage, details are unimportant as emphasis should be placed on larger forms and the overall shape of the design. The personality of a character is communicated clearly by the form and silhouette through its shape language, which relies on applying the feelings that certain shapes evoke to a design (Pelowski and Akiba). By relying on the innate emotions that are expressed through simple forms, a strong shape language can show the viewer the personality and emotions of a character without words. This is achieved by creating an interesting silhouette by emphasizing certain body parts, modifying clothing, or using personable poses.

Figure 2.3.1.3: Examples of applying references to preliminary sketches to the Drifter archetype. Here, I've already determined his shape language and personality, and now focusing primarily on the character's clothing. By using these references, my character takes on the appearance of a western protagonist, fitting within the visual expectations of the viewer.

The primary I used to make my characters were rectangles, triangles, and circles. Each of these shapes elicit specific feelings when applied to a character design, and can also vary depending on the context in which it is used. Triangles can represent instability or femininity, while rectangles are sturdy. Circles and their bounciness depict a playful feeling into a design. Overall, intentionally using shapes is important when creating a silhouette in order to make their personalities clear from the moment a viewer sees them.

Figure 2.3.1.4: Examples of applying references to silhouettes for the Determined Widow archetype. Here, I've put emphasis on determining a pose that best represents her personality.

Manifest features five primary characters who are members of the Grimsbank Caravan, a moderately financed and highly unqualified group of individuals trying to strike it rich in the West. These shapes and visuals I will be using will ultimately help convey the personalities of the characters, which are based on the Shopkeeper, Undertaker, Drifter, Kid, and Determined Widow archetypes.

3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT

3.1 Exhibition Process

I presented my work at the URS Symposium as my exhibition. It was conducted online, which gave me the opportunity to present my artwork and focus on the intricate details of my work by enlarging the pictures individually. Due to the medium of my artwork being digital, I could easily do this simultaneously showcasing my work in an online presentation format.

To present my character designs, I gathered and organized pictures that documented my process. First, I established the historical context of my world and then discussed how my research impacted my mood boards and character silhouettes. I then produced final renders of my character deigns, displaying them in a lineup. I displayed my five characters side by side to highlight how they visually complement each other. Beyond showing a consistent style, placing the characters beside one another shows how they collectively fit within the context of my theme. Additionally, I viewed each character individually on their own slide to focus on specific design choices that I made for each design. All of my artwork was made in Adobe Photoshop, so increasing the image size did not lead to a loss of detail.

3.2 Character Design Analysis

I wanted to achieve a wide level of variety within the characters' visuals, so I took extra care in using different shapes and combinations. Each character had multiple silhouette thumbnails made in order to determine the best pose and overall shape for their personality. I also gave my characters' clothing a primary color to more easily identify them from a distance. However, I made sure that these individual elements didn't make the characters seem too

visually separate from each other. I also made the economic and social statuses of my characters through how closely they follow the fashion trends of the decade. Additionally, I subtly applied the incomprehensible aspect of Lovecraftian imagery. Every aspect mentioned will be further elaborated on for each individual character design I created for my archetypes.

3.2.1   *The Shopkeeper, Ruth O'Hare*

As the shopkeeper archetype, I wanted Ruth to have colors and clothing that indicated a higher level of wealth compared to that of her companions. Although she is not in charge of the caravan as a wealthy benefactor, her past ties to money and business should be reflected in her design. The abundance of green in her clothing is representative of money. Triangles are also the primary shape within her design, as seen in her skirt shape. This is to show her mental sharpness and give a stronger sense of femininity to the character. To play into both her femininity and wealth, it was important for me to adorn Ruth's design with jewelry such as her gem necklace and earrings. This also plays into her role as a shopkeeper rather than a pure caravan employee; her clothing portrays her as less dirty than others in the Grimsbank Caravan. Her focus is on profits alone rather than the adventuring portion of her contract.

Implementing eldritch horror elements was a bit difficult to conceptualize in Ruth's design. I wanted to both include Lovecraftian elements to highlight the strange departure from standard westerns in *Manifest* while also showing that she is a bit disconnected from her surroundings due to her wealth. As a way to bridge these two ideas, I decided on having the character hold a rope leash that is tethered to a spill. This both implies her drive to capitalize on the existence of *spills* by using them as a sideshow attraction or breeding and her ignorance to their danger. It appears fairly surface level, but this depiction contributes to her overall archetype

as a shopkeeper for holding profit above all else; she takes advantage over something she doesn't fully understand in order to gain an economic upper hand against rival caravans. She appears almost cocky even though she doesn't have a complete picture of what she is dealing with, relying on her sharp wit as a professional to carry her. In the end, she believes that good business sense is more reliable than her survival instincts. This thought process embodies the tendency of humans in Lovecraftian literature to mess with things that they do not fully understand. However, it also encapsulates the idea of self-sufficiency from westerns in the way that she interacts with the *spills*. There isn't a fear of the unknown or lack of comprehension for ignorance's sake, but rather a strong spirit and desire for self-sufficiency that eclipses any potential fear she may have.

3.2.2 The Undertaker, Wyatt Grimsbank

For Wyatt Grimsbank, the character that embodies the Undertaker archetype, I wanted him to contain elements in his design that made him appear strange or uncomfortable like a foreboding omen. As the one who funds caravan excursions and hires the other characters, Wyatt sets the precedent for the start of their journey. He is the one that guides others down a dangerous journey with fantastical horror and adventure. With this in mind, I relied heavily on imagery that is typical of Death including dark colors, pale skin, inky black eyes, and a thin frame to appear almost skeletal. The rectangle is the primary shape used in his design, but its purpose is different from the Drifter's. Using the elongated shape creates a looming presence to give an overwhelming, encompassing stature. This feeling created from his shape language amplifies the eldritch nature of his design. His uncomfortable and foreboding energy is also captured in a simple prop that I included in his design. Wyatt smokes a cigarette, which shows his disregard for the law as well as the safety of others. Since fire is outlawed and can cause

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incredible amounts of damage if *spills* suddenly appear, smoking a cigarette is a dangerous act. This demonstrates how detached he is from the world and the consequences around him, which plays further into his eldritch and above-it-all nature.

The Lovecraftian aesthetic was most captured in this particular character. His boney, lanky form is a skeletal departure from the typical human frame. The appearance leans into the otherworldly strangeness that Lovecraft often uses in his work, although the historical clothing still makes it feel familiar to the viewer. The Undertaker's eyes are completely dark with inky black liquid spilling from them, holding visual similarities to the *spills* that roam the West. Additionally, his eyes appear almost feline; light reveals the irises as a reflective, unsettling yellow glare. Wyatt serves as the bridge between the two concepts – westerns and Lovecraft – in the most direct way by having physical characteristics that exist in the environment of *Manifest*. His eldritch connections also fall within his archetype's role as the Undertaker, as it physically displays his connection between live and death, order and chaos. Beyond his physical appearance, Wyatt also wears clothing that has more stereotypical Eldritch imagery. His dark clothing is subtly littered with gold accents of tentacle designs, as seen in his cufflinks and belt buckle. The use of subtly showing wealth also is a nod toward Wyatt's role within the caravan, as he is the sole source of funding for the Grimsbank Caravan.

3.2.3   The Drifter, Jonah Coy

As the Drifter archetype, I wanted Jonah Coy to be a semi-blank slate that the viewer could use to compare to the more fantastical looking characters. The Drifter is generally the protagonist of westerns, so it was important that he was the most visually similar to the standard characters and visual tropes found in old westerns. He is made primarily of rectangles and

triangles to convey his personality. The sturdiness of the rectangles demonstrates his standard stability as a strong western protagonist. The angular additions of the triangles elevate his design, giving an inherent sharpness to him. This shows that, while he may be stable in appearances, his posture showcases a slightly unstable personality or weariness. The triangles in his posture reflect his reaction to the world of *Manifest*. He is judgmental of this new environment he has found himself in, and this is also demonstrated in the peaked eyebrow and frown of his facial expressions. His color scheme consists of a series of browns to further cement his appearance as a standard cowboy type character. This is done to both visually connect him to the Drifter archetype of western movies as well as the standard clothing of the 1800s American West. The implementation of cowboy boots, spurs, and a large brown duster coat all lean into this desired aesthetic.

As previously stated, this character in particular serves more as a visual device to compare the strangeness of *Manifest* in relation to standard westerns. He is the fish out of water, the main character who has been introduced to a new world along with the viewers. Therefore, he should reflect his role in the story through his appearance. Jonah wears standard chaps and, overall, has a fairly average appearance. He is not too raggedy or uptight, and his clothes have the standard wear and tear earned through traveling. He is unassuming, although he wears a matching vest and spats - a footwear worn outside that covers the - as a way to show an intention to appear put together. For coming into a new land such as the West of *Manifest*, he absolutely looks like he wishes to look the part.

3.2.4   The Kid, Jordan 'Jo' Hayes

As the Kid archetype, Jordan Hayes should be seen as the wild spirit of the group. She is skilled, capable, but has a tendency for ignorance due to her young age and natural talent. With

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this in mind, I wanted for her to be perceived as slightly unhinged or wild in her personality. I ended up using circles in the majority of her design as a way to showcase her bouncy and turbulent personality, especially when compared to the more structured and stable characters. Jordan's clothing also represents her personality; her pants are a hodgepodge of different fabrics covering a series of rips and tears, playing into her chaotic nature. She wears a standard western duster like the Drifter, but differs in the plethora of bullet holes that litter the back. This plays into visualizing both her wild lifestyle and her role as the Kid. Furthermore, Jordan wields two crossbows, which is a departure to the equipment her comrades wield. This demonstrates her rambunctious personality by showing her preference for extra firepower in exchange for defense. The primary color in her clothing is red, which represents passion, energy, and danger.

A Kid is a product of their environment; they grow up to be talented and highly skilled because there is simply no other option to succeed. Therefore, it was important for me to create Jordan in a way that showcases how children could be affected growing up in an environment inhabited by the eldritch inspired *spills*. Her tie to her environment is the burns that consume half of her face and body by showing the effects of living in a place that harshly punishes mistakes. She is intensely scarred from playing with fire despite it being illegal in *Manifest*. Her appearance visualizes the consequences of actions, as she has grown up with a physical reminder on why one should follow the rules and stay in line. Although she isn't specifically eldritch in appearance, Jordan's physical characteristics tie her to the eldritch beings within *Manifest.* Her wounds help combine the fantastical and historical elements I've used as inspiration for my world. Overall, her character focuses on the effects these Lovecraftian elements have on the civilians of *Manifest* rather than being a direct eldritch character design. Jordan's design contributes to worldbuilding itself.

3.2.5   The Determined Widow, Diane 'Danny' Wes

As the Determined Widow archetype, I wanted Diane Wes to be seen as a strong, melancholic personality within the group. The primary forms used within her design are similar to the Drifter's triangle and rectangle shapes, but they are used in a different way that gives them different meanings. In this design, triangles are to show a feminine edge to Diane's design while the rectangle demonstrates her mental and physical strength. This plays into her role as the Determined Widow, as she contains an unrelenting drive to conquer a task placed in front of her. Diane's color palette also compliments her archetype role. Her design consists of a variety of yellows and gold to show her jovial disposition, though they have dull saturation to not make it stand out too much against the other characters. The muted colors also align itself more closely to the personality of the character, which is a more soft-spoken kindness. To add variety to the character lineup, I also have her wielding a bow and arrow rather than crossbows like the other members of the Grimsbank Caravan. This plays into the different weapon types within *Manifest*. As previously established, the banning of fire has made firearms illegal, and crossbows are inherently more expensive than bow and arrows. Dianne using this weapon type shows more how the world operates, and the Determined Widow specifically using the bow and arrow plays into her internal strength and resourcefulness. It shows her mental fortitude as well as her physical strength, as she has to spend more energy to line up shots and manually charge them.

Similar to the Drifter's limited eldritch elements, the Determined Widow also doesn't outwardly have any characteristics that are blatantly strange like the Shopkeeper's *spill* or the Undertaker's inky tears. However, her main color within her palette – yellow – connects her much more closely to eldritch stories than the other character designs. Although not directly Lovecraftian, the use of yellow is a subtle callback to *The King in Yellow*, an eldritch horror

story by Robert W. Chambers. On her own, Diane wouldn't necessarily stand out as a character with Lovecraftian influence, but within the context of the world it is clear to those familiar with his work. Diane fits into the visual language of the group but is able to hold her own as a strong western design when isolated.

4.   REFLECTION

4.1   Looking Back

Going through the concept art pipeline from gathering visual reference for mood boards, creating character thumbnails, and producing final rendered character designs allowed me to implement the knowledge gained through my research. As I explained during my research, the use of historical visuals in the form of clothing ultimately made my character designs more realistic to a viewer. The importance of using references when drawing cannot be understated; something will only appear as believable if an artist is able to capture what the human eye sees. However, through the process of creating my character designs, I also found that using references when conceptualizing my characters streamlined the creative process as a whole. I often found myself inspired to create my own designs reminiscent of American westerns, but of a flavor that was entirely my own. This is seen primarily in my Kid archetype. The character includes elements from stereotypical westerns, such as the large brown duster and cowboy boots, while also deviating from the standard with different colored eyes, strange burns, and exaggerated fantasy-like body parts. Using references gave me a safety net to fall back on if I ever felt as if my character designs deviated too far from the Western aesthetic I sought to achieve.

I often went back to assess my references, especially when I explored different ways to implement the Lovecraftian elements in my designs. This proved to be one of the most difficult parts of my research. An interesting problem I came in contact with was that Lovecraftian horror relies on the unknown or incomprehensible, and I found myself wondering how I could successfully visualize something that is incomprehensible to the human mind. In this instance, I

relied even more heavily on my research into *Bloodborne*'s art direction and directly referenced its concept art book. In the end, I took an ideological approach to implementing my eldritch elements rather than using the same blatant visuals *Bloodborne* uses to convey their eldritch elements. I focused less on creating fully unidentifiable forms and instead made slight uneasy alterations to things familiar to the viewer, such as the human form. This is seen in the Undertaker character design, where the character is explicitly human but contains elements that make him appear inhuman, such as his angular facial features, inky eyes, and deathly pale skin.

4.1.1 *URS Symposium Feedback and Reflection*

Presenting my research and creative work also proved to be an interesting challenge. I spent a significant amount of time sorting through my research and determining what was pertinent information for the viewers to know. It was challenging to distinguish between unimportant details and the appropriate amount of context needed to understand my characters and environment. After spending months organizing my thoughts and research, it became difficult to discern what information could be implied and what needed to be explicitly stated. I would have benefited from having someone unfamiliar with my work look over my presentation before I made my submission to the URS Symposium. The majority of my feedback recommended that I talk more about my world building, as my research of the American West took about a third of my presentation time. In hindsight, I should have spent more relating the details of *Manifest* and the character designs to historical events rather than dedicating separate slides to the research itself. Not only would this allow more time to discuss *Manifest* and leave the viewer less confused, it would also demonstrate exactly what I sought to prove with my

research; historical elements visualized in concept art can aid viewer understanding without explicitly stating the historical significance or purpose behind them.

4.2   Looking Forward

Moving forward, I would like to extend this information into aspects of concept art beyond character design. Drawing fully rendered environment pieces would help the viewer better understand the world of *Manifest*. This would also give me the opportunity to place my characters in an environment where they can interact and portray their archetypes and personalities bouncing off of each other. The original scope of my project included environment pieces, but they had to be removed due to time constraints. Although I was able to showcase the time period of *Manifest* through my characters' clothing, it would be even more interesting to place these characters within a fully visualized setting. Compositions with high amounts of actions could demonstrate the danger of the caravans and even highlight each character's role within the caravan. Overall, environment pieces would test how well the characters fit within a western setting, serving as a backdrop for the designs to be placed and compared to the setting they inhabit. Further alterations could then be made to the character designs to better help them fit within a western inspired environment. This would also provide me with the opportunity to act more under the scope of a concept art lead rather than just a character concept artist.

4.3   Final Thoughts

Through the conceptualization of my proposal, research, and final artifact, the process of making my character designs has informed my decision-making process moving forward. Meticulously searching through history in both text and images has left me more knowledgeable

about the American West during the 1800s as well as the design process overall. Even with visuals to work from, I had to learn how to assess what aspects of past fashion accurately fit into my aesthetic preferences for this project. Determining which aspects from a time period convey the core visual feel I wished to capture forced me to view the references under a more intense scope. In looking through existing pictures and references, I also found myself searching how other forms of art, such as movies, captured the 1800s. Combining the visuals from history and the visual language from pop culture helped form the framework of my project on the archetypes in these movies.

History always has a way of seeping into the content that we create. Art often is a visual connection between fact and fiction, relying on aspects of reality and morphing them to fit within the rules the artist creates. The more time we dedicate to increasing our visual library, the better we will be able to communicate ideas through imagery. Reflecting on our history and recontextualizing it for new audiences helps them not only better understand the events of the past, but also encourages them to engage with the content on a more personal level. By creating art that is reminiscent of a historical period, it forces the viewer to assess the historical aspects more critically as they engage with it and alter their perceptions toward the content.

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APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT

Figure A.1: Final render of the Shopkeeper archetype, Ruth O'Hare.

Figure A.2: Final render of the Undertaker archetype, Wyatt Grimsbank.

Figure A.3: Final render of the Drifter archetype, Jonah Coy.

Figure A.4: Final render of the Kid archetype, Jordan 'Jo' Hayes.

Figure A.5: Final render of the Determined Widow archetype, Dianne 'Danny' Wes.