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Abstract

“Far and Away” is an illustrated pitch bible created to explore the seedlings of a longer narrative I would like to develop in the future. It presents a beat-by-beat synopsis of the first half of the plot and is followed by a bestiary of creatures met later in the story. I felt presenting the project this way would allow me to display my strengths in children’s illustration and creature design, the two fields of illustration I would like to pursue post-graduation. In this project I pay homage to my favorite Hayao Miyazaki movies, who I credit with inspiring me to pursue a career in art and teaching me your dreams can achieved at any age. In this paper I also explore my artistic process, and how I approach creature design; followed by the career path I plan to follow once I leave Syracuse University.
Far and Away

by

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Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Illustration

Syracuse University

May 2019
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My thesis, “Far and Away.” is a combination of my two greatest loves in the field of illustration, children’s books, and creature design. To merge the two into a cohesive project I created a picture book that summarizes the main plot points of an original story I wrote and supplemented it with a few pages of creature design. A summary of the book portion reads as: during monsoons, residents of a sea-side town can see monsters wandering the waves offshore. The local children are extremely fascinated by these creatures and built a culture around capturing and trading pictures of the leviathans. Adults see the monsters as a regular phenomenon and have little curiosity about them. While attempting to take pictures of one of these monsters in a boat plane, the main character and his dad are swept up in a monsoon and transported to the world the sea monsters inhabit. While searching for a way home, they catalog all the different creatures they come across. The subtext of the story is about forming connections in spite of generational differences and igniting curiosity in the natural world. This project is a distilled version of the things that influenced my greater body of work, and what inspired me to pursue a career in art.

This spark of inspiration can be directly attributed to the works of director Hayao Miyazaki, whose filmography contains a diverse assortment of stories that taught me that storytelling in animation did not have to be restricted to fairytale adaptations. His use of strong female characters, universal themes, and highlighting the complex relationship between humans and the environment were what made me favor his films over those produced by Disney. Walt Disney’s films pioneered the field of animation through their technical achievements such as the multiplane camera, synchronized sound, and creating some of the first feature-length animations; however, they are not very ambitious thematically. Miyazaki’s most contained stories that are more akin to character studies that the protagonist overcoming adversities that are relatable. *Kiki’s Delivery Service* is an example of a small story that is crammed with personal themes like
leaving home for the first time, starting life in a new town, and rediscovering your passions during depression. With Miyazaki movies you get the beautiful set dressing and animation, in addition to powerful storytelling. This level of sophistication is something I’d like to portray in my own work.

Fig 1 Hayao Miyazaki, scene from Kiki’s Delivery Service, animation, Studio Ghibli, 1989, available from: https://www.watershed.co.uk/whatson/6675/kikis-delivery-service (accessed April 1, 2019).

My thesis project pays homage to four of his films that spoke to me the most on a thematic or aesthetic level. These films are *Ponyo*, *Porco Rosso*, *Spirited Away*, and *Princess Mononoke*. There are several aspects from each I wanted to reflect in my project, such as creature and set design, and character archetypes. I appropriated the overall look of the story from *Ponyo*, Miyazaki’s adaptation of *The Little Mermaid*. The sea-side side town, bright colors, and the large role the sea and its creatures play in the greater story are all things that inspired the aesthetics of *Far and Away*. Through *Porco Rosso* I learned that a plane can be just as much as a character as a person, akin to how haunted houses are characters in horror movies. *Spirited
Away, and *Princess Mononoke* sparked the inspiration for my project’s mythological flair: humans traversing veils between worlds and meeting god-like creatures.

![Princess Mononoke](https://drafthouse.com/show/princess-mononoke) (accessed April 1, 2019).

Thematically, I hope *Far and Away* helps smooth out the natural disconnect between older and younger generations by giving them the tools to find common ground. Because mass media has found purchase highlighting the petty differences between younger and older people, I wanted to create something that serves as a foil to the constant negativity buzzing around. The main characters, Koa and his son Haku act as avatars for someone from the upper edge of generation x, and a child from gen Z. I wrote their respective interests to parallel real-world hobbies as well: older adults can relate to Koa’s diligence to his job, while Haku’s hobby is modeled after kids love of collecting things, especially trading card games like *Pokemon*. My thesis serves as a basic exploration for this larger story.
My greater body of work can be described as whimsical, brightly-colored, drawing a great amount of inspiration from nature. Digital art has been my medium of choice since I got my first tablet nearly two decades ago. For years I stressed about having a unique style and what aesthetic best suited the type of stories I wanted to tell. After some experimentation and paying a closer eye to what work inspired me the most, I developed two styles, a clean style that employs the use of line-art, and a messier style with gritty, textured edges. The illustration below is a good example of the lineless, messier style. In it color and shapes are the most important aspects in creating the look of the piece. I try to give my work as much texture as possible, which may seem strange when referring to digital art. Current drawing programs have brushes that allow digital artists to simulate a wide array of textures, and patterns. In the future, I would like to buy a scanner so I can import and edit my own textures. For now, I rely on the wealth of resources provided by the digital art community; though it will be nice to have textures unique to my work.

Creating art starts with parsing out what I’m trying to communicate through a piece. I spend a significant amount of time on this step because mentally exploring a topic makes the thumbnailing phase significantly easier. For me, the thumbnailing phase is to explore different compositions, and to test the practicality of the idea. Concepts I can’t sufficiently execute are simplified, and reworked. Once I have around five thumbnails that I’m satisfied with, I choose my favorite, usually the most cohesive of the group, and move on to the refined sketch stage.

During this stage, I fix things like anatomy, add details, and tighten the composition. The style I have in mind for the piece determines the next step. If I am trying to achieve a classic children’s look style, I jump straight to colors; for something more contemporary, I’ll ink the sketch. With both styles, lined or lineless, I try to incorporate as many textures as I can. Although a line-style implies a more refined look, I’m drawn to gritty line art. Having textured
line work also makes my art look more organic, and less of the sanitized appearance people
normally associate with digital art.

While coloring, I normally use a bright, saturated color palette. Lately, I have been trying
to become more conscious of my color palettes in order to avoid my illustrations being too busy.
Syracuse’s illustration program has taught me using color deliberately elevates the illustration
and draw the viewer's eye in tandem with its composition. To achieve this, I make sure to include
complimentary, and tertiary colors.

For the thesis itself, the creative process began with trying to figure out what I wanted to
advertise to future clients. I have two career paths that I was interested in taking: visual
development and children’s book illustration, so I wanted my final project to reflect both in some
way. The plot of “Far and Away” is also a recycled idea that I came up with in graphic novel
class I took in the spring of my second year at Syracuse. The comic featured a short story that
mainly explored Haku’s home town and introduced the conflict: in the original version of the
story, the conflict was the world of the sea monsters was bleeding over into the human world,
thus the monsters washing on shore after storms. Another significant difference was that Haku’s
friends played a larger role in the story, with a minor plot that followed a similar vein as *E.T.* Over time plans I had for the story grew in scope, and too big to cover in my final project.

Because the storyline was originally created for a serialized medium, I decided to refine it, and illustrate a summary of the story’s first act for my final project. As for the visual development portion, I felt by focusing on creature design I could cover more ground, verses creating a full illustration for each setting, and character interaction. Thus, the children’s book portion shows glimpses of what the human world looks like, while the bestiary displays portions of the different biomes that exist in the world of the sea monsters.

Creating the creatures that inhabit the world behind the storm started with me researching various aquatic animals. After years of consuming media that involve monsters, I learned that the most successful ones were those that stuck to a set of in-universe rules, such as what they prey upon, what preys on them, and how they traverse their environment. The set of rules I devised for the creatures that live in the world behind the storm was they had to be amphibious in design, because they live in a world of sea monsters, thus it is mostly water. I wanted even the terrestrial monsters to be equally as comfortable in the water as they were on land. I also wanted to healthy
representation of various parts of the food chain, starting with the very bottom to an apex predator at the top.

As my time at Syracuse University draws to a close, the question of what next becomes ever more pertinent. Attending the illustration program has given me a great amount of insight into the world of illustration that I did not have before. With the knowledge I gained, I have come to the conclusion pursuing a career in children’s book illustration would best suit my skill set. After graduating, I plan to move back home with my parents for a year to adjust to the workload of being a professional illustrator and pay off my student loans. I am very fortunate to graduate with far less debt than the average college student, so I need to take advantage, and pay most of it off before interest is applied to it.

During the fall of my final year, I was approached by an agent from Bright who specializes in children’s books illustration. With them, I discussed the responsibilities of an agent, which sounded attractive to me as a young illustrator, especially the thought of having someone in my corner to help negotiate contracts and navigate a sea of unfamiliar clients. I also
plan to continue exhibiting at small conventions to aid in networking. The subject of isolation regularly came up during my three years at Syracuse, acknowledged by both my professors, and professional artists I follow on social media. Attending conventions seems like a helpful remedy to networking in a field where you spend most your time independently.
Bibliography


Vita

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Skills
Proficiency in Adobe Creative Suite, expert in Photoshop

Education
Masters of Arts student in Illustration at Syracuse University, September 2016 - May 2019

Bachelors of Science in Film and Television Production at Boston University, September 2012 - May 2016

Past Exhibitions
Created illustrations that followed a specific theme to be displayed in an exhibition
Disney Dream Destinations 2018 | Gallery Nucleus | Los Angeles

Dapper Dogs 2018 | Gallery Nucleus | Los Angeles

Past Conventions
Created merchandise to sell at an event with a large number of attendees. Interacted with customers and other artist to promote my artwork to a greater audience,
Otakon 2016 | Baltimore
Otakon 2017 | Washington DC
MoCCA Art Festival 2017 | New York
MoCCA Art Festival 2018 | New York