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出路
ASCENT

**Designing Characters in an Action Horror Game
About Chinese LGBTQ+ Survival and Power**

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

In mainland China, activism and globalised discourse for LGBTQ+ rights have resulted in a growing backlash of tightened censorship and state-sponsored queerphobia. Discussions are muddled by nationalist rhetoric that villainises queerness as a fully “Western” idea, and effectively dismisses any diasporic Chinese queer perspectives - even China’s own queer history - justifying a push towards blanket heteronormativity. To be Chinese, queer and third culture means to exist uncomfortably in the gap between this East/West ideological war, while being seen as a threat to political stability by your home country and facing an increasingly hostile future environment.

It is crucial to create queer Chinese media that acknowledges this complex third space, especially given the suppression of queer visibility in mainland China and a Western-dominated international LGBTQ+ media landscape. The reinterpretation of folktales can help reflect transforming culture in globalisation and with communicating transnationality, connecting present realities to traditional cultural identity through storytelling.

There is a real ‘horror’ in being queer in an unaccepting, conservative Chinese society, but the queer spirit has always been to prevail against its oppressors – “fighting” against the horror. This project confronts the divide between queer and cultural identities and anxiety for the future, by imagining an action horror game set in a speculative dystopia and visualising this narrative through concept design. I will create a modern queer interpretation of the characters from the famous Chinese classic *西游记/Journey to the West*, as young prisoners trapped in a futuristic conversion facility. The game levels are based on the Buddhist *十八层地狱/18 Levels of Hell* and are filled with machine beasts that are the distorted spirits of Chinese mythological creatures. The intention is to bridge queerness with Chineseness by combining modern queer imagery with elements of Chinese traditional culture, especially historically queer aspects such as Chinese Opera aesthetics – one of the oldest visual forms of storytelling for Chinese mythology.

This research project involves examining queer discrimination in China, issues of queer representation, the legacy of folklore and narrative trends of popular media such as video games, to inform the design of characters and plotline in creating cathartic media for a diasporic Chinese LGBTQ+ audience that aims to be empowering.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	Abstract
4	Table of Contents
6	Introduction
11	Research Question and Aims
12	Terminology
15	Literature Review
16	LGBTQ+ Censorship in China and a Need for Explicit Visibility
18	Exclusion of Queerness from Chineseness: Historical Stigmatization and Ideological War
20	China's External Influence and the Diaspora Rejection of China-centrism
22	Queer Translations of Journey to the West and Chinese Opera
25	LGBTQ+ in Video Games
	Case Studies
28	<i>Outlast</i> - Vestigial Queerphobia in the Horror Genre
31	Empathy and Power - Immersive Impact of Linear Story First-Person Video Games (<i>Bioshock</i> and <i>Half-Life</i>)
	Methodology
36	Adapting the "Journey": Displacing Mythological Characters into Hell
38	Game Synopsis
39	Scope of Outcome: Character Design
41	Character Design Methods
	The Design Work
47	"Sun Wukong"/Protagonist
58	"Tang Sanzang"/Zhiliao'er (Cicada)
66	"Zhu Bajie"/Pearl
68	Final Design Presentation
	Design Findings
76	Personal Growth and Deveopment
78	Conclusion
82	Works Cited
88	List of Images
	Appendix
92	Empowerment for A Chinese Queer Audience

INTRODUCTION

WHO AM I + WHO IS IT FOR?

CHINESE QUEER DIASPORA

This project rose out of a deep personal need to understand how queerness became a taboo topic in my own culture, and to make art out of that inner turmoil. I am a China-born, Singaporean, non-binary queer artist. I am a part of the generation born out of the students who survived Tiananmen Square. My existence is directly shaped by the complex tensions between the people and the state, between queer identity and cultural identity.

I grew up in a relatively openminded Chinese household, but there were still topics that nobody talked about, such as sexuality and gender. Most parts of Asia still grapple with gender inequality and cisgendered heteronormativity. Despite Singapore sitting precariously between the “East” and the “West” in terms of culture, queerness was still not widely talked about and even condemned by some religious communities. The internet opened my world, and I became intensely passionate about global queer history, and the bravery I saw in the LGBTQ+ community in the West, who fought to obtain recognition, rights and respect for their communities and who succeeded in many ways. But the world back “home” was so different. There was great turmoil in existing between the borders, confronted with the starkly contrasting worlds. I never really knew how to reconcile my Chinese identity with my queer identity, because queerness felt “taboo” in Asia.

In general usage, the term “taboo” is increasingly perceived from a critical standpoint and viewed as something negative. After all, taboos appear conservative, out-dated, and authoritarian: They create a climate in which it is prohibited to speak, to act, or even to think about a certain topic. From this understanding, taboos do not allow for discussion and thus, it can be argued, block change. (Jørgensen and Fassone 67)

The shunning seems to only be intensifying, backed by the Chinese Communist Party. There is no denying there has been a steady erasure of queer visibility in mainland China. As an avid participant in online queer fandoms, I witnessed content and communities disappear from Chinese online spaces. During my last visit to China, I looked up everything I could find on the real-life queer community and organisations, only to realise they had fallen one-by-one due to Party-state pressure.

With visibility being removed, information being stifled and safe spaces for queer communities being destroyed, the challenges faced by queer people can only get worse – self-hate, discrimination, social alienation, fear and misinformation, repression, and lack of support systems. Not to mention the active targeting by a government that deploys heavy public surveillance, facial recognition technology, private data tracking and violation of human rights.

There is a genuine horror in being confronted with a grim future you cannot control, knowing that the conservative environment and culture is only going to get worse for you as a queer person, as well as for the future generations who are still searching for their place in the world. This is an existential horror due to external surroundings, instead of an inner demon as commonly depicted in most horror stories.

WHAT IS THE MEDIUM?

CONCEPT DESIGN

Concept design is rooted in a kind of queer imagining that questions and transforms established imagery to create new possibilities, even as it is entangled in the needs of an often repetitive and sometimes conservative industry.

According to Elliot Lilly, the concept designer's main purpose is to "create images that flesh out ideas and designs of a particular subject matter that does not exist yet" (Lilly 12).

In many ways these concept design objectives align with José Esteban Muñoz's words, "queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present...essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz 1; qtd. in Bao, "Queer Comrades" 197).

For me, this project is also a confrontation of the fact that concept design can never truly be a self-standing piece of art. Concept design is type of creative work born out of industry need and serves to visualise ideas for larger production projects of a different medium like film or games (Lilly 23). While not all projects get green-lit, the resulting work still exists as a marker of its conception.

It is the point of this project to visualise a game that will be challenging to realistically produce, by virtue of its subject matter taboos. There is power in making these provocative designs, for the transgressive ideas to be visualised.

HOW AM I DOING IT?

A DYSTOPIAN VIDEO GAME AS CATHARSIS

This project aims to imagine an action horror game which serves as a metaphor for queer oppression in mainland China from a diasporic queer Chinese perspective. Its key themes involve confronting fear and feelings of powerlessness, dystopian visual precedents, and a fight for survival: elements common in video games.

There can be cases made for both 'positive' and 'negative'-leaning portrayals of Chinese LGBTQ+ issues. There is understandable worry about casting a bad light on an Asian culture, to have it seem 'backward' compared to the West and thus a danger of implying that the freedoms and systems enjoyed by the West should be adopted to solve things (Bao, Queer China 15; Liu).

Yet, I am incredibly frustrated with how the topic has been silenced in mainland China and even downplayed in its severity. There are active efforts by the Party-state to fabricate news about progressive developments in LGBTQ+ issues to construct a favourable global image (Wang and Ma 203). Even among writers of Chinese queer issues, many circumvent the inherent hopelessness faced by LGBTQ+ people in China, either intentionally through self-censorship due to Party-state pressure, or not wanting the conversation to "just end in nihilism" (Davies 268; Bao, Queer Media 4). To fall into this camp feels more egregious.

There is also the worry of disingenuous depiction or even glorifying suffering by 'playing with a serious issue', but the creative reinterpreting of negative experiences is common in the works of many queer artists and can be a reclamation of power. Lady Gaga transformed her personal trauma into pop anthems and electrifying music videos like "Marry the Night", "911" and "Replay". Eugene Lee Yang transformed his personal experiences and the struggles of his LGBTQ+ community into a high concept choreographed dancing short film. There is healing in the creative filtering of trauma, and it is an important part of survival. It is perhaps best described by Lady Gaga:

"...it's not that I don't want to see things exactly as they happened, it's just that I prefer to remember them in an artistic way. And truthfully the lie of it all is much more honest because I invented it...my past is an unfinished painting and as the artist of that painting I must fill in all the ugly holes, and make it beautiful again. It's not that I have been dishonest; it's just that I loathe reality." (Lady Gaga)

The horror genre can be a strong vehicle to explore topics normally deemed taboo in mainstream entertainment in a creative and engaging manner. There is a significant queer audience for Horror media for it frequently features stories about the other, and people being othered, which queer audiences can empathise with (Derry-Holmes)

Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) is a social critique of the oppression and fetishization

of Black people in the United States weaved into a suspenseful thriller, where the desire for Black bodies is made literal through the gruesome act of brain transplantation. Peele showcases the potential of horror and dystopian worldbuilding in expressing a complex political and social struggle from the perspective of the oppressed and describes the horror genre as a way to attain "catharsis through entertainment", that it is "a way to work through your deepest pain and fear" (Peele).

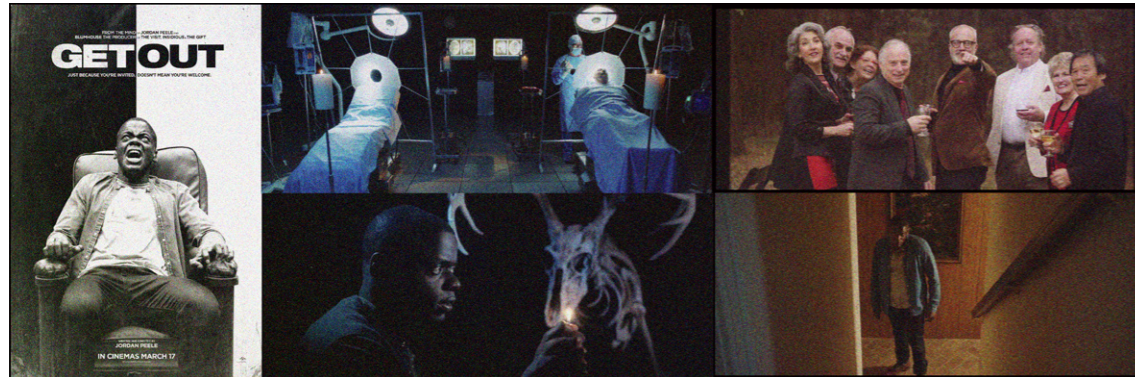


Figure 1 *Get Out* (2017) dir. Jordan Peele

A dystopia is an envisioned worst-case-scenario reality where people are often dehumanized, divided by an unjust system (Oxford English Dictionary; Merriam Webster, Definition of Dystopia). Erika Gottlieb also coins "speculative dystopia fiction" as the satirical imagining of a world created through "projections of the fears that their writers' own society... could be moving towards a type of totalitarian dictatorship already experienced as historical reality"(Gottlieb 7).

My use of dystopia aims to reflect the looming horror of large systematic injustices for queer third culture kids who are simply existing as they are. This dystopian space becomes powerful, especially in a video game where players enact agency, and allowing my own fears and anxieties to become fuel for creative expression

RESEARCH QUESTION AND AIMS

HOW DO YOU REPRESENT CHINESE LGBTQ STRUGGLE IN AN ACTION HORROR GAME DESIGN?

My contextual research facilitates understanding of this complex issue, deconstructing false rhetoric and ideology surrounding LGBTQ identity in China, and identifying other problematic media tropes in representing LGBTQ+ stories. This informs my positionality as a queer diasporic Chinese creative, and my goal to represent young queer Chinese people in an empowering way, with a focus on survival instead of victimhood, with the intent of reducing demonization or villainization in media and culture.

1. Visualise characters in an action RPG video game narrative crafted to reflect the existential horror of Chinese queer existence.
2. Respond to existing queer stereotypes and make queer empowerment the focus.
3. Bridge queer identity and Chinese identity (therefore representing third culture) by connecting Chinese traditional cultural elements with modern international queer imagery.

TERMINOLOGY

“THE WEST”

A constructed term referring to White-dominated colonial powers or the Global North, a political centre whose media output dominates globally. In this context, “The West” largely refers to the United States of America, which China has historically seen as its rival, has a large role in shaping China (Liu and Rofel 283), and is inarguably dominant and influential over world politics.

Xi Fang (“west direction”) is also commonly used in mainland China to refer to anywhere non-Asian regardless of colonial dynamics. I use “The West” in my exegesis to highlight this language.

“THE EAST”/“ASIAN”

An umbrella term for the different distinct cultures across the region of Asia, constructed to other these nations from “the West”. This is also a region that China has significant influence and holds disproportionate power over.

“QUEER” (NOUN)

LGBTQ+ identities and themes, an inclusive term for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other people of alternative sexualities and genders who are currently fighting for their rights in spaces that do not accept their existence. (Although more commonly referred to as rainbow communities in New Zealand, the use of the reclaimed derogatory slur “queer” in this exegesis highlights that LGBTQ+ identity still needs to be destigmatized in the Chinese context.)

Queer and LGBTQ+ are used interchangeably in this project with acknowledgement that queer identity does not always fall neatly into these letters from culture to culture. Although the system of categorisation and cultural differences are argued over (Yue; Erni), I ultimately believe in the unity of these diverse communities as a form of power against the oppressor.

“QUEER” (VERB)

A creative dismantling of the status quo.

A disruptive, transgressive, creative act of breaking established conventions and boundaries, that exclude certain narratives and restrict even the design of a piece of media itself (Ruberg).

A rejection of the present and insistence of another reality (Muñoz 1).

A reinterpretation of existing media with queer sensibilities and iconography.

“THIRD CULTURE/TCK”

Third Culture Kid and the Diaspora.

“raised in a culture other than their parents’ or the culture of their country of nationality.” (Merriam Webster, *What Is a “Third-Culture Kid”?*)

An identity that is transnational, with influence of two or more cultures at once.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project sits within many in-betweens – the overlaps of academia and practice and activism, global cultural dynamics of China and “Asia” and “the West”, the compounded complexities of queer identity and cultural identity. The conversations around all of these are ever shifting and rapidly evolving, as are the characteristics of queer studies and ongoing dialogue around cultural representation.

I begin by unpacking the issue of Chinese LGBTQ+ media censorship, the East/West ideological conflict, and various responses by diasporic queer Chinese writers and artists. Then, I examine the use of folktales as culture signifiers and reflections of culture evolution. Finally, I will examine the grounds of representation in video games and empowerment in new media.

Stories can affect change. They can galvanize people. And they can speak truth to power. But not when they are censored, sanitized...And certainly not if they never get told in the first place. (Tager 1)

Despite homoeroticism and androgyny being intrinsic features of ancient Chinese culture and stories (Hinsch), modern China is anything but accepting of LGBTQ+ communities. The 2018 banning of effeminate men on Chinese television marked a clear stance of the state against LGBTQ+ identity, directly policing fashion and appearances of male celebrities with the implication that no individuals of non-cisgendered identities are to be seen in the mainland media landscape.

This regulating of representation impacts all forms of creative media in the mainland, as well as China's global image, policing the image of Chineseness. This strong push towards a heteronormative and patriarchal image of Chinese society rejects Chinese queer history, silences the LGBTQ+ community and removes important LGBTQ+ spaces, relegating LGBTQ+ people firmly to the image of abnormal otherness (Hird; Lin).

Censorship rules specifically targeting LGBTQ+ content emerged in China during the late 2000s, when the Chinese Communist Party's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and

Television (SAPPRFT) banned homosexual imagery in almost all forms of public media such as television and cinema in 2008, and online content in 2017 (Guo and Evans 218; Bao, *Queer Media* 33). Suppression did not stop at media productions, but also was exercised upon LGBTQ+ events, organisations, film festivals, as well as academia (Guo and Evans 217; Bao, *Queer China* 4; Cui). There exist numerous grassroots efforts and some foreign-aided non-governmental organisations, however their efforts face constant pressures from authorities (Bao, *Queer Media* 72). An example being the Guangzhou Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays which renamed to Trueself in 2010 to protect itself by omitting LGBTQ+ terminology from its name and aligning its message more with the Party-state (P. Zhang).

There are very real consequences for those who violate these rules; it is not uncommon for artists, activists, and dissonant intellectuals to be arrested or sent into labour camps. Tianyi, a writer of online homoerotic fiction was arrested and sentenced to over 10 years in prison in October 2018 (Liu and Zhang 35).

However, regulation is also not consistent. It is an open secret that the most popular media that has come out of China in the recent decade is its homoerotic ancient fantasy (Maio). The *Boy's Love* (BL) genre originates from Japan, is commonly marketed to straight women, and sells often heteronormative portrayals of fictional gay love and erotic fantasies. BL's Chinese counterpart *Danmei* is consumed widely within China, with the works of Mo Xiang Tong Xu and more adapted to TV and quickly becoming an international sensation.

Zhao, Meng and Liu point out that all popular media productions in China grapple simultaneously with the political agenda of the Party-state and conflicting commercial interests, in that censorship is at times counterbalanced by commercial gain and globalised soft power (qtd. in Bao, *Queer Media* 4). The global demand for queer media is significant ("In the Pink"), and *Danmei* served as an effective tool of soft power. There is considerable irony in how *Danmei* could be sold uncensored outside of China, while authors must rewrite homosexuality out of their books for Chinese distribution (Lin 39).

Figure 2 Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation and Heaven's Official Blessing by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu



The portrayal of queerness in BL is also criticised to be unrealistic. The frameworks within which queerness is allowed to exist in media is generally quite narrow and there is a long way to go in terms of representation that is empowering, or at least humanising. Further information about queer representation in Appendices.

EXCLUSION OF QUEERNESS FROM CHINESENESS: HISTORICAL STIGMATIZATION AND IDEOLOGICAL WAR

Homosexuality in China had been a criminal offense under the category of 'hooliganism' or perversion and sexual deviance, until the category disappeared in 1997. Homosexuality was also defined as a mental disorder until activists and mental health professionals worked together to have it removed from medical definitions in 2001. Due to lacking public knowledge and its long history as a disorder and a crime, homosexuality continues to be haunted by social stigma (Bao, Queer Media in China 33).

Bao Hongwei observes that there has been a window of widespread queer awareness in the 1990s and early 2000s, leading to the rise of non-governmental queer organisations, queer arts, and spaces for LGBTQIA+ communities, such as the Beijing LGBT centre (2008-2023) and Shanghai Pride events (2009-2020) (33). The emergence of BL and Danmei also allowed pathways for the public to engage with LGBTQ+ issues, contributing to real changing attitudes among the

Chinese public (Lin). Things appeared to be moving in a positive trajectory until Party-state pressure began to surmount, starting in the late 2000s, and the CCP began to suppress queer content and promote heteronormativity, in direct opposition to cultural change. (Liu and Zhang)

Among the Party-state rationale, which includes the promotion of reproductive families, and maintaining "traditional values" of patriarchy, the most confounding but widely believed argument is the idea of queerness being a Western invention, which had been formed during China's socialist era. According to Sang Tze-Lan, the Chinese Communist Party began to condemn homosexuality "as Western capitalist corruption" after 1949 (281). Qingfei Zhang also observed that homosexuality was "imagined as Western capitalist darkness and spiritual pollution in Maoist official media" (Zhao 4; Q. Zhang 98).

It is true that Western queer movements served as the catalyst, inspiration and base for the campaigns for LGBTQ+ rights around the world. Most of queer theory is established in the Western world. The HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s was a major turning point for queer activism, especially in the United States, where in response to state injustice supported by religious groups, activism, academia, and creative media became invigorated to champion for acceptance and legal rights for people of alternative genders.

There has also been a significant body of mainstream queer media in the West and more 'positive' LGBTQ portrayals charged with affirmation directly for queer audiences and with the intent for social political change. However, Bao Hongwei warns against the assumption

that the Queer Global South will only be saved by adopting the systems of the Global North (Queer China 15). There is inarguable incompatibility between China's historical cultural values and Western liberalism, such that a copy-and-paste cannot be the solution (Bao 15).

All in all, the lack of queer inclusion and queer rights in China is a complicated conundrum that the mainland Chinese Party-state chose to silence and avoid rather than confront, upholding the status quo and continuing to promote a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ communities (Sigley 58). Derek Hird argues that unless the Chinese state comfortably reveals its own "inherent queerness", femininity and sexuality, there is unlikely to be national recognition of Chinese queerness (77).

CHINA'S EXTERNAL INFLUENCE AND THE DIASPORA REJECTION OF CHINA-CENTRISM

Censorship in China does not only affect its mainland media. In its goal to control an entire media landscape for its people and to protect China's global image, this censorship impacts large international productions as China holds great economic and political sway. The Chinese mainland market is highly lucrative, and it is well-documented that large Hollywood studios omitted queer representation from their productions to be allowed distribution in China or conformed to China's tight content restrictions in co-productions of blockbuster films, such as the case of *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), *Cloud Atlas* (2013) and *Star Trek Beyond* (2016), cutting out homosexual scenes (Tager 2, 6, 21; Lee)

This also impacts the way Chinese culture is depicted and talked about, as censors forbid Chinese representation in international media productions that

it deems unfavourable, including queer representation (Tager 21, 46). Due to China's state-backed rejection of LGBTQ+ visibility, Chineseness cannot be associated with queerness in the global conscience.

However, there are also responses to this oppressive control by Chinese people outside the mainland borders.

Sinophone queer literature and writings by the Chinese diaspora have provided invaluable insight into the issue of conflicting queer identity and cultural identity, which is frequently obscured by either Chinese nationalist rhetoric or the Western gaze (Liu). These writers challenge the idea of "Chineseness" being only defined by the People's Republic of China, and by extension heteronormativity as promoted by the nation-state. (Liu and Zhang 33)

Neither 'Chineseness' nor 'queerness' can or should be understood within national boundaries. (Leung 129)

Instead of being static, these writers postulate that the Chinese identity is evolving and expanding with its diaspora (Liu and Zhang 34), and queer identity in Asia is often transnational in nature (Erni 4).

Diasporic Chinese queer existence is complex and layered with contradiction (Erni 3), but it is incredibly valuable to have this dual perspective of China and the West which serves to deconstruct both.

In recent years, China's rules for foreign films have tightened significantly, likely in effort to stem the cultural influx (Toh). As a result, it has become unrealistic for international productions to attempt appealing to mainland Chinese censors and there came an outpouring of big-production American Chinese stories – diasporic stories - which finally deliver content about real queer issues. The international success of *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022) revealed a long-starved demographic that yearned to see media that expressed the complexity of generational and cultural divide.

Numerous diasporic queer Asian creatives also take upon themselves to create works that reinterpret traditional cultural folklore in a boldly modern queer manner. Andrew Thomas Huang's 2019 *Kiss of the Rabbit God* is a short film about a surreal tryst between a Chinese American man and the Rabbit God of Homosexuality, set in modern Los Angeles. All these works help navigate the subject matter of Chinese queerness through the transnational sensibility of the diasporic perspective.

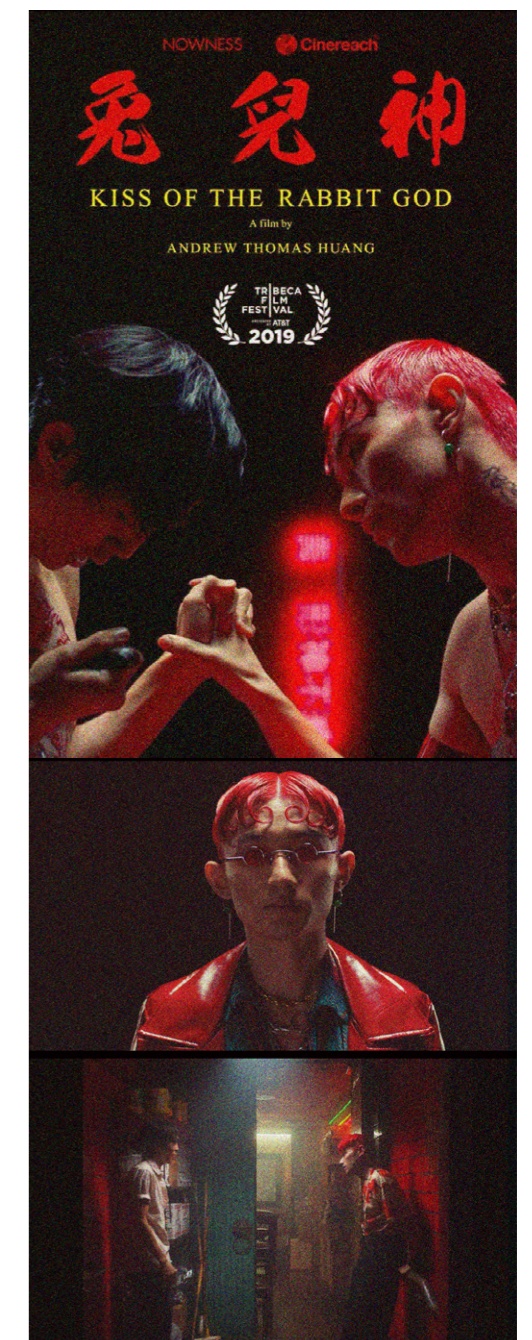


Figure 3 *Kiss of the Rabbit God* (2019)
dir. Andrew Thomas Huang

QUEER TRANSLATIONS OF JOURNEY TO THE WEST AND CHINESE OPERA

Parody is a powerful way of breaking the strict constraints in the realm of fantasy (Chan 106).

One of China's most famous classic tales is Journey to the West (hereafter referred to as JTTW), which is a fictionalization of the real pilgrimage of the monk Xuangzang and has captured the imaginations of storytellers since the late Tang dynasty. In this fantastical folktale, a group of eclectic characters are tasked by the emperor to go on a great quest from China to India, facing 81 perils to obtain a sacred scripture. The main cast includes Tang Sanzang/Tripitaka, Sun Wukong/Monkey, Zhu Bajie/Pigsy, Sha Wujing/Sandy and a magical White Dragon Horse. (Wang and Gray).

The evolution of China can be observed through how the story is adapted throughout the eras, from goals to teach Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist values, into representations of socialist ideals during the Maoist era, to the Monkey becoming an international icon that embodies a multitude of ideas for Chinese youth in the mainland and diaspora. (Wang and Gray; Sun).

Explicit queering of JTTW is most commonly found in Japan where there is a rich history of queer stories and where more creative liberty was allowed to be taken to reinterpret folklore, playing around with genderbending and androgyny in their characters (Chan 97,101). Leo Tak-Hung Chan refers to this as "radical translation", where Japanese artists saw "hidden potentials in the original text that can be explored", and examines Maya Mineo's Patarillo Journey to the West (2000) (Chan 98).

Building upon established Boy's Love genre tropes, Patarillo presents a version of Journey to the West filled with homoeroticism and gender subversion.

For Japanese artists, the "transgendering" and therefore, queering of characters, serves to break down patriarchal heteronormative divides by showing a fluidity of gender constructs (Chan 97,102).

Chan highlights the enraged response of some Chinese readers and academics who accused Japan of tainting the original text and called the work "malicious tampering" (恶搞, *egao*). This highlights the conservative attitude in China towards texts they deem culturally important, which is hypocritical considering the nation's own intentional tampering with history and changes to folktales across the ages. For example, in the 1961 animated adaptation *Havoc in Heaven* the finale presents Sun Wukong as being triumphant against a heavenly court – coded as the

decadent elite, rather than being punished by heaven. This reinvention was common during the revolutionary period and other folktales like that of Nezha being reworked to fit socialist ideals. (Wang and Gray)

The issue, therefore, is not about sacrality of cultural texts, but that queerness is not welcomed, especially if it comes in the form of foreign media. China's protectiveness over a culturally important text from any queering does not acknowledge the rising relevance of Chinese queer culture and dismisses China's queer history.



Figure 5 *Havoc in Heaven* (1961)



Figure 4 *Patarillo Journey to the West* by Maya Mineo

I personally believe *egao* is necessary.

With tightening restrictions around gender and sexuality, there is more need than ever to queer the Chinese identity itself, to challenge heteronormative constructs and to form new interpretations of cultural artefacts - especially for the third space.

This visual endeavour can be further informed by drawing upon JTTW's long historical connection to Chinese Opera, which historically was a queer space. Chinese Opera, Beijing Opera, or Jingju, was a site of gender subversion, with men traditionally taking on feminine roles, and has documented ties to male sex work. There is notable camp in the vibrant colours, elaborate makeup, exaggerated shapes, heightened and elaborate costume designs and its melodramatic performances.

Winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 16 (2023) Taiwanese drag queen Nymphia Wind highlights the parallels between modern drag culture and Chinese traditional arts, incorporating traditional Chinese Opera face mask painting into her drag aesthetic. In her Instagram post she describes her "passion to fuse different worlds, finding a place of collaboration and harmony." (66wind99)

Before being officially published in book form in 1592, JTTW had existed as Chinese Opera plays. The distinctive Chinese Opera visuals formed the bedrock of Chinese cultural imagery as one of its oldest art forms which later influenced the critically acclaimed animated feature *Havoc in Heaven* (1961) by basing its visual style on motifs of Chinese Opera (Hu 5), crafting some of the most iconic interpretations of the characters.



Figure 6 Nymphia Wind, winner of 2023 *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 16

LGBTQ+ IN VIDEO GAMES

Diverse gender inclusion has always been present throughout mainstream video game history, but the characters are few and far between, at times tokenized, and not often protagonists in their franchises in most large production mainstream video games, commonly referred to AAA games (Anna Anthropy; Chang 228).

Studies do reveal a gradual shift in the AAA video game landscape, where queer protagonists are becoming more common, and are playing more important roles in video game stories (Süngü 392). There are also interesting changes in the gamer social space, where there is an unprecedented growth of support for transgendered people in recent years. A flourishing independent game scene that arose in the 2010s helped to further diversify the video game landscape with queer perspectives and game design. In *Queer Games Avant-Garde*, Bo Ruberg documents numerous independent queer game developers and their efforts in contributing to the video game scene and queering established ways of play (Ruberg).

As video games have become the most popular form of entertainment in the world, there is more diversity than ever in the people who play them as well as those who make games. It is a space of boundless growth.

However, just like film and television, games also face censorship pressures. China is set to place rules restricting LGBT content in games, rendering future Chinese queer representation in games unlikely (Ye).



Figure 7 Transgender characters in video games

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies serve to inform the genre of game I am designing characters for: a first-person linear role-playing action horror video game.

OUTLAST - VESTIGIAL QUEERPHOBIA IN THE HORROR GENRE

Outlast is a horror survival game from 2014 and is significantly influenced by successful horror-themed first-person shooter games like *Resident Evil*.

The story of *Outlast* primarily takes place in Mount Massive Asylum, where a series of brutal secret experiments were run on inmates by fictional mega-cooperation Murkoff Cooperation to create a powerful nanomachine entity called the Walrider. The process, named the Morphogenic Engine, caused severe deformity and insanity among the inmates, and they eventually overthrow the operation, sending the asylum into chaos.

In its DLC *Outlast: Whistleblower* (2014), you play as Waylon Park, an ex-programmer for Murkoff who was captured after he tried to expose their atrocities and was put through the Morphogenic Engine as punishment. Players navigate the world as Waylon and must escape from the asylum overrun with insane and violent deformed inmates running loose. Threatening his life and dignity is the main antagonist Eddie Gluskin, a tortured inmate obsessed with “making brides” through forced castration and mutilation, a horrific parody of gender reassignment.

As the insane Eddie chases the player down the hallways of the ruined asylum, calling the protagonist Waylon Park various endearments and misogynistic slur from a 1950s America, the terror induced in the player is not just of a ‘game over’ but very specifically draws upon fears of emasculation and queerphobic discomfort from an assumed cisgendered straight male audience.

It is apparent that his character is moulded from a line of popular villains in horror fiction who embodied queer monstrosity as well as real-life serial killers that captured the American imagination; his name “Eddie Gluskin” evokes real life serial killer Ed Gein, with the brutality of Freddy Kruger and a cruel fascination with feminine bodies like Buffalo Bill of *Silence of the Lambs* and Leatherface from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.



Figure 8 Eddie Gluskin in *Outlast: Whistleblower* (2014)

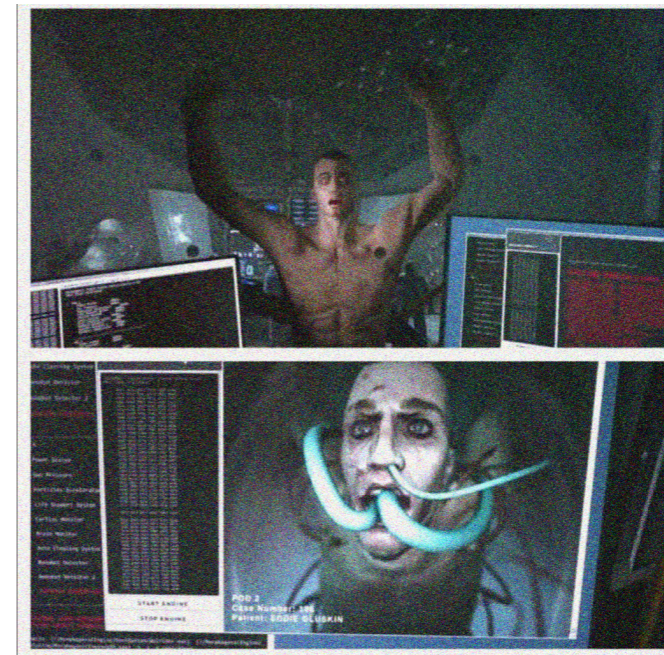


Figure 9 Eddie Gluskin's first appearance

However, the game does present Eddie as a tragic villain, a victim of childhood abuse, unwillingly tortured by the power-hungry Murkoff Cooperation in a place that was supposed to heal him. The story stresses that he did not have control of himself, and his monstrosity is not caused by individual immorality but directly formed by the betrayal of people and cooperations that he depended on. But despite the monster being a victim of systematic injustice, Eddie Gluskin is nonetheless a menacing example of repressed homosexual monstrosity, like the allegory of Freddy Kruger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985).



Figure 10 *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (1985)

In the 1985 movie, the monster Freddy Kruger directly represents the main character's anxiety about his own sexuality, with the director David Chaskin himself admitting that it is through internalised-homophobia and societal repression that this monster is created (*Never Sleep Again: The Elm Street Legacy*). But even though this allegory came from sympathy instead of moral judgement, it still sits in a problematic idea of queerness becoming dangerous and lashing out violently at the innocent.

It can also be said that presented image of shock and horror is designed from dominant cis-normative perceptions of gender affirmation surgery as violent.

And despite Eddie the queer monster being cast in a sympathetic light, his character does not escape the structure that has already been created which others a queer person.



Figure 11 Eddie Gluskin's final moment

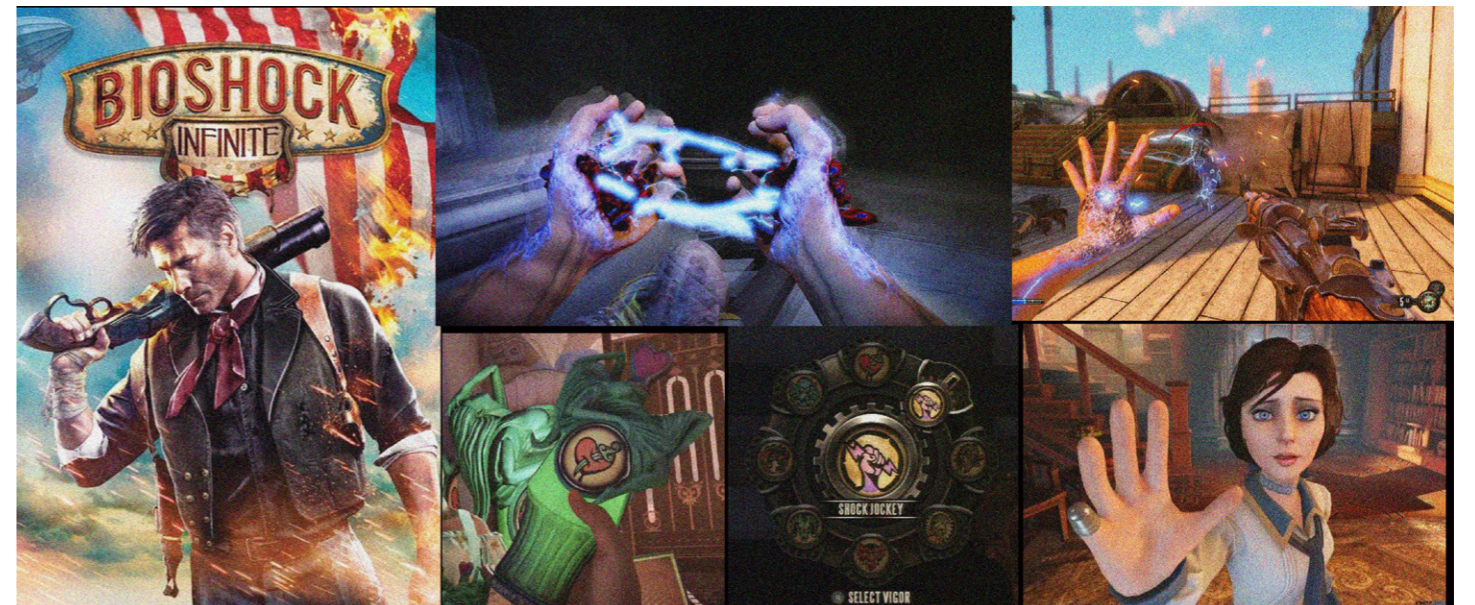
EMPATHY AND POWER - IMMERSIVE IMPACT OF LINEAR STORY FIRST-PERSON VIDEO GAMES (*BIOSHOCK* AND *HALF-LIFE*)

Some of the most impactful video games narrative experiences come from first-person role-playing games (RPG) with linear storytelling, such as *Bioshock*.

The *Bioshock* series (2007-2013) is a highly successful first-person action role playing game franchise where the story and setting critiques various forms of American exceptionalism. *Bioshock* (2007) makes use of survival-horror elements in its visuals, creating a suspenseful atmosphere where the protagonist Jack must survive hordes of insane citizens and hostile sentry machines in the gritty underwater city of Rapture. The game is made especially effective through its first-person point of view, which functions well for Horror. This immersion is also essential to *Bioshock's* delivery of its story experience.

First person camera is unmatched as a format when it comes to inducing immersion for the audience. The first-person RPG "reduces the distance between the game world and themselves" and lets players "take ownership of" the characters" (Denisova and Cairns 147), thus allowing events to feel real for the players and encouraging deeper empathy with the characters of the game. Unlike non-interactive media like film and television, players have an "interactive stake" in a video game and are challenged to skilfully progress (Cuddy 134). Seeing the world through the eyes of the character and taking action with the character's hands, the player become one with the character. In *Bioshock* you truly feel like you are part of the story and the world, and you are Jack or Booker Dewitt himself, and the game consciously makes use of this illusion of embodiment in its narrative experience; the feelings of empowerment induced are purposeful, though for its own purpose of subverting the audience's expectations.

Figure 12 *Bioshock Infinite* (2013)



Action first-person shooter games provide a fantasy of power to their players, both through the array of weaponry and superpowers you get to play with, and a strong fictional protagonist. In Bioshock, the player is presented with a vibrant range of superpowers through Plasmids and Vigors. The character of Booker Dewitt features heavily within Bioshock Infinite marketing despite the game being in first-person, as the promise of being a cisgendered, straight white man is a common part of the power fantasy in many first-person shooter games (Kilzer 29).

The linear first-person roleplaying video game can be said to have been pioneered by Valve's Half-Life series (Werner) ("Valve Part 1: Unlikely Heroes"). Where previous games used traditional cutscenes to communicate their narrative, Half-Life (1998) presented an organic-feeling, real-time style of storytelling that maximized immersion by having all game story events occur in the environment around the player's first-person camera. It was no surprise that the latest entry to the series, Half-Life: Alyx (2020), is in virtual reality,

making maximum use of VR's immersive capabilities to make the player truly feel like the character in the game setting and enjoy the fantasy world.

Linear storytelling also offers the most effective delivery of intended message and emotions when compared to choice and player-driven games (Lebowitz and Klug 147), which for the agenda of communicating horror is incredibly important. One of video gaming's key selling points has always been the promise of agency, but this freedom is never truly real, and it is how game narratives make use of this highly controlled space that becomes powerful (Chang 230).

Despite having limited freedom in its designed worlds with set rules, video games do still "facilitate the thrill of being someone different, someone important, someone powerful deploying commonsense definitions of control and power as the ability to affect, change, and better yourself and the world around you" (Chang 213).

Half-Life features an apocalyptic setting caused by a destructive accident in a research facility that unleashed alien monsters into the world, and the task of saving everyone falls on the shoulders of its protagonist Gordon Freeman, a simple physicist entangled in the chaos.

Reflecting on the experience of playing Half-Life 2, Peter Nelson describes feeling great "emancipation" from his mundane life, as well as a sense of comfort in the purposeful guidance of its linear story. Moreover, he found Gordon Freeman's background relatable to him personally and therefore felt pleasurable vindication in how the character conquers the challenges of his world (Nelson 68).

This may serve as an analogy to my game concept: Chinese queer people exist in a setting that they cannot change, just like the real constraints of a video game world, but the agency they can still enact in this controlled space is meaningful. The action horror game could allow us, oppressed queer people, to react and defeat allegories of our unspeakable fears. As is the game's objective to survive horror, the catharsis of playing a game aids in our survival in the real world, and to keep striving, imagining for the better.



Figure 13 *Half-Life* series (1998-2020)

METHODOLOGY

ADAPTING THE “JOURNEY”: DISPLACING MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS INTO HELL

The project draws upon numerous adapted versions of Journey to the West, though it considers the canonical story to be the 1592 published novel by Wu Cheng'en and its modern English translation by Anthony C. Yu. My adaptation veers away from the canonical storyline into a Science Fiction setting and displaces the characters from the original premise, to a futuristic, yet perilous journey. This kind of plot transformation can also be found in other Journey adaptations, especially radical translations (Chan 101).

This story takes the main cast from Journey to the West and places them into Buddhist Hell, with game enemy creatures based on other Chinese folklore creatures, essentially making the journey an escape from death and peril. The premise imagines a worst-case-scenario future, where the state decides to arrest members of the LGBTQ+ community.

I use a collage of various JTTW canon elements, Chinese mythology and folklore that were prominent in my own childhood. It was key to make use of recognizable figures like folktale and mythological characters, creatures, and settings. Viktor Shklovsky coined the term Defamiliarization, using existing motifs in new ways to reveal new perspectives and ways of thinking about existing images. In a similar way, I am combining traditional Chinese imagery and modern queer themes, creating bridges between Chineseness and queerness.

The version of Buddhist Hell, or “*The Eighteenhold Hell Behind the Mountain of Perpetual Shade*” (Wu and Yu 257) is taken from chapter 11 of Journey to the West and is used to represent a hostile landscape.

The enemies of the game are based on Chinese mythological creatures, now distorted machine versions of themselves - an allegory for the twisting of Chinese cultural identity by authoritative constructs. This exemplifies the conflict between people and the system of power, embodied by a “humans vs. machines” motif.

Chan describes “figuration” as the recreating and transpositions of personal character traits in parallel protagonists. My characters are not anthropomorphic beings like in canon, but young humans, each of which embodies a different theme and identities in the queer spectrum.

The art style leans heavily towards realism to induce believability and immersion, to resemble an AAA game with the intention of elevating the subject matter.

Figure 14 Project idea outline



GAME SYNOPSIS

In Ascent, authorities have begun capturing disobedient citizens, placing them in a massive underground conversion facility, where they secretly carried out experiments for a project to tap into the celestial realm to create powerful weapons. The project backfired, unleashing corrupted celestial energy over machines that were built to contain them, forming creatures that wreaked havoc. As survivors, an eclectic group of queer teenagers must find their way out. You play as an amnesiac protagonist who leads a group of 5 characters. Characters discover mysterious magical fashion accessories - eyeglasses, wigs, gloves, shoes and masks, which assigned to each character grant them special powers to fight back against the enemy creatures, clear obstacles and solve puzzles.

ASCENT/出路 Key Features

Full Immersion:

Immerse yourself in virtual reality, interact with the space, explore surreal environments, solve intuitive puzzles and engage in action-packed 360 degree real time combat.

Explore Supernatural Locations:

Discover secrets in a haunted underground medical facility distorted by corrupted supernatural energy, each of its 18 levels poetically reflecting a facet of queer struggle.

Superpowered Accessories:

Collect an arsenal of colourful accessories that allows you to use an exciting array of superpowers.

Fight the Horror:

Face down powerful mechanical beasts and help purify their spirits.

Gather Your Allies:

Lead a cast of eccentric characters each with their unique set of accessories and abilities, bringing different ways of play and strategy.

Figure 15 Drafted game features description

SCOPE OF OUTCOME:

CHARACTER DESIGN

Characters serve as point of direct connection to the story for the audience. They empathise, feel emotions and learn about the story through its characters, and this can be more literal in a first-person video game than film.

Although it may seem pointless to design a character for a first-person point of view, there are many protagonists in other first-person games that are iconic. *Halo's* Master Chief, Gordon Freeman of *Half-Life*, and Booker Dewitt from *Bioshock Infinite* are all protagonists rarely seen in full body in-game, but they are all highly recognizable symbols of their respective first-person shooter franchises, and feature heavily in marketing material. They are important representations of the game experience itself and the image of power promised to the players to embody.

As a character designer, I am tasked with designing interesting human characters with their own personalities and histories, conveying a depth of story through the details of their design.

The scope of this project focuses primarily on the first level as a vertical slice, where the protagonist and deuteragonist, Protagonist(Sun Wukong) and Cicada (Tang Sanzang) will appear. As the first characters appearing in the game story, they crucially serve to introduce the premise and themes of the game: visible queer representation, struggle, survival and empowerment.

Figure 18 Design direction choices




Figure 16 Lineup sketch of 5 main characters

In order from left to right: Pearl (Zhu Bajie/Pigsy), Protagonist (Sun Wukong/Monkey), Cicada (Tang Sanzang/Tripitaka), Dragon Girl (White Dragon Horse) and Shasha (Sha Wujing/Sand Monk)

(Character) Design Pillars


Chinese Opera

Highly decorative, heightened aesthetic that drew upon a lot of traditional symbols and shapes.




Drag Culture

A key part of queer visual culture and power of expression through fashion. Tearing down societal conformity.

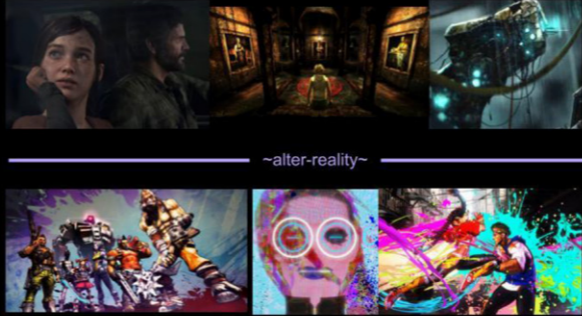


Alternative/Underground Fashion

Rebellious and individualistic sense of fashion. Involves an act of making something existing your own.



Art Style



~alter-reality~

- Grounded silhouettes and proportions (mostly)
- Textures and colours can vary.
- Multiple styles existing at the same time?

I think it's important to have the characters feel real and believable as much as possible, with the implied complexity of real people, and maybe that means realism instead of stylisation (which may lead to caricature)

CHARACTER DESIGN METHODS

Design briefs are laid out according to initial ideas, which goes through edits and synthesis informed by research on canon story and notable adaptations, forming a fresh interpretation of folklore characters which combines international queer iconography, Chinese cultural symbols, elements of canon descriptions and influences of existing video game media.

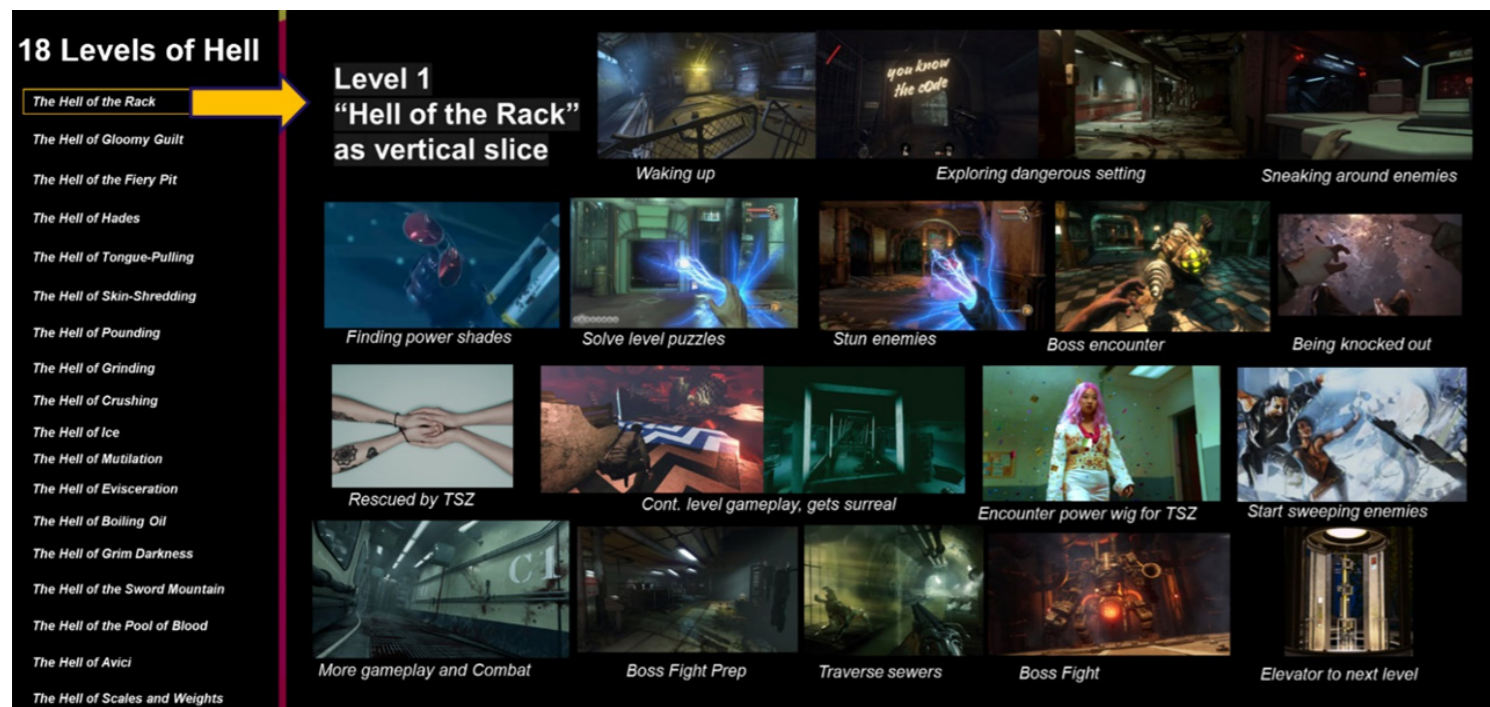


Figure 17 Sequence of events in the first game level

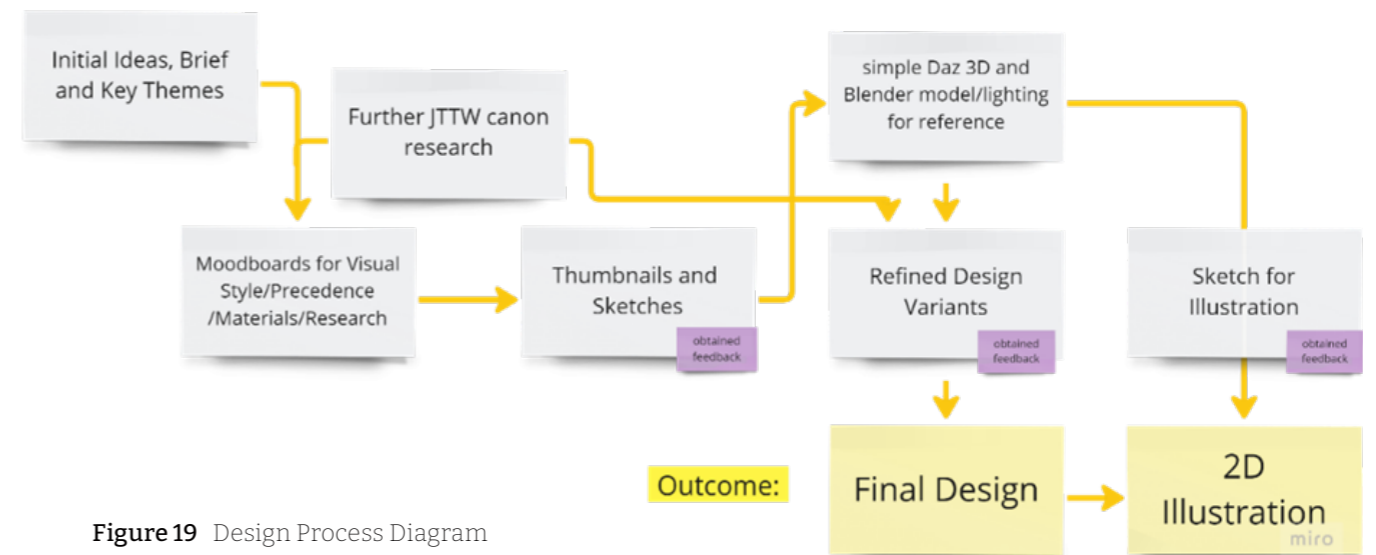
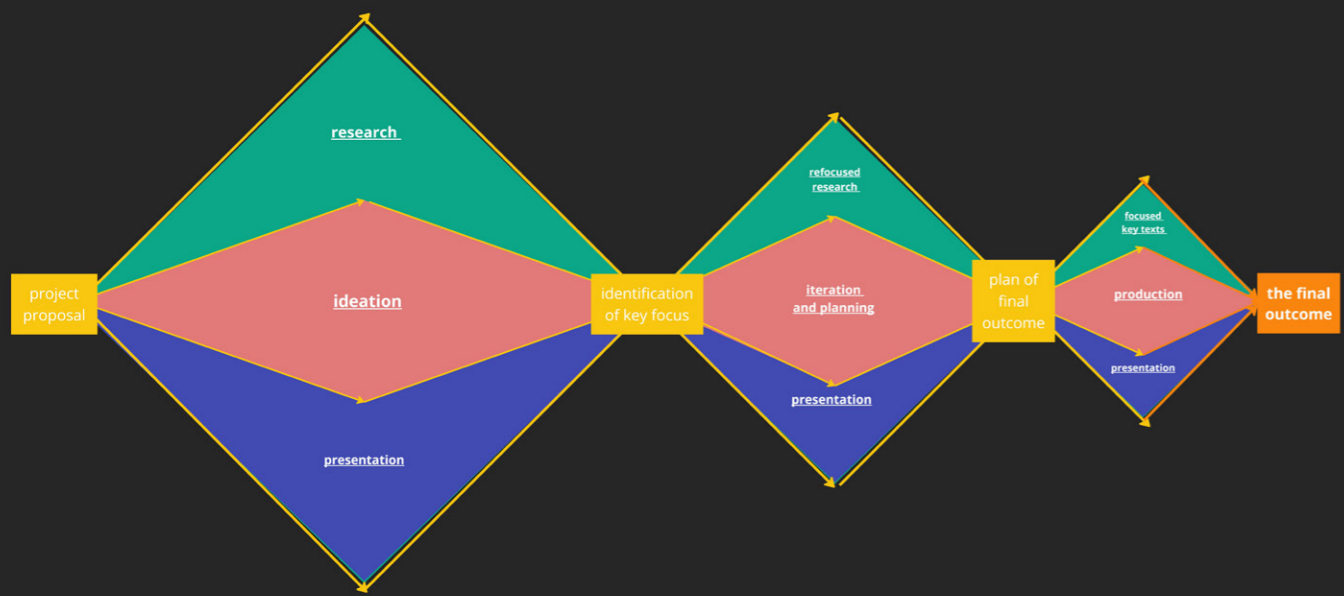


Figure 19 Design Process Diagram

Feedback from industry professionals at Wētā Workshop was a crucial part of the process, through presentations of the design work at various stages. Their input was incredibly helpful to make sure the design is of quality and function.

Figure 20 Diagram based on the double diamond



Explorations started very broadly to flesh out the story and premise through visual and contextual research, until the decision was made to focus on character design to best express the focus of this project which emphasizes on LGBTQ+ visibility.

THE DESIGN WORK

“SUN WUKONG”/PROTAGONIST

JOURNEY TO THE WEST’S MONKEY KING

The most popular character in the series, Sun Wukong or the Monkey King has always been a flamboyant figure of rebellion, as well as a prominent symbol for Chinese third culture kids as detailed in *Transforming Monkey* by Hongmei Sun (135).

In the original Journey to the West story, Sun Wukong is a pompous Rhesus Macaque monkey who was spawned from a rock, born with incredible superpowers, and ruled over the monkeys of the Mountain of Flower and Fruit as their king and leader. Iconic parts of his costume include his tiger pelt, his long staff and a golden circlet on his head.

There also exists some interesting discussion in the fandom of Sun Wukong about him possibly being transgender, though no real evidence was present in the original text. (Mcclanahan, “Is Sun Wukong FTM Trans?”)

CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

A young man wakes up with no memories, and a body covered in bruises, hanging from the cables of a massive machine. He wanders out into the dangerous unfamiliar facility alone, guided by mysterious voices in his head, leading him to discover the special leather jacket that once belonged to him from a storage room. Putting it on filled him with strange comfort and the young man decides to construct an outfit for himself. A pair of very torn pants was held it together with some tape, and the scraps of a prisoner uniform he once wore was transformed into a shirt. Following instinct, he gels his hair up into a pompadour because it felt right. Looking into a mirror, he sees a person he does not quite remember yet but starts to feel familiar.

In canon JTTW, Tang Sanzang rescues Sun Wukong from his imprisonment under the rock mountain made from Buddha's hand. Similarly, the Protagonist is released from his confine under a machine in the facility thanks to Tang Sanzang in Ascent's story, which marks the beginning of the game. The Protagonist is half-naked when he wakes up, vulnerable and helpless at the start. His body is also covered in Lichtenberg bruising, hinting as intense electricity delivered to his body by the facility which caused him to lose his memories.

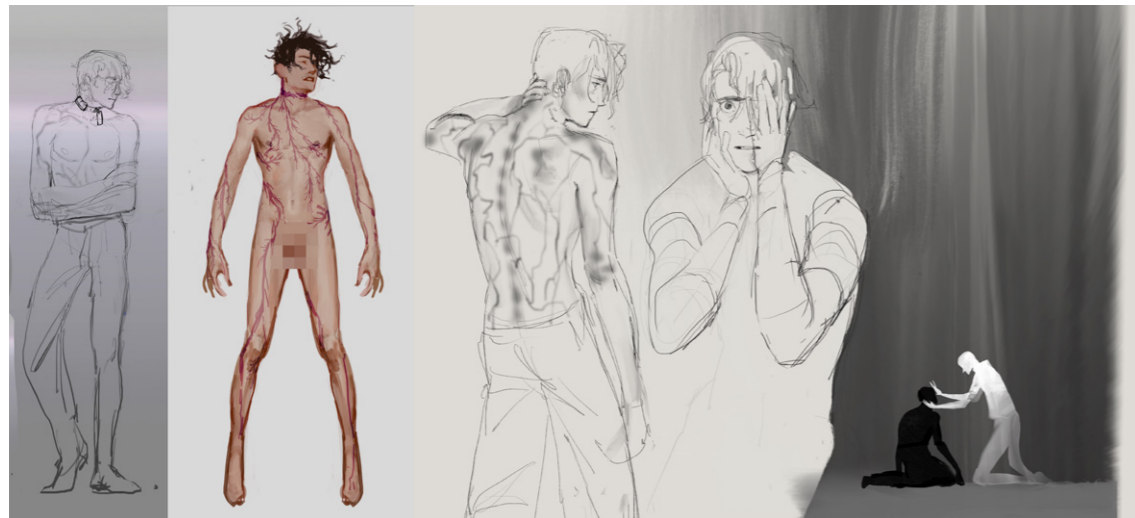


Figure 21 Sketches of the Protagonist first waking up and his rescue by Cicada

DESIGN PROCESS

The design began with expressive thumbnails, and outrageous costume explorations incorporating Chinese Opera costume shapes, pushing things dynamically in the beginning just to explore possibilities. In the end I settled on a clean base silhouette to make space for power visuals, which is also an important part of characters' appearance in-game.



Figure 22 Dynamic initial thumbnails for Protagonist



Figure 23 Initial explorations of Protagonist costume

Figure 24 Further explorations of Protagonist costume

The centerpiece of his outfit is a jacket made of a rainbow holographic vinyl PVC material covered in patches that reference his character story as well as notable Journey to the West adaptations. The lapel shape details are based on traditional costume shapes, specifically the 'cloud collar' that is found on female Chinese Opera costumes. It was important that his outfit, despite being generally masculine in silhouette, is also infused with feminine details. Brass square studs cover the shoulders, like Chinese plate armour, combining ancient Chinese elements and Western punk imagery. The inner lining of the jacket is a tiger print, inspired by Sun Wukong's tiger pelt. The zippers on the are small cylinders, a fun reference to his shrunken weapon staff.

And despite the leather-clad greaser being an icon of hypermasculinity and heterosexuality in no small part thanks to the movie Grease, it is also extremely homoerotic, as observed in the illustrations of Tom of Finland, and the queer fame of John Travolta himself. In a way, this is another reclamation and highlighting of queer iconography and the diasporic coexistence/synthesis of East and West.



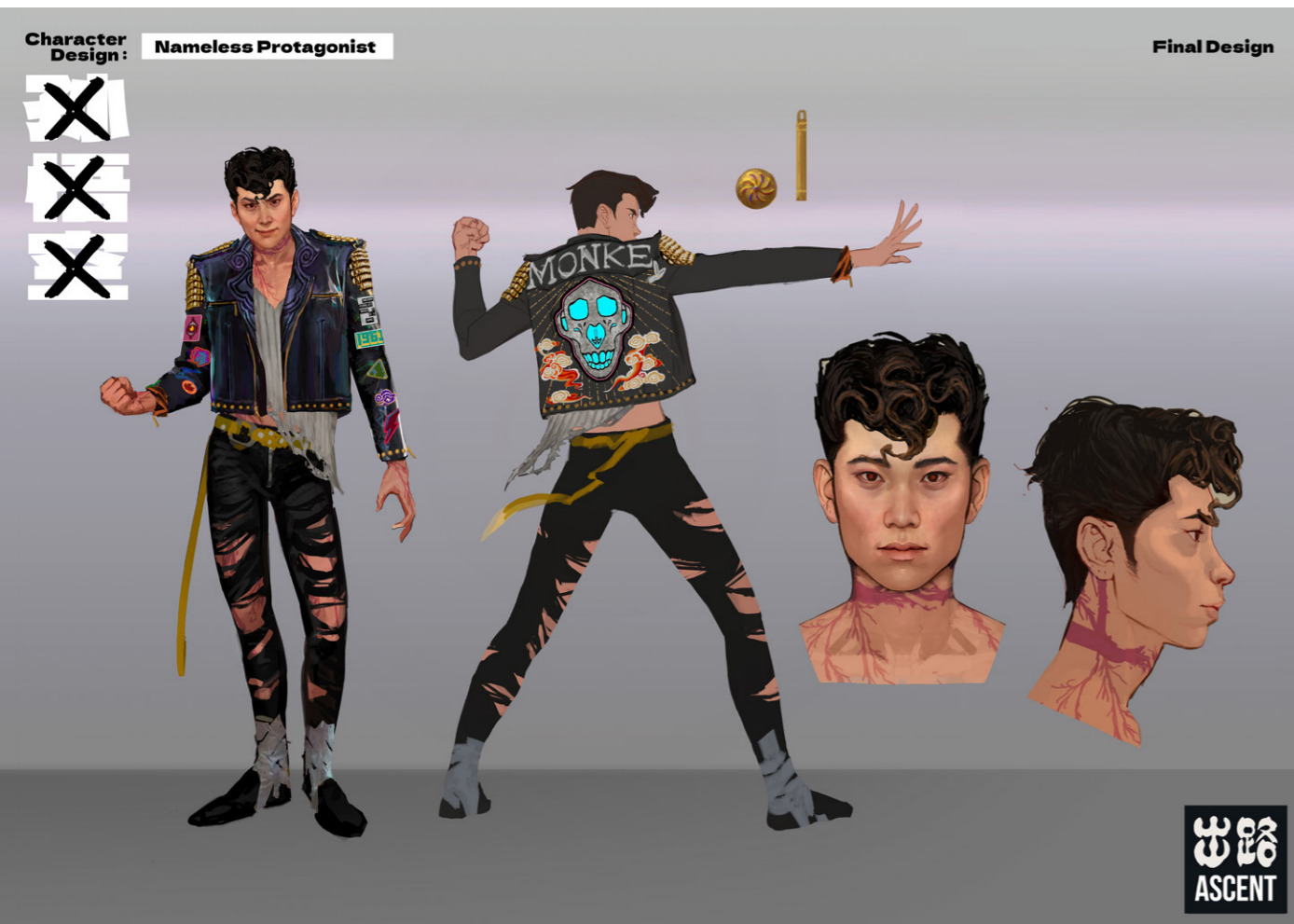


Figure 25 Protagonst final design

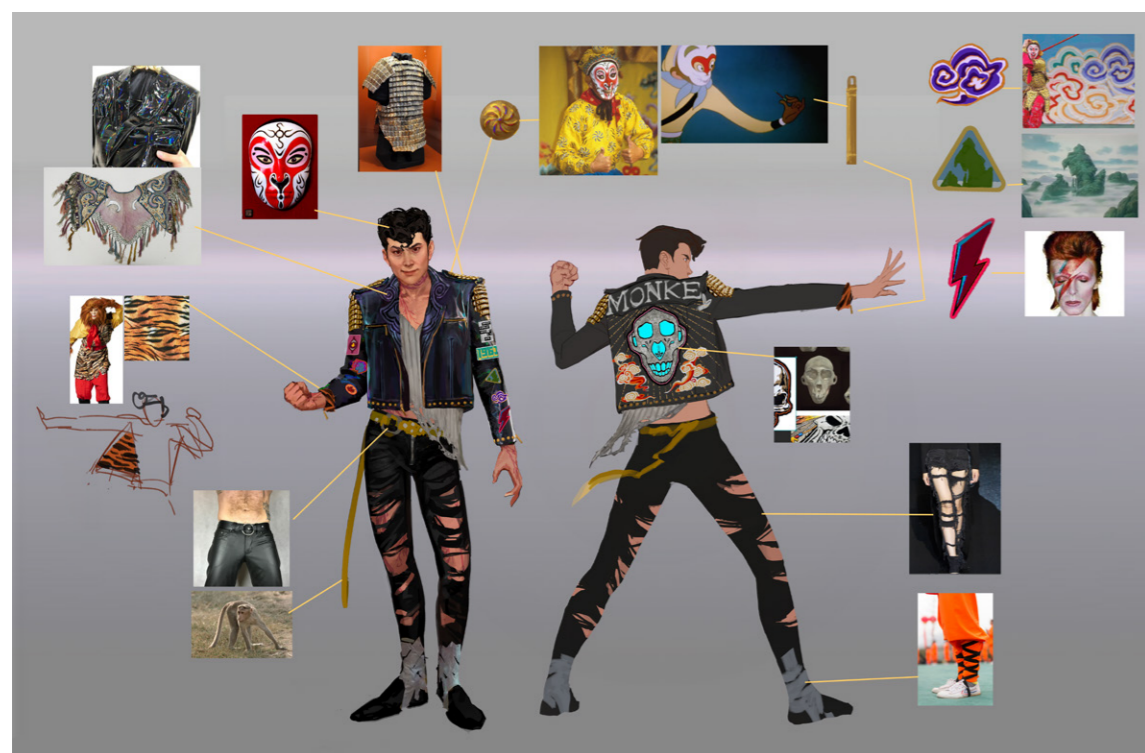


Figure 26 Protagonst design influences and breakdown

FACE DESIGN

The protagonist's face is designed to be long, with high cheekbones, slightly large ears, with a sloping nose like a rhesus macaque monkey profile. His hairstyle is the iconic pompadour of the greaser or punk outlaw. I worked in the swirling patterning of Sun Wukong's opera mask forehead into the shapes of the curls as another subtle nod to Chinese Opera. Altogether, he needed to look convincingly human while having hints of Monkey King characteristics.

The process started with sketches to pinpoint the major shapes of facial features, then moving into more detailed rendering. To aid in making a realistic believable face, I created a base Metahuman for lighting and textural reference. The level of control on Metahuman's editor was not good enough to achieve shapes I desired but served well as a starting point with realistic proportion and minute skin and hair details.

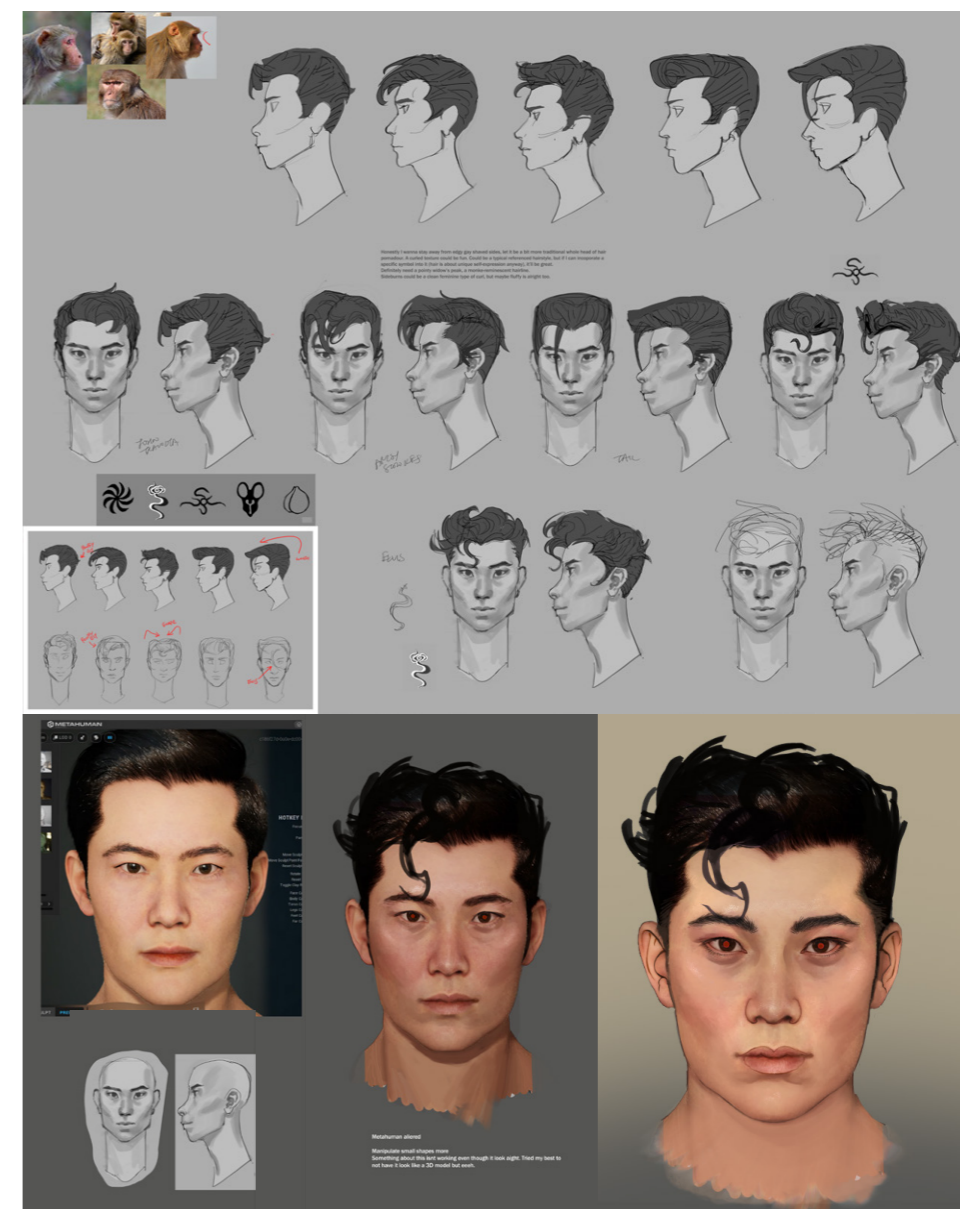


Figure 27 Protagonst face and hair exploration process

POWER EYEWEAR

The main items used by the protagonist are sets of eyewear of different styles and colours, which grant him different elemental powers (planned powers include electricity, fire, laser beams, air dash and water). This is inspired by the power system in Bioshock games. The meaning of the colourful eyewear has three layers - anonymity, a fashion accessory of self-expression, and the idea of viewing the world through a positive lens. All of which gives a person strength in a hostile environment, made literal in this premise. Inspiration was also taken from the striking eyewear of pop icons like Lady Gaga and Elton John.

Electricity is the first ability gained in the game. It is a reference to electroshock therapy given to treat homosexuality in China and many parts of the world, which causes memory loss (Macauley). In the story the protagonist was dosed with high levels of electricity as part of the experiments, causing the protagonist to lose his memories, but it also becomes the power he can use to fight back against his enemies.

(Canonically Sun Wukong has eye lasers as a superpower, gained after his imprisonment in Laozi's furnace, which will be worked into a future level design.)

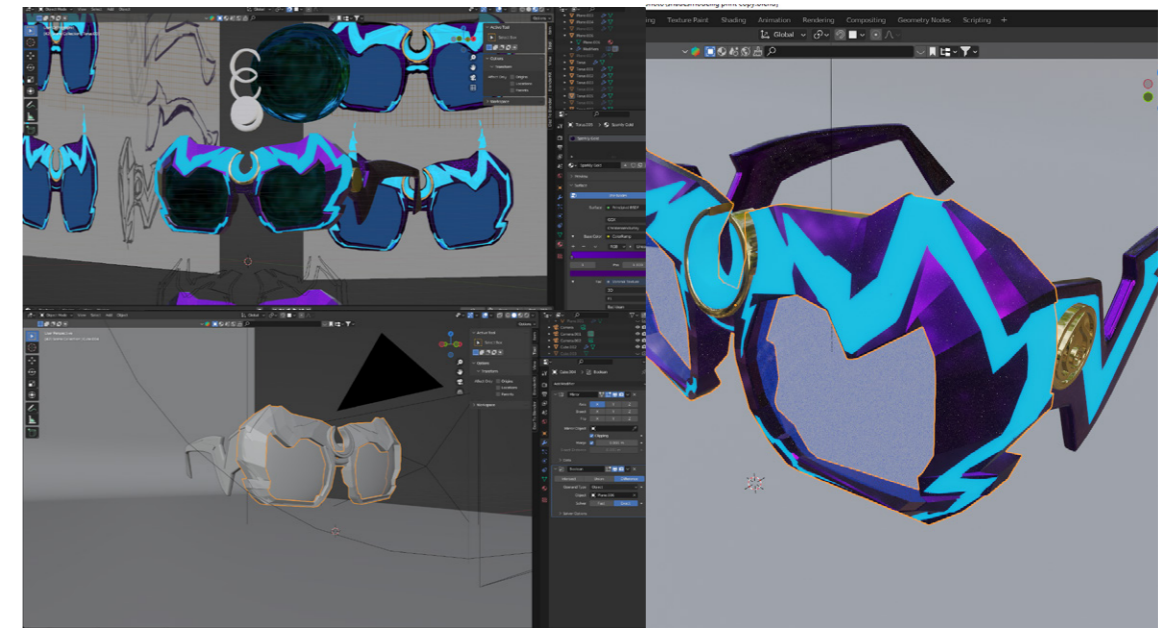


Figure 29 Prop 3D modelling in Blender

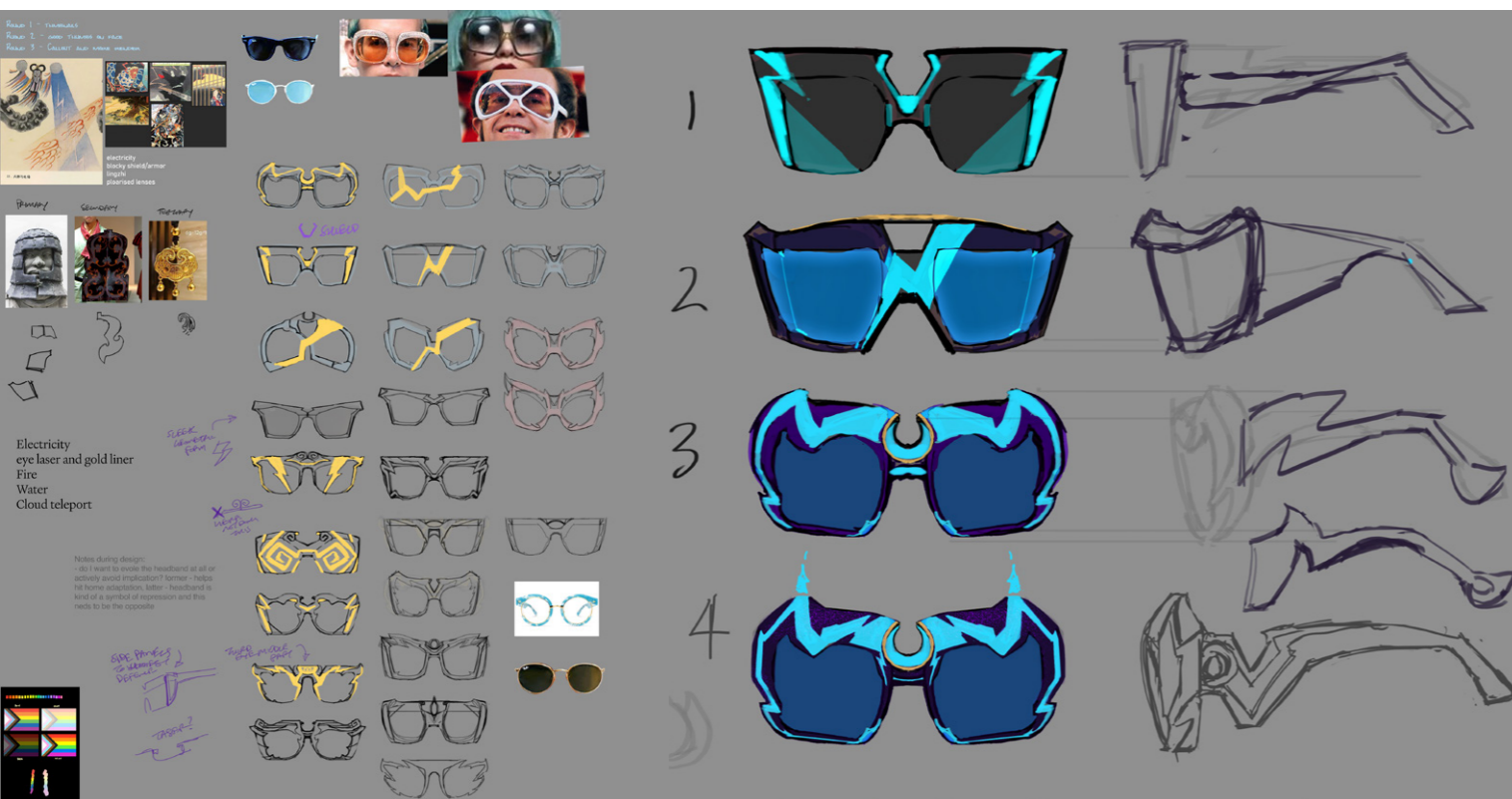


Figure 28 Explorations of eyewear prop design



Figure 30 Electric power shades final design

ADDITIONAL POWER VISUALS

Taking influence again from exaggerated shapes of Chinese opera costumes, a combo level system like *Devil May Cry* is planned. If a player is skilled enough to build up a combo, the character's power level increases and the character gains extra costume embellishments that resemble Monkey King's Chinese Opera costume.



Figure 31 Sketch of Protagonist levels of power



Figure 32 Superpowered Sun Wukong/Protagonist final illustration

CHARACTER ILLUSTRATION

A final illustration is created showcasing the powered Protagonist in action, with a dynamic pose highlighting the mobility of the protagonist in battle.

“TANG SANZANG”/ZHILIAO’ER (CICADA)

JOURNEY TO THE WEST’S TRIPITAKA

Tripitaka or Tang Sanzang is a monk, based on historical figure Xuanzang, who is given the quest by the Tang emperor to retrieve the sacred scroll and face 81 perils. The rest of the cast serve as his disciples and protectors in the journey as he is often preyed upon by demons because of a rumour of his flesh being able to grant immortality. Tang Sanzang’s appearance in adaptations has always been androgynous; frequently fine-featured, regal, tall and skinny to visually reflect his moral uprightness and a vulnerable frailness that needs the protection of his disciples.

The male beauty standard in ancient China is one that holds intelligence and sensitivity above strength and brutality, which can be described as highly feminine by Western standards (Hird 72,73).

There have been queer and gender-bent interpretations of Tang Sanzang, as listed by Leo Tak-Hung (99). Notably, in a 1978 Japanese live-action adaptation, he was played by a female actor.

Following “radical translation” as defined by Leo Tak-Hung Chan, I am making my own radical translation of Tang Sanzang as a transwoman.

PLOT AND SYMBOLISM

This project’s reinterpretation of Tang Sanzang is named Zhiliao-er/知了儿 or Cicada, a 19-year-old transgender girl from a village, who was the facility’s most important prisoner, a key part of their plan to tap into the celestial realm. When everything was thrown into chaos, she managed to escape her confines, altered her straitjacket into her own outfit and eventually rescued our protagonist.

Her names comes from Tang Sazang’s canonical previous life as the Golden Cicada, Buddha’s second disciple (McClanahan, “The Monk Tripitaka and the Golden Cicada”). The metamorphosis of insects is also often paralleled to the transgender journey.

Thematically, her costume forms a black/white contrast with the Protagonist, as is their focus on “masculine” and feminine” presentation, but both queer and subversive to the traditional image.

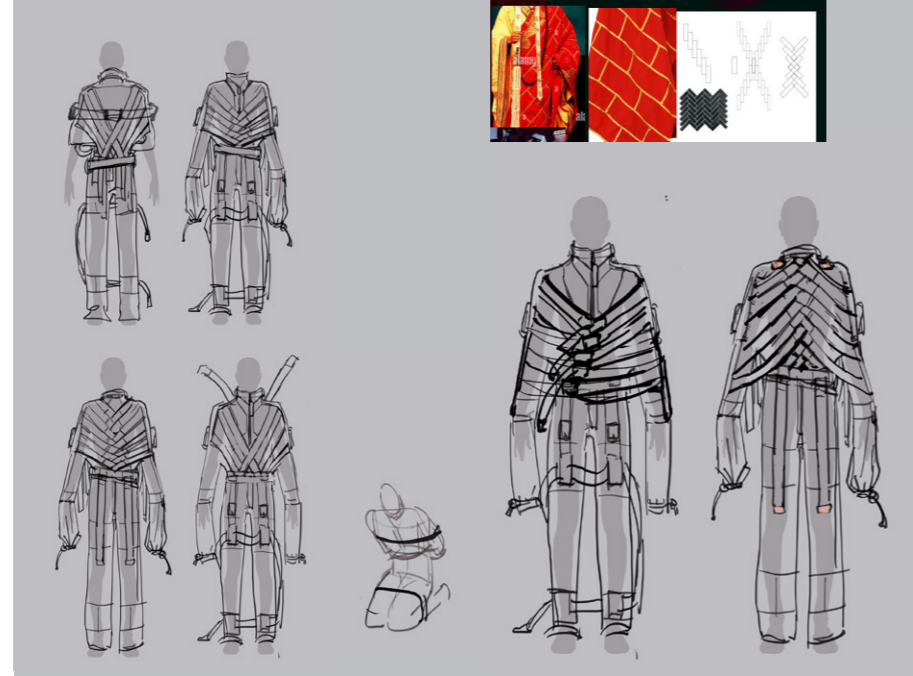
DESIGN PROCESS

The costume needed to evoke the flowing, loose quality of Sanzang’s monk robes, while also communicating the idea of restriction and obviously edited by its wearer to look feminine. The primary silhouette began with loose, large shapes with long sleeves, while secondary shapes were informed by rope bondage done to prisoners as commonly seen in Chinese movies and television. Various straps go around the figure, particularly around the waist for a feminine shape. I was also particularly interested in a cold-shoulder look. Various thumbnail explorations were done to figure out the general shape and distribution of material as a starting point.



Figure 33 Early costuming thumbnails for Cicada

Figure 34
Sketches for
functional
straitjacket for
Cicada



It became immediately clear that consideration needed to be given to the functionality of the straight jacket before its alteration. I incorporated the brick-like pattern of Tang Sanzang's costume into the straps of the straitjacket. It was then that the costume design truly came together.

As it is meant to be a futuristic setting, variations were made refining futuristic shapes on the straitjacket, while incorporating traditional Chinese costume details such as the folding neckline and knot ties, before finally arriving at the final design.



Figure 35 Further explorations of Cicada's costume



Figure 36 Final design of Cicada



Figure 37 Breakdown of visual influence for Cicada's design

I also consider giving her an additional jacket made of industrial netting during her first appearance; she creates it as part of her outfit to somewhat obscure the dotted scarring on her head, and fiddles with the flayed fibres like strands of hair.

It gets removed after she gains the first power wig, to help further communicate the idea of empowerment of the magical accessories. Putting on the wig brings her a step closer to self-realisation and sets her free from restraints.

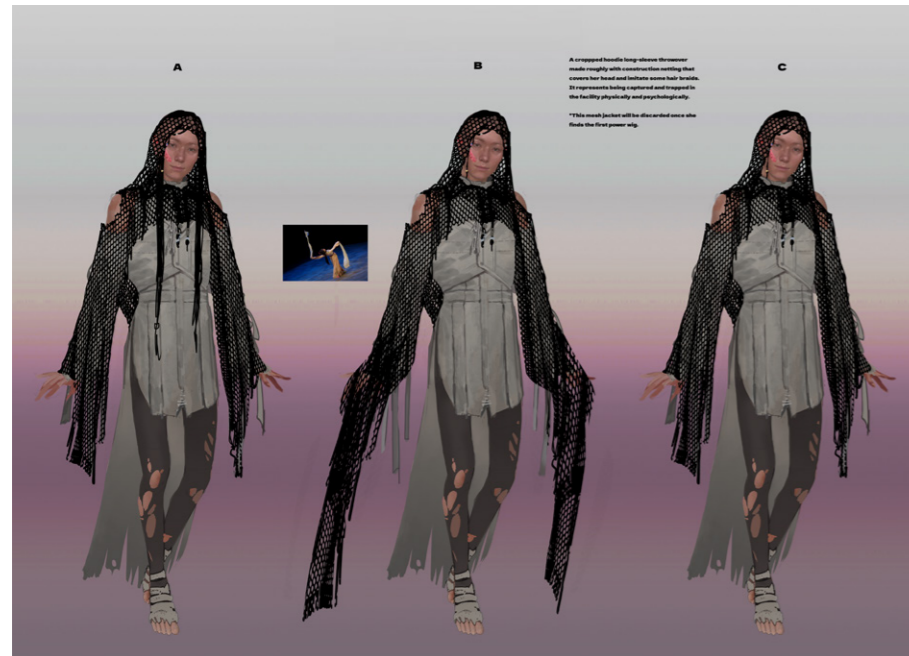


Figure 38 Explorations of Cicada with mesh hood

FACE DESIGN

As Cicada would not have had the opportunity to medically or surgically transition, I wanted her to retain some masculine physical features – a prominent jawline, angular features and knobby joints, but otherwise she turned out looking very androgynous, with femininity being emphasized through costuming and body language. The dotted scarring on her head was created by brain monitoring machines, hinting at medical abuse suffered in the facility.

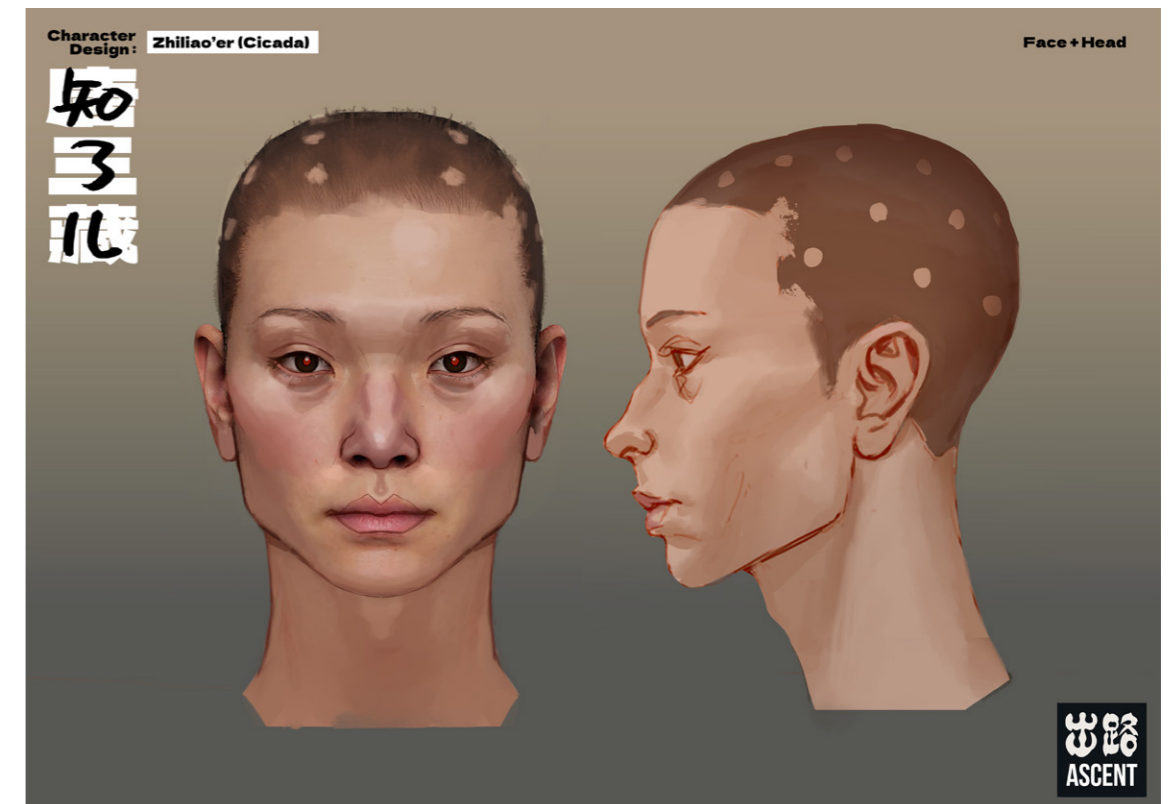


Figure 39 Headshot of Cicada

POWER WIG

The first power ability is telekinesis, and the wig establishes the base visual style and direction. The main colour pink is another signifier of femininity and contrasts with Protagonist's blue, while the hair gathers into a point like the petals of a lotus.

Lotus motif is a reference to Tripitaka's lotus shape headpiece, and as a holy (Buddhist) symbol.

When power is active, face makeup appears, based on Tripitaka's opera makeup shapes and lotus petal shapes. A fluid sash also materialises around the character, inspired by the images of Chinese ancient goddesses, to emphasize a graceful weightlessness.

Tripitaka's Chinese Opera makeup unfortunately is not as elaborate as other characters', but a heightened and interesting design can be made by repeating various shapes of the eyebrow and eyeliner. The makeup supports the overall lotus motif with its petal-like shapes.

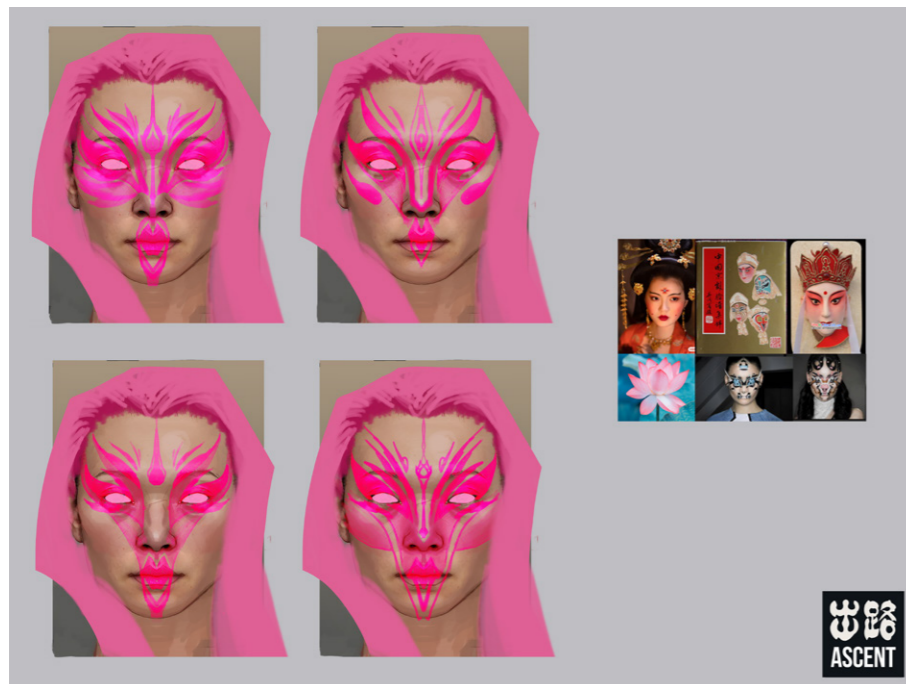


Figure 40 Explorations of powered face markings for Cicada

POWER ILLUSTRATION

The illustration of the character in action means to communicate the more static positioning of Zhiliao'er as a support character in contrast to the Protagonist.



Figure 41 Illustration of superpowered Cicada

“ZHU BAJIE”/PEARL

Zhu Bajie or Pigsy is the third character to join the gang in Journey to the West, known for his pig face and heavysset body. In canon story as well as adaptations, he is often the unpleasant and clumsy comedic relief, a common trope for his body type. Pigs are also commonly depicted as slow and dumb, even though they are highly intelligent creatures.

Ascent's interpretation of Zhu Bajie means to be the opposite of these negative stereotypes. Pearl is a genderqueer drag performer who was captured after a scuffle with police. They have a large strong figure which embodies the more aggressive side of queer resistance. Their name contains a wordplay pun, as the Chinese characters for pearl and swine is pronounced the same (珠zhū/ 猪zhū).

Their power accessory are finger guard claws, inspired by the ornate finger guards worn by Chinese empresses, and they are the heavy-hitter in the game. Their costume contains punk, BDSM and drag elements, and is constructed of repurposed security personnel gear: riot shields and armoured padding, as well as medical gowns. Both the state violence and medical violence upon the community historically is repurposed into an outfit. They wear jewellery made of found objects and trinkets. Their high heeled boots, which was a part of their drag costume, are meant to resemble trotters.



Figure 42 Design explorations for Pearl



Figure 43 Superpowered illustration of Pearl

POWER ILLUSTRATION

Pearl's silhouette stands in stark contrast with Protagonist and Cicada, bringing a more aggressive and intimidating energy. Yet it was important to balance the bold energy and softness as the queer design choices can easily be seen as villain-like. The aggression in the attacking stance and facial expression is counterbalanced by bright and pastel colours in the costume.

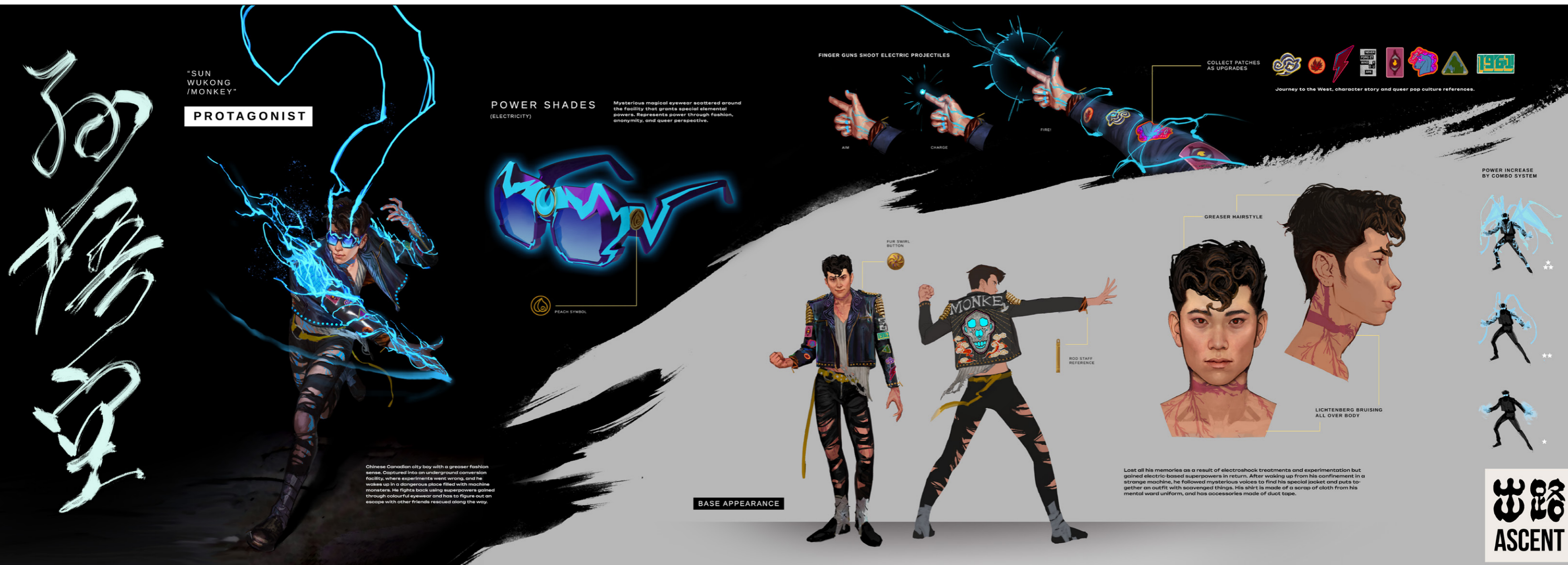
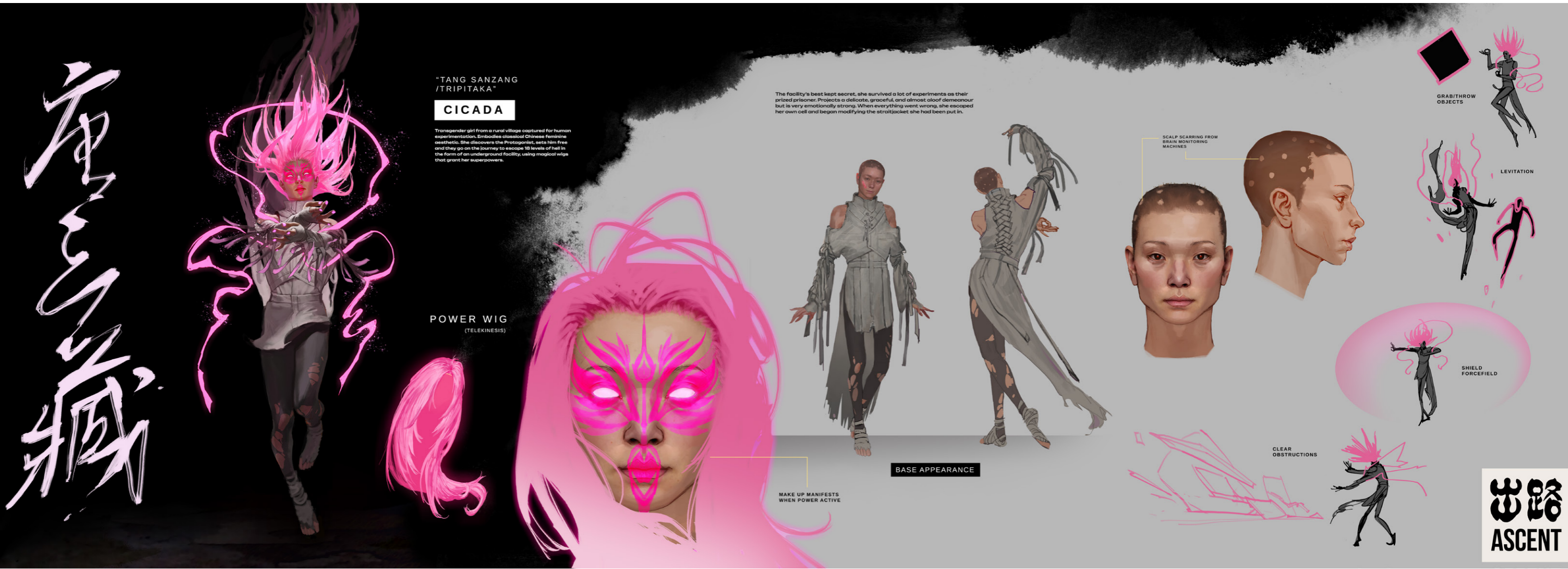


Figure 44 Sun Wukong/Protagonst design final presentation



"TANG SANZANG / TRIPITAKA"

CICADA

Transgender girl from a rural village captured for human experimentation. Embodies classical Chinese feminine aesthetic. She discovers the Protagonist, sets him free and they go on the journey to escape 18 levels of hell in the form of an underground facility, using magical wigs that grant her superpowers.

The facility's best kept secret, she survived a lot of experiments as their prized prisoner. Projects a delicate, graceful, and almost aloof demeanour but is very emotionally strong. When everything went wrong, she escaped her own cell and began modifying the straitjacket she had been put in.

POWER WIG
(TELEKINESIS)

BASE APPEARANCE

MAKE UP MANIFESTS WHEN POWER ACTIVE

SCALP SCARRING FROM BRAIN MONITORING MACHINES

CLEAR OBSTRUCTIONS

GRAB/THROW OBJECTS

LEVITATION

SHIELD FORCEFIELD

出路
ASCENT

Figure 45 Tang Sanzang/Cicada design final presentation

猪八戒

"ZHU BAJIE
/PIGSY"

PEARL

Underground brawler and drag queen who looks tough but is fiercely protective. The tank of the gang, embodying aggressive provocative queer energy. Their outfit is made of repurposed security and medical garb, with jewellery made of found objects - they crafted their entire outfit according to their taste, a love for punk and BDSM fashion, but also the function of fighting machine monsters with raw strength.



POWER NAIL GUARDS

Their power objects are magical finger claws, inspired by ornate finger guards worn by ancient Chinese empresses. A radical reinterpretation of the canonical role wielded by Zhu Bajie which has also been called "dragon's outstretched claws".



Despite their large frame, Pearl is highly mobile, flamboyant, and dancer-like. A force to be reckoned with. The claw trails resemble sparks, fireworks, and flare.



BOAR-LIKE MOHAWK

PIGTAILS



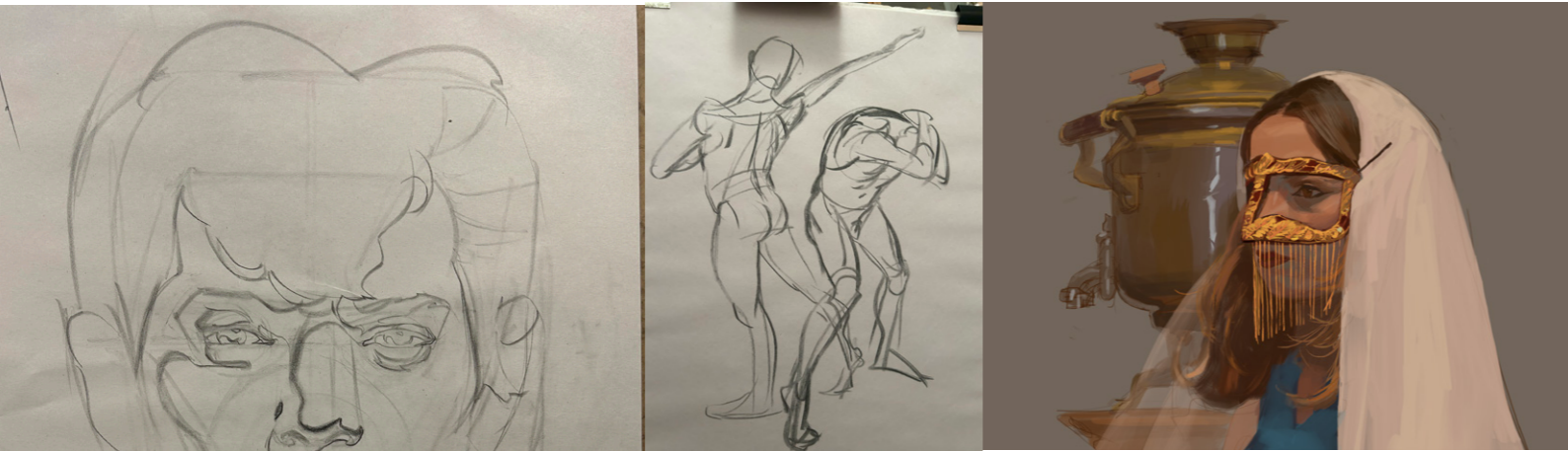
CHARACTER
OUTFIT
EXPLORATION



Figure 46 Zhu Bajie/Pearl design final presentation

DESIGN FINDINGS

PERSONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT



Realism is a powerful visual tool but does take a lot of practice to continue executing effectively. Through the year, I signed myself up for drawing courses at Wellington Drawing School and Matt Katz Atelier to keep my fundamentals of rendering, figure anatomy and gesture sharpened outside of university work. I was able to further my understanding of realistic bodies as well as gestural shapes and composition, which helped a lot in my design output.

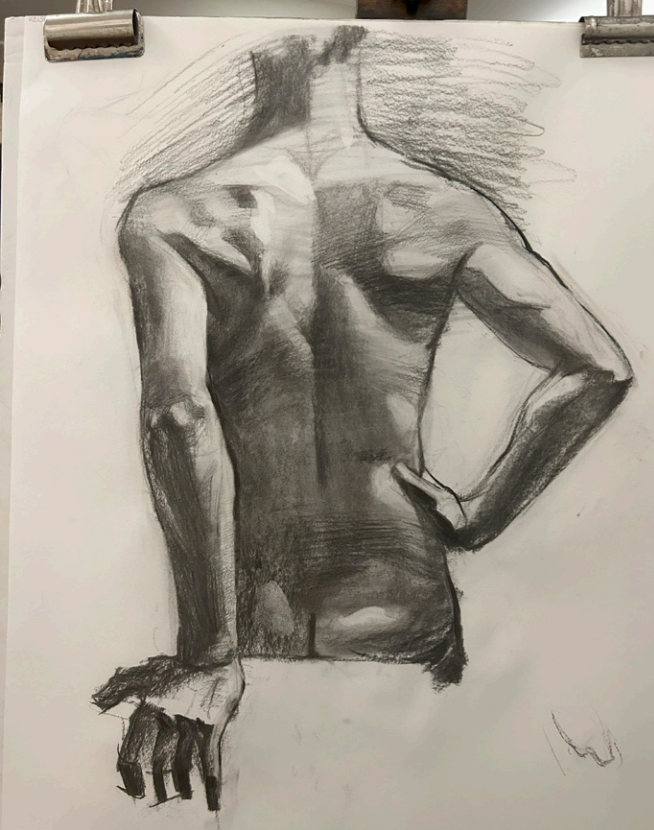
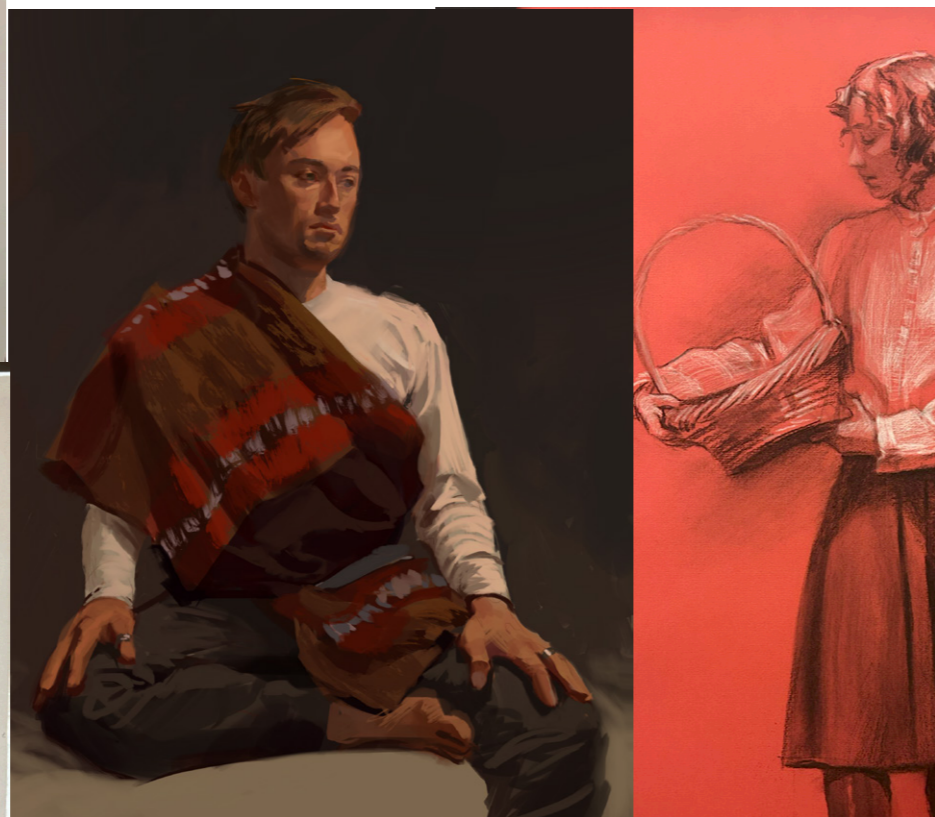


Figure 47 Select life drawings done in the past year



The contextual research for this project was dense and challenging to tackle, especially as the topics affect me personally, despite the focus being on positive empowerment and emancipation. It was hard to investigate the depths of the abyss, to be confronted with the grim realities of queer suppression and demonization throughout history which informs our present, even if I already understood the topic at a general level. Frequent counselling sessions and meetings with the school rainbow advisor were had to keep my mental health intact throughout the year, reminding me to practice mindfulness when handling tough information. I am especially grateful for this support system.

I discovered a wealth of literature by the Chinese queer diaspora which I never knew existed before, and new publications were constantly being made as I undertook this project, signalling the rising, long-needed attention upon Asian queer issues. I have also found a community of Asian diasporic peers in New Zealand, through the 2024 Asian Aotearoa Arts events in Wellington. It was very empowering to meet other diasporic Asians who are also working to legitimize the third culture space. Perhaps I thought for the longest time that there was only limbo in the gap between two worlds, and never knew it was richly populated. In a way, this echoes the queer journey, or the journey of any marginalised person - finding power and healing through community.

Taking on this design project has allowed me to fill the gap in my own heart and I am more interested than ever to reconcile with my Chinese cultural heritage. Now on my own terms, in my own queer ways.



Figure 48 Asian Aotearoa Arts 2024 group photo by Glenda Manzo

CONCLUSION

I believe I was able to shed light on a lot of the issues not commonly engaged with when it comes to Chinese queer representation and gain a better understanding of queer issues in China.

The combination of drag culture and Chinese Opera helped create interesting designs that embodies the vibrant expression of modern global queer culture while reminding the viewer of traditional Chinese cultural roots, the duality and coexistence of both I feel aptly represents queer third culture for myself at this moment.

Despite a grim dystopia being the centre of the project, I believe I was able to create a story of empowerment instead of glorifying suffering. Through the restrained costumes in a grim setting, I intended to communicate resilient survival but never the true potential of queer expression.

It was challenging being the director, designer, and manager of my own project, but it was valuable to learn the importance of balance and flexibility to complete this Masters exegesis. Nothing one makes will ever be perfect, and to complete something means to find compromise between ambition, realistic outcomes, and the requirements of the project. My ideas were ambitious, and I had very real limits and the outcome needed to be narrow. Reflecting on this experience, it will serve me well to work on increasing my workflow efficiency in the future.

The effort made, designing of key characters, and subsequent pinpointing of visual direction, nonetheless forms crucial groundwork for the further development of this project. For the future, I would like to flesh out more of Ascent's characters, environments, and game design. Considerations can be made for a multiplayer or co-op game mode, as well as potentially moving into the virtual reality platform. The great beyond is endless and full of possibility.

It is no secret that China’s influence reaches beyond their national borders and can be wide-reaching towards all forms of Chinese LGBT discussion. Le Cui wrote extensively on the threat of Chinese censorship in academia both in the mainland and internationally, enacted by the state directly and through its people. (Cui; Cui and Song)

But the man himself gave me great encouragement to pursue this project when I wrote to him about my concerns. According to him, queer issues are currently not as “risky” as larger geopolitical issues like Hong Kong-China relations or Xinjiang human rights.

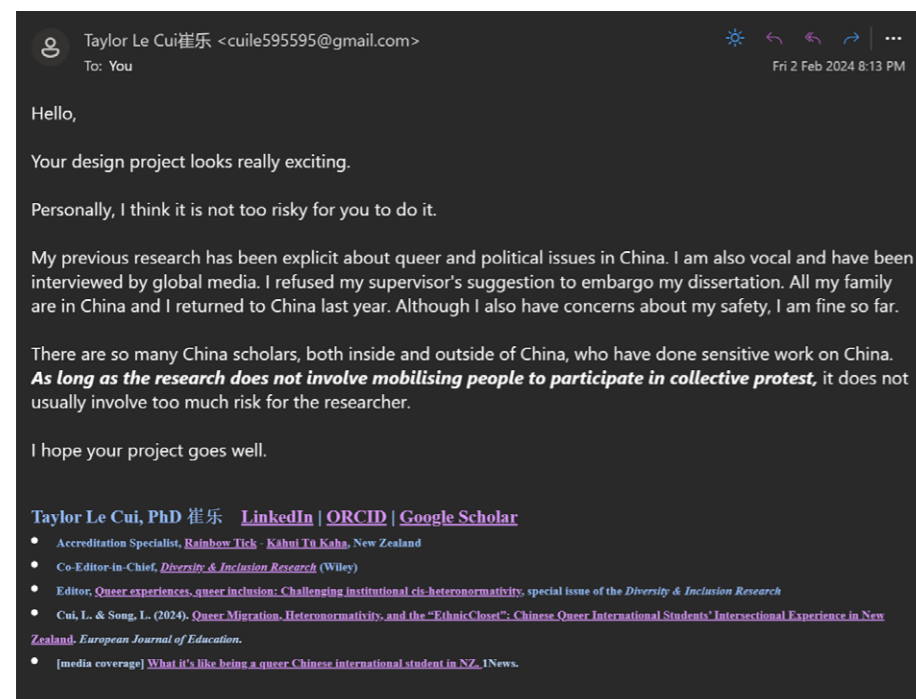


Figure 49 Email correspondence with Taylor Le Cui

Nonetheless, it still makes sense to be consider caution during public distribution, since this game does imagine a worst-case-scenario where the CCP physically targets LGBTQ+ individuals.

Conversations were had over protection my institution might be able to offer me, when it came to the mandatory archival of my exegesis in library, and the public graduate exhibition. The Massey College of Creative Arts offered the following options: embargo, redaction, and nom de plume. They fortunately have had experience with projects with a potentially sensitive topic like mine and were prepared to fully support me in whichever option I chose. I feel very supported by my university, such may not always be the case for everyone embarking on politically sensitive projects.

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LIST OF IMAGES

Figure 1 <i>Get Out</i> (2017) dir. Jordan Peele	10
Figure 2 Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation and Heaven's Official Blessing by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu	17
Figure 3 <i>Kiss of the Rabbit God</i> (2019) dir. Andrew Thomas Huang	21
Figure 4 <i>Patarillo Journey to the West</i> by Maya Mineo.....	22
Figure 5 <i>Havoc in Heaven</i> (1961).....	23
Figure 6 Nymphia Wind, winner of 2023 <i>RuPaul's Drag Race</i> Season 16.....	24
Figure 7 Transgender characters in video games.....	25
Figure 8 Eddie Gluskin in <i>Outlast: Whistleblower</i> (2014).....	28
Figure 9 Eddie Gluskin's first appearance	29
Figure 10 <i>A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge</i> (1985).....	29
Figure 11 Eddie Gluskin's final moment.....	30
Figure 12 <i>Bioshock Infinite</i> (2013).....	31
Figure 13 <i>Half-Life</i> series (1998-2020)	32
Figure 14 Project idea outline.....	37
Figure 15 Drafted game features description	38
Figure 16 Lineup sketch of 5 main characters.....	40
Figure 17 Sequence of events in the first game level.....	40
Figure 19 Design Process Diagram.....	41
Figure 18 Design direction choices.....	41
Figure 20 Diagram based on the double diamond.....	42
Figure 21 Sun Wukong/Protagonst character design brief.....	49
Figure 21 Sketches of the Protagonist first waking up and his rescue by Cicada.....	50
Figure 22 Dynamic initial thumbnails for Protagonist.....	50
Figure 23 Initial explorations of Protagonist costume.....	51
Figure 24 Further explorations of Protagonist costume	51
Figure 25 Protagonst final design	52
Figure 26 Protagonst design influences and breakdown.....	52
Figure 27 Protagonst face and hair exploration process	53
Figure 28 Explorations of eyewear prop design.....	54
Figure 29 Prop 3D modelling in Blender	55
Figure 30 Electric power shades final design.....	55
Figure 31 Sketch of Protagonist levels of power.....	56
Figure 32 Superpowered Sun Wukong/Protagonst final illustration.....	57
Figure 33 Early costuming thumbnails for Cicada	59
Figure 34 Sketches for functional straitjacket for Cicada.....	60
Figure 35 Further explorations of Cicada's costume.....	60
Figure 36 Final design of Cicada	61
Figure 37 Breakdown of visual influence for Cicada's design	61
Figure 38 Explorations of Cicada with mesh hood.....	62
Figure 39 Headshot of Cicada.....	63
Figure 40 Explorations of powered face markings for Cicada.....	64
Figure 41 Illustration of superpowered Cicada.....	65
Figure 42 Design explorations for Pearl.....	66
Figure 43 Superpowered ilustration of Pearl.....	67
Figure 44 Sun Wukong/Protagonst design final presentation	68
Figure 45 Tang Sanzang/Cicada design final presentation	70
Figure 46 Zhu Bajie/Pearl design final presentation	72
Figure 47 Select life drawings done in the past year	76
Figure 48 Asian Aotearoa Arts 2024 Hui. Photography by Abhi Topiwala.....	77
Figure 49 Email correspondence with Taylor Le Cui.....	80
Figure 51 Examples of tragic queer representation aligning with "bury your gays". <i>Brokeback Mountain, Last of Us, The 100, Supernatural, Trigun, JoJo's Bizarre Adventure</i>	93

APPENDIX

The popular LGBTQ+ media landscape today is in many ways shaped by the need to respond to its complicated past. The inclusion and characterisation of LGBT characters has evolved in response to changes in social climate and shifting audience demographics which is often tied to a larger desire for social change.

The influence of Hollywood cinema on global visual culture and cross-media narrative trends is undeniable, and one of the most significant measures that negatively skewed LGBTQ+ portrayals was the Hays Code (1934-1968), established out of conservative religious moral panic in America (Abreu). The Hays Code regulation forbid any positive portrayals of homosexual characters; they were only permitted visibility in stories if they were evil or if their stories ended in tragedy, as they needed to be seen 'punished' for their immorality. It led to a proliferation of queer-coded villains, exacerbating the image of queerness as evil and 'monstrous' in the global social conscience (Benshoff and Griffin 90). Efforts to change this monstrous image arose from real need to shift public perception during the HIV/AIDS crisis (1979-1995), when the U.S. government drew on the dominant negative religious stigmatization of LGBTQ+ people to justify a lack of response to the medical crisis that took millions of lives from the queer community (Benshoff and Griffin 204). Stories became sympathetic to the plight of the LGBTQ+ community, reflecting the real tragedies occurring to cultivate awareness and empathy from an audience who has until had now only seen them as dangerous, though it also reduced their portrayal into stories of suffering and death (Benshoff and Griffin 207; Hulan 22). In a post-HIV/AIDS era,

the queer community voices have become more dominant, making themselves heard as a demographic, demanding media that positively affirm and empower a future LGBTQ+ generation.

However, it will take conscious effort to overcome a representational past plagued with demonization and mortality. Ghosts of this past persist in the media landscape in the form of tropes such as "bury the gays", and queer coding of antagonists to signify otherness. In order to change this landscape for the future, we need to critically reevaluate stereotypes and genre tropes and we need an inclusive and diverse media industry that tells authentic stories.

Bury Your Gays is a literary trope identified since the late 19th century, featuring the frequent death of a partner in a homosexual relationship at the end of a story (Hulan 17). The proliferation of this trope meant that queer couples in media rarely have happy endings, or with queer people surviving their tribulations.



But things get more complicated on the Asian front, where LGBTQ+ content is largely underground due to the topic of non-heteronormative sexuality being taboo.

Asian queer characters feature as protagonists in Boy's Love (BL) media, however the diversity of queer identities portrayed is not on par with that of America or Europe (Chan 10). These narratives are also often limited to romantic or sexual pursuits, mostly leaning on saccharine escapist fantasies where the real social struggles are rarely seen (Wei 56).

Figure 51 Examples of tragic queer representation aligning with "bury your gays". *Brokeback Mountain*, *Last of Us*, *The 100*, *Supernatural*, *Trigon*, *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*.

While Gengorou Tagame's critically successful *My Brother's Husband* (2018) does signal a long-awaited break in this trend, addressing the social prejudice of modern Japan towards homosexuality and complicated cross-cultural dynamics, many BL stories still contain problematic characterisation that reinforces heteropatriarchal structure than dismantling it. (Lin 34, 35; Chan 104)

The continued othering of queer characters is apparent especially in Asian horror. Even though most plotlines draw upon rich histories of folklore and mythology, the fact remains that queer people are still represented as "deviant", often only afforded the position of the antagonist or victim in the scant instances when they are depicted in films. In September 2022, the blog AsianHorrorFlicks listed 10 Asian Horror Films that Feature LGBT Characters or Themes but summarised that most of them gave "the impression that LGBT people are some form of aberration" (Asian Horror Flicks).

There is a need for LGBTQ+ characters to take centre stage as protagonist/player instead of the supporting character of a straight protagonist. There is also a need to humanise queer people, and show them as diverse, nuanced, maybe even flawed – to move away from pre-structured conduits (Avila; Readus).

The queer audience also do not want more sad stories, which dominated the culture through historical homophobic media regulation and traumas of the HIV/AIDS crisis (Hulan 24). It is time to focus on the queer strength to survive and prevail.