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Ramayana Re-imagined: An Allegorical Approach to Adaptation

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1.0 Abstract

An allegorical method can be used within concept design as mechanisms of adaptation to facilitate the translation of an ancient Indian religious Sanskrit epic into a live-action science fiction film. The *Ramayana* is a popular text in India, and has been countlessly retold in different art forms, but adaptations outside of the mythological and fantasy genres are few. What writer E. Dawson Varughese (2014) calls 'Bharati Fantasy' (Indian Fantasy) addresses the differing perception among Indian and western audiences of content that draws heavily on the Hindu epics. The cultural references of 'Bharati Fantasy' will escape the reader unfamiliar with the epics. Expansion into the realm of science fiction film can address the limitations of its reception without compromising its cultural resonance. The philosophical exploration of consciousness and humanity framed in science fiction films such as *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), suggests that the ideas of the Hindu text can be aligned to this genre with minimal thematic alteration. To do so with authenticity is paramount as inclusion of Indian iconography and symbolism needs to cater to both audiences who ascribe to a belief in the narrative and the science fiction film viewership. A consideration of culturally specific symbols against those universally recognised frames the core research for the project. My role as Concept Designer is to negotiate the integration and purposeful juxtaposition of Indian iconography with a Science Fiction design sensibility by adherence to allegorical values for a live-action adaptation of the *Ramayana*. To that end, I intend to use character design concept art to explore this theme.

Contents

1.0 Abstract

2.0 Introduction

3.0 Contextual review

3.1 *Ramayana* in current media forms

3.2 Bharati Fantasy

3.3 Science Fiction

3.4 Allegory

The Three Gunas

Rule of Three

3.5 Iconography

Raja Ravi Varma

Visual Metaphor

4.0 Methodology

5.0 Design Process

6.0 Design Findings

7.0 Conclusion

8.0 Reference List

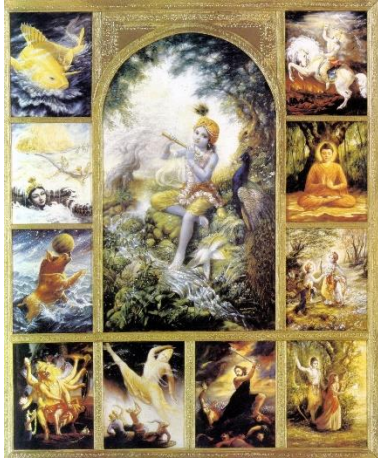
9.0 Figure List

10.0 Bibliography

2.0 Introduction

This project is a continued exploration of a cultural crossover that was the subject of the final-year project of my Bachelor of Design degree. It centred on one of the ten avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu.

Figure 1. The ten avatars. (n.d.).



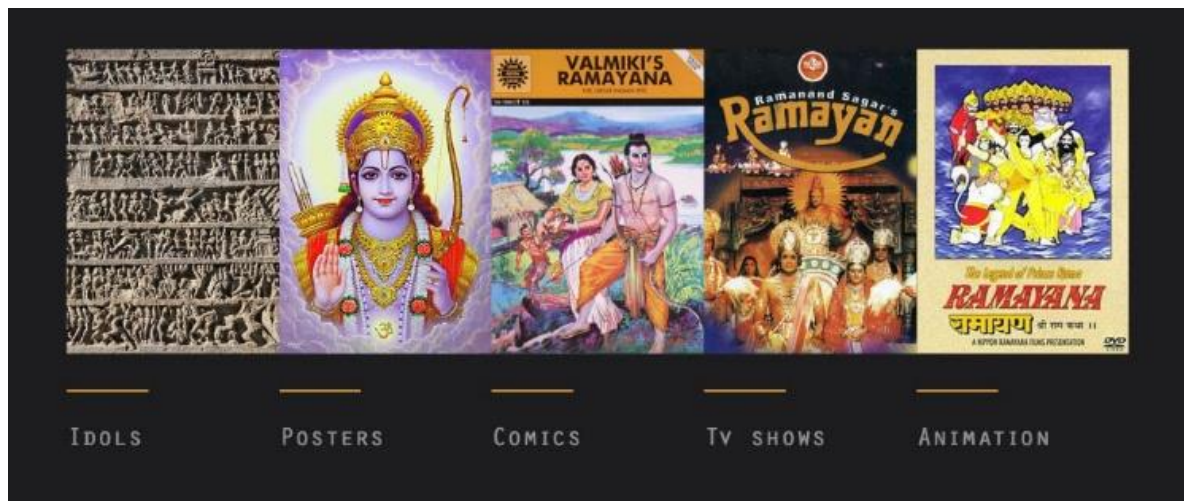
More recently I've been intrigued by the tone, grit, and world-building of cyberpunk films. I am specifically interested in how the Hindu epics could be re-imagined through a science fiction lens for my tendency is to visualise them through the narrative and aesthetic lens of the films I most enjoy.

Figure 2. Tech noir film map. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).



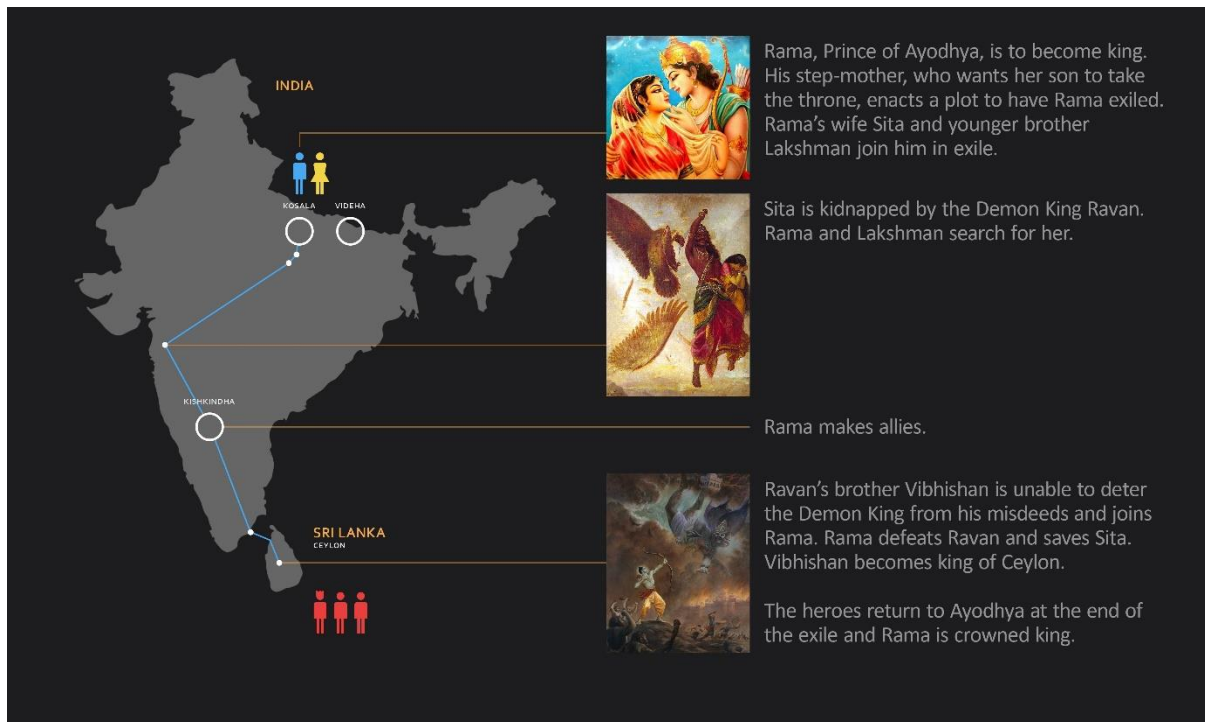
The *Ramayana* is the older of the two major Sanskrit epics of India and consists of nearly 24,000 verses. It is an integral part of Hinduism and the cultural consciousness of India. The story has been countlessly retold through many different art forms, including temple reliefs, classical dance, comic books, film, and television.

Figure 3. The Ramayana in various art forms.



The *Ramayana* is told over 7 parts and follows Rama, the God Incarnate as a mortal man, and dramatizes personal sacrifice for duty. Rama, Prince of Ayodhya, was to be crowned king but was exiled with his wife Sita and his brother Lakshman for 14 years through the plotting of his stepmother. While in exile Sita is abducted by the Demon King of Lanka Ravan. Rama's new allies locate Sita in Lanka. On their way there, they are joined by Ravan's brother Vibhishan who was unable to deter Ravan from his misdeeds. In the ensuing battle both Kumbhakarna, woken from his slumber, and Ravan are killed by Rama who is finally reunited with Sita. Vibhishan becomes king of Lanka and the heroes return to Ayodhya at the end of their term of exile and Rama is crowned king.

Figure 4. Ramayana story map. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).



Some notable adaptations include the live-action television series of the 1980's, *Ramayan*, and the Indo-Japanese collaboration for the animated *The Legend of Prince Rama* (1992). However, adaptations outside of the mythological and fantasy genres are few. The graphic novel *Ramayan 3392AD* (2006) adapts the story in a post-apocalyptic future setting though diverges from the source material in significant ways. There are however, no precedents for a science fiction film adaptation of this story which marks the defining opportunity of this research project to explore a method of adaptation.

Research Question:

How can the *Ramayana*, a religious epic of ancient India, be adapted into a live-action science fiction film for a global audience?

I make no pretence as to the personal bias that has informed the direction of this adaptation. In my estimation, there have been enough adaptations that follow the same aesthetic and tone, to the point that some are close enough to be interchangeable, that a different narrative approach would engage the imagination in an altogether new way. Certainly from a design perspective the analogous readings to be communicated through science fiction worlds can feature greater levels of reinvention. Films like *Ghost in the Shell*

(1995) and *The Matrix* (1999) are not without a spiritual or religious dimension and yet the visualisation of these ideas allow a level of thematic exploration all the same. To my mind, the ideas of consciousness and humanity present in the *Ramayana* are the same themes that make science fiction engaging. Rama, the protagonist of the *Ramayana* is the God Incarnate in a mortal form. To highlight the mortal aspect befits a grounded interpretation of the character.

In his commentary in the *The Holy Geeta* (2002) there are a couple of instances where Swami Chinmayananda points to an allegorical component of the *Ramayana* by way of the story's antagonist and his brothers. I found this additional dimension of the *Ramayana* fit so neatly into what I knew of the story. The lack of emphasis on this component of the story in adaptations limits how inventive the character designs could otherwise be irrespective of the aesthetic direction.

The *Ramayana* texts I've referred to include:

- *The Ramayana and The Mahabharata* (1974) by Romesh Dutt
- *Ramayana retold* (1957) by C. Rajagopalachari
- *The Ramayan of Valmiki* (n.d.) by Ralph T. H. Griffith

Adaptations of the *Ramayana* belong to the mythological genre of film. For an audience unfamiliar with the source material an adaptation can be viewed through the lens of genre to enhance narrative comprehension. A body of literary fiction in India that Varughese calls 'Bharati Fantasy' faces similar complications arising from religious and cultural specificity.

The Three Gunas is a notable allegorical component of the *Ramayana* and is personified in three individual characters who are the focus of my design investigation. Activity (*Rajas*), Inactivity (*Tamas*), and Unactivity (*Sattwa*) constitute the Three Gunas or attributes (Chinmayananda, 2002). They are expressed through the three antagonists as the three types of agents of action (Chinmayananda, 2002). The three characters are brothers; the primary antagonist is Ravan, the secondary antagonist is Kumbhakarna, and the antagonist-turned-ally is Vibhishan. The Three Gunas, and by extension the three brothers, conform to the Rule of Three pattern (Booker, 2004); this narrative device absolves the audience of the

need to have prior knowledge of the Three Gunas for narrative comprehension but remains accessible to those familiar with it.

My adaptation belongs to the cyberpunk subgenre of science fiction but I shall use the parallel term tech-noir for it addresses with specificity, the overlap of science fiction and film noir. The artificial humans, analogous to the demons of the source material, are an example of otherness that ideas of consciousness and humanity can be explored in relation to. Noir narratives are commonly constructed around the antagonist. Such narratives show the protagonist unravelling the mysteries/complications of the antagonist's arc or scheme (Selbo, 2014). The elaboration of the antagonist's back story as a method of interpretation guided by allegorical function, aligns it with the narrative and archetypal conventions of the science fiction and film noir genres to which it is being cast.

The Three Gunas is a good fit for this design research as it addresses the nuance often simplified to the opposition of good and evil. In its role as the mechanism of adaptation, parameters can be established around it to inform its visual representation through character design. The synthesis of narrative and design is a means by which the fantastical elements of the source material are 'rationalised' for the science fiction setting it is being adapted into.

Project Scope:

The allegorical expression of the Three *Gunas* through the three antagonists is the central objective of my project. The integration and purposeful juxtaposition of Hindu iconography in a science fiction context will determine the aesthetic and tonal quality of the live-action film adaptation for the intended Indian and western audience.

My role as Concept Designer is character design focused. The standard film industry practice of an iterative process within concept design will be used to develop a design response with the project situated in the design for fabrication phase of production. To ensure the design is faithfully recreated, whether physically or digitally, clear, descriptive artwork is required. This includes front and back views of the characters and supporting material such as detailed breakdowns and notations ought to be included where necessary for clarity of

communication. The final output of the concept design work is a character sheet for each of the three antagonists. In designing the characters as a set, a visual language will be created to distinguish them from other characters of the story. An explanation of the methods employed is followed by this design process where the practical design work is detailed and upon which I reflect in the design findings section.

Figure 5. Adaptation table. Patel, K. (2020).

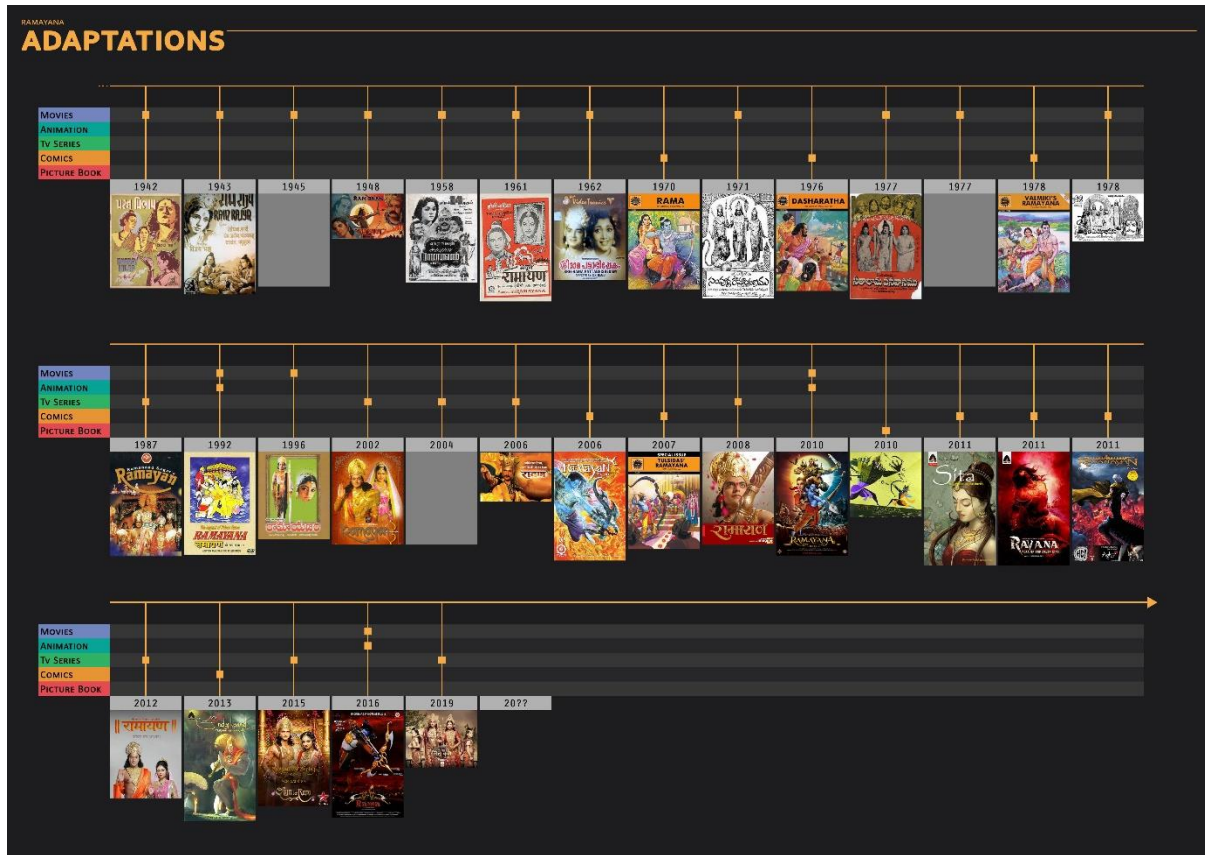
Story Type	Voyage and Return
Genre	Science Fiction
Sub-genre	Cyberpunk/Tech Noir
Themes	Balance
Rating	PG-13/R-16

3.0 Literature Review:

3.1 Ramayana in current media forms

The mythological is a genre of film in India that draws its narratives from Hindu mythology (Jacobs, 2012). It has been a popular subject matter since the earliest use of the film medium in India and has become, as Gupta (1989) suggests, established as a “long-lasting genre of Indian cinema” (p. 12). The *Ramayana* is one of the Hindu epics often retold within the mythological genre. The 1987 television serial *Ramayan* (1987-88) saw a resurgence in the genre following a decline of such content in film. It drew on multiple tellings of the Ramayana, primarily Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and Tulsidas’ *Ramacharitmanas*. Since then, the mythological has predominantly been told in the form of television serials. The Ramayana in particular has been retold multiple times while film adaptations have almost exclusively been animated productions. Comic books are another medium that feature mythological storytelling. *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, for example, have told mythological and historical Indian stories since its inception in 1967; and have told multiple versions of the *Ramayana* including Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and Tulsidas’ *Ramacharitmanas*.

Figure 6. Ramayana adaptations. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).



In his essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas*, Ramanujan (1991) describes, in Peircean terms, three types of translations of *Ramayana* texts. The first type is an iconic translation where the relation of the translated text to the source text is faithful. The second type is indexical; the text is “embedded in a locale, a context, refers to it, even signifies it, and would not make much sense without it” (Ramanujan, 1991, p. 157). The third type is a symbolic translation; it makes minimal use of plot and details of the source text to provide something of a counter-text. All translations, he asserts, have elements of these three types to some extent, even faithful renderings. My adaptation is comparable to an indexical telling but this is an uncomplicated assessment. A film adaptation could not be an iconic telling of the source text for a change in medium must entail interpretation of the text as opposed to direct translation (Ray, 1976); and the value of a counter telling is questionable if the global audience is unfamiliar with the text to which it refers. The benefit of such contextualisation is in addressing how science fiction is used in the adaptation.

3.2 Bharati Fantasy

In the canon of stories inspired by, or infused with, religious (Hindu) or cultural (Indian) narratives, an example in the literary domain makes for an interesting point of reference. The term 'Bharati Fantasy' (Indian Fantasy) is used by Varughese (2014) in relation to a "particular body of post-millennial fiction in English from India whose narratives draw significantly on Hindu epics and the historical contexts of early *Bharat* [India]" (p. 350). Her writing addresses the reception of this genre of fiction in domestic Indian literary markets and how it might be received in a global market. This necessitates discussion of the differing perception of such culturally intertwined fiction for an Indian and non-Indian readership. As an adaptation, as opposed to a story that draws ideas from the source material, my project would not sit within the Bharati Fantasy classification but the consideration of the perceptions of such narratives across differing audience groups is applicable.

The mythology-inspired fiction "anchors the Indian novel to, and in, India, its culture(s), people(s), and histories" (Varughese, 2017, p. 13). The Ramayana is one of the Hindu texts that Bharati Fantasy texts draw considerable inspiration from (Varughese, 2017). This body of literary fiction is often made for sale in India only. Its popularity is not reliant on "endorsement or consumption from anywhere other than India" (Varughese, 2014, p. 360). This speaks to the interest in fictional stories that include religious and cultural ideas for which there is an existing audience. The term mythology in Indian and non-Indian contexts has differing connotations that complicate its classification as a genre in global markets; the term Bharati Fantasy is used to designate a genre space for this type of fiction.

The fact that these texts are originally produced in English suggests its potential for wider distribution (Varughese, 2017). Although written in a language that in theory affords a greater, global audience, the narrative content of much of this body of fiction is not easily accessible. Of the Bharati Fantasy authors Varughese (2017) refers to, some have anchored their narratives in Indian culture so prominently that it is "questionable whether such works could be culturally translated into other literary markets despite all of these narratives being written in English from the outset" (p. 39-40).

For the readership unfamiliar with Hinduism, Bharati Fantasy texts can be interpreted through the genre lens of fantasy and science fiction (Varughese, 2017). The ability of fantasy fiction to “transcend social and cultural barriers by nature of its ‘other-worldliness’” (Varughese, 2014, p. 360) supports the potential for distribution of ‘Bharati Fantasy’ texts beyond regional restrictions into global markets. This suggests that what may be likened to historical fiction for some, can simply be fantasy for another. While comprehension of the encoded material requires cultural knowledge which all readers may not possess, Varughese argues that these are not so great as to be an impediment. The utility of the genre lens is something my project shares with Bharati Fantasy though it substitutes the ‘other-worldliness’ of fantasy for science fiction.

3.3 Science Fiction

Film genre facilitates narrative comprehension in its use of “familiar and iconic elements that are quickly recognised and understood” (Selbo, 2014, p. 10). A science fiction adaptation presents an opportunity for innovation in opposition to the over-saturation of the same visual language of mythologicals. The term ‘film genre,’ as it is used in the film industry, refers to a type of story, as distinguished from ‘genre film’ which refers to “imitative works of lesser quality and little originality” (Selbo, 2014, p. 1). Film genre functions “through a set of codes that are recognised and understood by both the spectator and the filmmakers via a ‘common cultural consensus’ or a ‘collective cultural expression’” (Doll & Faller, 1986, p. 89). Its provision of a “short course to narrative comprehension” (Selbo, 2014, p. 10) is especially important in the film medium that requires economy of expression and must, in this case, simultaneously reach a broader audience. Rather than being restrictive, the intelligible use of film genre allows room for original narrative, visual, and thematic content (Selbo, 2014). Consequently, an adaptation of the Ramayana need not sacrifice specificity even in addressing an unfamiliar audience.

Suggestions made of the narrative significance science must have in science fiction, as writer and critic Robert Grant (2013) does, are logical but the genre eludes widely accepted definition. Science fiction writer and critic Judith Merrill describes the complications in definition as resulting from the reliance on “axiomatic assumptions about the meanings of

‘science’ and ‘fiction’” (as cited in Sobchak, 2001, p. 18). However, her use of the term speculative fiction describes a type of science fiction story that encapsulates the essence of the genre as one from which something about the universe, man, or reality, can be learned (Sobchak, 2001). The concerns of science fiction are potentially universal ones (Langford, 2005). They speak directly to an audience that “has only broadened as the forms and practices of industrial and post-industrial society ... have extended themselves” (Langford, 2005, p. 193) to the world. The place of humanity in the universe, and the nature of existence are themes common to both religion and science fiction (McGrath, 2011). Science fiction provides a prompt for this line of ethical discussion in scenarios that depict the future of technology (McGrath, 2011). American cinema theorist Vivian Sobchak (2001) makes a similar assertion that the primary intention of science fiction is neither to inform nor philosophise, but the dramatic treatment of narrative and its constituents upon which the audience can reflect and draw their own conclusions. Ideas about humanity have traditionally been communicated in science fiction through the comparison of self as human and other as non-human subjects (Cornea, 2007). Aliens and robots are examples of otherness in relation to which a representation of humanity is explored in potentially morally ambiguous terms. Deckard and the Replicant Roy Batty in *Blade Runner* (1982) are an example of this. The genre is therefore an appropriate space for exploring religious themes of morality and consciousness, exemplified in the interpretation of the demons of the Ramayana as artificial humans. This adaptation compels the audience to question the relationship between artificial and biological consciousness and humanity, with understanding heavily influenced by religious Hindu discourse.

The development of the consistent, logical consequences of one, or very few, new postulates distinguishes science fiction from fantasy (Selbo, 2014). The effect of this approach is the ‘rationalisation’ of the fantastical elements of the *Ramayana*. The substitution of the ‘other-worldliness’ of its fantasy reading with one drawn from a technological extrapolation as a mode of translation is, as Grant (2013) describes of the science fiction genre broadly, allegorical.

Tech-noir is a genre hybrid of science fiction and film noir and is the result of science fiction that no longer speaks to the “proper use of science and technology” (Auger, 2011).

Film noir is an antagonist-driven plot and has a narrative structural utility. The alignment of the adaptation with the conventions of film noir thus foreground the allegorical dimension of the source material. It additionally addresses the envisioned tone of the adaptation. The aesthetic of a film has a “direct bearing on the story and derives from it” (Ray, 1976, p. 66). The fusion of Indian iconography in a science fiction context requires narrative justification that the future Indian setting of the adaptation and the globalisation aspect of cyberpunk provides. This sub-genre is a good fit for pushing the aesthetic boundaries of classic Ramayana depictions.

3.4 Allegory

As a religious narrative the allegorical component of the *Ramayana* is, in some way, educational. The dissemination of its teachings is not my reason for having selected this subject matter though its retention is necessary following the logic that its absence would render the adaptation neither faithful (iconic) nor indexical, nor a valid counter text (symbolic) if the viewer is unfamiliar with the source material.

Jule Selbo, author of *Film Genre for the Screenwriter* (2014), acknowledges the prevalence of allegorical storytelling in the fantasy genre and addresses allegory more broadly as a mode of communicating a point of view in more accessible terms. This bears some similarity to English poet Philip Sidney’s (1890) stance that the accessibility of stories in comparison to philosophy makes it a more useful educational tool. The use of allegory affords accessibility for a global audience without dilution of the narrative substance.

The discussion of allegory and its supposed opposition to symbol, predicated on the supposition that the former is ‘unmotivated’ and ‘radically arbitrary’, was a useful frame for articulating its application in the context of my project. Both allegory and symbol are large-scale expressions of conceptual metaphor (Crisp, 2005). Metaphor is “rooted in our using more familiar or experientially basic concepts to understand less familiar, less experientially basic, concepts” (Crisp, 2005, p. 331). In thinking metaphorically, one projects “directly constituted conceptual structures, or source domains, onto less directly constituted structures, or target domains” (Crisp, 2005, p. 331). The source domain is generally more

experientially basic to facilitate understanding of the referent that is the target domain (Crisp, 2005). For one domain to be mapped onto another, both “must share sufficient conceptual structure” (Crisp, 2005, p. 331). The relationship between source and target domain is thus highly motivated and non-arbitrary; a description that extends to allegory. In the literary sense of allegory the text world, the story to which the allegory is mapped, “functions continuously as a metaphorical source domain, while with symbol it does so only occasionally” (Crisp, 2005, p. 334). This simple difference highlights the use of continuous narrative that distinguishes allegory.

However, the allegorical presentation of abstract entities does not involve direct target domain reference. Abstract personification involves what cognitive scientist Gilles Fauconnier calls pragmatic connectors, “devices allowing one to refer not to an expression’s primary referent but to some entity associated with that referent” (Crisp, 2005, p. 326). The pragmatic connector has metaphorical utility in abstract personification; an abstract entity is the primary referent and the entity referred to is a person in the fictional, story world of the allegory (Crisp, 2005). This frame articulates the mapping of the Three Gunas onto the three antagonist characters.

The Three Gunas

The Three Gunas is a notable allegorical component of the *Ramayana* and is personified in three individual characters who are the focus of my design investigation. The Three Gunas refer to attributes innate in matter/nature and are thus present in everyone and everything but differ in proportion (Chinmayananda, 2002). They are Activity (*Rajas*), Inactivity (*Tamas*), and Unactivity (*Sattwa*) (Chinmayananda, 2002).

The three brothers represent the three types of agents of action (Chinmayananda, 2002). The primary antagonist Ravan represents *Rajas*, action performed out of the desire to gain, and is interpreted as ego. The secondary antagonist Kumbhakarna represents *Tamas*, action undertaken from delusion and without regard for its consequences. This is interpreted as inertia. The antagonist-turned-ally Vibhishan represents *Sattwa*, action performed without attachment to the fruit of action. This is interpreted as balance.

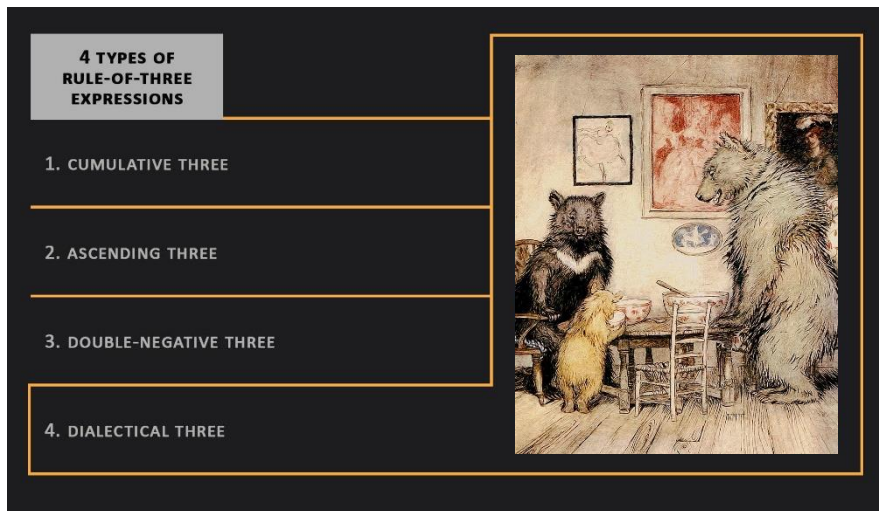
Figure 7. Rule of three. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).



Rule of Three

In the context of the *Ramayana* the Three Gunas conform to the Rule of Three pattern articulated by author Christopher Booker (2004). The Rule of Three describes the prevalence and significance of patterns of three in narrative structure. It is a device of transformation, whether positive or negative (Booker, 2004). Of the four types of the Rule of Three pattern the Three Gunas as it is presented through the brothers is the Dialectical Three. Booker (2004) describes this as “the one capable of the most sophisticated development” (p. 231) of the four types. The story of Goldilocks is an example of this; the first bowl of porridge she eats is too hot, another too cold, and the third is just right. Two negatives, wrong in differing or opposing ways, in relation to a third positive way is a framework that can be used in the visual communication of the Three Gunas through contrast.

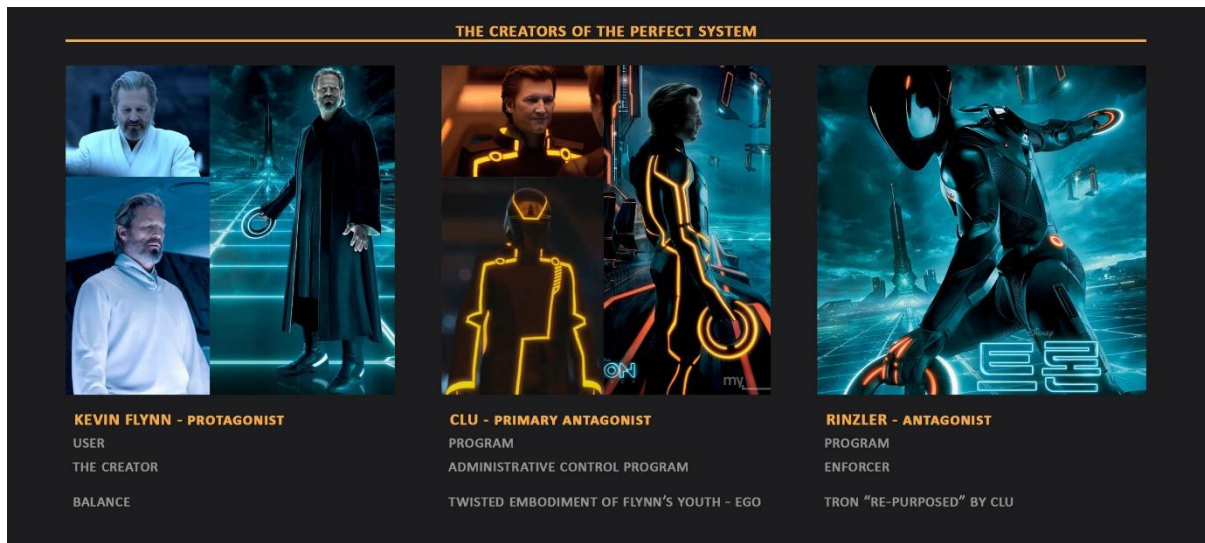
Figure 8. Rule of three. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).



In *Tron: Legacy* (2010) the protagonist Kevin Flynn, and the antagonists, Clu and Rinzler are the three creators of the “perfect” computer system, and an example of the Rule of Three pattern. Although Rinzler later shifts allegiance, for the majority of the story the three characters are comparable to the double-negative type of Rule of Three. The double-negative three features two negative aspects, wrong in essentially identical ways in relation to a third positive aspect (Booker, 2004). While this does not have the depth of the dialectical three type, both types must utilise contrast to reveal character through design. This is most evident in the costuming; Flynn’s monk-like clothing is white or has white accents, while the antagonists wear black, combat-oriented suits.

The Rule of Three pattern absolves the audience of the need to have prior knowledge of the Three Gunas to understand the adaptation; while this dimension of the story remains accessible to those familiar with it. This fulfils the theoretical part of the research objective that must be actualised through design.

Figure 9. The Rule of Three in Tron: Legacy.



3.5 Iconography

For an adaptation designed for a visual medium the inclusion of religious iconography has always been a central consideration. The visual style of mythologicals is influenced by the visual conventions of 'god posters,' a term Stephen Jacobs (2012) uses to describe the mass produced imagery that feature Hindu deities.

Raja Ravi Varma

Ravi Varma is perhaps the most famous of the artists of such works. He painted in oils and his depictions of Hindu gods were rendered with an imitative western realism that Jacobs (2012) describes as having caused a "sensation when his work was first exhibited" (p. 139). The Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press he founded reproduced his work and that of other artists (Jacobs, 2012). Though the extent of his significance may well be exaggerated, Varma's representations have been "exceedingly influential in the visualization of the major Hindu deities" (Jacobs, 2012, p. 139). This is attributed to the significant impact of print technology on the dissemination of such images which "entailed standardisation in the representation of particular deities" (Jacobs, 2012, p. 139).

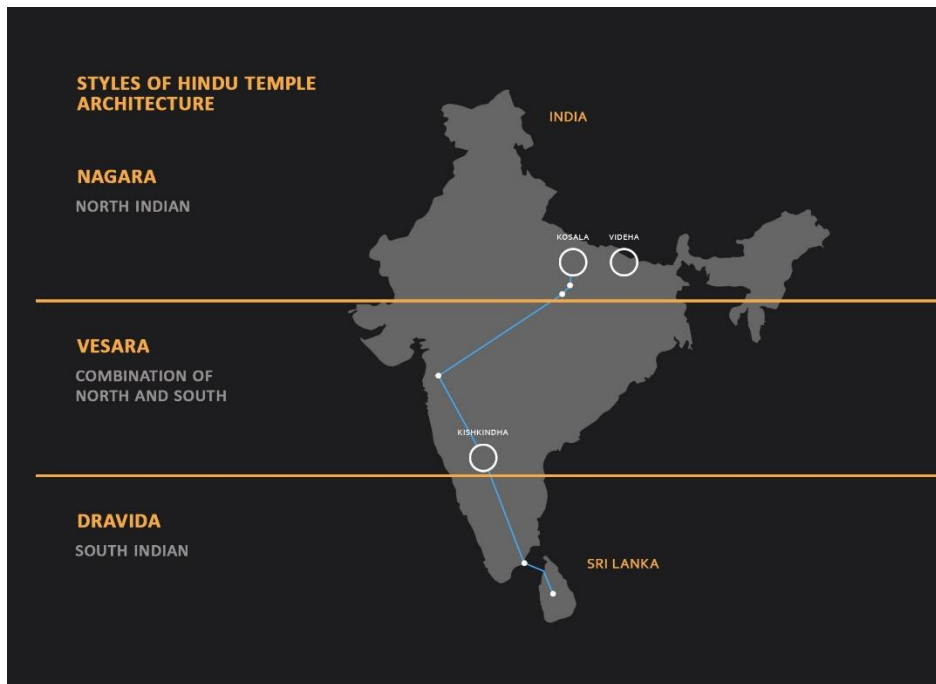
Filmmaker, critic and historian Chidananda Das Gupta (1989) suggests the shift from the idealized figures of frescoes and stone idols to "florid bazaar oleographs" (p. 17) is but a "crude homage to the naturalistic idiom" (p. 17) of the west. This criticism is supported by art historian Ratan Parimoo (n.d.) who describes the reverential treatment of such imagery

becoming pastiche through reproductions and imitative works. The widening distribution of these representations was continued through film (Jacobs, 2012). Its visual conventions dominate the mythological genre and is particularly notable in the costuming of the gods (Gupta, 1989). Any treatment, Gupta (1989) asserts, that did not follow Varma's "insipid style" (p. 17) would be met unfavourably by the audience. Moreover, Gupta (1989) describes this stylistic influence on programs like *Ramayan* (1987-88) as "uninformed by either a historical sensibility or an understanding of Indian art traditions" (p. 17). From a concept design perspective this presents a significant drawback to its inclusion. While a notable fusion of Indian iconography and western art practice, its stylistic prevalence in film and television depictions restricts the design language that would service character and world design.

To navigate the limitations of this imagery I looked to architectural forms of Hindu temples. The visual conventions particular to each architectural style present far greater scope for the designation of a shape language. As the Ramayana is a story that takes place across India the intersection of geographic location and architectural styles presented an opportunity for the synthesis of story and shape language. The Hindu temple architecture of South India (Dravidian architecture) was used for this purpose.

The Yali pillar which depicts the mythological Yali creature is a distinctive feature of the Dravidian style of Hindu temple architecture. It is a combination of animals including lion, elephant, and horse; this prompted the use of animal attributes as a metaphorical expression of character. Its utility is supported by Lawrence (1993) who writes, "the human need for metaphorical expression finds its greatest fulfilment through reference to the animal kingdom. No other realm affords such vivid expression of symbolic concepts" (p. 301). The reception of metaphorical expressions will be variable across cultures but potentially broadened through the use of animal symbolism.

Figure 10. Hindu temple architecture style map. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).



Visual Metaphor

The design of Catwoman's goggles in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) functions on two levels, and is an example of visual metaphor. This device was used to adapt the characteristic cat ears of the comic book depictions of the character to the live-action realism of director Christopher Nolan's neo-noir story world. The design provides a logical explanation for the inclusion of the ears that costume designer Lindy Hemming and Nolan resolved through an iterative process of design (Weintraub, 2012). Though the night vision and magnification utility of the goggles is not unique to the film interpretation, its functionality justifies the character's use of it. In its upright position the shape of the goggles make the ears; the design combines functionality with the iconography of the comic book source material. In the context of my project, there will be similar considerations to make in the process of translating existing imagery into designs suitable for a film, especially in the science fiction genre that typically requires a technological extrapolation to imbue the designed components with verisimilitude.

Figure 11. Catwoman goggles.



4.0 Methodology

Idealised Cognitive Model

Understanding the use of film genre in the construction of narratives for the film medium was necessary to adapt the source material. Developed in the field of linguistic philosophy by Fauconnier, the Idealised Cognitive Model (ICM) describes the way in which knowledge is a conceptualisation of experience not necessarily consistent with reality. A film, Selbo (2014) posits, is an idealised cognitive model; and for the purpose of narrative construction for film, she proposes an additional component. In her estimation, the screenwriter, in each screenplay, creates an ICM; this in turn, is created through the construction of a mental space for the audience. The three main components of mental space are schematic knowledge, specific knowledge, and relevant knowledge. Schematic knowledge applies to the framing of the narrative through the film genre. Specific knowledge concerns the emotional appeal of specific genres. Selbo's proposed addition is relevant knowledge; it concerns the audience's connection to the story that in some cases the choice of genres can achieve.

This framework, to be actively applied by the screenwriter in the construction of narrative, prompted considerations useful in the initial conceptualisation of my film adaptation in written form. The construction of the adaptation through film genre ensured the interpretation of characters would be informed by the narrative and in cohesion with its central themes. The design actualises this as opposed to attempting adaptation through visuals alone, thus averting a superficial treatment of the iconography. In relation to the scope of the project this model was used in an internal framing capacity; situating the antagonists in a corporation within the science fiction world, for example. Such details were incorporated into the brief and thus established some initial parameters for design exploration.

In creating production art for film I followed the standard industry practice of an iterative concept design process. In the Design for Fabrication phase in which this project was situated, it was necessary to convey full body character designs in a clear, diagrammatic

manner. This includes multiple views of each character (3/4 front and back), costume changes, and magnified renderings of detail elements. These details include textures, patterns, and graphics that are provided so that the costumes and props can be physically made to a level of detail that is believable in a live-action form. To this end I created character sheets for each of the three antagonists with all the aforementioned visual information. A dualistic element of each character's costume visually portrays something particular to their archetype. In the context of a visual medium, the richness of the creative opportunity lies in the communication of character development through design (cultural or otherwise). The rendering of these changes, as in the example of the open and closed helmet configurations, ensure unambiguous communication of the design.

Before the Internship week at Weta Workshop where the practical design was initiated, I took Craig Mullins' 9-week Schoolism course. Schoolism's online art classes are taught by industry professionals and Craig Mullins is a leading concept artist. In his class *Digital Painting with Craig Mullins* he discussed and demonstrated the fundamental principles of design. The primary technique I applied in my concept work pertains to legibility, what is described as the 'graphic read' of an image. It encapsulates the need for a design to be legible even without details (which speaks to the difference between simple and loose).

The pursuit of a strong graphic read of an image using limited tones was a primary consideration in the design of the characters. The limited palette of grey tones emphasises the strength or weakness of the shapes as well as the overall silhouette and as such, is a useful technique in the development of a distinct appearance for characters to service their role in the story. Additionally, the limited tones encourage the design of costume elements to be used purposefully to determine focal points. This hierarchy ensures the right visual information is registered first and thus informs the integrity of the contrast necessary to show differing characteristics between characters (which is a primary consideration of my design practise in addressing the research questions raised).

The observance of daily painting studies was used to develop and apply relevant skills. When artist models were suggested I used this time to study their work, initially copying it, and later taking another image to interpret in their style. Its utility in my own work was in

improving the clarity of communication. Among the subjects of my studies were characters and stills from film noir and science fiction films. Film noir is characterised by low key, hard lighting creating bold shadows (Bowen, 2018). These studies were a means to process the visual conventions of the genre's aesthetic so its integration in my design work was considered. The shadows cast over the character's form was one way that this was evoked.

One process employed in the concept design industry that I found beneficial was the War Wall (Tobin, 2018). Its function is to consider the development of ideas, research, and designs, holistically (Tobin, 2018). This was gradually set up in the same way it was done during the Grad Camp, an introductory short course at Weta Workshop at the start of the programme. The noted benefit of being able to 'look back and reassess earlier concepts' (Tobin, 2018, p. 15) occurred organically as a result. Comparisons between concepts, across the three characters, is notable for providing direction to the appropriate level of visual contrast. Producing concepts in sets of three is an established industry practise. It affords comparison between concepts, offering the client multiple options in response to the requirements of the brief. In the context of this project I am my own client.

Figure 13. War wall 1. Patel, K. (2020).

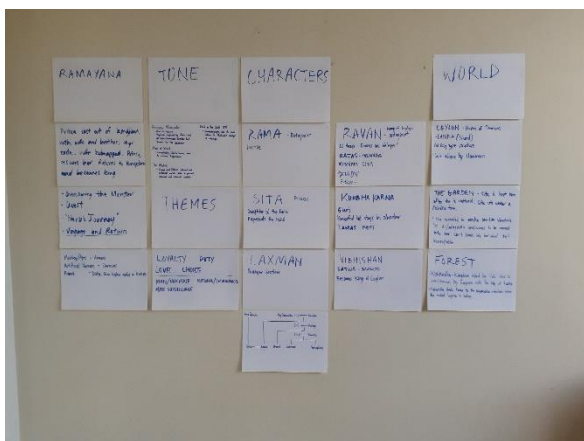


Figure 12. War wall 2. Patel, K. (2020).



5.0 Design Process

I have structured my design process according to the design steps I undertook to visualise and develop the three antagonists. I employed the same design process for the graphic design work used to create logos applied on the costuming and props.

A blog was used to document my process: <https://sites.google.com/view/kp-mdes/home>

5.1 Defining the Brief

I first determined how the three brothers would personify the Three Gunas which constitute part of the allegorical reading of the Ramayana. The character-specific details from my notes were refined into design briefs. An important additional component of the brief was a breakdown of how the iconography could be infused within the science fiction context. The components of each character's design were separated into smaller briefs (such as cloaks and helmets) which enabled me to add levels of design specificity regarding narrative function, in-universe functionality extrapolated from existing technology, and the inclusion of Hindu iconography. In writing the briefs I determined an archetype for each character that provided a prompt for collating images on moodboards. Initially each character had a moodboard. As the categories from which I was drawing reference imagery broadened, I created separate Pinterest boards for each of them. I then kept a moodboard for each item of design as a Photoshop document to collate the relevant imagery from the various Pinterest boards. Examples of real-world objects and technology were present on each board to ensure the designs explored addressed a level of plausibility necessary for the chosen genre.

I used Ravan to develop my design methods, and then applied these strategies to the design of Kumbhakarna and Vibhishan. Consequently, ideas for these two brothers developed out of consideration of what could be contrasted to Ravan and the purpose, practical or metaphoric, it would serve.

5.2 Thumbnails

The design process began with iterative thumbnail sketches to quickly explore silhouettes to capture a defining quality of a character archetype through pose or costuming without detailed elements.

Figure 14. Ravan thumbnail sketch exploration. Patel, K. (2020).

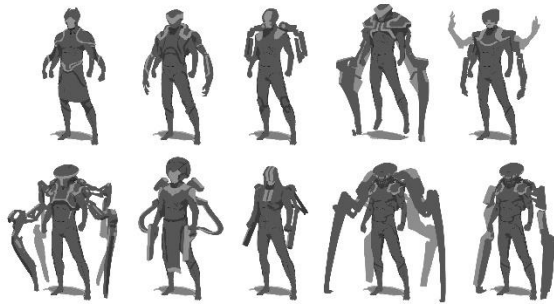


Figure 15. Kumbhakarna thumbnail sketch exploration. Patel, K. (2020).



Figure 16. Vibhishan thumbnail sketch exploration. Patel, K. (2020).



5.3 Concepts

The selected thumbnails were developed into concepts by enlarging the images and further defining its features and adding relevant details in accordance with the brief. The first step was to ensure the design would conform to a figure of realistic proportions. To do this quickly I used a 3D figure posing tool and took screenshots to which the thumbnails were mapped with slight adjustments. Colour was introduced when the designs became more defined.

Figure 17. Concept process. Patel, K. (2020).



Ravan:

Ravan's design was focused on his kingly status, and the addition of mech arms. The insectoid appearance of the multiple eyes on the helmet makes the character less human, a useful distinguishing feature of the antagonist. The intention of the helmet design was to function as a brim when 'closed' and like a Hindu god's crown when 'open'. This approach mirrors the use of visual metaphor that the Catwoman goggles utilised.

Figure 18. Ravan concepts 1. Patel, K. (2020).

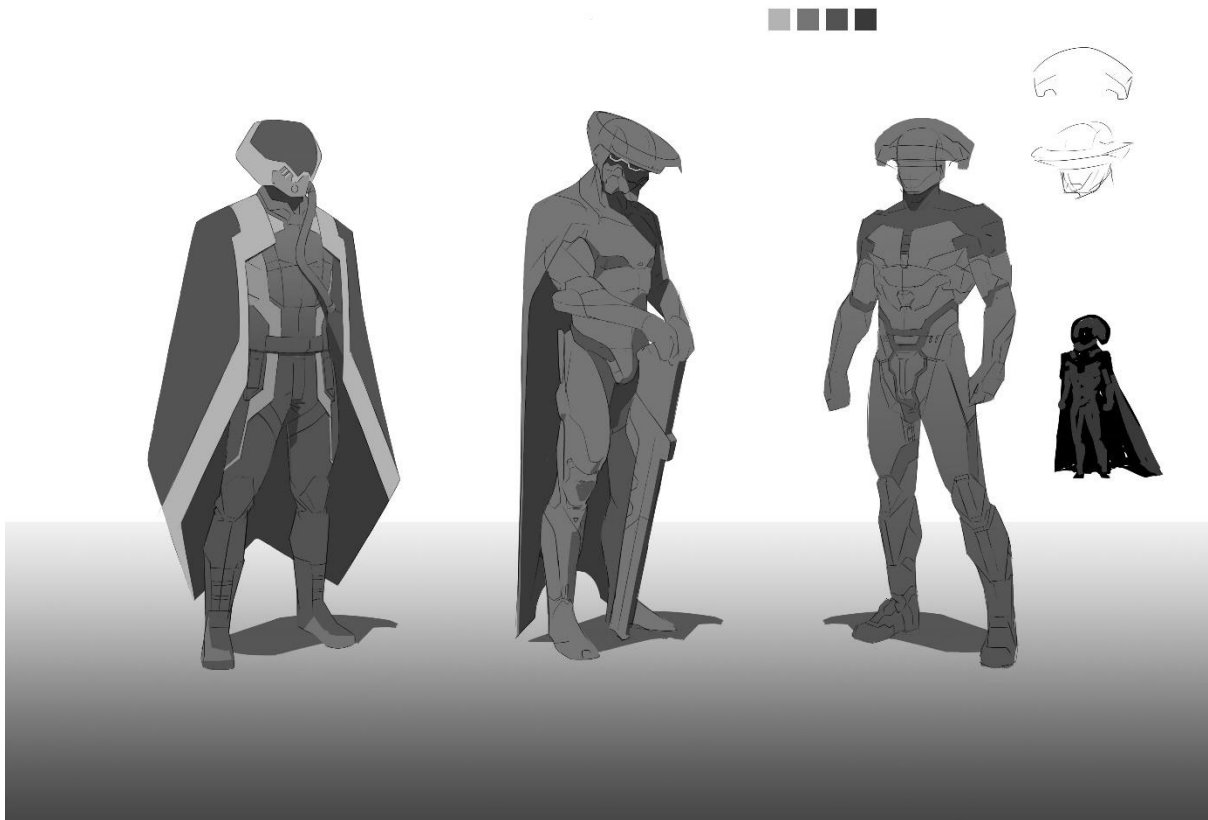
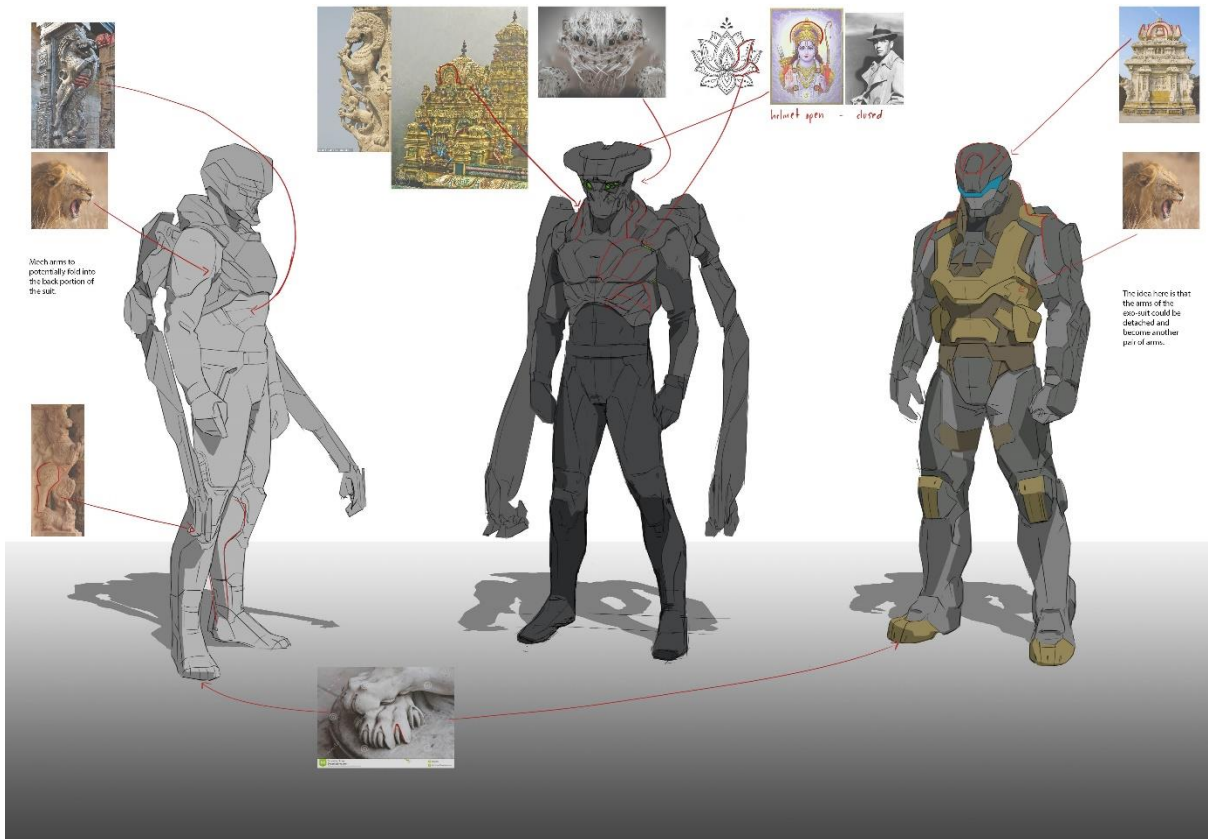


Figure 19. Ravan concepts 2. Patel, K. (2020).



Kumbhakarna:

Concepts for Kumbhakarna explored a variety of armoured and tactical options to personify the assassin archetype. The helmets, hoods, and cloaks were designed to cast shadows over the body to accentuate the effect of the hard lighting of Film Noir to tie the character design to the Tech-Noir setting of this adaptation. Achieving an equine quality was a key objective for Kumbhakarna to steer the design away from a typical stocky build.

Vibhishan:

As a non-combat character Vibhishan's design tended towards an unassuming figure to heighten contrast between the brothers. Indian and indo-western clothing were primary sources of reference; as the latter is a fusion of Indian and western styles of dress it was a logical referent for a futuristic Indian story world.

Figure 20. Kumbhakarna concepts 1. Patel, K. (2020).



Figure 21. Kumbhakarna concepts 2. Patel, K. (2020).

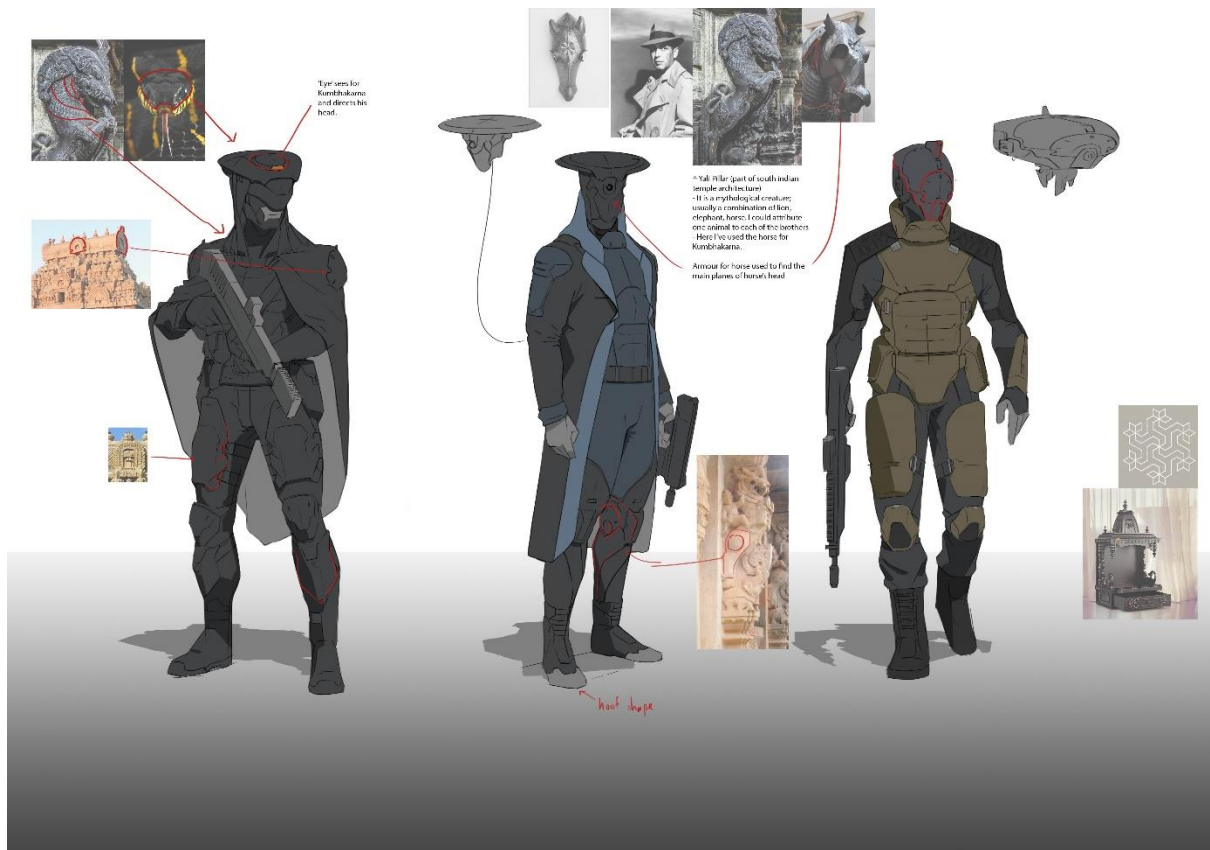


Figure 22. Vibhishan concepts 1. Patel, K. (2020).

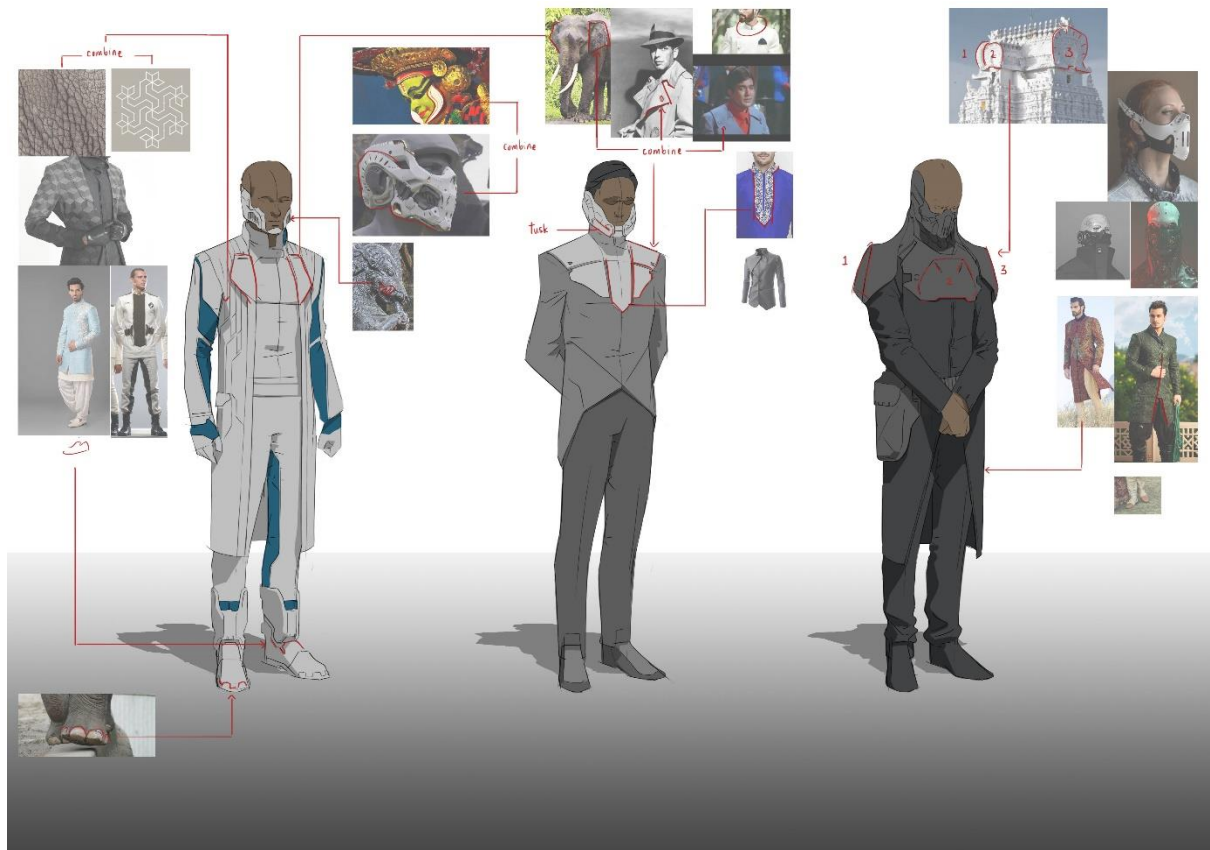
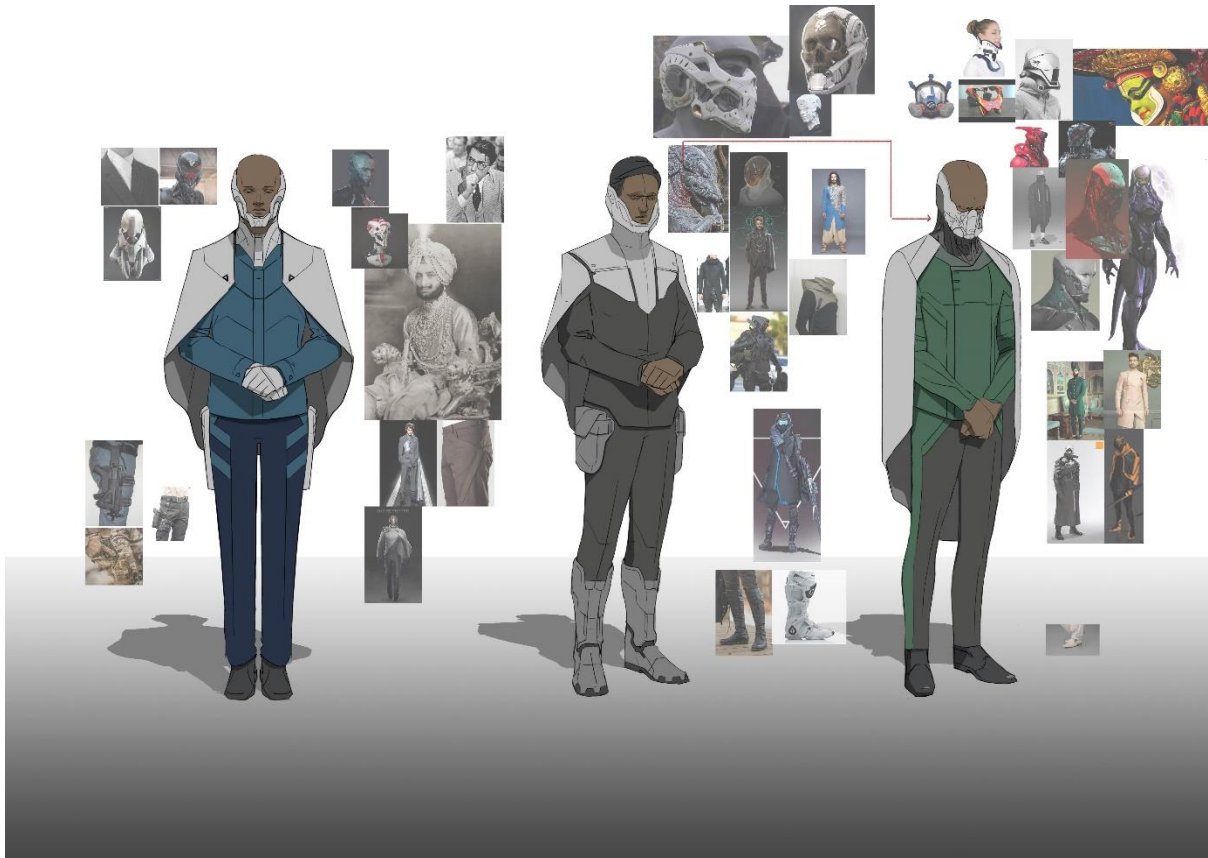


Figure 23. Vibhishan concepts 2. Patel, K. (2020).



5.4 Shape Language and Symbolism

A shape language for the corporation would provide visual elements common to all three characters and visually distinguish them from other characters. As the *Ramayana* is a story that takes place across India the intersection of geographic location and architectural styles presented an opportunity for the synthesis of story and shape language. The Hindu temple architecture of South India (Dravidian architecture) was used for this purpose.

The Yali pillar depicts a mythological creature (part lion, part elephant and part horse) that is a notable feature of South Indian temple architecture. It prompted the decision to map the animals to the characters to leverage their traits in the communication of the character archetypes.

Figure 24. Shape language study of Dravidian Hindu temple architecture. Patel, K. (2020).

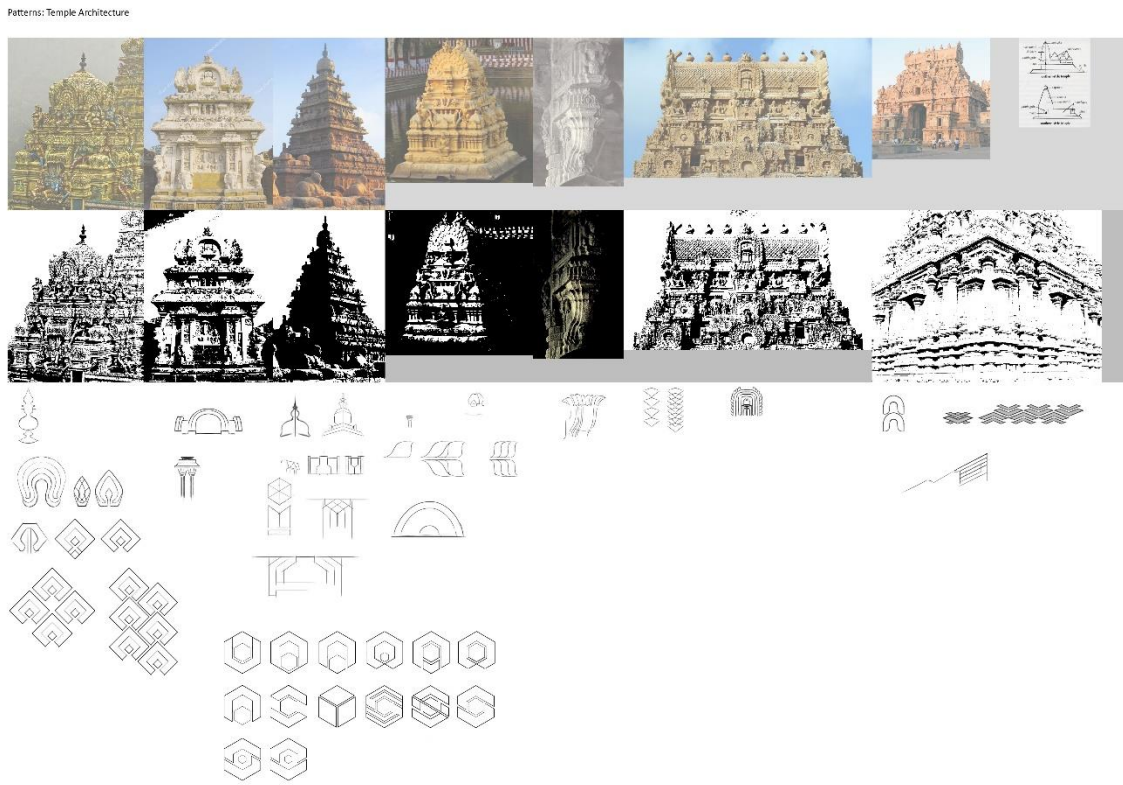
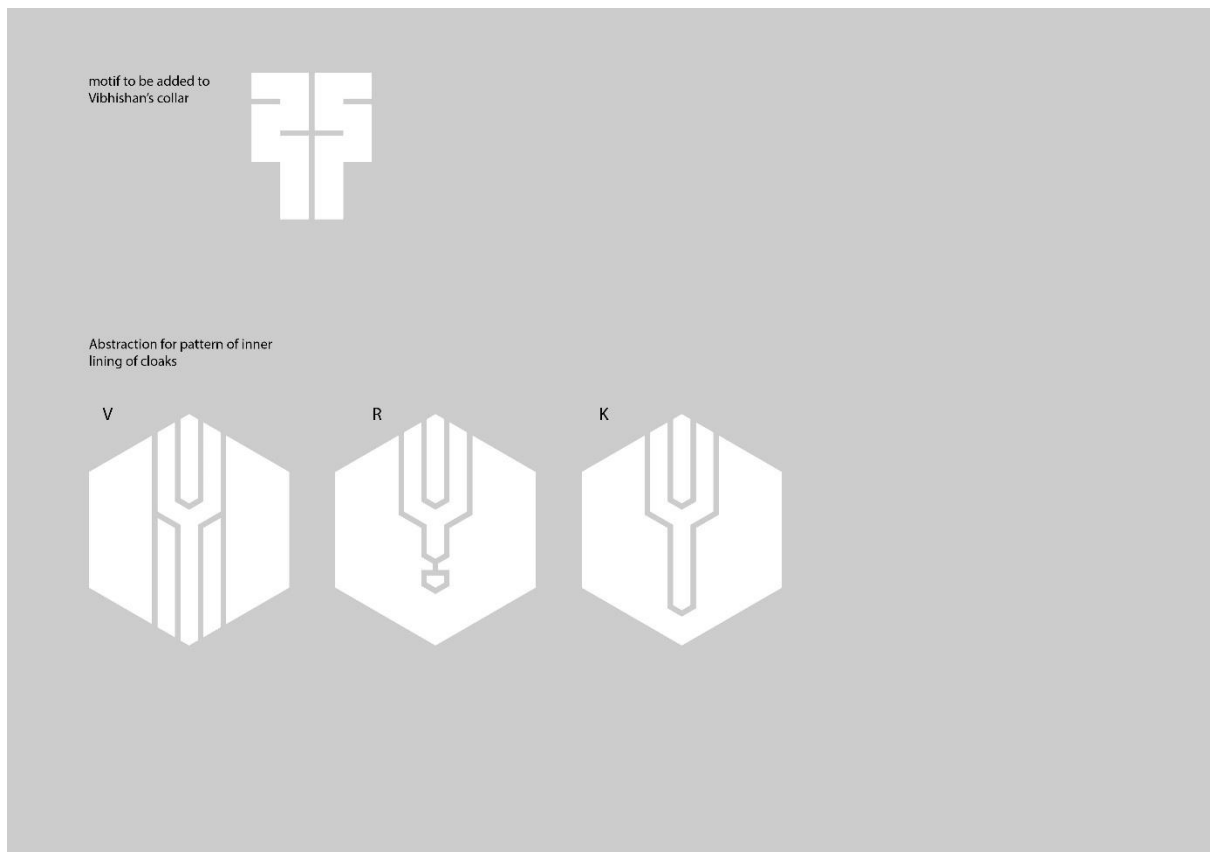


Figure 25. Abstracted animal icons. Patel, K. (2021).



5.5 Helmets and Masks

Ravan:

I familiarised myself with the basic tools of Autodesk Mudbox (2019), a 3D modelling program, to address issues of dimensionality for Ravan's helmet. As my final output was 2D the sculpt did not need to be refined. I used reference imagery and a selection of my own sketches in this process. I took screenshots of what I'd sculpted and drew over it to resolve the design. This process was repeated and gradually narrowed in on a design that best met the requirements of the brief.

Figure 26. Ravan helmet development 1. Patel, K. (2020).

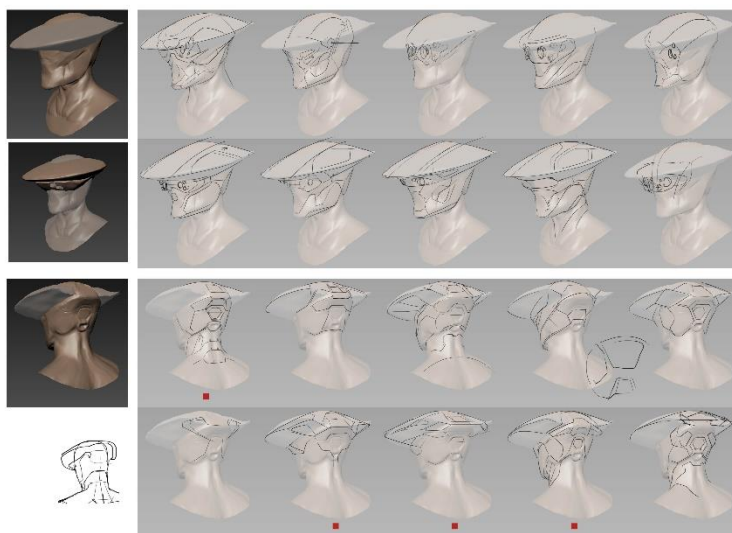


Figure 27. Ravan helmet development 2. Patel, K. (2020).

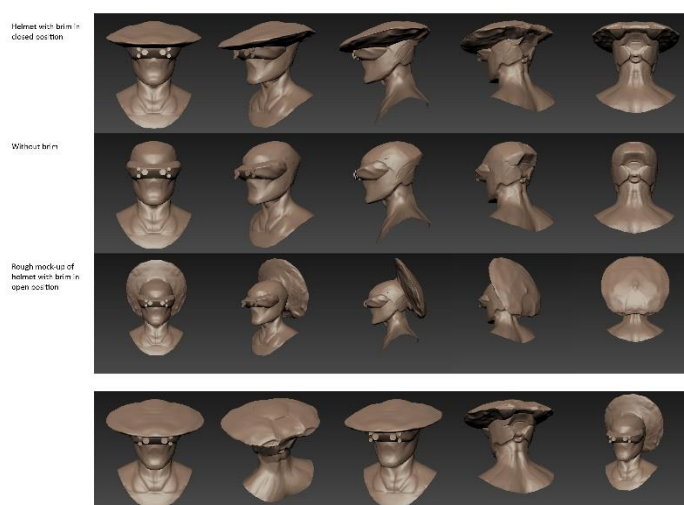
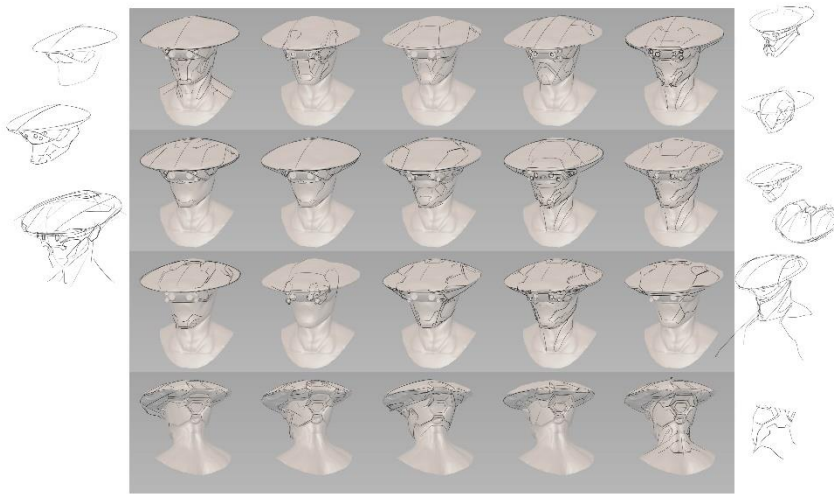


Figure 28. Ravan helmet development 3. Patel, K. (2020).



Kumbhakarna:

Kumbhakarna's helmet was designed to make him appear taller than his brothers in reference to his giant stature in the source material. The equine influence was translated to the helmet face in an abstracted form. The cowl was similarly simplified to achieve greater overall cohesion.

Figure 29. Kumbhakarna helmet and cowl development 1. Patel, K. (2020).

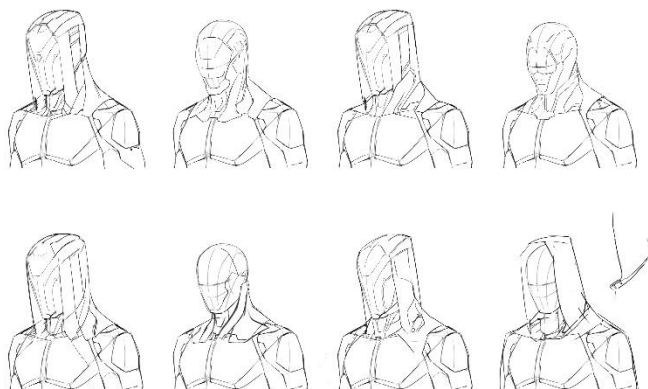


Figure 30. Kumbhakarna helmet and cowl development 2. Patel, K. (2021).



Vibhishan:

The respirator functionality of the mask was necessary for realism as consistency of a head piece for all three brothers was needed. The *Kathakali* mask was the primary cultural referent for the open configuration of the mask. It is an example of a science fiction exterior and culturally inspired interior element combined in a single design. As the design neared resolution a 3D model was used to ensure the designs developed were dimensionally sound and conformed to the perspective that would be used in the final rendering of the character design.

Figure 31. Vibhishan mask concepts. Patel, K. (2020).

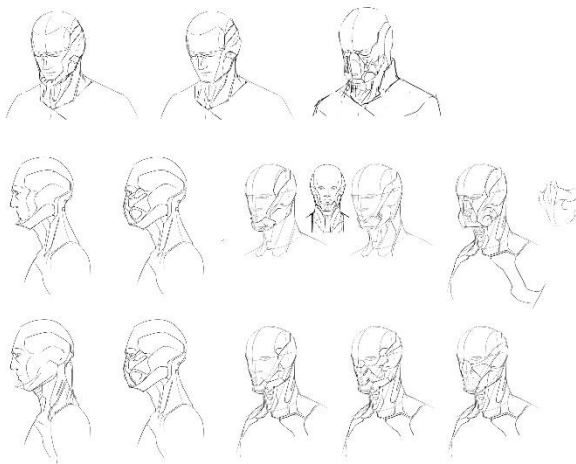
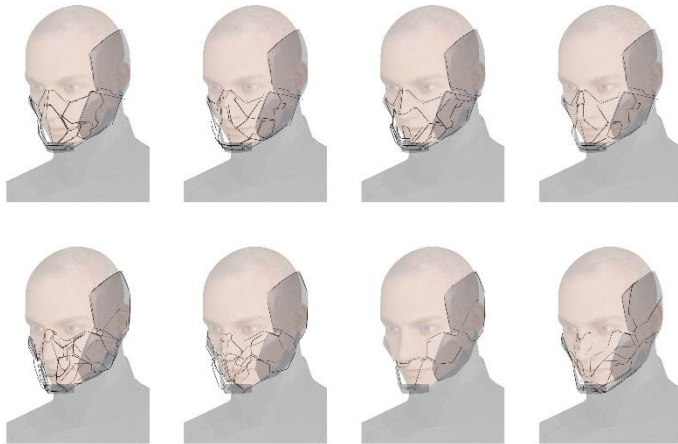


Figure 32. Vibhishan mask development. Patel, K. (2021).



5.6 Cloaks

Each of the three characters has a cloak as a visual marker of unification. The cloaks vary in form based on the function of the character archetype. Uniformity was conveyed through similarity of colour, materiality, and application of pattern in the inner lining. The individuality of each character was highlighted through contrasting silhouettes. The inner lining of the cloak features an animal motif particular to each character. The abstraction of the lion, horse, and elephant allowed for visual consistency due to the iconic, as opposed to representational, treatment and thus better suits the science fiction aesthetic while its application mirrors that of Indian clothing.

Figure 33. Ravan cloak concepts. Patel, K. (2020).

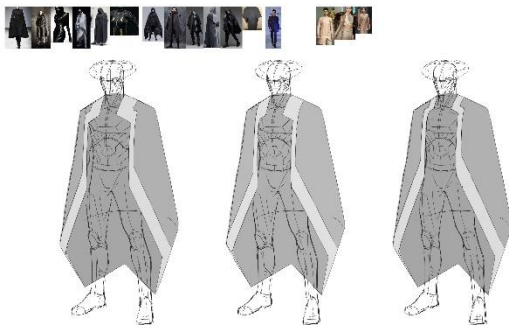


Figure 34. Kumbhakarna cloak concepts. Patel, K. (2020).

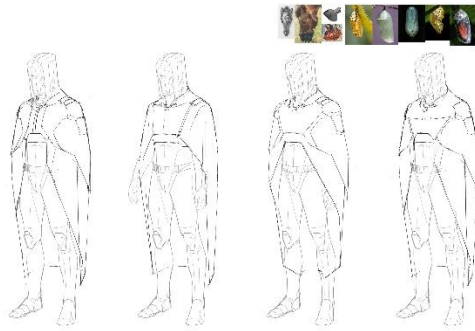
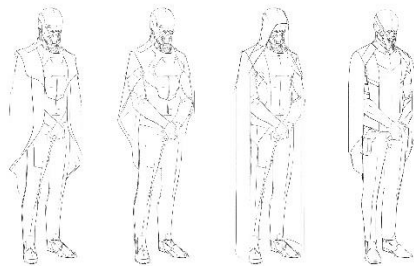
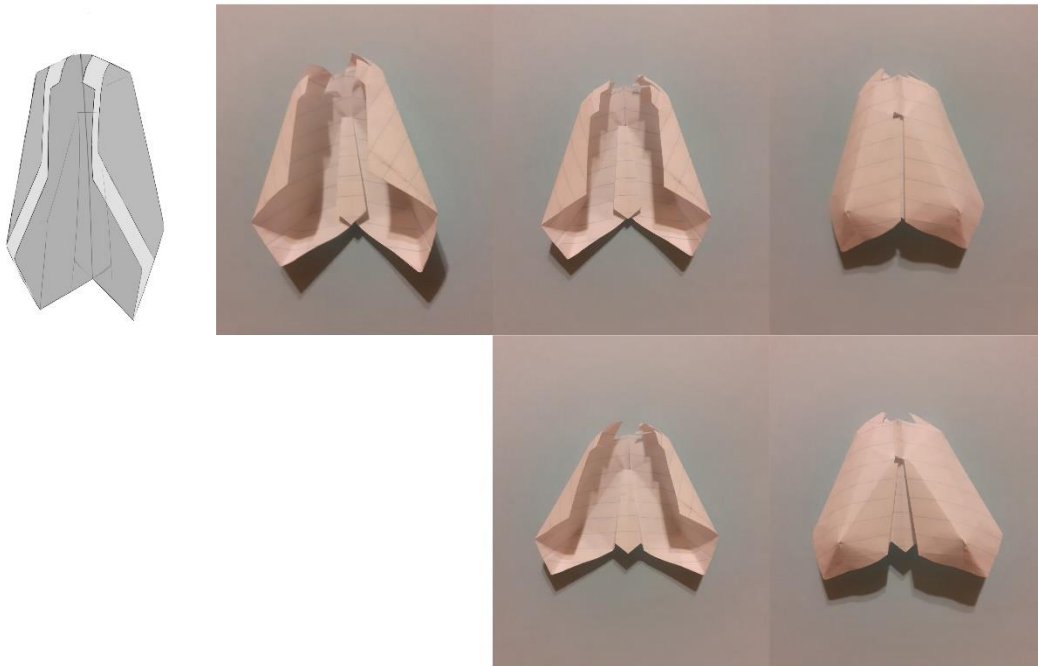


Figure 35. Vibhishan cloak concepts. Patel, K. (2020).



For Ravan's cloak in particular, I used tangible 3D reference to solve issues of dimensionality in the form of paper models. The early phases of cloak-making tutorials by fashion designers and costume designers in which fabric dimensions were planned were useful in evaluating the feasibility of the design. One of the successes of this process was the moth-inspired configuration for his cloak. It is parted down the middle, concealing folds that allow expansion of 'wings' when the mech arms are released from its stowed position. By concealing the folds, I was able to retain the sharp cut particular to my science fiction aesthetic without compromising utility. This configuration was not a consideration I would have made had I not sought to resolve the design brief this way.

Figure 36. Ravan paper model cloak. Patel, K. (2020).



5.7 Props

Ravan's Mech Arms

The addition of mechanical arms was a means to reference the multi-armed depictions of Hindu Gods in a science fiction setting. The idea of concealing the stowed mech arms beneath the cloak became a central element of the character's design.

Figure 37. Ravan mech arms concepts. Patel, K. (2020).

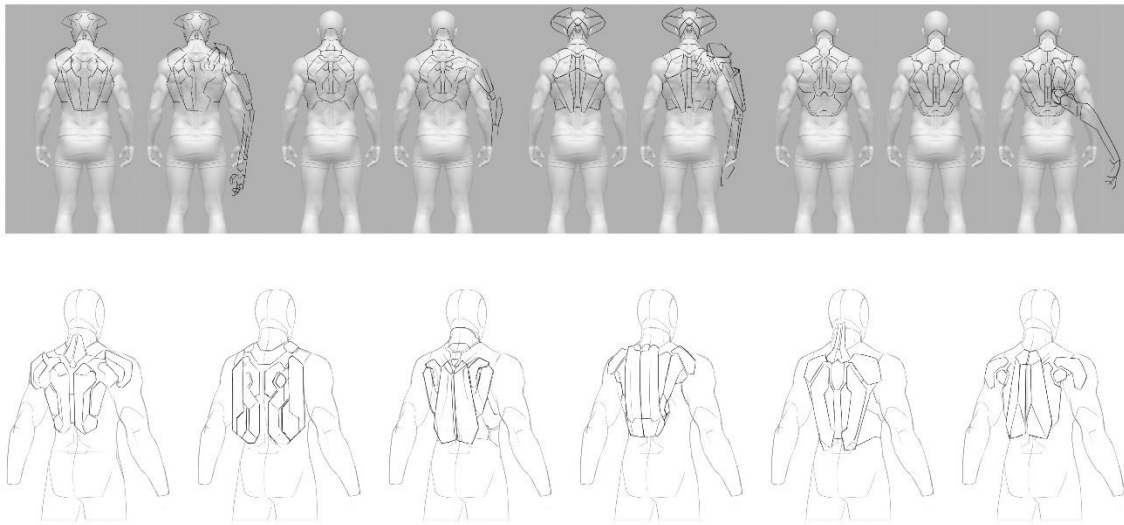
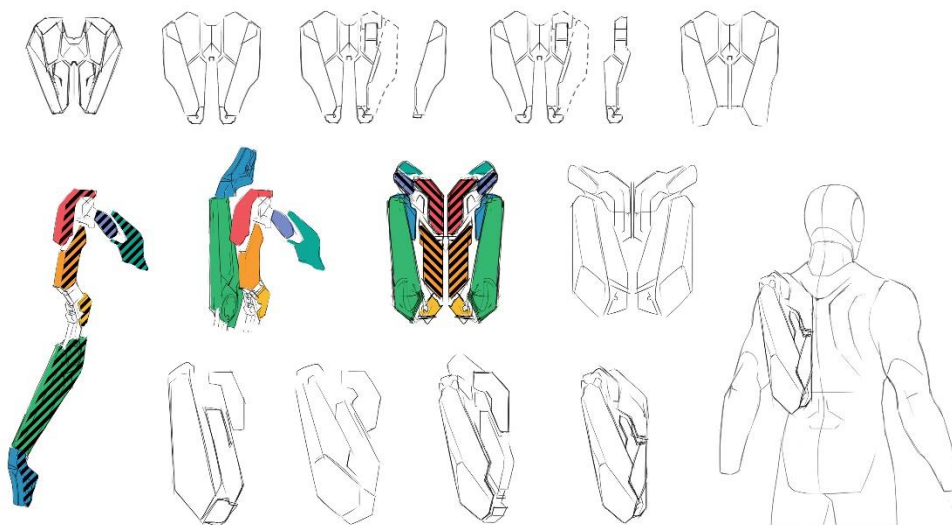


Figure 38. Ravan mech arms stowing configuration development. Patel, K. (2021).



Kumbhakarna's Assault Rifle

The design of the gun echoes the established shape language. This idea was developed and resolved in consideration of the realism required of the adaptation.

Figure 39. Gun design development. Patel, K. (2020).

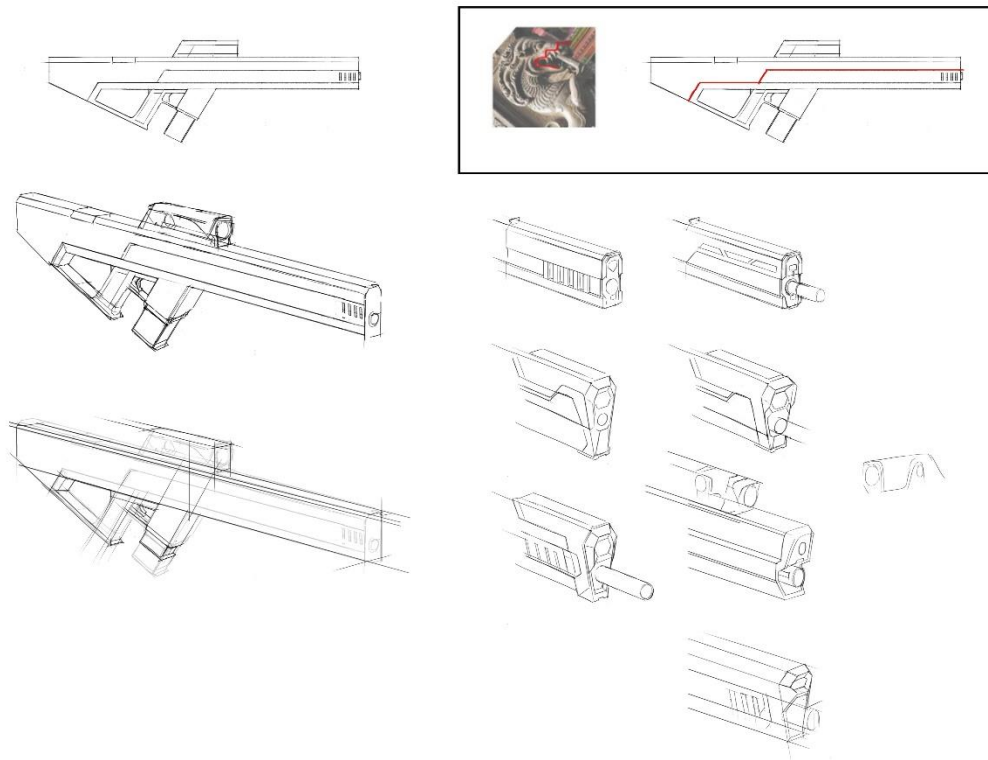


Figure 40. Kumbhakarna's assault rifle final design. Patel, K. (2021).



5.8 Colour:

With the intention of creating a cohesive aesthetic the colour exploration was conducted with the characters together. The use of colour in key areas was used as a focal device.

Figure 44. Colour test 3. Patel, K. (2021).



5.9 Logo Design

In archetypal function, corporations in science fiction are analogous to kingdoms in fantasy. Designing logos for the corporation substituting the kingdom of Lanka of the source material was a logical intersection of science fiction world-building and (graphic) design.

The Yali pillar was the primary referent for the logo of the security division of the corporation. Through a process of abstraction it was integrated into the science fiction aesthetic. The line weight of the letterforms were made equal to the lines of the logo to unify the final design.

Figure 45. Analysis of Yali forms and early logo concepts. Patel, K. (2020).



Figure 46. Logo concept exploration. Patel, K. (2020).

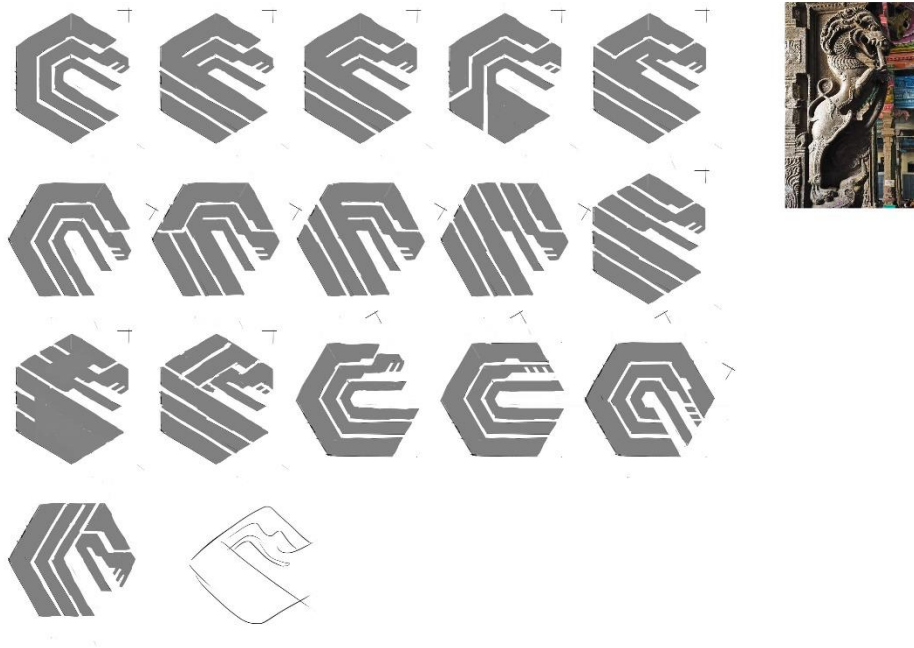


Figure 47. Typeface development. Patel, K. (2021).



Figure 48. Logo colour trials. Patel, K. (2021).

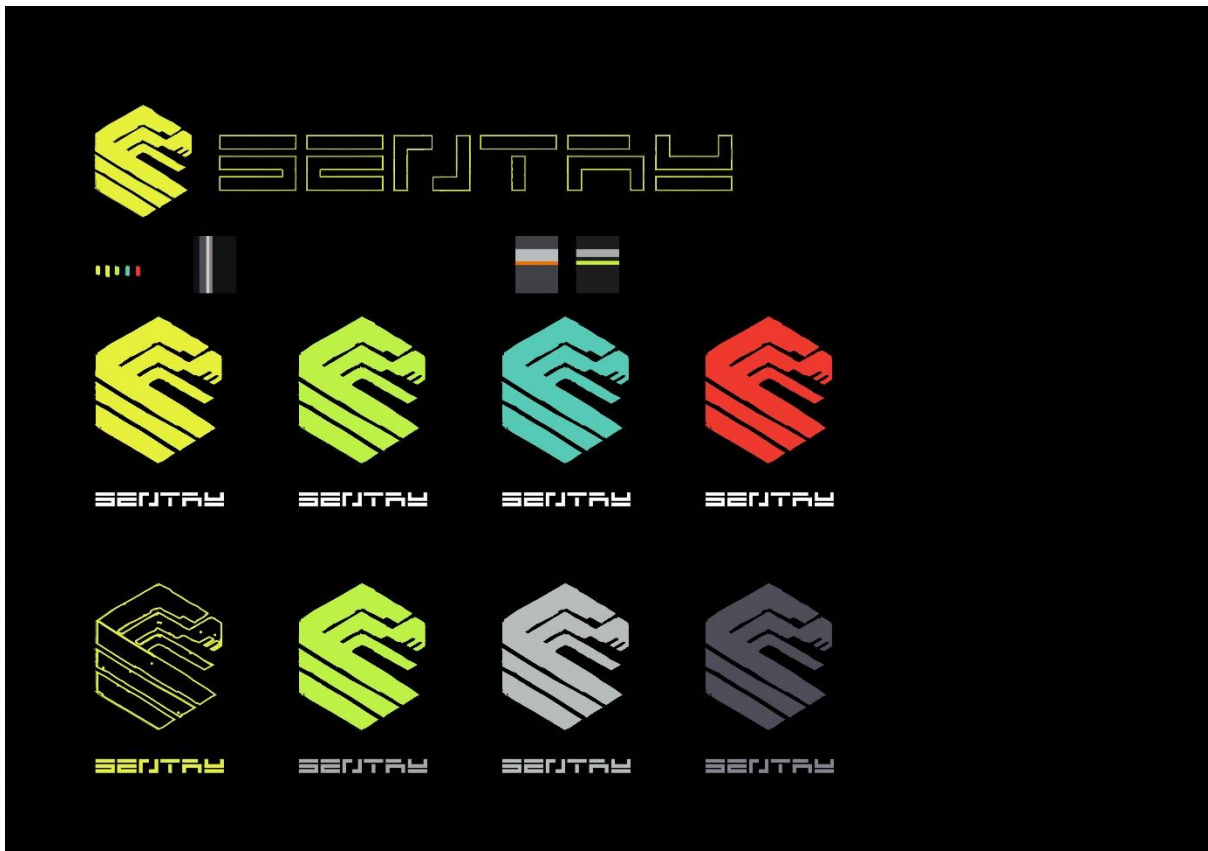


Figure 49. Logo refinement. Patel, K. (2021).

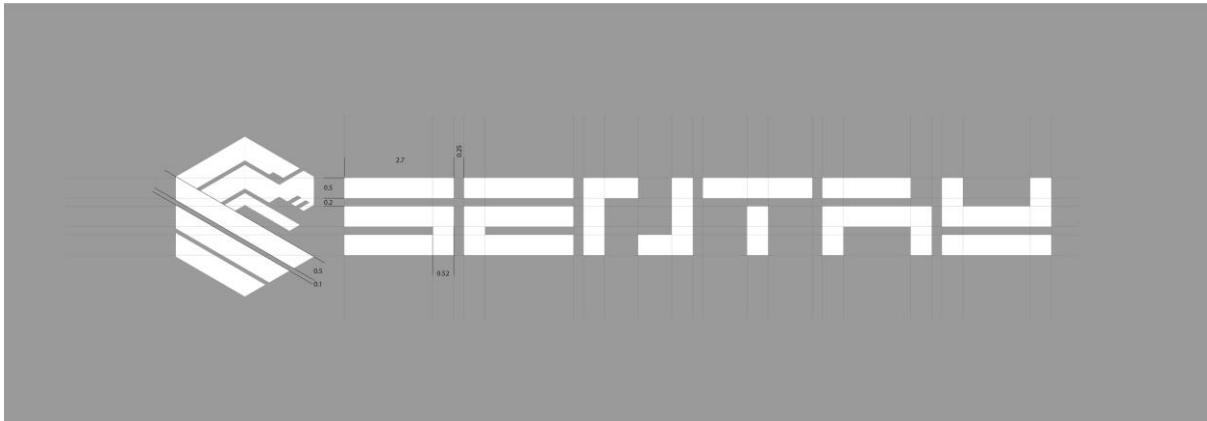


Figure 50. Sentry logo final design. Patel, K. (2021).



5.10 Rendering

The chosen concepts and design components were integrated and rendered in this stage. Photo-compositing was used to integrate textural information into the designs thereby adding a level of realism to the image and conveying materiality for fabrication purposes. The head of a male figure was posed in Daz Studio and was composited in the final rendering; the skin tone was altered to more easily be registered as Indian.

Figure 51.

Ravan refinement 1. Patel, K. (2021).



Figure 52. Ravan final design. Patel, K. (2021).

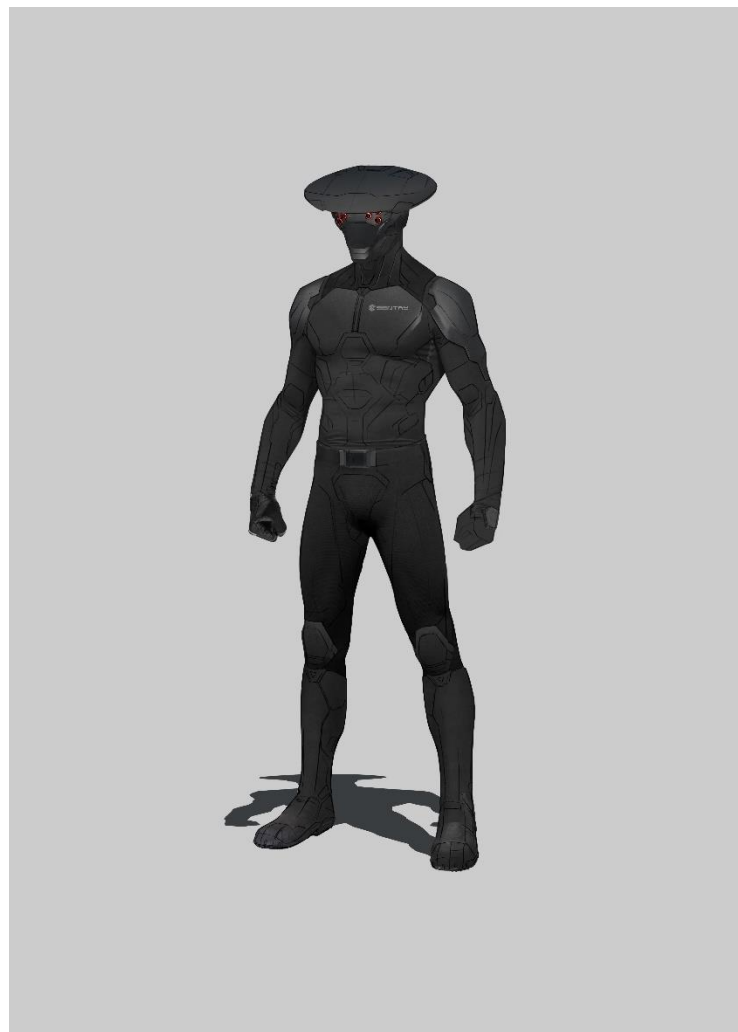


Figure 53.

Ravan refinement 2. Patel, K. (2021).



Figure 54.

Kumbhakarna refinemen 1. Patel, K. (2021).

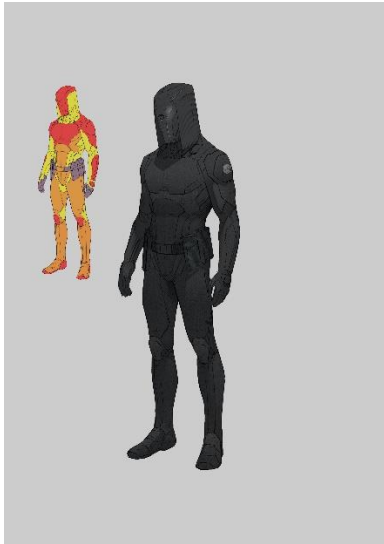


Figure 55. Kumbhakarna final design. Patel, K. (2021).

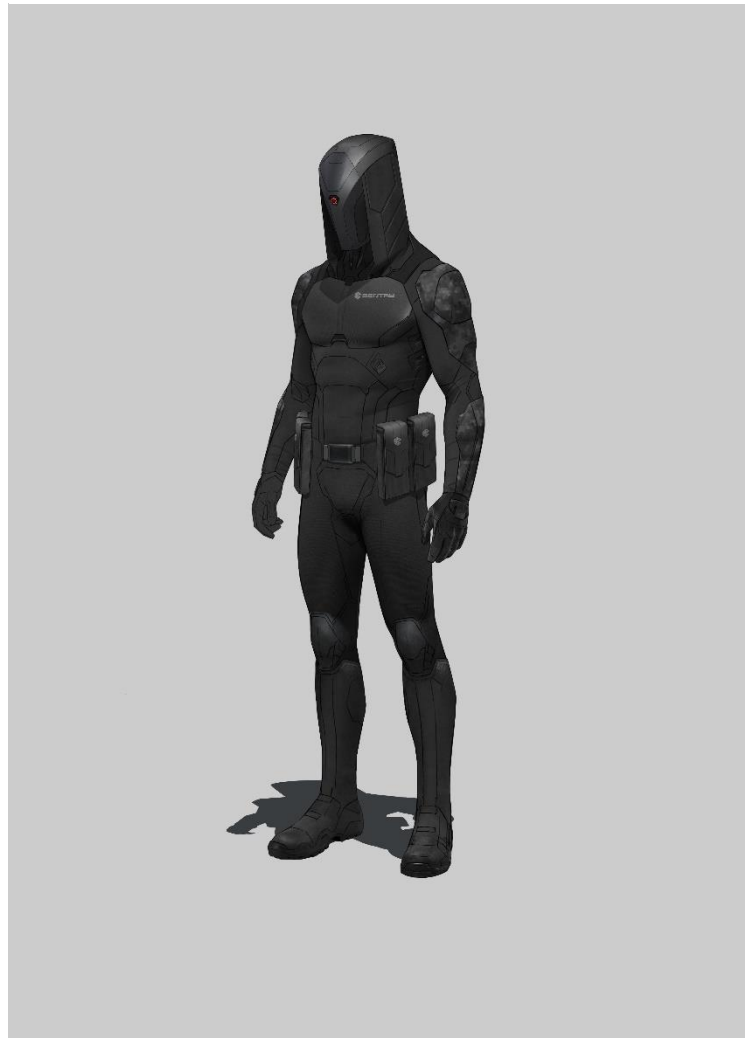


Figure 56.

Kumbhakarna refinement 2. Patel, K. (2021).

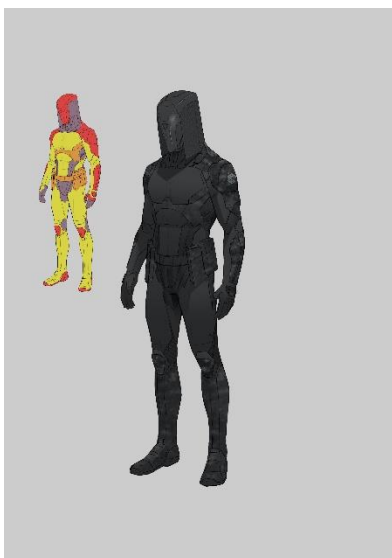


Figure 57.

Vibhishan refinement. Patel, K. (2021).



Figure 58. Vibhishan final design. Patel, K. (2021).



5.11 Final Character Sheets

The final design work has been presented as character sheets in which the designs are aligned in a row with details such as graphics and patterns magnified where necessary for the communication of the design. Each sheet follows the same layout so similarities and differences can be easily seen. The text provides contextual information including a character biography while the accompanying sheet displays the design process.

Figure 59. Project concept. Patel, K. (2021).

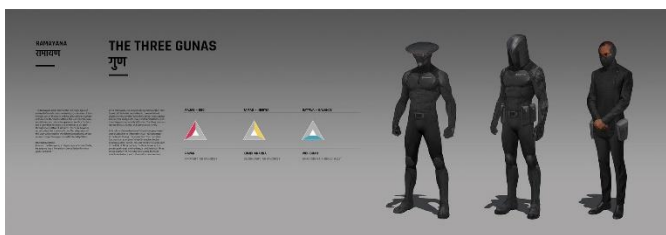


Figure 60. Ravan character sheet. Patel, K. (2021).

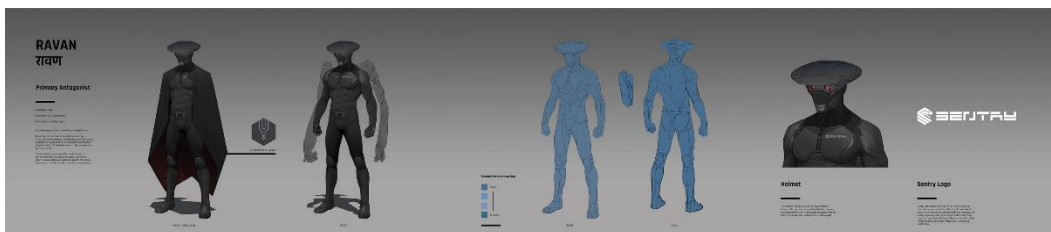


Figure 61. Ravan design development. Patel, K. (2021).



Figure 62. Kumbhakarna character sheet. Patel, K. (2021).

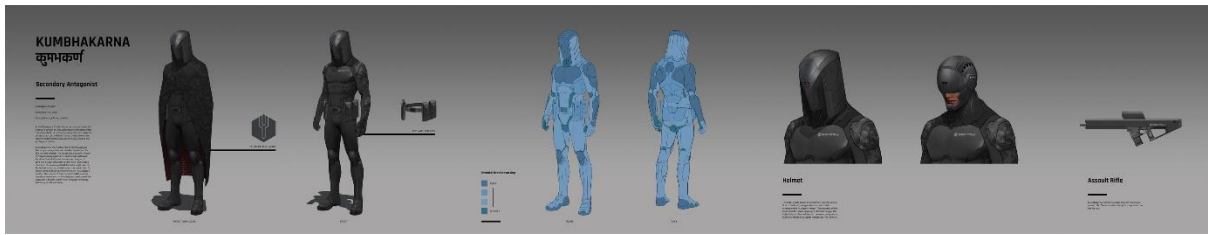


Figure 63. Kumbhakarna design development. Patel, K. (2021).



Figure 64. Vibhishan character sheet. Patel, K. (2021).

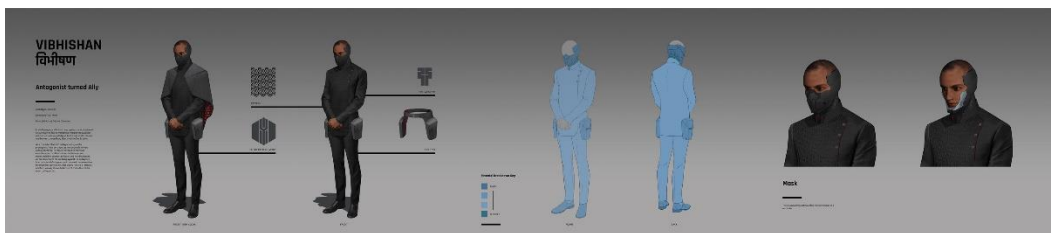
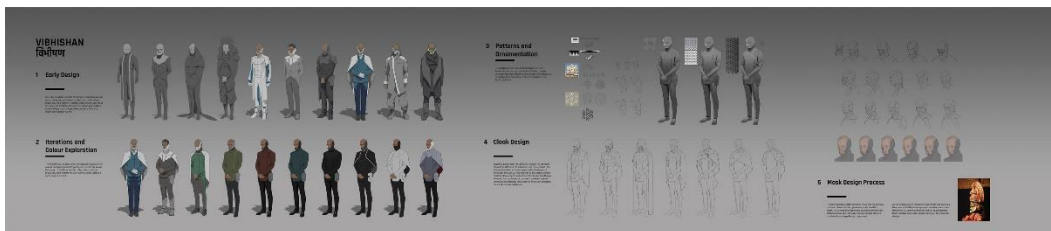


Figure 65. Vibhishan design development. Patel, K. (2021).



6.0 Design Findings

The final character designs achieved a cohesive aesthetic to unify the three brothers through a designed system of similarities in costume elements.

The project aimed to adapt the *Ramayana* into a live-action tech-noir film. This was to be achieved through personification of the Three Gunas through the three antagonists. Its alignment to the narrative pattern of the Rule of Three absolves the audience of the need to have prior knowledge of the Three Gunas to understand the adaptation but remains accessible to those familiar with it. In this way, cultural specificity is not diluted despite the intention to appeal to both an Indian and non-Indian audience. As a group of characters with distinct roles the three brothers were a good choice for the focus of the project. The inclusion of a non-combat character that shifts allegiance to join the protagonist presented the opportunity to draw from a greater variety of cultural sources in pursuit of the cultural fusion that I sought. The integration of the iconography in the designs produced is purposeful; having been informed by the narrative its inclusion cannot be said to be superficial. In the context of a concept design project, it was beneficial for the design exploration to look to a variety of sources of Hindu iconography including idols, architectural forms and traditional art to produce unique designs. It was of primary importance for the character designs to communicate that this is a science fiction adaptation that the selective use of elements derived from the iconography services.

To communicate the allegorical attribute particular to each character, contrasting elements were included within the parameters of the established aesthetic. Examples of this include the differences in overall silhouette, helmet shapes, number of eyes, and pattern motifs. All of this was further supported by the differing poses. The Hindu iconography was used to create a shape language specific to the antagonists. It is reflected in the logo design and is attributed to the corporation as a way of distinguishing it from other aspects of the story world through contrast.

Overall, the design work produced works well in light of the project aims but I recognise a few aspects my project would have benefitted from by addressing. The inclusion of the open configuration of Ravan's helmet would have been beneficial in communicating the visual

metaphor of the design which combines noir elements with Hindu iconography. The design of the mech arms also needed to be resolved. For Kumbhakarna, the addition of Theyyam-inspired graphics on the visor underneath the helmet would have continued the pattern of a science fiction exterior and a culturally inspired interior for the helmet and cowl design. Concepts were explored for this purpose but went unresolved. His drone would have made an important addition to the character sheet.

7.0 Conclusion

It was my supposition that the story of the *Ramayana* could be adapted into a live-action science fiction film for a global audience with minimal alteration of its ideas and themes. In my estimation, determined by the research and design work completed, this was achieved by adapting the antagonists through the mechanism of their allegorical roles and its alignment with the Rule of Three narrative pattern and archetypal conventions of the science fiction and film noir genres to which it has been cast. The cultural specificity is thus retained and accessible through the allegory while not an impediment to narrative comprehension for an audience unfamiliar with it. The use of the iconography, drawn from a variety of sources, to develop a shape language particular to the antagonists and the corporation that created them, was the result of effective use of abstraction processes to adapt it for the tech-noir setting. The application of logos and graphics in costuming, and its simultaneous utility as an element of world-building added realism to the world of the adaptation and was an intersection of the concept design and graphic design disciplines.

I gradually became accustomed to a level of flexibility within the iterative design process through the course of the program. The use of 3D modelling and physical (paper) models yielded results I had not anticipated. As tools to explore and resolve concepts I intend to further integrate them into my workflow. The management of files was an important part of the process. The increasing number of pages of design work for the multiple components of design for each character necessitated a simpler mode of organisation. The filing system I implemented at the start of the development phase has proven to be effective. This too will

be a vital skill for future projects. The practice of daily painting studies will be continued to sharpen the ability to communicate ideas and concepts with clarity and efficiency. Character design is the area within concept design in which I am most interested though through the course of this project this interest has broadened to encompass the design of props and graphics.

Further exploration of this world is as exciting to me now as it was at the beginning of the course, if not more so. Situating the characters I have designed in implied backgrounds or in key scene design would be the next step in communicating the cinematic potential of the noir quality of this adaptation. The parameters established in the process of design, most directly conveyed in the breakdown, can be applied as a design guide for other aspects of the world through its allocation of iconography and narrative referents. This would include the main protagonists who conform to another type of the Rule of Three, and notable minor characters. Additionally, the design of drones and vehicles to substitute the chariots and creatures of the source material, offers significant creative opportunity.

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- Wachowski, L. & Wachowski, L. (Directors). *The Matrix* [Film]. Warner Bros.; Village Roadshow Pictures; Silver Pictures.

9.0 Figure List

Figure 01: The ten avatars. (n.d.).

Figure 02: Tech noir film map. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 03: The Ramayana in various art forms.

A: Ramayana temple relief. (n.d.).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:A_relief_summary_of_Ramayana_at_Hindu_temple_cave_16_Ellora_India.jpg

B: [Rama]

C: Valmiki's Ramayana (2009). Amar Chitra Katha.

D: Ramayan (1987)

E: Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama (1992)

Figure 04: Ramayana story map. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 05: Adaptation table. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 06: Ramayana adaptations. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 07: The Three Gunas. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 08: Rule of three. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).

A: Goldilocks and the three bears. Rackham, A. (1918).

Figure 09: The Rule of Three in Tron: Legacy.

A: Tron: Legacy, Kosinski, J. (2010).

B: Tron: Legacy, Kosinski, J. (2010).

C: [Promotional art for Tron: Legacy] (2010).

D: Tron: Legacy, Kosinski, J. (2010).

E: Tron: Legacy, Kosinski, J. (2010).

F: [Promotional art for Tron: Legacy] (2010).

Figure 10: Hindu temple architecture style map. Diagram by Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 11: Catwoman goggles.

A: [Catwoman]. Lee, J. (n.d.).

B: The Dark Knight Rises, Nolan, C. (2012).

C: [Promotional art for The Dark Knight Rises], (2012).

Figure 12: War wall 1. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 13: War wall 2. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 14: Ravan thumbnail sketch exploration. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 15: Kumbhakarna thumbnail sketch exploration. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 16: Vibhishan thumbnail sketch exploration. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 17: Concept process. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 18: Ravan concepts 1. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 19: Ravan concepts 2. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 20: Kumbhakarna concepts 1. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 21: Kumbhakarna concepts 2. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 22: Vibhishan concepts 1. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 23: Vibhishan concepts 2. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 24: Shape language study of Dravidian Hindu temple architecture. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 25: Abstracted animal icons. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 26: Ravan helmet development 1. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 27: Ravan helmet development 2. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 28: Ravan helmet development 3. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 29: Kumbhakarna helmet and cowl development 1. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 30: Kumbhakarna helmet and cowl development 2. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 31: Vibhishan mask concepts. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 32: Vibhishan mask development. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 33: Ravan cloak concepts. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 34: Kumbhakarna cloak concepts. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 35: Vibhishan cloak concepts. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 36: Ravan paper model cloak. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 37: Ravan mech arms concepts. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 38: Ravan mech arms stowing configuration development. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 39: Gun design development. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 40: Kumbhakarna's assault rifle final design. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 41: Colour palette ideation. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 42: Colour test 1. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 43: Colour test 2. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 44: Colour test 3. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 45: Analysis of Yali forms and early logo concepts. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 46: Logo concept exploration. Patel, K. (2020).

Figure 47: Typeface development. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 48: Logo colour trials. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 49: Logo refinement. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 50: Sentry logo final design. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 51: Ravan refinement 1. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 52: Ravan refinement 2. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 53: Ravan final design. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 54: Kumbhakarna refinemen 1. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 55: Kumbhakarna refinement 2. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 56: Kumbhakarna final design. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 57: Vibhishan refinement. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 58: Vibhishan final design. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 59: Project concept. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 60: Ravan character sheet. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 61: Ravan design development. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 62: Kumbhakarna character sheet. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 63: Kumbhakarna design development. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 64: Vibhishan character sheet. Patel, K. (2021).

Figure 65: Vibhishan design development. Patel, K. (2021).

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