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Beyond the Static Landscape

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Beyond the Static Landscape Thesis Proposal

The way we perceive our world is influenced by our surroundings. Colors are bright or dark, sounds are sharp and muffled. This combination of senses tells a story. The moment we step out the door, we're enveloped in information. Sounds, smells, shadows all add to the identity of a place. Landscape paintings are a classic example of art that transports the viewer to the artist's make-believe world, and conveys that environment's magic. The artist has grand control over the world they create, and the story that it tells.

For my thesis, I want to make a series of three video landscape illustrations that go beyond the static image. This project is designed to be experienced in the digital realm. Each video will be accompanied by a soundscape that I compose, and will have visual special effects that will add to their immersion. The videos will be themed after three natural environments: Forest, Desert, and Cosmos. The final outcome will be an atmospheric experience meant to transport the viewer to my three outdoor environments. In a quiet, calming way, the viewer should over time know the story of each place as the video progresses. My goal for this project is to create exceptional and accessible portfolio pieces that will showcase a diverse range of my talents. My areas of focus are visual and sound design, background design and illustrative storytelling.

I grew up in a desert. When my family would drive out into the Owyhees (desert mountains in South Western Idaho), there was the sense of peace that can only be obtained by being outdoors. Out in the desert, your field of vision goes and goes until it hits the far mountains. The sky stretches forever. It's sublime.

A year ago, I created a series of ten landscapes for a character to reside in. The result was artistic satisfaction on a level that I hadn't felt before. I could capture that sublime feeling in art that I felt while out in the desert of Southern Idaho. When you look at a painting of a mountain, looming over a lake, you feel it. It could be the combo of atmospheric perspective, temperature lighting and shadows that sells this make-believe place as a real location, scientific principles we take for granted when our eyes register it. What's achieved is like magic. When I look at a painting like that, it feels like I'm actually there, outside. When I worked those ten landscapes, adding depth and lighting, unifying the colors, it clicked in the

same way. It felt like a gift to my drawn characters, giving them a beautiful place to reside in forever.

The digital realm opens up opportunities for these landscapes to move beyond the static image. When you're outside, you aren't looking at unchanging scenery. There are environmental sounds like birds, wind, cars, rivers. In asking myself how I can take a landscape beyond its static boundaries, the diverse world of sound is one way. My soundscapes will be a blend of found sounds such as birds and leaves, water flowing, from nature. They will include melodic compositions from instruments that I deem will best set the mood for each place. For example, a rainy scene in the forest might warrant a quiet piano tune. This part of the project will involve some outdoor field work, collecting these sounds. I will compose and arrange these sound pieces after planning out the landscapes, to have a visual guide. Being out in nature will also keep the inspiration for this project alive.

As for the visuals, the digital video format also opens up opportunities for animated elements to further push the depth in each piece. The main technique I will include is the Parallax Effect¹. This is commonly used in side-scrolling video games. The Parallax Effect is the visual effect of more distant objects appearing to pass the viewer slower than closer objects. An example is riding in a car, and watching the grass next to the road fly by while you slowly pass the same mountain in the distance. This trick adds visual miles to the otherwise simple backgrounds of many platform games. Including this, along with small animated elements, will give my landscapes new life.

The final project will be three themed videos: Forest, Desert and Cosmos. The videos will be available for accessible viewing on YouTube and Vimeo. Each video will include a landscape that will be a long dimension of 11"x42.5", or five 8.5"x11" pages long. While it plays, the camera will gradually scroll left to right, slowly displaying the entire landscape at length. This will be edited in Adobe Premiere. I will include visual effects such as the Parallax Effect and small animations, such as leaves blowing by and clouds shifting. The illustrations will be mostly digital drawings in Photoshop, with scanned analog elements. I will compose a unique soundscape for each theme that will be played in the video. The soundscapes will be a composition of found and recorded sounds, with melodies from acoustic instruments. These will be composed into three songs using Adobe Audition, and will each be two to three minutes long.

The inspiration for my visual landscape style mainly comes from the artist, Ma-Ko, @drivemeawaytroubledheart on instagram.² Their style is very

¹ Video Game Animation Study, "The Beauty of Parallax," YouTube, April 19, 2019. Video, 10:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9tBce8eFqE>.

² Ma-Ko (@drivemeawaytroubledheart), Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/drivemeawaytroubledheart/>.

line-based, and their beautifully detailed scenes achieve the same feeling that realistic paintings do without being in a realistic style.

My inspirations for environmental soundscapes come mainly from Nintendo. As a kid, my favorite Wii games were Super Mario Galaxy and Kirby's Epic Yarn. For Kirby's Epic Yarn, the composer Tomoya Tomita was told to create the music as if he were making music for a game that a mother would play with her young child.³ He thought of it like composing music for a picture book instead of a videogame. In the game, there are different themed locations you unlock as you complete the last area's levels. There's a desert area, an undersea area, etc. The music sets the scene for each place perfectly.

My style is a blend of shape-based and line-based, with solid blocks of color defining the composition. I currently don't have an interest in the level of realism typically seen in traditional landscape paintings. It is fascinating to explore other avenues of immersion. Cartoony scenes can still give a sense of depth, along with simple side scrolling platform games. This project is an exciting new step in the pursuit to create a more fleshed-out imagined world. I've had fun with video editing software and music composition in the past, and it will be fun to incorporate these elements into my style.

These digital videos will be a transporting, multi-sensing experience. They will explore depth and atmosphere through the themed natural environments of Forest, Desert and Cosmos. They will be accompanied by uniquely arranged soundscapes, meant to more fully immerse the viewer in the scene, like video game stages. The aim of this project is to create easily accessible portfolio pieces that showcase different areas of work, such as video games, picturebooks, and sound design.

³ Tomoya Tomita, "An Interview with Game Composer Tomoya Tomita," interview by Anthony Pelone, Hey Poor Player, 2016, <https://www.heypooplayer.com/2017/03/17/tomoya-tomita-interview/>.

Bibliography

Ma-Ko (@drivemeawaytroubledheart). Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/drivemeawaytroubledheart/>.

This artist was a big inspiration for my style, and motivated me to start making my own landscape scenes.

NintenDaanNC. "[NC UK] Koji Kondo Interview." YouTube. December 16, 2009. Video, 4:47.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iJJCerCucA&t=1s>.

This is an interview with the head music composer for Nintendo, Koji Kondo. He composed the original music for Super Mario Bros.

Nintendo. "Chatting with Koji Kondo - Nintendo Minute." YouTube. December 12, 2014. Video, 9:23.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WsP4InFq9w>.

Here is a more laid back interview with Koji Kondo, composer for the original Super Mario Bros. It's nice to hear how he goes about composing music for different stages.

OCTOBERHAYWIRE. "Composer Profile - Koji Kondo." YouTube. November 30, 2016. Video, 7:10.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELfS3H7Ex1s>.

Here's a video about Koji Kondo, not an interview. It talks about his life and career.

Tomita, Tomoya. "An Interview with Game Composer Tomoya Tomita." interview by Anthony Pelone. Hey Poor Player, 2016.

<https://www.heypoorplayer.com/2017/03/17/tomoya-tomita-interview/>.

This website has a written interview with Tomoya Tomita, composer for the music in Kirby's Epic Yarn. His process is more fun and intuitive, and he was worried he wouldn't get the job because he doesn't have classical music experience.

Video Game Animation Study. "The Beauty of Parallax." YouTube.

April 19, 2019. Video, 10:22,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9tBce8eFqE>.

This video very thoroughly explains the parallax effect, which I didn't know about before. It gives both good and bad examples of the effect in video games.

Written Thesis Defense

Intro:

- Hello! My name is Beth Jensen. I'm an illustration major at PNCA, and this is my last semester here. Welcome to my thesis.
- I made two side-scrolling videos of landscape illustrations. One is forest themed, and the other is desert.
- (slide) I grew up in Southwestern Idaho, which is classified as a high desert. A high desert is a general term for deserts that are comparatively higher in elevation, about 4,000 feet above sea level or higher. I grew up in the Treasure Valley, surrounded both by the remote Owyhee desert, and the pine forests of the Boise Mountains. Me and my family would go on drives through the Owyhees. We would usually be hyperactive at the beginning of the trip, but the car would get quiet after a while, each of us in our own thoughts. I liked to look out the window at the sky, which would go forever and ever.
- (slide) In middle school and high school, my main subject matter was characters and small vignettes. The focus was very singular. I'm drawing a person. A fish. A cat. While at PNCA, I did enjoy making drawings that focused on one thing, or had an ambiguous background. But one project, Junior year, I wanted to make a series of landscapes. Just try it out, see how they would look in my own style. After studying things like atmospheric perspective, lighting, values, I got to a comfortable level of illustrating convincing outdoor scenes. And when I would hit the sweet spot of the sun turning the grass yellow, of the mountains jumping farther away the cooler I colored them, it hit me. I got the same feeling of wonder looking at these that I got while out in the open desert. That was it. I had to make more.

Overview: @5 mins

- (slide) I wanted to focus on a specific biome for each video. I chose to make a forest one because in previous projects, I had explored snowy, plains, and mountainous environments. I really wanted to dive into a lush, dense landscape, full of growth. The forest video is inspired by the Boise National Forest at the beginning, and the Oregon coast at the end. This video ended up shaping to fit my own experiences with the forest these past few years. I was used to dry evergreen forests in the mountains. Since moving to the gorge, I've been surprised at how different its forest feels compared to the one back home. Everything's dripping with green growth. Moss grows on the sidewalks in the city. I love both places, and I wanted to spend more time understanding their differences and similarities.
- (slide) For the other video, I've been romanticizing the desert lately. As a kid, the Owyhees were my backyard. Its remote landscape spans south western Idaho, Oregon and Nevada, about 9 million acres. I've also been fixated on the red rocks of Utah, Nevada and Arizona, which are places I haven't yet been. The forest video is a narrower focus, centering two forest settings that I've experienced. The desert video is more of a road trip that starts in Idaho/Oregon, and heads south to Mexico. It's more based on places that I'm going to experience in the future. Specific areas I took inspiration from were:
 - The Owyhees, Idaho
 - Painted Hills, Oregon
 - Arches National Park, Utah
 - Red Rock Canyon, Nevada
 - Saguaro National Park, Arizona
 - Joshua Tree National Park, California
 - And the Chihuahuan desert, Mexico.

- (slide) I had originally planned to make three videos. Another environment I had been romanticizing was...out of this world...space. It didn't fit with the other two. It was the most abstract and fantastical of the three, not rooted in tangible experience. I also moved during this semester, so I made the decision of saving this video for another time to focus on the more research-heavy videos.
- (slide) For audience, I approached it very loosely. I made them to be strong portfolio pieces, but I can also see them being used for non profits, ecology foundations, national park projects. I aimed for a neutral audience, because the subject of nature can be enjoyed by anyone regardless of background, age, identity. However I recognize that small children probably wouldn't have the patience for the slow pace of the videos. I'm hosting these videos on popular sites like youtube and vimeo, so people would need access to internet to view them as well.
- As for the videos' subject matter, it's all pristine nature. The places in my videos are untouched by people. These kinds of places in real life almost don't exist. I couldn't make illustrations of unaltered wilderness without acknowledging that they're utopias, and without action from us, companies and the government, these places will disappear. I'll have some links to conservation efforts and charities at the end of this presentation.
- (slide) My method was very research-heavy in the beginning, but loosened up once I started drawing. This project was almost entirely research and technical stuff until after midterms. The art style came from the past two years of working on landscapes, so it was comfortable to return to.

Process: @15 mins

- (slide) First things first, I drew some trees and rocks. Getting the composition just right was the smoothest part of the process, since it's what I was most familiar with. It was a little different than my static drawings because I had to design them with the long layout in mind. I also wanted the scenery to stay engaging throughout the whole thing.
- (slide) Here are the sketches that I went with. I also played with different kinds of formats, like some compositions that would turn or rotate. This proved to be kind of weird though, because the dimensions of the videos weren't square, so rotation would have been even trickier to figure out.
- (slide) The major technique that I used for adding depth to my landscapes was the parallax effect. Parallax is the visual phenomenon of objects farther away from the viewer appearing to pass by slower than nearby objects. An example is looking out the car window at the same mountain in the distance while the bushes right next to the road fly by. I was excited to dive in and try this out myself, because I'd seen it used successfully in lots of media like anime, movies and cartoons. This visual illusion is also popular in platform video games to add depth to otherwise flat 2D backgrounds. This effect was really cool! I just had to figure out...how to do it...
- (slide) Okay first, I had to decide on the dimensions I wanted my videos to be. I chose the standard 1920x1080p that most screens are at these days, since these videos were created to be viewed virtually. 1920x1080 is a standard ratio of 16:9, so I also did some math to find a good equivalent of this ratio in inches. Having set dimensions in inches would help me calculate the lengths of each layer more easily than if I kept it as pixels, plus it would translate better if I ever wanted to print these out. I decided that 6.4"x3.6" at 300dpi was a nice goldilocks size to work with.

- (slide) Here's where things get... experimental. At the beginning I did make an attempt at an analog approach to this, using long rolls of transparent paper to sketch on. After measuring out the longest layers, (which were... 153 inches long) I retired that idea early.
- (slide) To find out how long each layer had to be, I tried out what I called the "tree test." With this video, I made a blank 1920x1080p composition with a drawing of a tree on the left side. In premiere, I lined up copies of this drawing next to each other, and made a simple animation of them side scrolling. I would set the animation to different speeds, and count the trees that would pass by the screen in a certain amount of time. The amount of trees would equal the amount of 1920x1080 pictures I would use for the length of each layer. While working on this, I called them "tiles," which isn't a standard term. To differentiate the different layers, I colored the trees different colors.
- (slide) After using this experiment for a bit, I just couldn't tell if these speeds looked good for a landscape. This video I called the "speed demo." I analog sketched two tiles for each layer that would repeat, and made four layers, with some rolling hills in the back, and grass up front. This gave me a much better feel for how the speeds looked.
- (slide, hit play) This second version of the speed demo was because I learned that as layers got closer, their speeds would increase exponentially, instead of equally. I got a little nerdy with the exponential formula for a hot moment before just deciding to work with doubling numbers of tiles. A lot of the give and take of these speeds and numbers was slowing the background down and speeding up the foreground, really pushing the distance between them.
- (slide) I made my own frame of reference for these measurements. The different layer percentages are based on the speed of one original layer, slowed down or sped up to percentages of its original speed.

- (slide) One thing was wrong with the speed demo video. I didn't have the number of tiles labeled. I didn't know how many tiles each layer was! So this next iteration of videos did two jobs: getting my rough sketches started, and keeping track of each tile with handy dandy reference lines. At the beginning, I only had 3 layers. I added more over time for that depth. Since these are 2D pictures, aside from 3D animation, the more layers I added, the more I could portray that diagonal "swing" that objects on a 3D plane do when you pass them.
- Once I got the timing between each layer just right, something was still off. First, I had to revisit perspective. The front layer was too high and looked like it was on a hill. The trees didn't shrink in size correctly, so they looked strange and close up. I also slowed down the videos to half speed, because they were going too fast for the quiet mood I was going for. I wanted to give the viewer time to really sit and take in the space. It felt too much like a race to look at everything.
- (slide) In this version of the videos, I have a little sample of some guitar I was working on. I wanted to add composed soundscapes to these videos. (hit play)
- (slide) Before this project, I'd been subconsciously organizing the music I listen to into different playlists based on environments: snow, ocean, desert, etc. During the beginning, I brainstormed what it was about certain songs that made them sound like forest or desert songs to me. Things like acoustic guitar and more minor chords sounded like the desert, and light piano melodies and harmonies were the forest. A lot of this is influenced by the conditioning from video games and media during my childhood. During forest levels, there was usually a light and intricate song to go with the kind of hush of being surrounded by trees. Desert's usually had a moodier, beat heavy sound to them to represent their less forgiving environment. The

music side of environmental design is something I really want to dive into more after this project.

- (slide) There were different directions to this project that I considered, such as having the videos loop continuously. While I'm interested in trying this in the future, I didn't want to do this for these videos. I wanted them to be a set journey with a start and finish, and planned for the mood to shift over time. The end result was very subtle, but there are still little elements of change. In the forest one, I have the sun rising slowly throughout the video. The desert has a bigger change. It starts in the early evening, and ends at dusk. The sky very gradually turns to sunset and darkens, with the first stars coming out. Shadows also lengthen, cutting the Organ Mountains in half at the end. To mirror each other, the forest video is based on a fresh dawn color scheme, and the desert is a warmer dusk.
- (slide) For the landmarks and nature, I did extensive visual research. While rendering, I would often ask myself stuff like, "What color is the dirt in Arizona?...ah okay, light yellow brown... and the rocks? Hmm, also light yellow brown..." For the red rocks specifically, I made another piece in a class based on Red Rock Canyon in Nevada, to practice hitting that warm glow especially in the shadows.
- (slide) After doing a lot of research into different types of trees that grew in the Boise forest vs. on the coast, by the time I jumped into linework, I felt comfortable enough to get a little loose with it. The world is so diverse and interesting, it felt like I was taking these elements of nature and going, "you get to be right here, you're cool too, let's squeeze you in next to the water where you like to grow..." Research was making a collection of all these things that make a place special, and making a space for them in my art. Nature is so complex and full of different things to discover that I think that's why I've dived

into these scenes based on real places. There isn't much room to live in fantasy when I'm too busy... looking up how jumping spiders have crazy good eyesight, or how evergreen trees keep their needles to preserve nutrients and water all year.

- (slide) There were unforeseen challenges while rendering this, like making shadows in perspective. Since the objects are moving, I couldn't go the traditional method of measuring them based on where the sun was. I had to imagine the sun as a moving object as well. I used a set distance from the sun for each object, lining up this reference to each object as I drew its shadow. This also helped keep all their shadows parallel to each other, since the sun is so distant of a light source that shadows on earth appear parallel. Also I made sure that the layers didn't overlap awkwardly, like the islands on the Oregon coasts, which would've broken the illusion. At one point, I was drawing trees with trunks that were too wide, so I had to relearn how to draw trees. At this point, you can probably tell that this whole project was a Comprehensive Analysis of Trees.
- (slide) There's also something to be said about the timing of this project. I started brainstorming this at a time when the shutdown was in full effect. I was living downtown, sidewalk-locked, cooped up in a one-bedroom apartment. I had no means to head out into these places in person, so this was definitely a form of escapism from the situation.
- (slide) After everything was planned out as thoroughly as it could be, it was time to hit the ground running. I jumped into the most familiar part of this process while rendering the artwork. I refined the sketches of both videos, did the linework, and flatted them, coloring in all the stuff with colors that would be changed later. A method I use for my pieces is what I think of as digital Grisaille, because like that traditional painting method of painting the values first, and adding

your colors over them. Then it was shadows, color, and coloring the line work so it helped make things recede in the distance. And bingo.

- (slide) After the visuals, I went in and put together some atmosphere tracks. I used Soundsnap to look up sounds of wind howling, coyotes, bubbling streams, etc. These are temp tracks. In the future, I'm going to revisit this and work on more musical elements for these scenes.
- (slide) I'm inspired by the sound works of Tomoya Tomita, who did the soundtrack for Kirby's Epic Yarn. Other big inspirations are from the video games Nier: Automata, and Breath of the Wild.

Project in Culture:

- (slide) I see many places for this project to live. I see it projected on the wall in a gallery themed around conservation. I see clips of it as gifs on my website and social media, screenshots of the different locations too. This project was focused on showing my interest in many different fields. I'm interested in picture books, background design for video games and media, campaigns for National Parks and forestry projects, non profits, educational magazines for kids and adults, textbooks, all sorts of things.

Conclusion:

- This project was a next step up from diving into landscape illustration and creating believable, immersive worlds. In the future I hope to add to this project things to take it further like animals, little animations of leaves moving, water ripples, musical melodies. This process has been a fun puzzle to solve, and I'd like to try more motion things like this, this time with tools better suited for what I'm trying to achieve. However, figuring it out on my own has taught me the nitty gritty of perspective, and why certain things work and others don't.
- (slide) There are many, many environmental groups out there to check out. Here is a list of some Oregon-based ones.

- I'd like to thank my mentor, Zack Rau for talking me down from painting the sistine chapel. I'd also like to thank my mom for telling me to take breaks, and my dad for always being enthusiastic about my artist journey. I'd also like to thank my friends who have been incredible support, the friends who are going through it with me, and the friends who I can complain to about how hard art is. And lastly...
- (slide) I'd like to thank my rabbit George for being very soft and sweet (and for chewing things he isn't supposed to and making me get up from my computer to shoo him.)
- (slide) Thank you for coming to my thesis. I will now be taking questions.