Tampere University of Applied Sciences

DESIGNING VIDEO GAME CHARACTERS BASED ON AN UNFAMILIAR CULTURE – CASE SKÁBMA

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ABSTRACT

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The digital age has given us tools to tell stories that have been passed from generation to generation for centuries before our time. When transitioning from oral and written tradition to modern audiovisual experiences, the artist needs to be mindful of the original source and be able to identify what is needed to visually depict the original story and its characters in a way that remains respectful and loyal to the source.

The purpose of this thesis was to answer the question "What needs to be taken into consideration when designing video game characters from a culture that is not your own?" The thesis researches methods most commonly used in character development in video games and then compares them to a design process, where a cultural background is used as an inspiration. Video games discussed include *Never Alone* (2014), *Civilization VI: Rise and Fall* (2018) and *Blasphemous* (2019) that all have used folklore, real-life historical figures, or mythology as their inspiration.

As a case study, the thesis explored the character design processes of *Skábma – Polar Night,* an adventure game based on Sámi mythology and culture.

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Key words: character design, video game, culture

CONTENTS

GLOSSARY

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Concept art	Visual representation of a design
AAA (video game)	Colloquial term used to describe video games developed by a large or otherwise major game company
Indie (video game)	Independent video game. An unofficial term used to describe video games made by an individual or a small team.
VR	Virtual Reality
Iterative cycle	A production method in which a design gets refined and changed based on feedback and analysis
Photobashing	Design method, in which an artist uses photographs, 3d images and illustrations to create original art by blending and merging them together
Thumbnailing	Design method that has the artist drawing small scale variations of the design
Art bible/guide	A document detailing the processes used for design
Turnaround	A collection of images showing a design from a few different angles
High poly	A 3d model with a high polygonal count
Low poly	A 3d model with a low polygonal count

1 INTRODUCTION

Stories based on mythology have been a staple in our society for a long time and are a rich vein of inspiration to many modern artists, who wish to tell these old stories in their own words. For example, many of us have seen versions of Hercules fighting Medusa and Hydra in several different movie and video game adaptations over the years. As new versions of these stories come up, the origin of the characters comes up as a topic of conversation. How are these characters depicted in the original source material? What did the artist use as their source? How can you even find the reliable sources? What about stories based on cultures that are still present today?

The topic of this thesis stems from *Skábma – Polar Night*, an adventure video game based heavily on Sámi mythology and culture that is under development at Red Stage Entertainment Oy in Tampere, Finland. At the time of writing this essay, I am working as a graphical artist for the project and my tasks involve character concepting and visualising. In this thesis, I aim to shed light at the visual development of a character, starting off from source material research and the very first initial sketches.

In the theory portion of this thesis, I will walk through the general pipeline of concept art creation for video games and later address the challenges and possibilities when creating a video game character out of folklore and stories that have never been told in a modern media format. I will also bring up other instances of when culture or its elements have been used as an inspiration for a character and discuss the design methods and reception of said characters. My main goal with this thesis is to find an answer to the question "is there a correct way to create a video game character using elements from a culture that is not your own?"

2   GENERAL VIDEO GAME CHARACTER DESIGN PRACTICES

This chapter will focus on general character design practices in video games. Character production can roughly be divided into three categories: pre-production, design phase, and implementation phase. PICTURE 1 demonstrates the general character development process that will be elaborated on in this chapter.
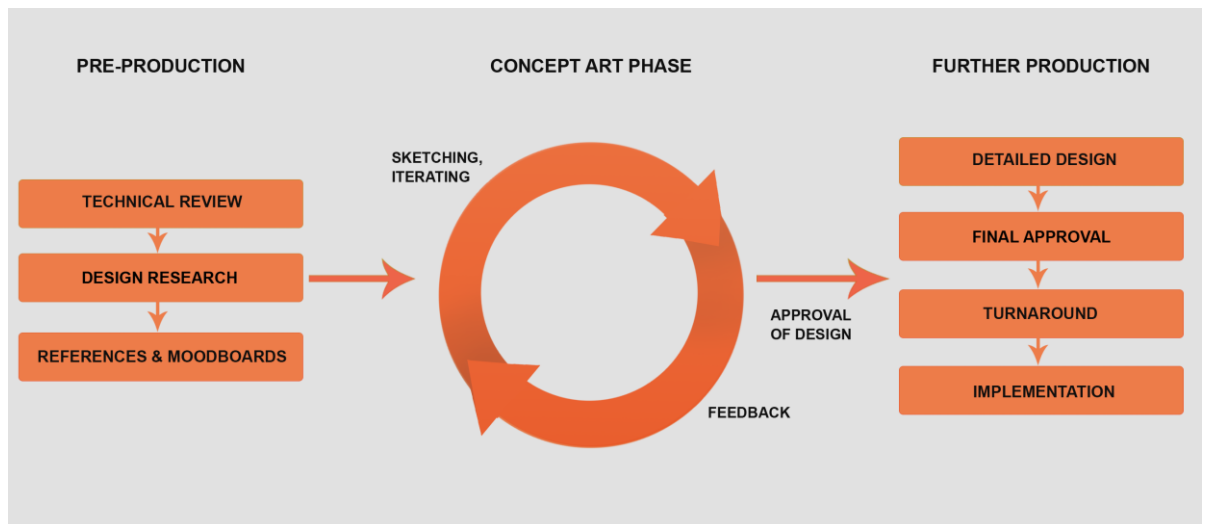
PICTURE 1. A graph describing general character design phases in video game development

2.1   Groundwork for character visual development

> When starting to design characters, it's very important to determine the setting and universe that you are designing within. Sometimes you don't have a lot of control over it, but it's worth thinking about and internalizing this information as you are going forward with designing your characters, as they do not exist in a vacuum (Hummel, 2017).

When starting with character development, a designer should already understand the underlying themes or the world that the character will inhabit. Any background information available will help flesh out the character faster, which is often crucial in the fast-paced video game development cycle.

Before an artist can start sketching the very first concepts of a character, they need to know who the character is. After all, that knowledge defines how they will appear to us and the world. Questions the artist might ask themselves include

things like: where does the character live? What is the main aesthetic of the character? How does the player interact with the character? (Salmond 2017, 142)

There is a big overlap in character design, world design, story and level design – and, unlike in movie productions, all these design aspects also need to work around the game mechanics of the project in question. There are a lot of moving parts when it comes to first mapping out the design and visual look of a character. Making decisions based on the questions mentioned above, as well as the given mechanics of the video game allows the character to be built in more detail later as development progresses. (Salmond 2017,132.)

2.1.1 Technical review in pre-production

Before beginning the process of character design, it is important to know the technical limitations of game development and understand how they can affect visual design. The scope of the project, the target platform (PC, console, mobile, VR, etc.), known game mechanics, the chosen game engine, developer skills, and preferences all have an influence in how the game will look like. An important part in video game pre-production is determining what is to be expected from the design process.

The design department or art director might write a design document (also colloquially named "art bible" or "art guide") that works as a reference document for how the game, including its characters, is going to look like. The document may also review the specific workflow and tools that will be used during the asset development process (Moore 2011,8). The document can also cover other background guidelines for the design, including possible deadlines, the target audience, story beats and programs used by the art team. The design document should be used as foundation for all visual design decisions made during the progress of game development.
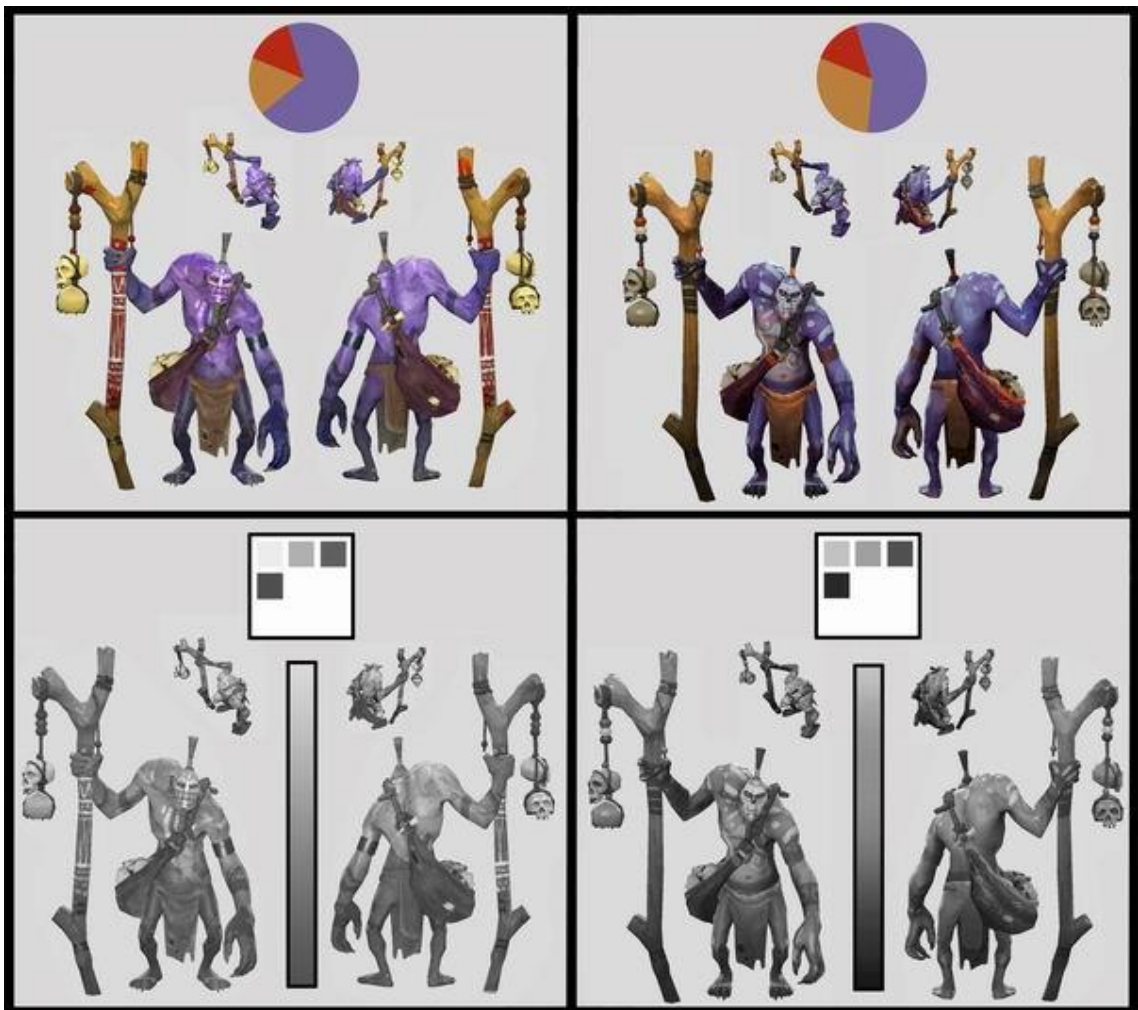
PICTURE 2. An image from the character art guide for Dota 2. The image illustrates the correct use of colors and values for a character by showing an adjusted example on the right. (Valve Corporation 2017)

Keeping the general technical requirements and limitations in mind while developing a character will help the designer avoid possible problems further along in development. A design might work well on paper but prove difficult to implement later if these requirements have not been discussed in pre-production, which makes this pre-production phase so important to many studios. Well-thought out production plans will minimize the risk of potential time waste.

2.1.2 Mood boards

There are a multitude of ways to brainstorm and visualize ideas like the aesthetics of a character. One commonly used way of fleshing out the very first ideas is to make a mood board. A mood board is a collection of images that represent the

character in question. The purpose of the board is to communicate different elements of the character, like size, clothing, props, color palette, aesthetic and occupation. All of this helps the character take shape before an artist starts drawing the first concept art. (Salmond 2019, 146.)

The artist can use certain keywords like the character's traits or a specific genre, that have already been somewhat established, on search engines like Google to find images that fit the feel and look of the character in development. Images used can be anything from screenshots of a movie, images of other video game characters, real life photographs, paintings or drawings; anything that the designer finds aesthetically pleasing and fitting for the character.
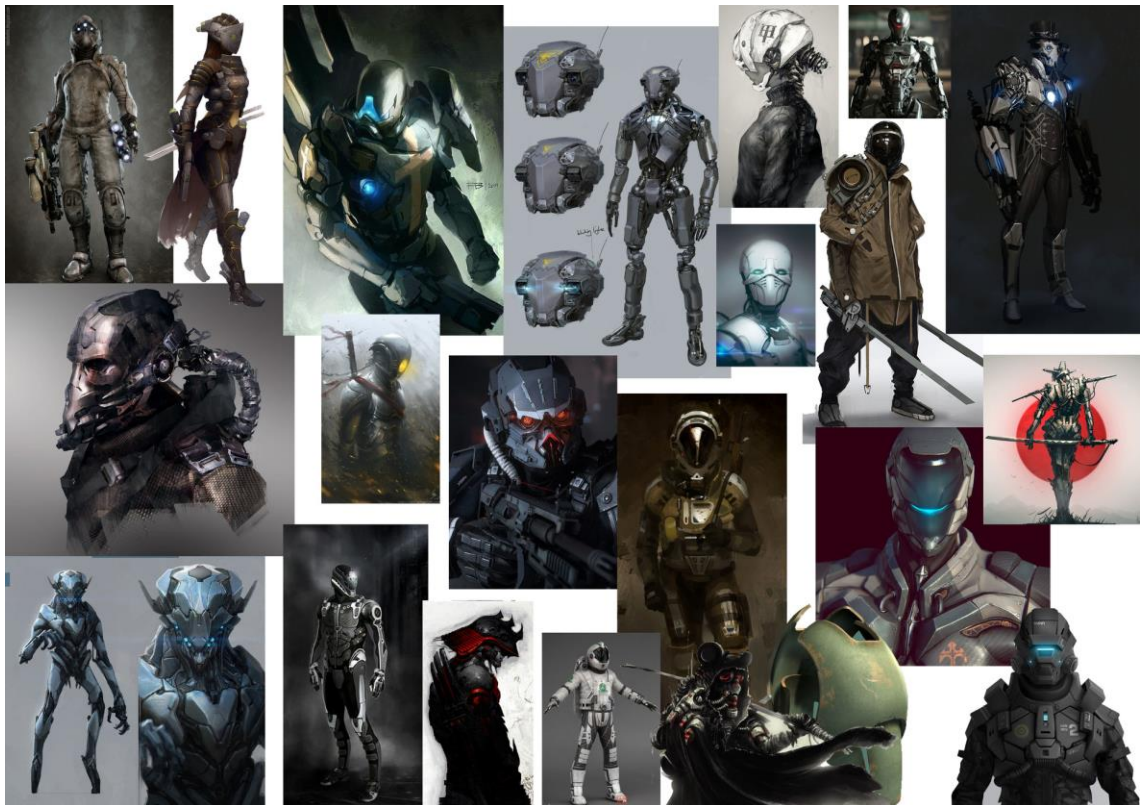
PICTURE 3. A mood board for a game character, visualising elements such as the aesthetic, genre, presence, clothing and stature (Singh 2015)

Total accuracy is not the focus at this stage. The important part is simply to get a very general feel of the character and use that as a starting point for further development. An artist might use certain shapes, certain colors or certain poses straight from the mood board when fleshing out the character. However, the point

is not to pick one image off the board that the artist likes the best and trace that as is. Ideally the board works as a "melting pot" for the design to take form from. (RisingHighAcademy.com 2011)

2.1.3 Visual references

References can be used as more literal guides when sketching and designing the character. As opposed to mood boards, that are supposed to give a general feel and mood for a character, references are used to ensure that what is being portrayed is visually accurate. (Tillman 2011, 85.)

Something an artist might need to reference, for example, are clothing items, anatomy, poses, facial features or props, such as weapons that the character has on them. Basing the design in real-life photographs will help make the character appear more believable. The exact references needed depend on the artist and the already established aspects of the character. Like with mood boards, there are no hard-set rules with using references. Once visual references are gathered, artists can create the first pieces of concept art and see what paths they can take with the design.
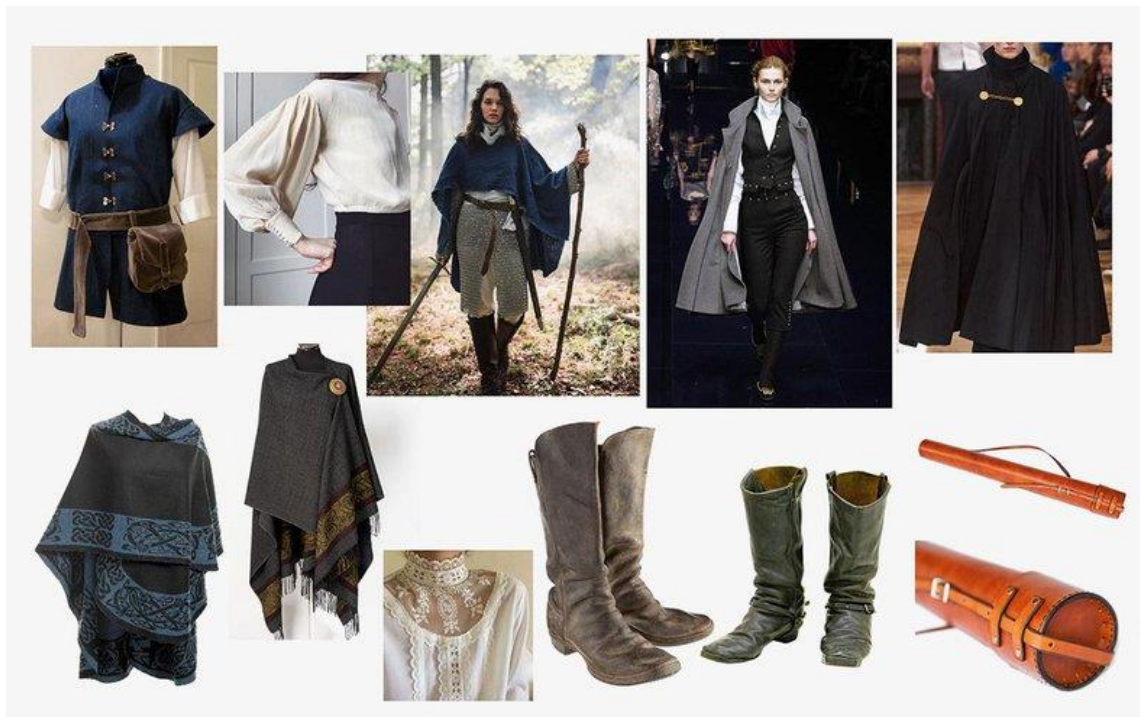
PICTURE 4. Reference pictures for a character's clothing (Tarrant 2019)

2.2   Visual development

2.2.1   Understanding concept art

Concept art is visual representation of an idea. It is an essential part of video game pre-production that works as a visual base for the rest of the development cycle and helps pull ideas together into a strong visual reference. It is used to visualize characters, environments, props and the narrative that they are part of (Fitzgerald 2019) and is used as a fallback reference by all the artists in the team. Concept art can be made in-house or it can be commissioned from an external freelancer.

The exact case use of a concept art can differ a bit depending on which stage of development the asset is in. Internal concept art that is only meant to be seen by the other developers in the team is often made in quick iterative successions as it gets reviewed by the art director or by the other members of the team. At this point, the actual execution of the art does not matter much. The emphasis is in exploring high-concept ideas such as the given mood, aesthetic and narrative and translating that to a visual form. Focus might be in shapes, colors or other basic elements of the design.

When the development is at a stage where a design needs to be shown to more people (e.g. a publisher or a potential consumer via a social media post), the art is often more polished and more like an illustration rather than just a quick sketch. At this point the design has most likely already been through many iterative cycles in order to reach the point where an artist can comfortably draw a more detailed version of it (Anhut 2014). Here more focus can be put in details, realism, composition or other complimentary elements of the design.

Ancient Civilizations: Lost & Found
Thumbnails

Omercan Cirit

PICTURE 5. Initial black and white character thumbnail sketches for an art challenge titled *Ancient Civilization* (Cirit 2016)

Often the main purpose of this so-called promotional art is to give the external parties an idea of what the game is like and showcase the skills of the development team in an eye-catching manner.

PICTURE 6. Promotional art for *Horizon Zero Dawn* (karakter.de; Guerrilla Games 2014)

It is hard to draw a hard-definite line between concept art and promotional art. Artists are encouraged to only publish their best work in their portfolios, so the concept art one most often sees is either promotional or otherwise further along in development, which can skew the view of what concept art is in its different stages. However, the decision of exactly how long a concept art piece should take or how much detail it should have is always dependent on a multitude of things such as time and resources available. There is not only one correct way to make concept art.
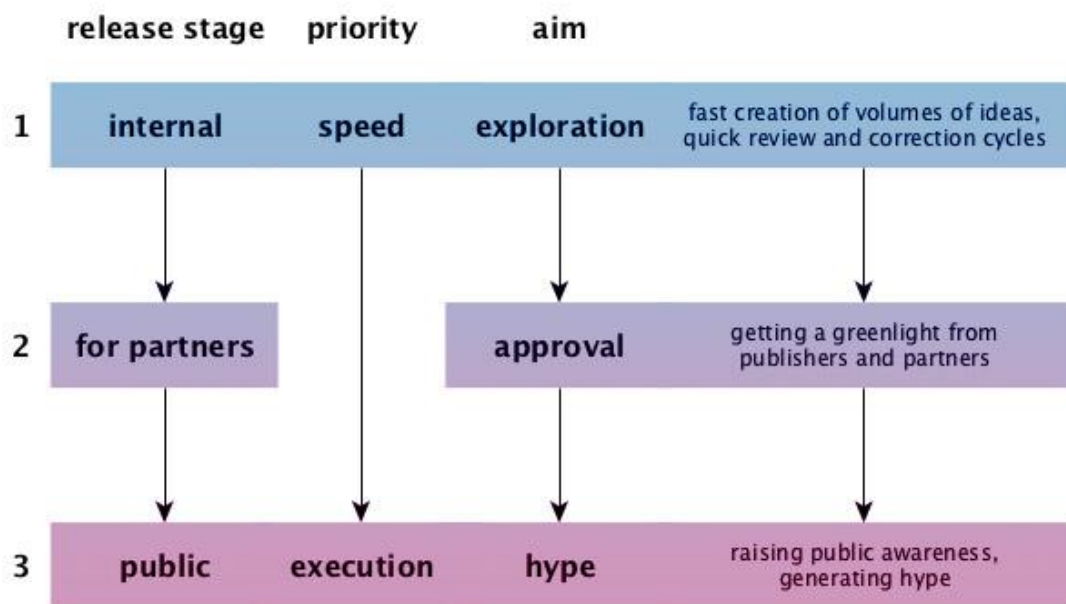
PICTURE 7. Priorities in different stages of development (Anhut 2014)

2.2.2 Tools

What tools an artist ends up using when designing a character depends largely on the production workflow and what the artist is comfortable using. Some are most comfortable using traditional tools such as pen and paper. Digital tools, although usually the more expensive way of doing things, are widely used both in indie- and AAA-productions alike.

The digital approach usually requires a drawing tablet, a software suitable for digital drawing and a computer strong enough to run the programs efficiently. The artist also needs to have the right set of skills in order to get the most benefits

from the digital workflow, such as knowing how to use the chosen art software as well as general skills in art creation.

What makes working digitally so attractive to individuals and studios alike is all the advantages it can offer over the traditional approach, such as quick iterating and image sharing – and any time saved is always a plus in video game production. Granted, image sharing is still perfectly possible with the traditional approach but requires the artist either to scan or photograph their art to a digital form, which can be a potential time sinker in a large production. Programs and the associated tools are also becoming increasingly more sophisticated and are widely accessible to almost anyone with a computer, which is why so many artists choose to use them.

However, some of the most widely used digital art software, like Adobe Photoshop, include a monthly subscription fee, which might turn some artists away from using the software. The popularity of cheaper, or even free, alternatives has risen over the years, as the programs have become more sophisticated and well-rounded for making digital art. Most popular softwares also offer full support on major commercial drawing tablets. Below is a short table with examples of some of the most popular software and their individual price comparisons.

Tool	Platforms	Cost*
Adobe Photoshop	Windows, Mac OS	Starting from 12,39€/month
GIMP	Linux, Windows, Mac OS	Free (optional donation)
Procreate	iPad (iOS 11.1+)	10, 99€
Autodesk Sketchbook	iOS, Android, Windows 10	Free individual license, Enterprise license 12,10€ /month
Krita	Linux, Windows, Mac OS	Free (optional donation)

TABLE 1. Some of the most commonly used digital art softwares with their respective platforms and price points at the time of this writing.

2.2.3 Techniques

At this point in production the artist hopefully has at least a vague idea of how the character could look like. If stuck, the artist can consult the mood board, the references, character story synopsis or any other tool that can help them form an idea for the character's visuals. A lot of initial concept art is very simple and sketchy in nature. Focus is in creating lots of variations of the character that all have a basis in the information that has already been provided. The artist is not creating an illustration to be hung on a wall, they are creating a visual base off which the design will be iterated on.

The artist may choose to use several techniques when creating the visuals for a character. Sketching, photo bashing and thumbnailing are some of the more widely used techniques, which all allow the artist to quickly come up with designs without getting too stuck on details or other still-irrelevant aspects of a character's design.
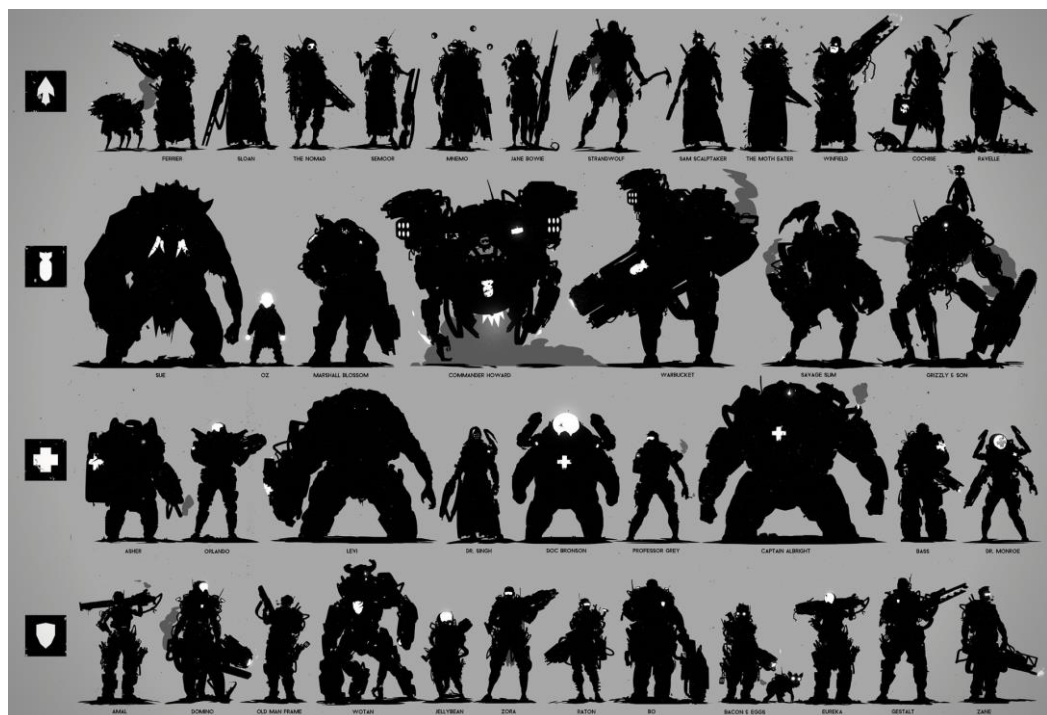
PICTURE 8. Collage of character silhouettes, effectively unifying the size and shape differences between several of the production's characters (Flanders 2016)

As the design moves along the iterative design process and the character's visuals begin to take a clearer shape, the more detailed the sketches become. When the design has been agreed on, the artist often makes a final turnaround image of the character. The purpose of a turnaround is to show the character from a few different angles, so that the 3d artist can use those images as reference when modeling the character in question. The turnaround image also ensures that everything is modelled in the correct scale.

PICTURE 9. Turnaround image of a character from Frozenbyte's 2017 title *Nine Parchments*. Without the image showing how the character looks from the back, the 3d artist might have to guess and make their own design decisions based on how the character looks like from the front (Frozenbyte 2017)

3 HOW THE SOURCE MATERIAL AFFECTS VISUAL DESIGN FOR VIDEO GAME CHARACTERS

Story is a crucial part of a character's design. It will define how they act, how they dress and present themselves and provide them with goals and motivations. Character believability comes from the viewer understanding the relationship between the character, the environment and the supporting narrative. This is partly communicated through the visuals of the character; their clothing, colors, shapes and body language all contribute to the narrative non-verbally. This chapter aims to cover that relationship and shed light on how the story and the narrative can influence a video game character's visual design.

3.1 Stories in general

Video games are a relatively new medium in terms of storytelling. Roughly, characters in video games can be divided into two categories: Playable and non-playable characters (often referred to as NPCs). Playable characters, also called avatars, are controlled by the player. This essentially makes the player the main character of the story. In some cases, the avatar can also be customized to appear however the player wants them to look like, within the boundaries of the game in question. This feature is unique to video games medium, although the non-customizable, "traditional" character design is still present in most modern games. (Somerdin 2016.)

For the game world to be believable, the relationship between the character's design and the story needs to make sense. Why would a character wear heavy armour or brandish a weapon unless they had a reason to do so? Why would the character wear a flashy evening dress when going out to hunt deer? Everything about the character will always point back to the story (Tillman 2011, 25), which means that a designer needs to be mindful of what story aspects they want to represent with the design.

In Tillman's book Creative Character Design, a character's involvement in the story has been divided into three different categories: Archetype, Environment and Timeline (Tillman 2011, 36). Archetype describes the character's overall

type; are they a hero, a villain or something in between? How does that affect the way they show themselves to the world? The environment depicts the world the character lives in. If the character lives in a cold place, it would make sense for them to wear clothing meant for cold weather; or perhaps the cold environment affects the character visually in some other ways?

Lastly, timeline characterizes the character's own timeline and history as well as the time they live in. Two character who are otherwise identical, but with the other living in 15th century and the other in the futuristic 23rd century would still look different because of the difference in time and environment.

3.1.1 Character archetypes

In storytelling, a character archetype means a specific set of traits that represent a typical character seen in many pieces of literature and other forms of art. An archetype is often a combination of physical features and universally recognized human behavioural patterns. (Jung 1981, 20.)

Although there have been many different archetypes in the history of literature, the most commonly used set of archetypes in today's storytelling were introduced by Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. Jung believed that the root of an archetype lies in the shared experiences of mankind, such as love, religion, death, birth, life, struggle, and survival. He argued that this "collective unconscious" is the reason why the same character types and patterns can be observed in the myths and stories across all cultures around the world. (Jung 1981, 20-21.)

It is good to note that Jung's theory has faced a good amount of criticism throughout the years. In an article by Sumit Saurav, it is noted that the times during which Jung theorized about the unconscious and the archetypes have huge differences to today's world and were originally designed to be very role oriented. He also discusses whether the archetypes are too labelling to an individual (or in the case of this thesis, a character) and suggests seeing the archetypes more as a spectrum. Focusing too much on making a character the "perfect" representation of an archetype might make the character feel flatter and less believable than one

who exhibits traits from two or more archetypes or traits not specific to any previously set type. (Saurav 2018.)

Why are archetypes important in character design? In Bryan Tillman's book "Creative character design" archetypes are described as examples of an ideal character that the artist can use as a mold for their own original design (Tillman 2011, 12). Using Jung's collection of archetypes as a base, Tillman categorizes 6 distinct character archetypes most commonly used in storytelling

In modern storytelling these rough archetypes are often mixed, so a single character may possess qualities that fit two or more archetype categories. Below are brief descriptions of each archetype with example characters from published video game titles.

3.1.1.1.   The Hero

The Hero, sometimes also known as the warrior, is fearless, helpful and someone who will always put their needs aside for the greater good. A hero's core desire is to prove their worth through courageous acts and improve the lives of others. Their weaknesses might include overconfidence in their abilities, or the fact that they would never let anyone else get hurt in their stead, causing them to throw themselves in dangerous situations without a second thought. (Reedsyblog 2018.)

They are often in the protagonist role in the story, which means that as video game characters they are most likely controlled by the player. Good examples of such characters include Commander Shepard from the *Mass Effect* series, Hershel Layton from the *Professor Layton* series and Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn*.

PICTURE 10. Commander Shepard from the *Mass Effect* series, Hershel Layton from the *Professor Layton* series, and Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn*. All characters are the main protagonist within the games story, and selflessly try to prevent antagonists from doing evil (Bioware 2012; Level-5 2007; Guerrilla Games 2014)

3.1.1.2.   The Shadow

In Jung's theory, the shadow is described to be the dark side of someone's personality (Jung 1981, 36). As an archetype, "shadow" characters can be perceived as disagreeable, malicious and ruthless (Tillman 2011, 13). Their goals are often driven by selfish desires, such as the need to obtain control, power or wealth. The shadow only sees instrumental value in other people. Once someone stops being useful to them, they stop caring.

The shadow often takes the antagonist role in the story, being the opposing force to the protagonist.

PICTURE 11. Micah Bell from the game *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Ganondorf from the *Legend of Zelda* series, and Dr. Nefarious from the *Ratchet & Clank* series. All act as the main opposing force for the game's protagonist, the latter two in more than one game. All characters embody multiple villainous personality traits, such as greed, hunger for power and malice towards to anyone who opposes them (Rockstar Games 2018; Nintendo 2014; Insomniac Games 2016)

3.1.1.3.   The Fool

As the name suggests, the fool is typically a less capable character. They can easily be manipulated and taken advantage of by the antagonist (or any other character) and are easily overpowered by the dangers they may face in the story. They might require the help of the protagonist to keep themselves out of harm's way as they are incapable to do so by themselves. They can work as a comic-relief in the story but will likely cause unintended hardship to themselves and others around them due to their lack of strength and wisdom. (Reedsyblog, 2018.)

Fools are hardly ever intentionally bad or malicious towards others. They often exhibit almost childlike traits, like having strong emotional reactions to the situations they find themselves in and they can be quite I. Physically fools are often much less imposing than the main characters and may even have some caricature-like elements in their design, which is apparent in the *Legend of Zelda* character Tingle in PICTURE 11.

PICTURE 12. Characters from left to right: Roman Bellic from *Grand Theft Auto 4*, Tingle from the *Legend of Zelda* series, and Larry Butz from the *Phoenix Wright* series. All characters can be characterized as well-meaning idiots, who often get into trouble due to their flawed intelligence (Rockstar Games 2008; Nintendo 2014; Capcom 2001)

3.1.1.4.   The Anima and Animus

In Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, anima represents the feminine qualities present in the male psyche and, respectively, animus the masculine qualities in the female psyche. They can either be personal complexes or archetypal projection in the psyche of the opposite sex (i.e. the image of an ideal woman in men and the image of an ideal man in women). (Jung 1981, 42-45.)

In storytelling, an anima or animus character represents the ideal version of their sex and often has the love-interest's role in the story. These characters often have very sexualized features, since they are also meant to be attractive to the player and draw them to the story. Story events that affect them are meant to evoke emotional responses from the viewer and further immerse them into the story. (Tillman 2011, 17.)

PICTURE 13. Characters from left to right: Honoka from *Dead or Alive Xtreme 3*, Princess Peach from the *Mario* series, and Alistair from the *Dragon Age* series. All characters act as the protagonist's or the player's love interest at some point in the series (Team Ninja 2016; Nintendo 2015; Bioware 2014)

3.1.1.5. The Mentor

The mentor's role in the story is to guide, give advice and help the protagonist on their journey. The relationship between the protagonist and the mentor can be describes as that of a parent and a child or a professor and a student. The mentor is often characterized as an older person, since we tend to associate wisdom with age. (Tillman 2011,19.)

In video games, the mentor archetype can often be associated with gameplay tutorials, where the player learns about the basic mechanics of the game, i.e. how to move, how to jump, how to interact with objects, et cetera. So, on top of being guiding the protagonist, they can also help the player advance in the story by giving them the tools needed to advance in the story.

PICTURE 14. Characters from left to right: Rost from *Horizon Zero Dawn*, Toriel from *Undertale*, and Aku Aku from the *Crash Bandicoot* series. All characters are portrayed as older and wiser than most of the game's central characters, and act as a kind of surrogate parent to the game's protagonist (Guerrilla Games 2017; Fox 2015; Activision 2017)

3.1.1.6.   The Trickster

The tricksters are best described as clever and mischievous personalities, who will trick and deceit others in order to get what they want. Their alignments are ambiguous, in that they are not necessarily purely good or evil, but often work within a ruleset of their own making. (Tillman 2011, 20.)

PICTURE 15. Characters from left to right: Goro Majima from the *Yakuza* series, King Dice from the game *Cuphead*, and Moneybags from the *Spyro the Dragon* series. All characters are hard to characterize as either evil or good, as they act according to their respective moral codes (Sega 2009; Studio MDHR 2017; Activision 2018)

3.1.2 Visual storytelling

As mentioned in the previous chapters, character's backstory, their possible archetype and the world they live in can all have an effect on how the character looks like. When the character is being developed for a video game project, the chosen style and technical restrictions also play into the choices an artist can make when deciding what they want to tell with the characters design. An artist might also choose to hide certain aspects of a character's story, which also plays into the visual storytelling.

3.1.3 Case *Fallout*

The *Fallout* series is a good example of both customizable characters as well as premade non-playable characters. *Fallout* is set in a fictionalised post-war future, where the world has been left a wasteland after nuclear war has left the world in a post-apocalyptic state. As the player begins to explore the post-apocalyptic world, they will soon uncover the long-term effects the war has had on the environment and its residents. The high dosage of nuclear radiation has left some of

the former human characters so unrecognisably scarred, mutated or otherwise altered, either physically or mentally, that they are now considered a different race (or even species) altogether. This has, in part, created a wholly new socio-economic and political system that is explored throughout the game via the game narrative. (fallout.bethesda.net 2015.)

Given that this is a world with limited resources where everyone is fighting for their own survival, some characters are more hostile towards the player than others. In order to avoid a "game over", the player needs to be able to quickly recognize potential danger from potential companions. PICTURE 16 depicts some of the game's characters. Despite some clear differences, all character designs are well grounded in the story. Most characters wear clothing that have tears and rips in them and they use whatever they have managed to find, such as vehicle parts, repair tools and museum pieces, in the wasteland as weapons or armour. Even without interacting with the character, a player can make quick assumption of the character, their role and background just by reading their design.

PICTURE 16. Various character designs in *Fallout 4*, first image being an example of the playable avatar whose visual appearance the player can customize to their liking (Bethesda Softworks 2015)

Sometimes these expectations can be used to surprise a player. Sometimes a player can run into someone who seems like a threat at first glance but turns out to be a friendly companion, or a seemingly friendly character might turn out to be a dangerous villain. A certain amount of contrast between the characters visual design and their actual role in the story can create interesting twists in the story.

3.2 Mythology and culture

> Mythology is a vast subject. Rather like history, it is not easy to encapsulate or contain it. Sacred stories from around the world are numerous, and huge bodies of stories make up the complete works of a culture or civilization's belief systems (S. Bartlett 2009)

Mythology and folklore differ from modern stories in many ways. Although, at heart, mythologies are types of stories, they cannot be sourced to one sole author. The stories in folklore can be interpreted in many ways and people often have their own way of telling those stories. The stories get shaped the culture can have different variations and meanings depending on the region, time and person. (Yow 2018.)

When creating visual concepts from an already existing world, whether it is a book, a myth, folklore or culture, sources play a critical role in the design process. Not only has the artist take into consideration the design elements discussed above, such as the character's role, their own backstory and relation to the world around them, the artist needs to know enough about what they are basing the design on.

There are a lot of examples of mythological stories being used as inspiration for video games. The God of War series features characters from both the Greek and Nordic mythologies, such as the Greek God Zeus and Odin, the ruler of Asgard in Nordic mythology. Other popular games that have drawn inspiration from mythology around the world include the *Assassin's Creed* – series, *Age of Mythology*, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, *Ōkami* and *Blasphemy* (more under PICTURE 17), just to name a few.
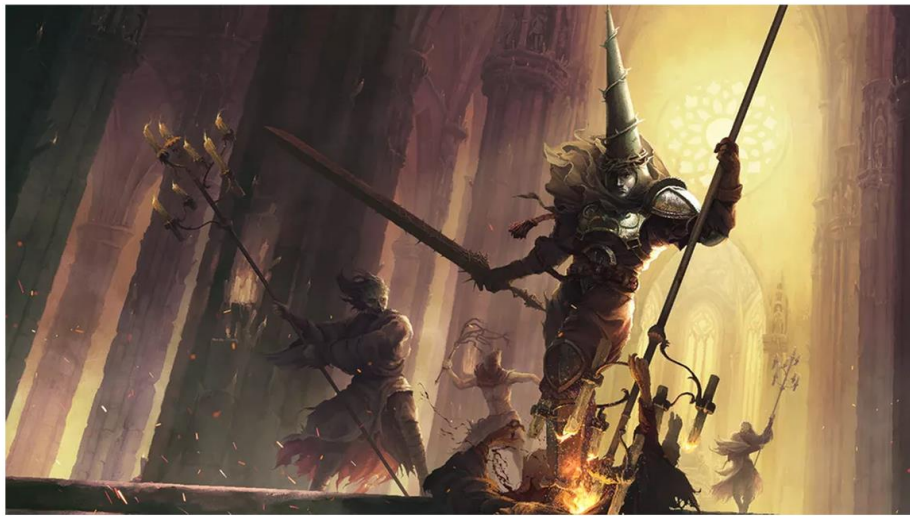
PICTURE 17. A Procession of Flagellants[1] by Fransisco De Goya (1812-1819) and key art for the 2019 video game *Blasphemous*, featuring the game's protagonist The Penitent One. The game's developer, The Game Kitchen, have stated that the game's artstyle takes influence from Christianity, as well as the foklore of the city of Seville, Spain. They featured Fransisco De Goya's painting above on their Kickstarter page as an art inspiration (The Game Kitchen 2019)

Folklore, culture and mythology often go hand-in-hand and it might be difficult to design something from a mythology without including cultural aspects to it. Culture can also be included in the video game in other forms than mythology. An artist might draw influence from real-life cultures and stories that are still present

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[1] Original title: *Procesión de disciplinantes*

today. However, taking something from a culture that is not familiar to the designer is a very volatile subject.

3.2.1 Cultural appropriation

When making characters based on a culture that is not your own, a designer must be mindful of the concept of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is a term used to describe when a dominant culture takes elements of a minor culture, including art forms, themes or practices and uses them outside of their original context. (The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature, 3)

A well-known example of cultural appropriation is the selling and wearing of the feathered Native American warbonnets as fashion items. In Native communities, the feathers are symbols of honour and are only presented to those who have earned them through special ceremonies. (Keene 2010) The fact that anyone can buy replicas of these headpieces and wear them to a party erases their significance as a cultural item and makes them lose the power they originally had. (Keene 2015.)

This appropriation also extends into the media we consume. Controversies surrounding cultural appropriation are present in many types of entertainment media, including video games. Video games, especially early video games from the 80's and 90's, have a reputation of having grossly inaccurate representations of minority cultures and characters.

As in the previous example about Native American warbonnets, the indigenous people have not been represented well in the world of video games either. In early video games such as *Indian Attack* (1983), *Kane* (1986), *Cowboy Kid* (1991), and *Hammer Boy* (1991), The natives are seen represented as overly primitive and are often the target for the player to attack and conquer. The characters are stereotypically visualized as half-naked, feather wearing mystical beings, with women especially being overly sexualized in their design. Indigenous characters were used more as exotic background decorations rather than fully fleshed out characters representing a culture. (Fabius 2014.)

PICTURE 18. Thunder Hawk from *Super Street Fighter II* (1993), Julia Chang from Tekken 3 (1997) and Nightwolf from *Mortal Kombat 3* (1995). All characters are represented in a stereotypical Native American fashion with little to no background included in the games themselves (Fabius 2014)

Although developers and consumers alike have become increasingly aware of the issues surrounding cultural appropriation in the last few decades, that does not mean that controversies have stopped existing. In early 2018, *Civilization* game series publisher 2K Games received backlash for adding the historical Saskatchewan leader Chief Poundmaker in the game *Civilization VI: Rise and Fall*. *Civilization* is a turn-based strategy video game originally created by the game designer Sid Meier, in which the player takes on the role of a civilization leader and attempts to build an empire of their own. The game features real-life historical leaders, one of which will always represent the player. As the game progresses, the player can choose to advance their civilization by building historical monuments, choose to adopt different diplomacies, wage war between the competing civilizations and take over their land (Civilization.com 2019). Although the characters, monuments, political ideas and inventions are based in real-life, the civilization that the player (or the AI opponent) develops based on their choices remains fictional outside of the simulated space.

The fact that the player can choose to play as a ruthless dictator or a world colonizer ended up being the main topic of controversy with Chief Poundmaker. The real-life Cree nation leader Chief Poundmaker (otherwise known as Pîhtokahanapiwiyin) was known for his work as a peacemaker between the Canadian Government and the indigenous First Nation in the late 19th century. The fact that the

player could choose to take the aggressive route and conquer other civilizations while playing as Poundmaker did not sit well with the native representatives. (Shield 2018.)

Poundmaker Cree Nation Headman Milton Tootoosis states in a CBC Radio interview that he would have hoped the developer had contacted the community and consulted them before including the character in the game: "They should have shared the script. I think we would have been honored to have Poundmaker used in a game like this, but in a culturally appropriate manner, not in this manner." (Tootoosis 2018). The main concern is that the inclusion of the character misrepresents the First Nation values as being anything like those of the colonizers that they were affected by. (Shield 2018.)

PICTURE 19. The real-life Chief Poundmaker and how he appears in the game *Civilization VI: Rise and Fall* (Lamoureux 2018)

3.2.2 Cultural awareness

Does that mean that all cultural inspiration and borrowing is strictly forbidden? In an article published by the Guardian, novelist Hari Kunzru states that if creators were banned from building characters with traits that the artist themselves have not experienced or does not "own", be it cultural, sexual, ethnic or gender specific, then writing fictional works would not be possible. He continues by stating that

good writers should "transgress without transgressing", while claiming that some accusations about cultural appropriation stem from nothing more than the critics' need to retain a normative status. A good writer does, however, do their research and remains humble about the subjects and experiences that are unfamiliar to them. (Kunzru 2016.)

In the same article, author Naomi Alderman says that failure of some level is something you need to come to accept when creating something based on a culture that is not your own. An artist needs to remain humble and accept criticism when appropriate and understand that no matter how much research they do and how hard they try to do things the right way, there are always going to be people who will criticize, or openly refuse to consume their work because it was not written by the minority that is being represented in it. (Alderman 2016.)

Although cultural appropriation is a touchy subject to many and a topic of constant debate overall, it does not mean that one is never allowed to draw inspiration from another culture. When using elements from a foreign culture, especially when those elements are from a minority culture, the designer should acknowledge the appropriated source material and understand it in its original context. (Young 2005, 141) In the case of *Civilization VI: Rise and Fall* and Chief Poundmaker, the problem was not the inclusion of an indigenous character in a video game. The problem was that none of the real-life natives were consulted in the matter, which resulted in presenting the historical figure and the culture in an inappropriate context. (Shield 2018.)

The key to avoiding cultural appropriation is collaboration with the appropriated community. This can be as simple as finding a group of community members on Facebook or other social media platform and ask for assistance. This way the designer can ask the community directly whether the borrowed elements have been used correctly or if something needs to be changed. This does not mean that everyone can be pleased equally, but the designer should aim to show tact and respect when dealing with cultural appropriation and minimize the risk of offending the majority of the culture in question. (Interaction Design Foundation, Appropriation and Design: A Tale of Two Concepts, 2019.)

A good video game example of such collaboration is the 2014 title *Never Alone* (also known as *Kisima Inŋitchuŋa*). *Never Alone* was co-developed and published by an Alaskan based company Upper One Games and E-Line Media in New York, US. The game itself is a simple puzzle-based platformer, where the player switches playing between an Iñupiat girl Nuna and her arctic fox companion. The main goal of the game is to find the cause of the blizzard that is plaguing the girl's village and the story is narrated through the perspective of an elder storyteller.

According to the entertainment media review aggregator Metacritic, the game received mixed reviews (Metacritic, 2014). Yet what really made *Never Alone* stand out was the fact that the game's storyline is based on Native Alaskan stories and myths and was developed in collaboration with an Alaskan non-profit educational organization Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), that wanted to raise awareness of the indigenous culture among a younger audience in the form of a video game. The development process meant constant communication between CITC and the developers and required balancing between the creative, cultural and commercial needs. The game is narrated entirely in Native Alaskan Iñupiaq language (with subtitles in 16 different languages) and includes unlockable "cultural insights", which are mini-documentaries and interviews detailing the culture and traditions of the Native Alaskan people. (Encelewski, 2019.)

Since its release, the game has been featured in over a thousand publications, has been downloaded by players by more than 3,5 million times and has even been featured in museum such as the Smithsonian. The game has also won several awards, including a "Game of the Year" at Games for Change, which is an organization encouraging creators to drive real-life change through video games and technology. (Encelewski, 2019.)

PICTURE 20 The two main characters of *Never Alone*, Nuna and the arctic fox and a screenshot of one of the cultural insights the player can unlock during gameplay and view in the game's menu (Upper One Games; E-Line Media)

In a 2014 interview with National Public Radio (NPR), CITC executive vice president Amy Freeden, when asked if the team had any sense of what kind of a reception the game would have, said "We had a pre-launch celebration in Anchorage, Alaska – – and what we saw was that everyone saw themselves up on the screen, and it wasn't seen as something that was appropriated." She also stated that she hopes video games like *Never Alone* will continue to be developed and culture shared and celebrated. (2014.)

3.3   Sámi in media

In the interview with Red Stage Entertainment's Chairman of the board Marjaana Auranen, when asked why she thought historical and cultural accuracy were so important to character design, she stated that the majority Nordic cultures have long used elements from the Sámi culture to either ridicule or to promote "the mystic north" for their own benefit. Relations of the Sámi and the Nordics have been rocky at best in the past few centuries. After the second world war in Finland, Sámi were considered to be of a lower-class and no public school offered studies in Sámi languages, which meant that children were forced to learn a foreign language in order to get education and those of a Sámi background were prime targets for bullying. This assimilation resulted in many of the Sámi dialects disappearing completely and made people hide aspects of their cultural background because of the fear of being ridiculed. (Lehtola, 2015.)

Although people have gotten more aware of the importance of preserving the culture, it is crucial that we designers, especially those of us that are from a Nordic background, are aware of the history of appropriation, ridicule and assimilation and make sure that every design decision is made carefully (2015). Furthermore, in a 2019 ECRI (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance) report on Finland states the following:

> ECRI notes that pejorative comments and prejudice against Sami can create an atmosphere in which members of the country's indigenous community are inhibited from freely expressing their culture, such as wearing traditional clothing or using their own language, in public places. Reports also confirm that Sami clothing is negatively portrayed in the media. In some cases, Sami feel compelled to hide or deny their ethnic origin in order to avoid being confronted with negative stereotypes (ECRI report on Finland, 2019)

Anyone who has lived in the Nordic countries has probably seen these less-than accurate depictions of Sámi in the media we consume daily, including controversies of people getting dressed in historical clothing without knowing their actual significance or background. Two such examples, seen in PICTURE 21, include the Finnish athlete Tanja Poutiainen, who celebrated the end of her career in a

fake Sámi national costume and Miss World Finalist Carola Miller, who repre-sented Finland while dressed in a similar looking Sámi national costume that was actually bought from a novelty store. (Puoskari, 2014; Aikio, 2015.)

Another controversy started in 2016 when the contemporary art museum Kiasma, located in Helsinki, Finland, added an art video piece by Jenni Hiltunen into their collections. The video, named Grind, depicts women dressed in Sámi national dresses, gáktis, and underwear while dancing in slow motion. Sámi artists Marja Helander and Outi Pieski stated in an article on Helsingin Sanomat that using gákti on the video takes away its original meaning of being a piece of Sámi iden-tity and turns it into a colorful novelty item used to benefit the marketing of the video (Helander & Pieski, 2016). Hiltunen later defended her work stating that the accusation of cultural appropriation has been a misunderstanding and that she never meant to insult anyone. She elaborated that the video was meant to criticize the way the music video industry steals and appropriates ideas and takes them away from their original context. The girl wearing a Sámi costume was just used as an example of such exploitation and was never meant to be the whole point of the video. (Mäntysalo, 2016.)

PICTURE 21. Image compiled by a Sámi artist group Suohpanterror, showing examples of when Sámi costumes have been used wrong. The women wearing novelty store costumes made to resemble Sámi national dresses were seen as highly offensive to the Sámi people (Suohpanterror 2016)

PICTURE 22. Frame from the video Grind by Jenni Hiltunen, that was purchased by Kiasma art museum in 2016 (Hiltunen 2012)

In a 2019 article published in the Finnish national broadcasting company Yle, documentarian Päivi Leino discusses the examples above and brings up other ways Sámi people have been presented in modern media. The article includes an interview with an Inari Sámi Eira Morottaja, who states that she does not believe anyone would wear a gákti just to hurt and offend. She believes that most cases of appropriation, like the examples above, are purely caused by misunderstanding its cultural significance. (Morottaja, 2019.)

Under the same article, Morottaja continues by stating that she personally thinks that the violent negative reaction caused by some of the cases of cultural appropriation are at times a little overstated. At the same time, she empathizes with those who are offended. She says that the negativity towards cultural borrowing is the result of the Sámi feeling like they need to protect the remains of what is culturally theirs, since so much of their culture has been an object of ridicule and conscious erasure in the past. (2019.)

Because of the visible and audible uproar caused by the cases of appropriation, she thinks many Finns may be hesitant to show their curiosity towards the Sámi culture in fear of coming out as insulting. The article theorizes this being one of the reasons why Sámi culture is so unknown to the Nordic majority, although Sámi people are one our closest neighbors and the only indigenous people in northern Europe. (Leino, 2019.)

4 SKÁBMA – POLAR NIGHT

Skábma – Polar Night is a video game under development at a Tampere-based company Red Stage Entertainment. The story is told from the perspective of a young Sámi child named Áilu, who sets off on a journey to restore balance after the world has fallen into an eternal polar night. The game is heavily based on the real-life culture and stories of the indigenous Sámi people, who inhabit the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, also known as Sápmi region.

My tasks in the team include concept art, 3D-modeling, texturing and level design. As I started working on the project, I quickly learned just how little I knew about the Sámi. I thought that searching up pictures of people dressed in Sámi national dresses on Google and using them as reference was perfectly acceptable, which will become clear in one of the early character concept seen in PICTURE 33 on page 56. Additionally, I am going to discuss the specific design aspects that were considered inappropriate, why they were inappropriate and show how the design evolved over the iterative process through feedback and appropriate background information.

The main objective of this chapter is to shed light into the character development process for *Skábma* and discuss the different design limitations that need to be taken into consideration and balanced when creating video game characters based on Sámi culture. For this part of the thesis, I also interviewed Red Stage Entertainment's Chairman of the board (COB) Marjaana Auranen. She oversees the narrative and cultural design decisions in the project.

4.1 Groundwork for Skábma – Polar night

4.1.1 Technical review and tools

Skábma – Polar Night will be developed on Unity, the cross-platform game engine developed by Unity Technologies and is planned to be released on a PC and console platform(s). During the pre-production cycle, a document detailing the project, its scope and department specific workflows was co-written by the team, led by the project manager. The art team is using Adobe Photoshop CC as the

main tool for any sketching and visual illustrating, meaning that character concepts will also be done using said program. For concepting, I am also using a Wacom drawing tablet together with Photoshop CC to guarantee the best possible result and workflow efficiency.

In terms of character development, we are using high poly to low poly workflow to achieve optimized, yet detailed characters for the project. What this means for me as the concept artist, is that I can design a character with a variety of detailed elements, such as patterned clothing, jewelry, trinkets et cetera and not worry too much about those detailed getting lost because of the level of detail is too low. There does come a point when the level of detail presented in the concept would be challenging to recreate for a game character, either in terms of time consumed in the modeling phase or in terms of the unjustified size the character's associated files would take up on the project.

During the concepting phase, the artist should discuss the initial design and its possible technical limitations with the rest of the art team, namely the 3D artists and animators, since they will be the ones working on the character after the design has been set in the concept phase. In this project, the art team is included in on the design discussion as soon as the first few sketches are done. Specific limitations and challenges differ from character to character, but as discussed earlier, the game is not developing for a mobile platform, nor are we aiming for a simple low poly art style that would limit our possibilities in terms of details, we already know we can get quite a lot of detail into the design.

4.2   Cultural and mythological groundwork

When asked about the challenges of creating characters for *Skábma*, Auranen explains that finding reliable information about Sámi culture and its early mythology can be challenging. Although material about certain mythological aspects can be found online, the sources for said information might not be reliable enough to be used as a base for our needs as designers. The Sámi have a cultural history with oral tradition, meaning that the stories have been passed down generations in the form of joiks, traditional Sámi songs or in spoken word. The earliest docu-

mented information about Sámi beliefs and traditions were almost exclusively authored by foreign priests, explorers and travelers, who had limited knowledge of Sámi languages and often held a bias towards the spiritual aspects of the culture. These old documents tend to mirror the traditions of Sámi with those of the authors background and they should be considered reliable only as a foreigner's perspective into the culture. (Auranen, 2019; Beneath Northern Lights, 2015.)

The first book about Sámi, by Sámi was published as late as 1910. The book was written by Johan Turi, who is now considered the first Sámi author as well as a pioneer in Sámi literature. His book, titled Muitalus Sámiid Birra ("An Account of the Sámi") recounts his experiences as a Sámi reindeer herder in the early 20th century and provides insight into the livelihoods, traditions and culture of the Sámi people of that time. The book also features Turi's illustrations depicting everyday scenarios of a reindeer herder, shown in PICTURE 23.
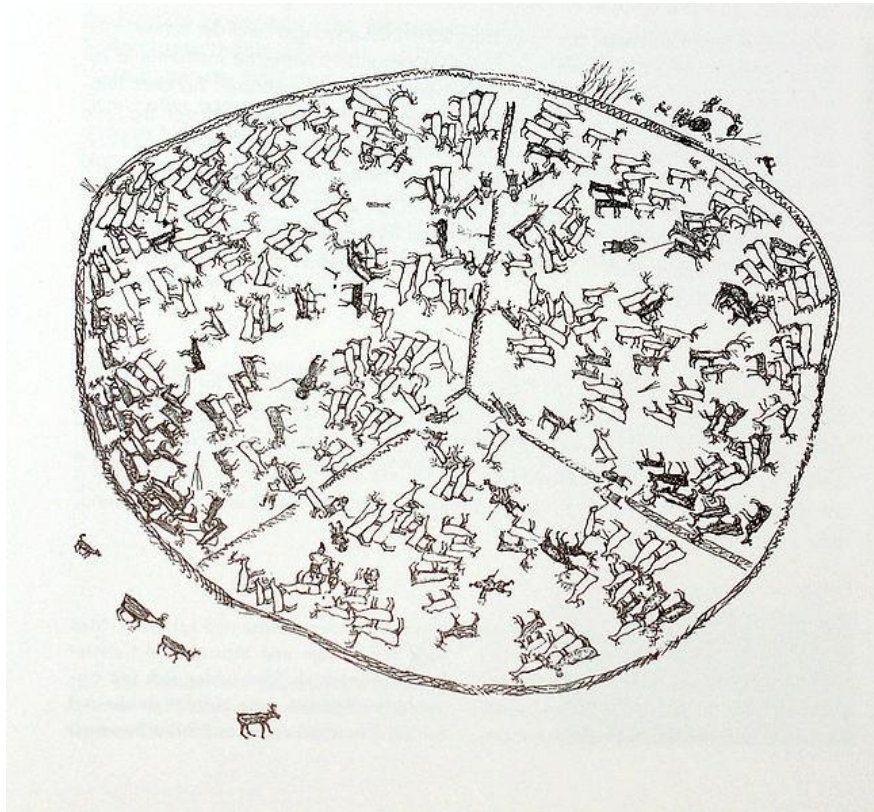
PICTURE 23. One of Turi's illustrations, depicting a herd of reindeer in an enclosure (Wikimedia commons)

What can be concluded is that we cannot use only one singular source when designing characters for our project. We do not want to risk accidentally using a source with false information, neither do we want to appear biased towards a certain region or a family. Instead, we wish to take elements from a variety of sources mentioned above and mix them in a way that still represents the character in a recognizable way to someone who is already familiar with a version of the character in question.

If we cannot confirm the accuracy of a certain design aspect, i.e. symbols, color schemes, et cetera, the art team seeks help from the Sámi community online. Although Auranen usually acts as the cultural expert, we sometimes run our early concepts through other Sámi people we have connections to, including one of the company owners Mikkel Sara from Karasjok, and Hanna Helander, who works for the Sámi archives. According to Auranen, there are plans of involving more Sámi throughout the design process as the project advances. (Auranen, 2019.)

4.3   Visual references

In the early chapters of this thesis, I brought up the importance of visual references, stating that references are used as guides for the artist to get different elements of the character looking accurate and correct. That statements holds very true in the case of *Skábma – Polar Night* as well, since we want to assure that our characters, including their anatomical structures, their clothes and their accessories are portrayed so that the cultural and historical accuracy remains intact. I also mentioned earlier that original depictions of mythological Sámi characters are not easy to come by. What is even more challenging to come by than written descriptions, is illustrations. It quickly became quite clear that the idea of us referencing original visual illustrations of the mythological characters drawn by Sámi people living hundreds of years ago would not be viable, because original art depicting the characters that we wanted to represent either did not exist or it was not available to us.

A good case example of such challenges is perhaps one of the most prevalent Sámi characters, Stállu. Stállu (also known as Staalo, Stalo or Stallo, depending

on the region), is commonly described as a rich, yet kind of a simple-minded man-eating giant. Stállu is commonly depicted either living in a family with other Stállus, or with his wife Lutak. (Pulkkinen, 2014) Stállu being a big, dangerous being is where the similarities between different versions tend to end, though. Depending on the source, Stállu has been described in a variety of ways, ranging from a bear to a half-human, half-demon hybrid to a giant made out clay that has been conjured up by dark magic. A more festive, red robed Christmas Stállu also appears in stories that were originally meant to scare children to behave around the holidays. (Auranen, 2019; Pulkkinen, 2014.)

Since Stállu is such a relevant character in a lot of Sámi stories and myths, we knew we wanted to include him in our video game as an antagonist. This meant we had to come up with a visual design for him, despite all the challenges discussed previously. Before I started drawing the first sketches of the man-eating giant, I made a search on Google Images to see if anything would come up that I could use as a starting point or inspiration. Since we had no way of utilizing any "original" illustrations made by the original Sámi storytellers as references, the art team decided to see if any previously made art of the character could be found online.

To my surprise, there were quite many depictions of Stállu, most illustrated by independent artists. Although the basic elements of the character, like the size and general shape, were similar in nearly all images, the specific design choices varied a lot between the different artist, as shown in PICTURE 24. Most depicted Stállu as a large-framed human male with black hair and Sámi inspired clothing. In many images he is also seen holding a knife, which according to Auranen, is also something that is mentioned in many of the stories featuring Stállu. Some visualized him as less of a human and more like a troll-like monster with torn and tattered clothing.

These images worked as a great starting point, akin to a mood board, since they gave a bit of an insight to all the different angles an artist can have on the character. However, we had no idea what decisions and research these designs were based on, which is why all designs had to be taken as mere inspiration rather than guidelines or references.

PICTURE 24. Different depictions of Stállu found online that show just how differently the character be portrayed. On the other hand, it also showcases connecting elements between each illustration (Myrskyn Sankarit 2013; Fradga 2018; Goranus Oy 2013; Bauer)

On top of the images shown in PICTURE 25, we also used images of real-life historical Sámi clothes as reference for the characters' clothing, including Stállus. One of the major sources used was Nordiska Museet's website, that has collected several historical Sámi items in their visual library. What made this website so valuable, was the historical accuracy aspect. As a museum, we knew the source was reliable and the number of different clothing items helped us build our own library of items that we wanted to use as reference for the characters.
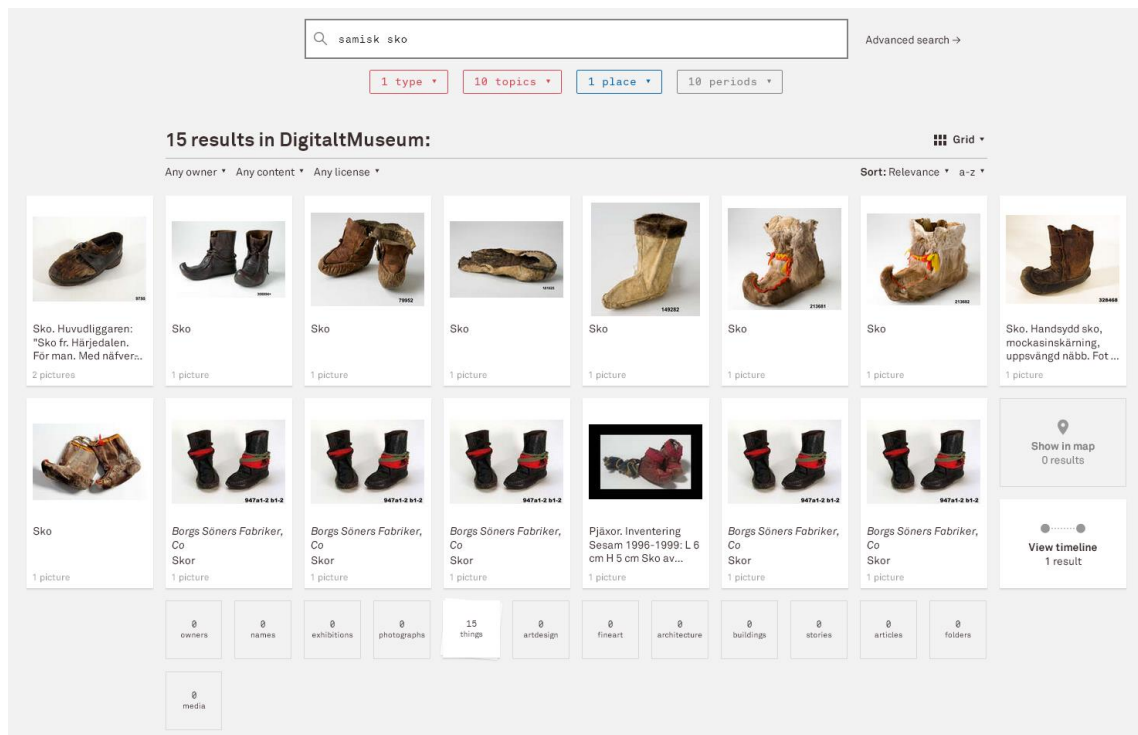
PICTURE 25. Screenshot from Nordiska Museet's website showing multiple different shoes worn by Sámi. Clicking on any of the pictures reveals more information of the shoe in question, such as its materials and sometimes an estimated time of its original usage as a clothing item (Nordiska Museet)

4.4 Visual concepting – Case Stállu

After the initial discussions with the team leaders and research about the character, I started sketching the first visual concepts of our example character Stállu. I use Adobe Photoshop CC and a Wacom drawing tablet as my tools when designing characters and Stállu's character was no exception. For Stállu, I used very little reference pictures in the beginning. After I had read a short summary of the character on an online encylopaedia named Encylopaedia of Saami Culture and discussed the specifics with Auranen, I had a pretty clear image of the character in my head that I could sketch quickly for additional feedback.

For the purposes of our game, we decided Stállu was going to exhibit some of the bear-like qualities described in some of the stories. The design team thought this was a good idea, as the bear-like power and other characteristics could be well implemented for a video game antagonist. Animal-like qualities, such as unusual size, claws, fangs and other elements could be used to communicate the

dangerousness of the character to the player and can also be used as means of attack.

My first sketch of Stállu, seen in PICTURE 26, featured elements that I thought fit Stállu's character description. He was large (although size is not the easiest thing to convey without size comparison) top heavy, bearded, long haired and muscular. I gave him glowing eyes, indicating that he is not exactly human, despite looking a lot like one. I also designed simple clothing, including Sámi inspired pointed shoes and a shirt that held resemblance to a Sámi gákti due to its length and patterns.

PICTURE 26. The first sketch of Stállu, featuring Sámi inspired clothing with character specific tears on it, bear-like claws and an unspecific animal pelt hanging off his shoulders (Red Stage Entertainment Oy 2018)

I made the conscious choice to use muted colors with a few accents throughout the design, as I felt very colourful clothing did not fit the character's description

too well. However, I was careful not to use colors that could be linked to any real-life clothes or patterns worn by actual Sámi people. This is because some specific color patterns (like the well-known blue, red, yellow patterns) are often linked to a certain family or a region. We did not want to directly associate Stállu as being any of them, which is why we chose not to use any. Stállu is often described as someone who likes to show off his riches and expensive items, but I felt that even if he had had very bright clothing to begin with, they probably would have lost their vividness due to Stállu's lifestyle as a giant who lives isolated from the "normal" society. I referenced the shoes from Nordiska Museet's website (PICTURE 22), but I made the overall design of the shoes very simple, since they were not the main object of interest.

I added some rips and tears to the hems and sleeves of his outfit to make it seem like he might have ripped his clothes either by accident, due to his clumsiness, or by having it torn in the many fights he has had with humans and animals alike. Additionally, I gave him a pelt on his shoulders to symbolize the animal-like qualities he has. The idea was that maybe he could throw the pelt over his head and transform into a bear mentioned in the stories.

Although the character fit the general description of Stállu, Auranen, our cultural advisor, thought the design was a little too "Viking"-like and noble to perfectly fit the original description of Stállu. She also felt the animal-like side was not clear enough, despite the pelt hanging off his shoulders and the claw-like fingernails. I was tasked to take the feedback into consideration and iterate on the original concept.

In hindsight, I would have to agree with the feedback; Stállu looks a bit too much like a generic huntsman and the unique design aspects, like the claws, the pelt and the long hair were too subtle to communicate anything "out of the ordinary" to the viewer. The main goal for the second iteration was to really focus on the inhuman and almost feral nature of Stállu and really drive in the unique nature of the character.

As evident in PICTURE 27, I kept the original pelt on the shoulders -idea, but I made the pelt a lot more visible. I wanted to make it look almost as if it was growing out of the character himself. I added the large paws hanging down the sides of the pelt, signalling the fact that this was indeed a bear pelt. As for Stállu himself, I made his stance more rigid and tense and I exaggerated the size of his upper body even more compared to his lower half. His eyes are now wider and more open, and his hair and beard appear less groomed. The bear-like claws and his feet ended up looking very similar to the original design. Just slightly more exaggerated in size.

For variations sake, I created another design that included the bear's head as part of the pelt that worked almost like a hood on a cloak. While talking about the character, we thought tricking the player into mistaking the character for a bear could create an interesting moment in the game, which is why I "hid" Stállu under the hood in this iteration. I felt the bear head also worked as a bit of an off-putting element that signals the unusual nature of the character at first glance.

PICTURE 27. The second iteration of Stállu's character. This time with more overstated proportions, wilder hair, simpler clothing and a clearer pelt design (Red Stage Entertainment Oy 2018)

On the second feedback round, the more animal-like elements were well received within the team. The character looked more unique and we felt the design was heading in the right direction. However, the team considered taking the inhuman side to a slightly different direction. In the current iteration, Stállu seemed almost feral or insane due to his tense stance, wide eyes and the strong grip of his knife. Auranen, among other team members, also mentioned how thin his lower body looked in comparison to everything else. In my effort to exaggerate the proportions of the character to pull attention to his bigger shoulders, I had taken some of the design elements away that made the character look strong and large. I had instead made him look almost feeble and old, which did not fit the character's original description.

The pelt became another topic of conversation, since I was not sure how challenging a pelt would be to animate on a video game character such as this. Although I personally liked how the cloak-like pelt looked on the second iteration, I would have had to leave it out of the next version had the technical or time constraints been too much of a risk. I discussed with the team animators and technical artists and the pelt was determined to be a doable asset for Stállu's character.

Using quick edit tools in Photoshop, I quickly went over the most recent concept and changed the design according to the feedback. I made Stállu's legs significantly bigger and more muscular looking, his head smaller and his stance a little more relaxed. His arms were no longer right next to his torso, nor were his shoulders right up to his ears. Additionally, I made his shirt slightly lighter in color, as I felt the previous design blended in a little bit too well together, making the character harder to read. It also worked thematically, as his clothes have most likely faded and lost their color over time. The changes I made can be seen in the first image on PICTURE 28.

Although the design was getting closer and closer to what everyone felt happy with, we thought the character's hair and beard still looked a little too groomed and short in comparison to his tattered clothing. Stállu is a villainous archetype, and we thought that by giving him a wilder and spikier hair would communicate that better to the viewer. It also fit well into the characters original description

better, which is why I chose to exaggerate those features for the next iteration. Based on this discussion, I sketched the right image in PICTURE 27. This time the character was not standing still but was positioned slightly away from the camera. With this stance I wanted to show how I imagined the character carrying himself. The slightly raised arms and wild hair made him appear less human, which was an element I felt was getting a little lost in the rigid, upright front-facing shots I had sketched thus far. Furthermore, I made his head a lot smaller than before, yet upped the volume of his hair and his beard. This was due to the feedback I had received earlier about his hair looking a little too groomed.

PICTURE 28. The third and fourth iterations of Stállu. The fourth one is in response to feedback from the third one and it is shedding a bit more light to how I imagined Stállu's character holding himself, as opposed to having another rigid shot of the design (Red Stage Entertainment Oy 2018)

There were a lot of elements that the team liked in both the third and the fourth iteration. For the fifth version, we decided to combine elements from both the third and the fourth image. The bear pelt, the body and the general stance would remain close to the third image, and Stállu's head and proportions would be closer to the fourth iteration. Again, to save time, I used quick edit tools in Photoshop so I could simply drag and drop the head on the correct body without other major changes, apart from slight visual clean-up.

I defined the look of the bear pelt a little more and removed the hood of the character, which was thought to be a little too obscuring. The bear head would still be added, but it would hang off the back of the character and would not be shown in a front facing image like the following iteration.

PICTURE 29. The fifth version of Stállu, made by combining the two previous iterations seen on PICTURE 28 (Red Stage Entertainment Oy 2018)

At this point we knew we were close to achieving the right design for the character. Few final changes included changing Stállu's eyes closer to how they appeared in the previous iterations and taming his hair just a little bit. In fact, throughout the design discussion the team was a little worried about the amount of hair on the character. The bear pelt, the long beard and the wild hair might prove challenging to pull off or might be taxing on the real-time rendering resources if done in an unoptimized way. After discussing some possible options for how to create hair like in the concept art, the design was determined to be fitting for our character creation pipeline.

What we needed next was the final, clean turnaround image that I could hand out to our 3d artist. Turnarounds are typically picture collages made by the concept artist and are used by 3d artists as references when modeling a character in a 3d modeling software. These images often have the character standing upright with their arms to the side and the character is most often depicted from three different angles; front, side and back (hence the colloquial term "turnaround"). This way we can make sure the 3d artist does not have to "guess" any of the design elements that might not be directly visible in the usual front facing character concept. In Stállu's case, the bear head that is part of the pelt is a good example of this. It cannot be seen in the final iteration of the character, yet it was still part of the character's design, just hidden behind the back of the character.

One last change came with the final feedback loop with the turnaround image. I had drawn the bear head so that it was facing directly away from the character's back, which created a bit of an awkward shark fin -esque silhouette. I fixed the issue by placing the bear head closer to Stállu's own head, almost like a hood. This got rid of the protrusion in the silhouette and made the bear pelt look a little more "alive" when viewed from the back.

PICTURE 30. The first turnaround with Stállu, featuring the "shark fin" bear head that needed to be edited before handing the collage off to the 3d artist Red Stage Entertainment Oy 2018)

In hindsight, it would have been more efficient to sketch more pictures of Stállu facing away from the camera, so that we could have spotted issues like this earlier in the design.

PICTURE 31. The final rendition of Stállu, both with and without the pelt for modeling purposes. I also included our game's protagonist, Áilu, as size reference to the side of the character (Red Stage Entertainment Oy 2018)

4.4.1 Cultural misunderstandings – Case Askovis

When I started working on the *Skábma* project, I knew very little about the Sámi and their history. I had seen the pictures above and I knew that wearing a gákti as a Finn was considered something of a taboo, but that was about the limit of my knowledge on the cultural issues. One of my very first tasks as a character concept artist was to concept a character named Askovis. In Sámi mythology,

Askovis is a trickster character who often goes toe-to-toe with Stállu. Although Stállu is physically much more threatening, Askovis always ends up winning due to his trickery and quick wits. (Pulkkinen, 2014)

Having read the description of the character, I was immediately reminded of a character in Santa Claus and the Magic Drum[2], a 1996 animated movie that I had watched numerous times growing up. The antagonist of the story, illustrated in PICTURE 32, is a mischievous little shaman man who tricks people by manipulating the world around him using a shaman drum. Growing up I was not aware that the character was meant to represent a Sámi shaman, but I later came to realize that his clothing and accessories, namely the hat, the drum and the bright color scheme were very close to the typical image of a Sámi that us Finns had at the time. Yet I did not think there could be anything controversial about the character or its design, as to me it simply represented something from my childhood.

PICTURE 32. The shaman antagonist in the children's book Santa Claus and the Magic Drum, written by Mauri Kunnas & Tarja Kunnas and published by Otava Publishing Company Ltdin 1995. The book got a movie adaption of the same name a year later in 1996. Since its release, the movie has been broadcast in Finland almost yearly around Christmas (Kunnas 1995)

I started sketching Askovis with this image in mind. I wanted the character to be dressed in similar bright color scheme and I wanted him to wear a hat similar to

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[2] Original movie title: Joulupukki ja Noitarumpu

the movie's antagonist, as this "four winds hat" was one of the clearest symbols of Sámi culture to me at the time. I also made the character seem somewhat short and stocky in his stature; a feature that made him look even more stereotypical in hindsight.

I did not do much research into the other aspects of the character, so the clothing features a lot of details that I just thought "looked cool", like the strings around the neck of the shirt and the obvious stitching on the hem of the shirt and the sleeves. This very first iteration of the character is what can be seen below in PICTURE 33.

PICTURE 33. The first iteration of Askovis. This is also one of the first sketches I drew when I started working on the project (Red Stage Entertainment Oy 2018)

As expected, the image got a lot of feedback from Auranen. I was informed that the bright color schemes and patterns represent different real-life regions and families that we do not want to draw clear reference to through our characters. The stories that these characters are present in are told in many regions, so having the character resemble the color scheme of a certain region is not something we want to do. Askovis' current iteration looked very similar to real-life Skolt Sámi

men's clothing. Traditionally, the shirts for Skolt Sámi men are also blue with red patterned highlights around the collar and the sleeves.

I also learned that national dresses should not be used as direct reference for the character, as they were only worn on special occasions. I quickly learned that simply googling "Sámi dresses" was not going to work for our characters. Around this time, we started gathering more accurate references, like the ones discussed earlier in this thesis.

Before I got around to drawing the second iteration, some time had passed due to other tasks taking priority at the time. Auranen recapped the feedback I had received from the first sketch of Askovis and I decided to draw a few different alternatives of the character with this new knowledge in mind. As seen in PIC-TURE 34, these alternatives do differ from each other a little, but they are all drawn with a clearer cultural framing in mind. The color schemes are more neutral and some of the accessories, while clearly inspired by the culture, have their own unique twist to them. Instead of the character wearing the four-pointed hat I mentioned earlier, they had shapes resembling a crescent moon or reindeer horns on them.

Had the first iteration been the final look of the character, we probably would have received a negative reaction from the part of the audience that is more aware of the cultural background of the Sámi. As Morottaja stated in the article referenced earlier, the design decisions I had made for the first version of Askovis were based on me simply being unaware of the cultural significance of certain design elements. I had no intention to design something provocative just to annoy or offend a group of people. Still, although the early design decisions were not meant to be ill-spirited in any shape or form, I am glad I was corrected as quickly as I was.

PICTURE 34. The second batch of sketches of Askovis. I wanted to avoid cari-caturizing the character like in the first sketch, but instead opting for more neutral elements that were contrasted by our own unique elements, like the hat designs or the unusual color schemes (Red Stage Entertainment Oy 2018)

5 DISCUSSION

Character design for video games is a multi-layered process. Video game development involves not only the concept artist, but also the 3d-artist, programmer, producer and technical artist. In order to create a character that works within the set technical and stylistic limitations of the project, the team needs to be able to communicate with each other and the concept artist must be able to iterate on the design based on the feedback they are given.

Before the actual sketching begins, the artist should start their process with research. Depending on the project and its timeline, the research could simply mean gathering images for reference or mood boards. Getting familiar with the shape languages, colors and other design elements associated with the character's archetype can also help the artist make decisions about the character's visual outlook. Spending some time on researching your character will greatly enhance the quality of the design and make the character more believable.

Sometimes consulting an expert about the topics and themes surrounding the character is needed. This type of research is especially important when the inspiration for a character stems from a real-life culture. Experts, in this case, could mean community members of said culture, who are willing to give a hand evaluating the character and the design decisions the team and the artist have made. Experts can also guide the artists to other credible sources that can be used as reference when fleshing out the characters visual design.
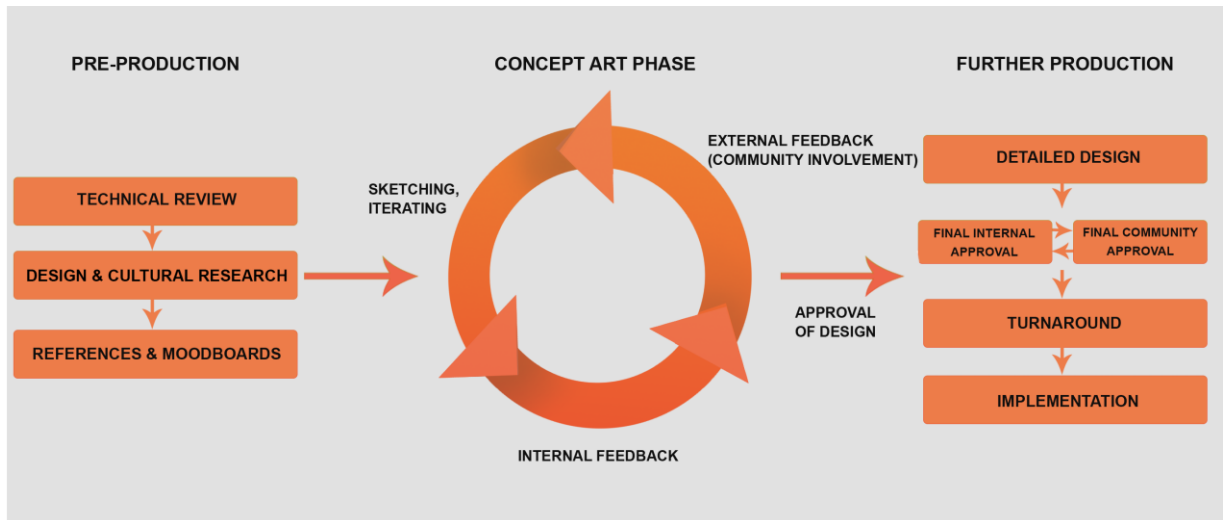
PICTURE 35. A graph outlining the character design process of *Skábma – Polar Night.* Cultural research and community involvement are essential to creating a believable design while staying respectful towards the source material.

Cultural appropriation is a highly touchy subject to many. Yet, when using another culture as inspiration for design, it is crucial for the design team to acknowledge its existence and remain humble about their familiarity towards the source. Although there is not one true answer to completely avoid offending someone, there are certain precautions that can be taken. Communication plays key role when creating a good character design. Not only does the team need to be able to communicate and cooperate amongst one another, outside sources should be included in the iterative design process. The right kind of communication ensures not only the quality, but the accuracy of the design.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview with Marjaana Auranen

Tell a little about yourself. What is your role in the company and what are your relations to the Sámi culture?

Owner, COB & producer. In the project I'm mainly focusing on the narrative design and writing. I'm Saami from my father's side.

What do you think are the most important things to portray for a character based in Sámi mythology and culture?

The Saamis are a minority that has a strong history in assimilation, ridicule, shame and even racism on behalf of majority cultures. Our traditions and handcrafts, including dresses, has been used shamelessly by Nordics in the means of creating exotic images about the mystic north. Knowing the history is number one thing before starting to design a character from the culture that is not familiar to the designer. Designing a Saami character, the most important thing is usually the dress, gákti. There are many unspoken rules considering gákti and one can only know these rules by speaking to those who are skilled in duodji, traditional Saami handcraft. To me it is important to honor the traditional knowledge and community's conceptions about the characters - There are certain characters and their characteristics that are mutual to everyone in Saamiland - but there are also many differences.

Are there things that should be avoided?

Common pitfall is to use stereotypical imagery. There are few common negative stereotype about Saami. We have been portrayed as drunks with black faces, wearing our traditional dresses, hay in our hats and shoes, always traveling across the fjells with reindeer sledge. So the imagery is both incorrect and outdated and it doesn't fit the modern Saami way of living. Also using the modern gákti designs is one thing that can easily go wrong: first one should know the differences womens dress and mens dress, then know the differences between regions, families and their way of using the decorative bands. The dress band patterns are also very unique to each family and shouldn't be copied without permission. It is safer to find and use dress references from earlier than 1900 century or create your own.

We want to avoid these stereotypes and build a positive imaginary about the Saami. Of course we can't totally avoid using the old imagery about Saami, since our game is set in the time when we still lived in lavvus - so it can seem very romantic and exotic to the outsiders. But for us, it is history and hereby part of the culture. Separating what is a stereotype and what is a historical portrayal is definitely needed when making design choices for our game.

Do you think there have been any challenges in developing Sámi characters for video games? What kind?

The dresses and the headwear has been a challenge. There has been multiple occasions when small details have been almost forgotten just because of the hurry. When looking the character one doesn't normally think about if there is right shaped buttons in the belt, certain amount of stripes on the backside of the dress or if the hat looks like it sewn correctly. Also recognising the stereotypes has been sometimes difficult. The

first iterations of concepts usually have been the most stereotypical since it's sometimes hard to put in words what stereotypes to avoid. For our game we decided avoid the modern dress patterns and designed our own dress code for the village, our own rules for the patterns and colours used in dresses.

Finding the accurate information has also been challenge: internet is full of web pages that sell false information about Saami mythology plus the oldest information about Saami beliefs has been written down by outsiders: priests, explorers and travellers. So the old texts has to be put to context first to see if the writer has had any biases or misunderstandings of the culture etc. Finding the old texts has been challenging. Libraries don't necessarily have them and museums haven't necessarily digitalized them. And we are not yet in the position that we could travel to Inari just for a day or two to get to the actual source - so we have to rely on studies made based on the older texts. But that said: I was very lucky to find many of the old books from antiquarian bookshops.

The first book about Saami, written by Saami was published as late as 1910. It was Muittalus Sámiid Birra, by Johan Turi. But it really doesn't give enough information about the older mythology. Also Saami people haven't been one homogeneous nation but a variety of small families with their own versions of the characters and stories. One character or phenomenon could have been described multiple ways depending on the region.

And also there is an expectations of how the Saami game should look and feel like. Based usually in the stereotypes of how indigenous people are expected to express their art and portray their culture. Videogames are still a very new storytelling platform and transforming the old characters and mythology in a form of a game is not a cake walk. We constantly balance between how to preserve the old and still create something new. Every design decision that differs from the tradition has to be well justified. We want to keep as much of the old mythology in game as possible and unite it as part of our core game mechanic.

Has a specific character proved to be more difficult to design in your opinion? If so, why?

To me Stallu has been the most difficult character. It has been described so differently depending on the area. In Kildin Saami mythology Stallu has been both a giant and a bear, Anar Saami believed it was half demon, half man, in other Saami areas Stallu was a giant made out of clay and conjured up by black magic. And then there is also a Christmas Stallu with red robe and all. So making the decision of what kind of Stallu we are going to portray in our game was challenging.

What kind of outside sources we have to determine whether or not a design (or a piece of design) is accurate or good enough to continue developing?

I usually do the first and last "Saami checkup" about the characters. And then double check them with the other Saami I know. We also have one of our owners Mikkel Sara from Karasjok to check the concepts and comment on them. For some of the ideas we have been asking an opinion from Hanna Helander from Saami archives. This portion of the game we are making now, we haven't had yet the need to reach out the official Saami direction since there is not so many characters involved. But in the future, when we are bringing more characters and locations to the gameworld, it is very important to check that our vision unites with the official members of the Saami.

Furthermore, why is accuracy for our characters important? (in your own words)

Accuracy shows the respect for the culture. It is important because changes in small details can change the characters whole gender or marital status. Taking symbols, objects and accessory from a culture that one is not familiar with can go horribly wrong. Doing the proper background check, double check and preferably including the actual members of the culture to the work process could prevent future PR disasters. One can end up insulting the whole nation because of disregarding the homework and not consulting the actual members of the culture in question.

One usually knows not to put a shoe on western characters head. The same should go with other cultures: if you don't know what the accessory is and how it has been used, don't use it. Simple, right?

What research methods do you use?

Literature from old explorers journals to priests notes but also modern studies about Saami beliefs and mythology. I have been reading also fictional literature written by Saami authors. Also asking help from other Saamis in social media has proven to be a good way of getting to know if people are familiar of certain characters and beliefs. And as I mentioned earlier, the internet is full of articles and studies about Saami, but one have to be critical with the source. Not all information is true.