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How female fantasy design can be made more inclusive?

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to investigate both the representation of female characters in fantasy games and offer a proper way to make inclusive and less stereotypical designs. The thesis highlights different sides of the dilemma and explains how inclusive female character designs can unify the gaming community and erase gender role stereotypes between male and female players.

The initial phase of this research emphasises the misrepresentation of female characters in fantasy games which has been present for decades. The author provided examples of inclusive designs from several games; in addition to that, the author implemented some inclusive female character designs to deliver a message to the audience and to the game developers that a game can be successful without the need to objectify female characters in games.

The thesis succeeded in the objective of offering solutions to the issue. However, different aspects could be considered in the future to make games inclusive where a variety of options are available for the players to choose from and feel safely represented.

Keywords: design, concept, representation, fantasy

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

When talking about female characters in RPG games, it is important to point out the inclusivity of those character designs. For that, this thesis is based on the importance of making female character design inclusive. Moreover, the author's work will implement some examples of inclusive female character designs to demonstrate the severity of non-inclusivity as well as the skills needed to create appropriate designs. This demonstration will provide ideas to those who are passionate about female character design and want to make it special where it does not need to be sexually appealing, and anyone can play the game with no exclusive thinking.

The examples that will be given in the thesis are art pieces created by the author. Additionally, reference material featuring completed female game characters will be included to showcase the ethical dimensions in female character design. For instance, creating a female character free from stereotyping, to avoid overly sexualizing and objectifying women, thus showcasing more diverse and respectful representations in gaming. In addition to that, the overall representation of female characters must include diversity, different body types, ethnicities, age, and backgrounds. Additionally, the most important aspect of the ethical dimensions is to avoid exploitation, meaning that character designers could be more careful about the objective for which they are creating the character. For instance, there are plenty of games that use the female body as selling point by ignoring inclusivity. Instead, these companies prioritise their creations for micro-transactions and use those characters to make a profit.

It should be discussed how much time should ideally be invested in character design research and determine what is the most optimal timeframe for designers. In what way does in-depth research affect the character design process and could there be visible impact in creating a successful design? What is considered as the current standards of how a fantasy character design should be created based on audiences' expectations?

Information will be sought out via analysis of other games and observing what are unpreferred methods. The research questions will be answered through production which means an action research method where what has been researched will be implemented into my own project. The last method to be used in the thesis is the case study conducting in-depth analysis of other games and their creative decisions and perception of female characters in fantasy games.

2   LITERATURE THEORY

The sexualisation of female game characters has been around for a long time. The reasoning behind it can be pinpointed to multiple factors. However, according to Morris's article "Why Do We Sexualize Video Game Characters" (2017), it is weird how players drool over fictional female characters. Yet, he still believes that developing those feelings for those game characters is completely harmless. Although Morris's perspective is nonchalant about sexualising female game characters, he still believes that it is somehow inappropriate to look at females as objects in real life as well as in games. Most male players highly adopt this type of perspective. (Morris 2017.) Though, this research will cover the topic from a different point of view which shows the radicalisation of the gaming community that is mostly built on simple-minded male players' opinions.

2.1   Speculation

Sex appeal is a widespread issue in Role Playing Games (RPG) fantasy games due to the popularity of this genre. However, it has been an issue since the beginning of video games where women's roles have been used as a tool to progress instead of a character to develop. As a reference to all that has been said, Bègue, et al. (2017) stated in their research article on early content analysis where it appears that most best-selling games portrayed women as sex objects where most of them were half naked or with exposing outfits. To continue from here, it is clear that it has always been a strategy to use female characters to monetize and market games. In the same article, the authors highlight the major role of repetitive gameplay in shaping the gender stereotyping of women in

games and increased levels of sexism and sexual harassment by male players. (Bègue, et al. (2017.) To conclude, the lack of gender representation has affected and still affects many gamers, old and young, which brings up the importance of making good character design that does not create an issue with misrepresentation of female characters.

2.2   Context of subject Matter

The representation of female characters in fantasy both in games as literature has been rare to non-existent, historically speaking according to McKenna's article (2014) women's representation in fantasy literature has been known to be imbalanced and unequal due to the Victorian worldview back then. The author emphasised the importance of equal representation of males and females in literary works, especially since women held authority and refused to be ruled by men around 19th century and early 20th. Similarly, the representation of fantasy female characters in games is limited to how women were conducting in the Victorian age. Therefore, when you see a female character, she usually represents the weakest side of the story as she would be only complementary to male characters and represented as a sexually appealing object to satisfy the desires of male players.

The author also expressed concern for the young readers who engross themselves in fantasy books as the way that female characters are represented affects their understanding of gender roles and history. Furthermore, the same applies to games which means the inadequate representation of female characters and gender roles can affect how young players perceive those characters and the realistic portrayal of women. McKenna acknowledges some fantasy fiction works where strong female characters are represented such as "Marion Zimmer Bradley's Darkover Books" (1958–1996) and "Melanie Rawn's Dragon Prince series" (1988), female characters in these fantasy narratives took initiative and made their own choices. Games are also a form of entertainment and are not limited to children only since the average players' age is around 35 years, according to Skowronski, Busching et al. (2021) across the United States

and Europe, over 40% of women actively participate in video gaming which puts them in front of a misrepresented women images in a sexualised depiction. This representation only happens when an individual's intentions are fully concentrated on sexual appeal. Moreover, with the lack of representation of female characters in games, they are usually showcased as extremely sexualised. Several top-selling games had barely female characters and most of those are illustrated in sexually revealing clothes if not partially or fully nude, on top of that female characters have unrealistic bodies compared to male characters.

2.3   Inadequate representation

Fantasy games that represent female characters usually lean towards making them sexually appealing and more exposed than male characters. The most popular example of a game that includes this stereotypical representation of female characters is Genshin Impact (2020), most female characters if not all in the game have exposed thighs or chests in addition to the sexually illustrated with objectified bodies. Compared to male characters, female counterpart illustrated as skinny and fully armoured and covered. Another example of the intentional misrepresentation of female characters in fantasy games is World of Warcraft (2004) despite being the most played fantasy game, it was advertised for male players and the implementation of unequal options for garments and armour for female characters since males have plenty of armour pieces that are full body covering while female characters have shorts or skirts that are revealing as well as the top pieces.

These types of exaggerated features contribute to the implementation of unrealistic beauty standards in fantasy games. Furthermore, singleness in female character designs in fantasy games leads to the objectification of these characters which makes them targets for the player's gaze rather than inclusive designs with unique personalities. This raises another issue which is the impact on players, especially the young audience of the games Genshin Impact and World of Warcraft (WoW) (2004) since the exposure to such representation of

female characters in the games causes them to have gender stereotypes and a wrong perception of body image of women. Figure 1 shows some of the most popular female characters in Genshin Impact that illustrate the sexually exposed characters in the game.

Figure 1. Display of Genshin Impact female character design (GameRant 2023)

As we can see in figure 2 and 3 World of Warcraft is the most-played MMORPG fantasy game by Blizzard (1991). Despite that, female characters in the game are exposed with revealing armour pieces such as thigh highs, crop tops and bikini armour.

Figure 2. Display of revealing armour on Alexstrasza (Wowpedia 2023)

Figure 3. Display of revealing attainable armour (Wowpedia 2023)

Fan artists also created fan art for both males and females wearing the same outfit to show the difference between armour pieces that are made for males. Fan artists contributed to the creation of a few WoW female characters wearing the same clothing pieces as male characters to show how unequal and sexualised those characters are when wearing their female outfits. Fan artists approached the matter through their art creations to highlight the inequality and differences in character design for both genders with proof that female characters are made for the sexualised male gaze.

Figure 4. Armour comparison of WoW characters (MMO-Champion 2016)

Moreover, these fan art portrayals of female characters in WoW emphasise the double standards in character design and illustrate the differences in the attire, creating arguments that evolve around female characters being objectified and exposed with revealing clothes while males, on the other side, have fully covered armour.

3   RESEARCH SOLUTIONS

The suggestion to fix the rising issue of female objectification in fantasy games is to broaden one's scope of research and opinions from different individuals by acquiring information. For instance, in the discussion article "How to design gender-inclusive character customisation tools" by Dealessandri (2023), there are many questions to ask oneself while coming up with characters' stories, backgrounds, and designs. These questions help shape the characters' roles and the significance of their preferences and gender identity. However, having multiple sources and opinions would help create more authenticity in a character

design. The goal is to question throughout the process how to create a character that feels well thought out with an actual purpose and personality, and not just a sex object to sell the game. In the article, Osthof (2023) a game designer who was interviewed, mentioned that when producing a game where there is character creation, it is important to bring up ambiguity and give the player the option to choose how to represent their character. Giving players more unique features to choose from feels more included and in the end, it creates more diversity and hopefully less over-sexualisation.

3.1   History of representation

There seems to be a lack of good representation of females in fantasy games since most of them are stereotypically sexist using a side of history that is not accurate to portray women as incompetent or just plot devices. For instance, in WoW, female characters are just as powerful as the male ones, but the game keeps the aspect of mythology and historical accuracy in multiple different ways in the game world. In the game, the main characters made by the player have no limitations and, in the storyline, there are no direct sexist constraints towards female characters. However, in this manner WoW accomplished an inclusive representation of strength in the newer version, even though older pieces of the game still have the old mindset of how female fantasy characters dress. When making characters, these actions must be considered as WoW has done well with the representation of female power. Furthermore, the other aspect that is important is women's personality and versatility in the story.

3.2   Example of adequate representation and development

An example of faithful representation is Aloy from Horizon Zero Dawn (2017) where the character is taking on a role less stereotypically feminine and her outer appearance was not made trying to please the male gaze, hence most male players were unhappy. The most recent debacle concerning Aloy was about her appearance lacking being a supermodel as highlighted by Henley in her article "The Complaints About Aloy's Look Highlight the Hypocrisy Around Realism"

(2021). The author brings up how games are stuck in the past as well as their designs hence most male gamers are expecting the same template. Additionally, they try to argue that they are unhappy because of a lack of realism when in truth, they are seeking a sexualised character in a game, and they are insinuating that they are dictating how women should look in real life. Furthermore, in the game, Aloy has been changed to reflect her surroundings. For instance, Aloy is a ginger character, and her skin shows that by having a sunburn which brings actual realism compared to other female characters such as Lara Croft from Tomb Raider (1996) whose design has always been created as eye candy without physical flaws. Figure 5 shows Lara Croft in different series of the game Tomb Raider. (Henley 2021.)

Figure 5. Display of Lara Croft's appearance from Tomb Raider (Dead Talk News 2023)

Aloy was designed to implement inclusivity and show what average women look like and that comes through with the female gamers being exceptionally happy given the choice of character design that resonates with the female audience. The author brings the article to a close by mentioning that most complaints are created when the character is under-sexualised, and the opposite happens when

it comes to over-sexualised characters. (Henley 2021.) Figure 6 demonstrates
Aloy in her element, which caused an uproar in the gaming community.

Figure 6. Aloy from Horizon Zero Dawn (Wired 2022)

Thus, realism is when a female character is dressed up or looks more relatable to
female gamers given the example of Ellie from The Last of Us (2013) where she
is flat-chested, muscular and with a lack of curves, which makes it unpleasant for
the male audience. Figure 7 illustrates Ellie's features and the difference between
her and Aloy is a decade even though Ellie's appearance was updated in the new
release of The Last of Us Part II (2020) which is shown in figure 7.

Figure 7. Ellie from The Last of Us Part II (The Gamer 2020)

3.3 Integration of inclusivity

While gaming companies ignore the inclusivity part of concepting and settle for stereotypical choices which are highly consumed by majority of male players, it is effectively shown that inclusive games garner a good reputation but face bad criticism from the genre's community. The template traditionally includes male protagonists who are warrior type and eventually, they find a female healer, or they already have such a character in their party from the beginning of the game. However, plenty of other games have specific templates of fantasy games that do not enforce inclusivity or feel the need to please the community since this stereotype is well-known and loved. Luckily, this sort of stereotyping is being modified to a better template that is newer and sparks more interest. Most traditional game makers are sceptical of making a female lead for their game. For instance, the now-popular Horizon Zero Dawn character Aloy was considered a financially unwise decision for the company, as mentioned in Williams' article "How Horizon Zero Dawn Moves Beyond The Strong Female Character" (2020.) the results were thankfully pleasant. The reason most players regard Aloy as a good representation of a female lead is thanks to her power and good judgement skills; and to top it off she dresses in situationally and environmentally suitable

attire as told by Williams, (2020) in addition to her realistic design. Keeping these items in mind, what is always emphasised is creating a dynamic personality and integrating the character into the world. Aside from these main factors, consideration of lifestyle is needed to implement diversity of the character by showing a variety of body types and ethnicities. There must be more consideration for these stereotypical outfits that most fantasy characters are dressed in, and one should avoid the use of plot armour or the power of the character to explain minimal clothing.

4 PRODUCTION

Beginning the production, the first step was to design the three main characters' appearance. The process was simplified by already having a decent description of the characters' personalities, backgrounds, and abilities. Before delving into the designing and the concepting of the characters, there was plenty of research and reference gathering to get the desired aura of the characters. Furthermore, the sketching process included multiple variations of the characters' faces and bodies since the main factor to be considered is resonating with characters by implementing inclusivity. The artist was also tasked to write for the thesis which made it challenging in terms of time for the production process and the research at the same time. Thereafter, completing the sketching enabled the next step which is the silhouette and colour concepting process where the real essence of the character came to life. In this process, it was important to convey the characters' abilities and temperament. The vibe of the game was supposed to be dark and solemn, for the characters to display such a world their colour scheme was supposed to be on the darker side.

4.1 Schedule

The schedule displayed below includes the most important due dates and some indication of how my workflow with the project was to make the deadlines. The artists quality of work was quite high given how much time was available for the game project.

Month	November	December	January	February	March	April	May
To-Do		Concept research	Concept work	Concept finalizing			
		Concept materials	Model sheets	Character scene art			Thesis seminar 06.-08.05.2024
Deadlines	12-Step research plan (WIHI) 24.11.2023	Break	Workshop 22.01.2024	Preliminary work 1/3 (Teams) 24.02.2024	Thesis feedback 2/3 (WIHI) 18.03.2024	Thesis hand in 3/3 (WIHI) 15.04.2024	Thesis essay 10.-17.05.2024

Figure 8. Schedule of the project (2023)

4.2   Arrangement and tools

The planning phase was subsequently finished and allowed the artist to move to the next step which was to create a clean concept turnaround that illustrated the full outfit and gear owned by the characters. In this process, it was vital to reference every material and item to get a realistic feel and look. Prior to this process, the colour schemes were decided, making the colouring process efficient. The artist used the drawing program Clip Studio Paint to create all the assets of the character design and the drawing tablet in use was XP Pen Artist 15.6 Pro. Additionally, the crucial application that was used to gather references was PureRef where most of the ideas were collected.

4.3   Cast introduction and process

The process of creating the characters' silhouettes was fun and good practice to warm up for more detailed and important concept pieces. The main character is an Ice mage who tragically lost her memory in a dungeon expedition where she gained back her senses and some memories on her quest for vengeance. The Second character is a druid healer who stumbled upon the main character early in the game when she was gravely injured. Finally, there is the half-elf assassin character who was caught up in trouble and the aforementioned acquaintances assisted in her dilemma. Figures 10, 11 and 12 display the characters' silhouette and colour concepts for Noyie, Elyean and Ainzur.

Figure 9. Silhouette & colour concept for Noyie (2024)

The main character's colour palette was decided by her abilities which are glacius and frost themed. Additionally, her colour palette is harmonious since it keeps the same hue for the whole character. There was the experimentation of warmer tones for her overall look and the project manager decided on the fourth colour variation; whereafter, the artist started working on the full concept turnaround. Noyie was designed to be a rounded character with a little bit more fullness since her origins are from a colder region, which makes it more likely for her to be chubbier to keep warm. Her silhouette shapes mostly consist of squares and some circles. Furthermore, her body is proportionally leaning toward a bigger stomach and legs while her upper shoulder part is smaller. The character's pose for the silhouette was supposed to be calm and stable showing that she is headstrong, and she trusts her intuition. Noyie uses a mage's book to cast her complex spells making it her most important item to carry around. Her attire is made to keep her warm which is why it was made of thick material, but the outermost layer was made from silk satin.

Figure 10. Silhouette & colour concept for Elyean (2024)

Elyean's colour palette reflects her connection to nature as it all consists of different hues of green. Her main abilities include healing, nature boon and manipulation of nature to assist the allies and herself. Her final colour concept was concluded to be the second variation as it had somewhat of a swampy and deep forest feeling. Elyean is a deer humanoid, while she walks on two legs and has a mostly humanoid body, she has distinct deer features such as horns, ears, snout, hooves, and tail. This makes Elyean's character have a very skinny and stick-like figure, with more detail in her silhouette. Elyan's pose displays her scared nature and readiness to bounce away if danger heads her way as she is nimble on her feet and alerted by anything just like deer in nature. Her character consists of mostly rectangular shapes while her hair, tail-end and staff have a little bit more roundness. Her attire is made of common materials such as cotton and embellished with personal embroidery to show her distinctive nature to heal those in need. Being warm is not an issue for Elyean as she has fur and lives in a rather warm region where the climate changes only slightly throughout the year.

Figure 11. Silhouette & colour concept for Ainzur (2024)

Ainzur's worldview is dark, and it is reflected by her colour palette being in dark purple hues while the only bright part of her design is the distinctive ivory hair. Her abilities are limited to her knowledge of blood magic which she mainly uses to gain speed and swift death on her opponents. Her whole colour hue reflects dusk. However, while there was an exploration of other colours, the results were not as requested; so, the final design colour palette was decided to be the third option. Ainzur's character is angular and triangle-shaped to showcase her dangerous nature; her body shape is muscular yet slim, reflecting her need for training. Her pose is to reflect her determined, quick-witted and ready-to-bounce personality. Her attire is made for easy movement, concealment, and protection where many parts are of leather and others for general coverage and warmth made from cotton. As equipment is her trusted knives that she treasures to keep herself safe, mostly having nothing else to her name other than coins.

4.4   Character turnaround

The more detailed version design took the most time as coming up with the design was challenging due to the artist's wish to achieve an in-between look not directly referencing one image but merging multiple of them to create more of a unique look. Most of the characters' references were easy to find since fantasy design is quite popular; in a sense the process of gathering resources was accessible. The project manager gave a clear description of the characters and their background which made the design process swift and short. The world-building was taking the example of The Witcher (2007) as it is dark and deadly and WoW was the reference for the fantastical side of the world such as abilities, powers and the race system that was implemented in the game. Figures 12, 13 and 14 illustrate cleaned and detailed concept art pieces of Noyie, Elyean and Ainzur.

Figure 12. Character turnaround Noyie (2024)

In this finalised concept art, it is clearer to see the details, especially the facial features and accessories. There was slight inspiration from Yakutia traditional garb as the character herself is made to resemble the people from that region. Noyie is from a tribe where ice mages are most born for that, the Russian region

was appropriate for the reference. The character's attire was made to look more elegant since she was hired by a well-known guild to assist in battles which consequently means that she has plenty of assists to adorn herself. Yet, she decided to keep her attire light and comfortable for the sake of ease of travel. In Noyie's concept art, it can be noticeable how she uses her powers through her mage's compendium.

Figure 13. Character turnaround Elyean (2024)

Elyean's character concept art displays her animalistic features in a clearer design, such as her horns, ears, and nose. The design is taking reference from a WoW race called Taurens. While her design is not completely accurate to a deer as her tail is longer and more cow-like. Her hair is very puffy and almost moss-like as the colour of her hair is supposed to make her more connected to nature as she is a druid. Additionally, the outfit is kept simple while showing her most accessible valuables and needs. For instance, the herbs needed for potion brewing and cures. In this image, it can also be seen that her staff regrows leaves while in her use, the staff's purpose is to make direct attacks while she uses her hands to heal allies in a general area. Furthermore, her abilities use leaves and green streaks of light as visuals to reference she heals with aid from

nature. Her dress is made for accessibility as it makes it easier to run with the slit in the sides while her tabard has a hood for more coverage which also has embellishments for her ailment for aiding adventurers.
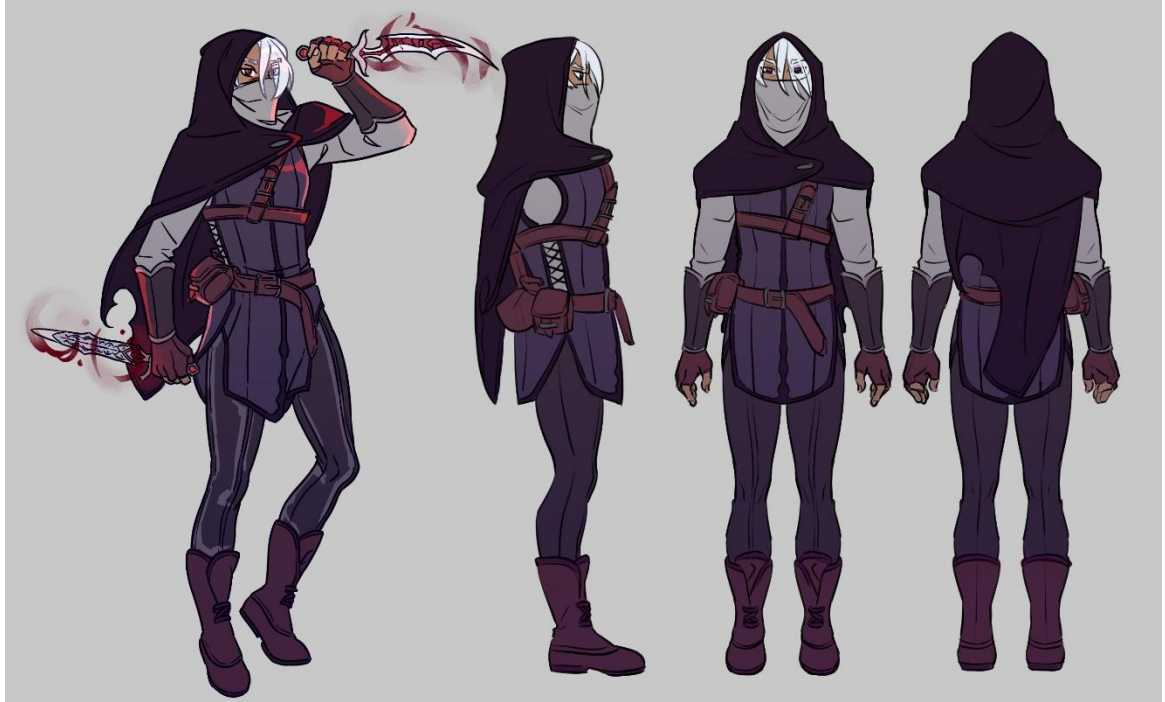

Figure 14. Character turnaround Ainzur (2024)

Ainzur's face is partly covered by a veil as shown in the character concept art. Her lifestyle is of an assassin making her life difficult since covering is always a mandatory action. Coming up with her design was the most challenging out of the trio since her appearance is mostly covered and the artist wished to use leather as her main material. As a result, her outfit was decided to partially loose fabrics while keeping the pants leathery along with the shoes and arm bracers. The design showcases her ability in direct action as she activated it with her blood to enhance her speed. Her design is darker than the other two as she is the character who suffered the most in her lifetime. In her story, she is a half-elf mixed with a hypothetical Albanian human who in their world is a lower-class minority as her mother was taken in by a noble for dreadful purposes.

4.5 Splash art

The last piece of art was supposed to showcase the characters in action and the contrasting differences of individuality. The artist started with making a silhouette illustration of the idealised final art piece to achieve a better grasp on the creation process and composition. The figure below displays the concept of the future splash art.

Figure 15. Splash art silhouette concept (2024)

The creation process included referencing various splash art illustrations from fantasy games and deciding on a definite action pose which fit the theme of the game and the artist's capabilities. The composition and layout were based on popular trio team illustrations that had plenty of flashy magic as an addition to the piece. The silhouette piece has the main character on the centre and the subordinates on the sides in detail while the foreground has a little blurred magic fumes and the background has a little more definition. The focus is to be kept on the character while their abilities are a plus to add more interest; and the colour scheme is based on the previous concept art illustrations of the cast. The illustration is to show the cooperation and intensity of a fight.

At the onset of the production process, the next stage involved mapping out the details of the planned polished illustration. The artist created a sketch which was mainly followed yet changed to better fit the illustration. Subsequently, figure 16 displays the illustration which already had base colours laid out for the characters based on the sketches, thus the illustration was ready for the rendering process.

Figure 16. Splash art pre render version (2024)

The next stage which was the most time consuming was the rendering of the characters. The artist's focus was on creating a harmonious piece which worked well with the characters poses and the subtle environment. Thereafter, the artist focused on rendering the characters and adding elements of interest such as lighting and shining elements for the environment. Figure 17 displays the finished rendered characters and slight changes for the environment. There was discussion of keeping the background elements on the minimum as it would be covered up by other creations later.

Figure 17. Splash art character render version (2024)

After this process in the production, it was crucial to add more elements of interest as well as items to make the illustration cohesive. Furthermore, in this stage the artist focused on adding magic elements, snow particles and snow dust for the viewer's interest. It was crucial to keep the interest on the characters which was successfully achieved through the limited detail in the background and lighting which kept the focus on the trio. The artist capabilities are sufficient for this amount of detail for the finished illustration. However, due to time constraints it was difficult to employ all the wishes of the artist. Figure 18 showcases the finished illustration with all the necessary components.

Figure 18. Splash art finished version (2024)

5   CONCLUSION

Although, there is no definite structure of how long one should invest on character design research, based on this thesis' production, it is stated that one must consider how in depth they must reach to make a character relatable. Thus, an artist would spend from 5 to 20 hours depending on the complexity of the character and the background of the world, especially when one is putting effort into making an inclusive character in their environment.

The creation process is already difficult to begin with, one must contemplate the amount of research and how it affects the design process. Consequently, one in the creative field must make efficient use of their time while also making adequate designs which match with the production managers' opinions. Conducting preliminary research for the design process assists with generating a dynamic; design which is inclusive and easily resonates with the audience.

The standard of fantasy design quite often includes stereotypical moulds, especially for the female characters where visual appeal for the audience is a priority. However, these moulds are remodelled by the modern view since the

growing community of female gamers affects the need for a different perspective of character design. Due to the recent standards of fantasy repetitive character designs, there is demand to bring more creativity and inclusivity instead of leaning towards typical male gamers' fantasies.

The overall production was rushed. However, the main literature research was plentiful and thorough. Despite the challenge the author faced with time constraints for the illustration part of the thesis, all in all the outcome of the whole process was accomplished within the timeframe.

The future of this project is to include more world building, side characters and deep storyline that require additional research and planning. Furthermore, the project entails more illustrations to showcase the characters and personalities in different environments. To summarise, the creation of this fantasy game project would require plenty of thoughts and consideration of the consumer's preferences.

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