

The Wishing Stone

Gina Garavalia's Senior Thesis

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Introduction

Animation is a storytelling medium like no other. Through drawings or computer renderings, it builds a world entirely from scratch. It gives life to the impossible. Yet, as we engage in the story, we forget its irrationality. Animation suspends belief and replaces it with a child-like wonder. It transcends language barriers and communicates meaningful stories that relate to the audience, often regardless of age.

But the finished animation seen on movie screens, televisions, or on the internet represents only a fraction of the work behind its production. I'm interested in animation's infancy – the drawings, paintings, designs, and careful planning involved in bringing the story to life. This side, often unseen by the public, is expansive and beautiful. Concept art, character designs, set designs, prop designs, color keys, and “moment” paintings work together to define the story world, set the mood, and give a definitive sense of the narrative before it is animated. For my IP project I chose to focus on this step in the animation pipeline. By combining artwork and narrative, I visualized a story as an animated television series called *The Wishing Stone*.

Set in a Victorian fantasy world, *The Wishing Stone* follows fourteen-year-old treasure-hunter Wren. Wren's father disappeared while searching for the Wishing Stone, a legendary magical artifact. Now, Wren believes if she finds the Stone, she'll find her missing father as well. The story begins when Wren meets Candle, an eleven-year-old boy with a secret: he is actually a dragon disguised in human form. Wren and Candle team up, searching for both the Stone and Candle's missing memories, outwitting monsters and collecting treasure along the way. *The Wishing Stone* addresses themes of family, friendship, and perseverance in the face of adversity. It features a strong female lead, secondary male lead who defies gender stereotype by his timid nature, and a focus on platonic relationships.

For the purpose of my IP project, I focused on the development of the series' first episode and a few later moments which capture the feeling of the narrative. The final project is presented as an art book containing designs for characters, environments and props; a color script for the pilot; and “moment paintings” which help define the world and its inhabitants.

Contextual Discussion

My inspiration for this project begins with existing animated television series. In recent years, many children’s cartoons have proven themselves capable of engaging an audience outside their intended age group. While still appealing to children, teens and adults have also found enjoyment in these shows’ thoughtful writing, relatable characters, and imaginative art direction.

One such cartoon, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, ran on Nickelodeon from 2005 to 2008. While one long narrative shaped the course of the series’ 61 episodes – Avatar Aang’s quest to master the four elemental powers and save the world from destruction – each episode (or occasional pair of episodes) consists of a self-contained story arc. This format appealed to me because, while the longer narrative sustains an enticing plot and encourages viewers to watch the series in full, there is also room for one-off stories which explore the characters and story world without necessarily requiring an understanding of the preceding episodes. I decided to adopt this as the ideal format for *The Wishing Stone*.

Avatar: The Last Airbender also takes place in an immersive fantasy world filled with alien creatures and people with magical powers (“bending”). Still, this strange world is made relatable through the characters and their dialogue. This atmosphere is something I wish to emulate in *The Wishing Stone* – build a historical fantasy world containing elements which are still recognizable and familiar to modern audiences.

Another influential cartoon is *Gravity Falls*, which aired from 2012 to 2016 on Disney Channel and Disney XD. While the premise of the story is simple – a brother and sister spending the summer in rural Oregon and investigating the paranormal – the show is unique in the way it interacts with its audience. It contains a lot to pick apart and analyze: clues and mysteries, foreshadowing of later events, and cryptograms hidden in background artwork and episode trailers. Each character receives an intricate character arc, and viewers watch them evolve from the series’ beginning to its end. The show contains themes of family and friendship, which I want to explore in *The Wishing Stone*. Also, the art direction in the series consists of bold, high-contrast, saturated colors strategically employed to inform the mood of the story. I admire *Gravity Falls*’ complexity and attention to detail in all its aspects, and I hoped to employ something similar in the *The Wishing Stone*.

Outside of television, children’s literature has influenced the story, characters, and setting of *The Wishing Stone*. Over the past four semesters, I’ve taken classes in the English department relating to children’s literature, creative fiction writing, and fantasy literature as part of my creative writing minor. The texts read in those classes, as well as novels I’ve read on my own time, spawned ideas which have manifest in *The Wishing Stone* regarding the kind of story I’d like to tell.

I’ve long been a fan of the fantasy genre, starting with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* which was a childhood favorite. Talking animals, prominent figures in fantasy novels and folklore, appear often in my work. However, I’ve noticed that much of fantasy literature consists of either immersive fantasy set in a medieval world, or invasive or portal fantasy where charac-

ters from a modern-setting encounter fantasy elements or travel to a medieval world. In order to bring something new to the genre, I'm interested in another kind of fantasy world – immersive and set somewhere between medieval and modern, containing a collection of elements from different historical moments.

In one of my children's literature classes, I came across the poem "The Chimney Sweeper" by William Blake. Published in 1789, "The Chimney Sweeper" is quite sober in nature; it tells of an orphaned chimney sweeper boy and offers social commentary on child labor laws and working conditions of the time. It sparked ideas for an interesting protagonist: a "lovable thief" character who uses their position as a chimney sweeper to play a Robin Hood-type role. While my story eventually moved away from that idea, "The Chimney Sweeper" did play a role in determining the Industrial Revolution's influence in my world's setting. Chimneys themselves remain an architectural aesthetic I find interesting, which I've made a conscious effort to place into my concept art.

Some of these attributes can be found within the steampunk genre. Steampunk is a fictionalization of the Victorian Era, sometimes set in an alternate version of Earth. One such example is the *Leviathan Trilogy* by Scott Westerfeld. This young adult series follows a pair of young protagonists during an alternate history of World War I. While the setting includes real-world countries, fantasy elements such as genetically-engineered animals and human-piloted mechanical walkers make the familiar unfamiliar. The result is a lively, complex world with capacity for adventure and exploration, and I hope to achieve something similar with *The Wishing Stone*. Additionally, *Leviathan* features a bold, brave female protagonist named Deryn, who disguises herself as a boy to enlist in the British airforce. Her determination, intellect, and certain knack for rule-breaking are qualities which I think will appeal to *The Wishing Stone's* intended audience. I thought of Deryn while devising my character Wren.

Deryn is an example of the trickster figure seen often in folklore. Tricksters are small in stature and perceived as weak, either physically or in regards to social standing. However, they overcome stronger, more powerful opponents through wits and trickery. Tricksters such as J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan are prominent in children's literature because children identify with them. The prospect of overcoming a threats often associated with unjust authority (such as Captain Hook or even the abstract prospect of growing up/adulthood) gives them agency. Many of the qualities of the trickster figure emerge in Wren's character; she's small and lacking in physical strength, yet she stands up to monsters (such as the giant ants featured in *The Wishing Stone's* first episode) and authority of the city guards seeking to capture Candle.

The novel *Peter and Wendy* also contains references to birds and flight imagery. Birds are associated with children and appear repeatedly in children's literature and fairy tales such as "Cinderella" ("Aschenputtel") and "Hansel and Gretel". They're often associated with freedom and childhood. References to birds in children's literature informed the naming of Wren.

Methodology

Preliminary Work

I began with three ideas: a fantasy story set in a Victorian world, a lovable-thief child character, and a shape-shifting dragon character. From there, I brainstormed. I doodled, took notes, and worked to transform these ideas into a story. I researched the Industrial Revolution and its technology as well as the Victorian Era and its culture. At the time, I knew I wanted Candle to be a flightless dragon more eastern in appearance and behavior, so I researched dragons in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean folklore to gain a better understanding of what dragons mean to those cultures.

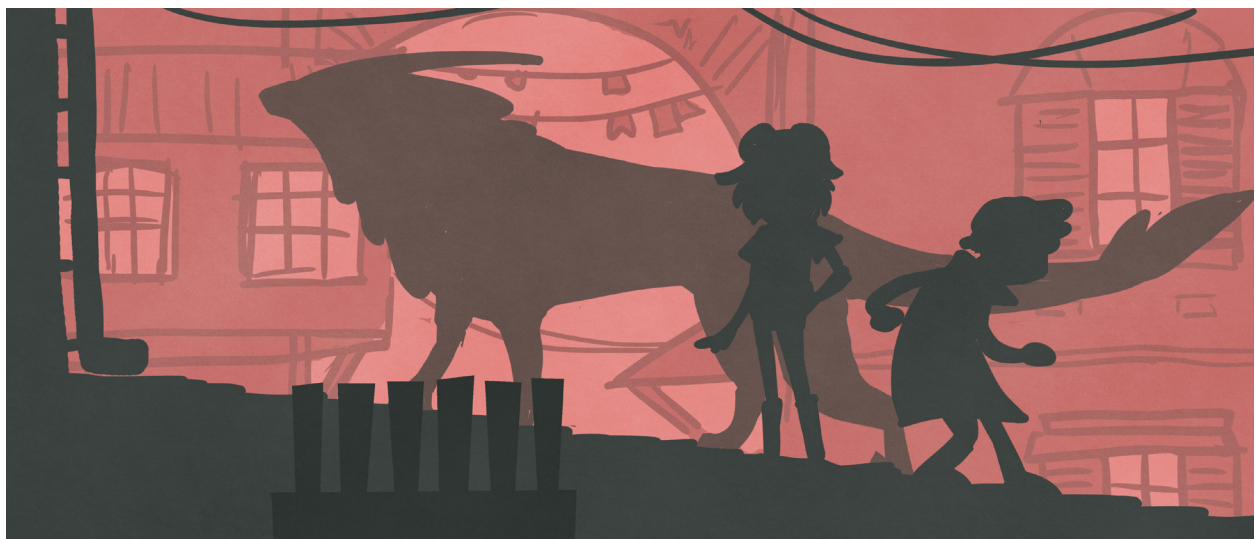
For three months over the summer, I focused on developing the story just enough to provide a launching-off point in time for the Fall semester and the official beginning of my project. I was surprised by the extent my story idea evolved over the summer. I filled half a notebook with scribbled thoughts and ideas. It was my expectation – and desire – that the story would continue to evolve over the course of the year.

Initial Concept Art

After settling into my studio, I first turned to the question which daunts many an artist: where to begin? I had my story, but how to begin visualizing it?

In the end, I decided to dive right in and start experimenting. I began with the city Dalterra, where much of the story takes place. I also developed the Undercity, located in a cave system beneath Dalterra.

I painted small experiments focusing on the look of Dalterra and the Undercity. I left the characters in silhouette and focused on environment and color. I knew the overall feeling I



wanted the Undercity to convey: cluttered, hidden but lively, home to misfits and outcasts and all manner of shady characters – but most of whom have good hearts.

After these experiments, I had a better idea of what reference images might be helpful. I compiled moodboards of reference images. I drew inspiration from places like Edinburgh, Scotland. Edinburgh interests me because of its architecture, which is somehow both old, charming, and other-worldly yet familiar at the same time. I discovered a city called Ronda in Spain, built in the mountains. I was struck by the interesting bridge dividing the city and how it matched many of my initial sketches.

In my moodboards, I also included images from other artists, images of pipes and steam, old photographs of industrialization, chimneys, and old mining towns. These were mostly about aesthetic and finding details to incorporate into my designs. Finally, I looked at Son Doong cave in Vietnam, the largest cave ever discovered. Son Doong is so large that it has a forest growing inside of it. Although, I believe a visit to Mammoth Cave, KY a few years back first sparked my interest in caves.

Looking at the images I collected, I consolidated all my ideas into a single piece of concept art, which guided my understanding of the world moving forward.

Making this brought about new details concerning the Undercity. The river wasn't planned, but it developed as I thought about where these people's water source came from. Regarding the buildings, I asked myself these questions: what do the factories manufacture? Is the clock tower a sort of central landmark of the Undercity?

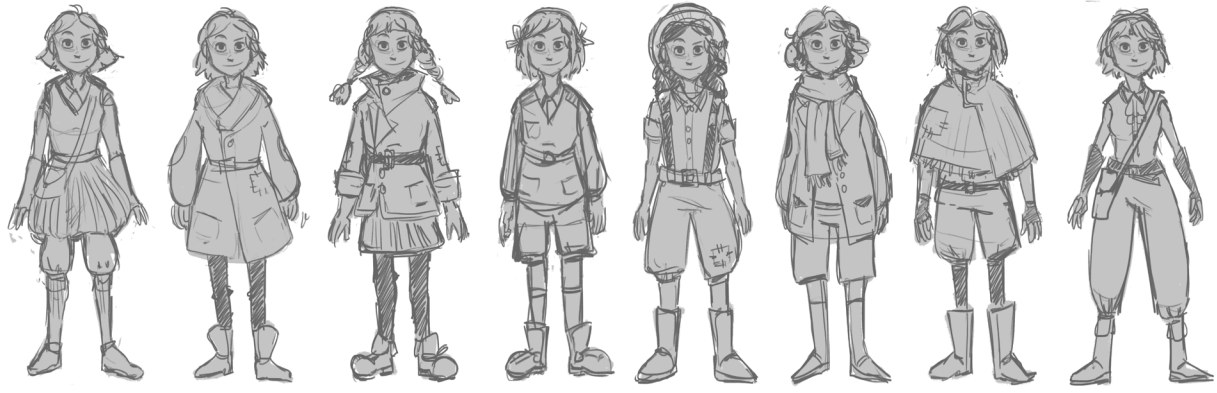
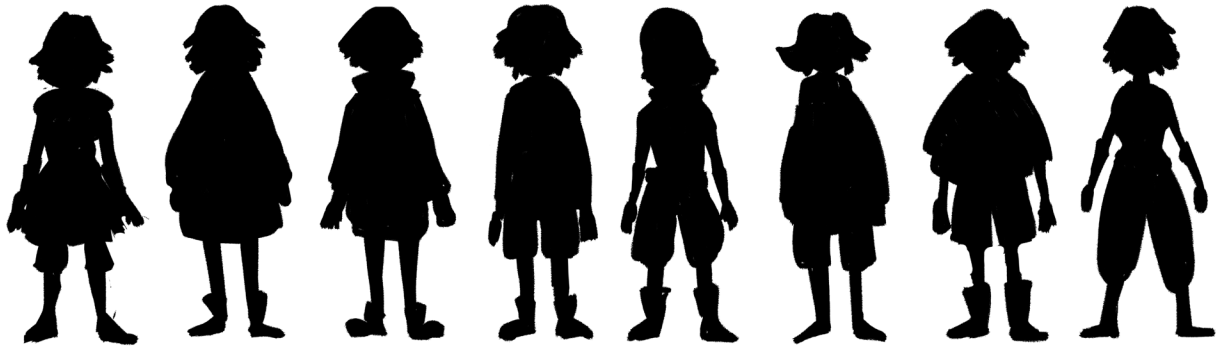


Character Design: Wren

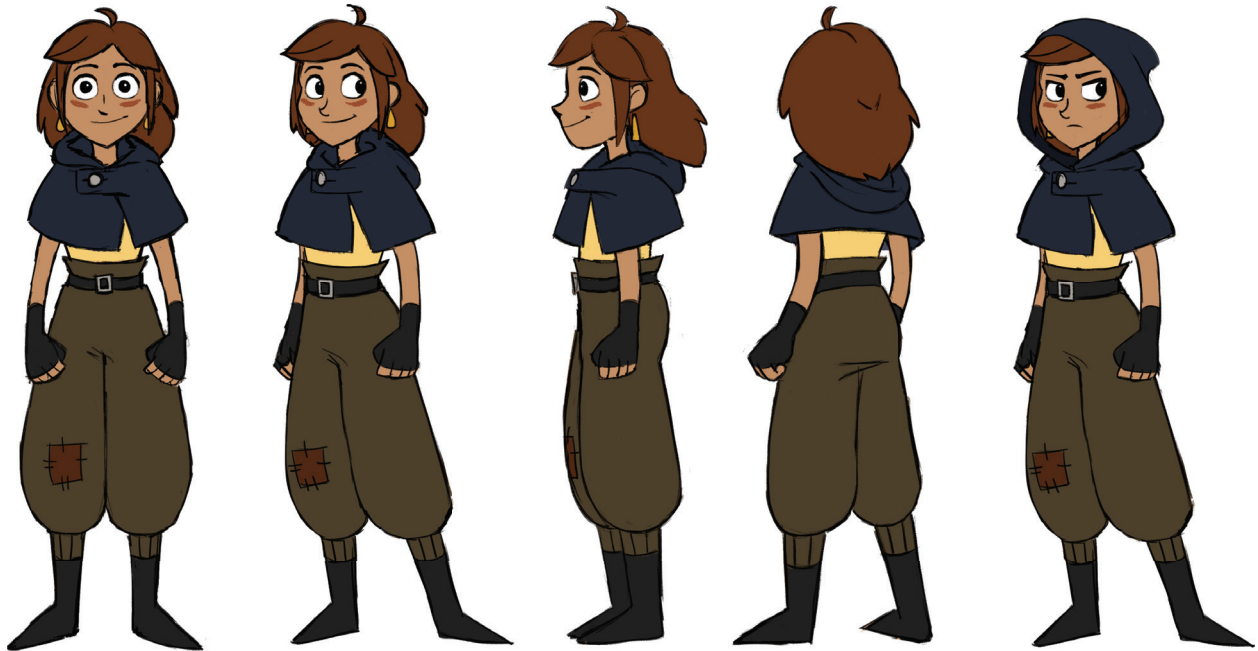
Because this story depended on a number of elements – story, characters, and setting – working together, I didn't want to move too far ahead on one element. Rather, I wanted the elements to inform one another and grow together into finished designs. Therefore, I next moved to character designs for Wren and Candle.

Wren is the 14-year-old protagonist of *The Wishing Stone*. She's a treasure-hunter and adventurer – but also a capable thief. She's brave but reckless at times. She's a trickster figure, sly and agile. Still, she's fiercely protective of those she cares about.

To begin, I researched historical clothing. I wanted to define a dress for this world that resembles that of the late 1800s – but is distinctly different and otherworldly at the same time. I looked at a blend of influences, from historical photos, to renaissance fair costumes and steam-punk fashion, to film stills, to modern-day fashion with Victorian influences.



Next, I started drawing silhouettes in order to define an interesting and definitive shape. I created different design options based on those silhouettes. Some of these options were more successful than others. Some designs simply didn't fit the character I had in mind for Wren. She does a lot of running and jumping, so her outfit needed to allow for that motion.



The above image is Wren's final design. Wren wears her caplet nearly all the time, and she pulls her hood down when she wants to hide or obscure her identity. She has points on her nose and chin, reflecting the trickster aspect of her personality. I gave her longer hair than in the initial sketches in order to more easily tell her apart from Candle. I also added some gold earrings to reflect her feminine side, but at the same time, they appear pirate-like and contribute to her role as a treasure-hunter and adventurer. She has poofy, swashbuckling pants that billow around her when she runs and jumps.

Character Design: Candle

Candle is a dragon, a magical creature with the power to transform into a human. As a human, he looks and behaves like an 11-year-old boy. He's timid, quiet, and easily-frightened. However, he feels more comfortable around Wren. He's thoughtful and thinks through his actions better than Wren, acting as her voice of reason.

I expected Candle's design to pose a particular challenge. I was right; dragons have such a strong set of imagery associated with them already. I wanted to design Candle to look like a dragon – but not. I used rounded shapes, friendlier than pointed ones more often associated with dragons. Even the triangular shape of his face contains rounded corners and allows for emotion to be read clearly.

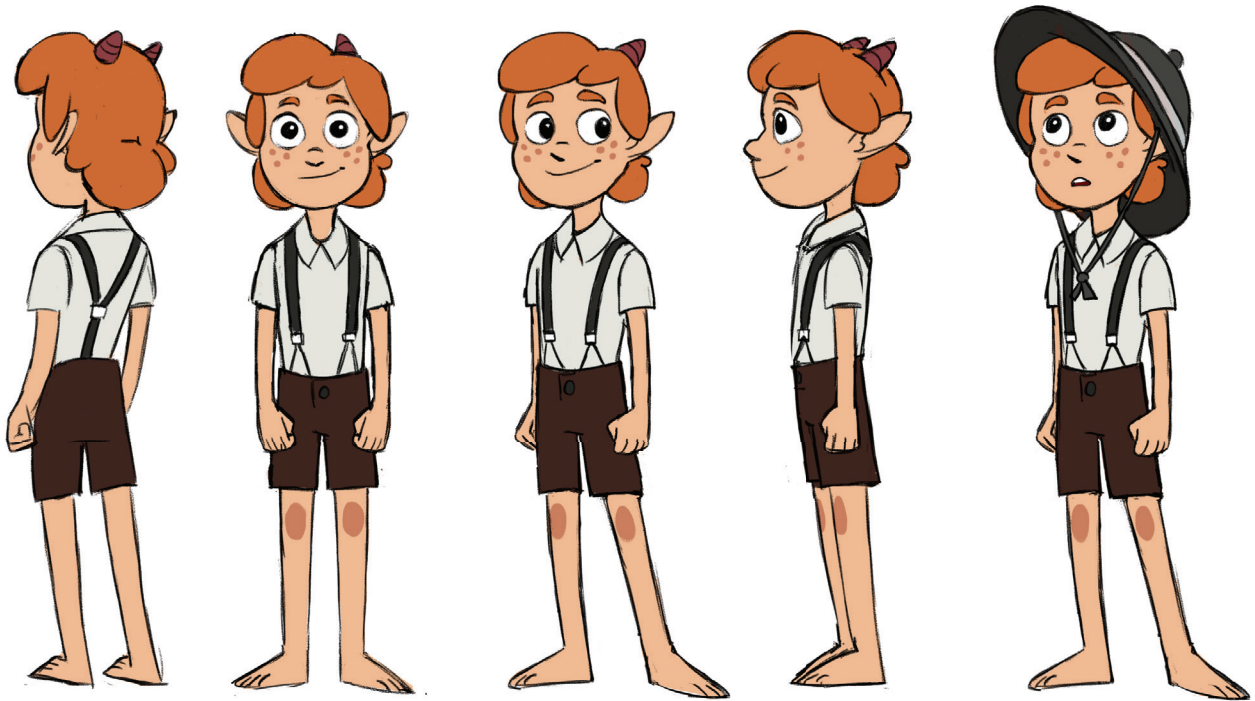
For Candle's human design, I looked at old photographs from the late 1800s, modern steampunk fashion, and costumes for movies set in the Victorian Era. For Candle's dragon design,

I looked at animals with the longer body shape I was interested in. I started with animals in the weasel family, like the white ermine and the pine marten. I also watched videos of these animals to see how they moved. I looked at images of horned animals and this tufted deer, whose ears I was interested in. I didn't want Candle's design to immediately scream "lizard," despite conventional ideas of dragons.

After pages of fruitless sketches, I decided to try a different approach. I focused more on Candle's relationship with Wren. This helped me visualize a form that would interact with Wren the way I imagined. Since his name is Candle, I wanted his design to include warm colors. As I sketched, I was able to better grasp Candle's shape and how I might simplify it. His front legs ended up looking thicker and rounder than I'd initially drawn them. This would allow me to push Candle's dragon proportions a bit more and make him more unconventional. His design ended up unexpectedly feline. While the resemblance was unintentional at first, I decided to continue gather more reference images of lions and cheetahs.



Candle posed a different challenge when I began thinking how his dragon form would translate to a human appearance. I wanted human Candle to be small and unassuming. I tried to emulate Candle's dragon features; his hair is the same color and contains the same rounded shapes as the dragon's mane. He has the same eyebrows, nose shape, and freckles on his cheeks.



As a human, he prefers to walk barefoot. He also has long, dragon-like ears. In one of my initial sketches, I drew him wearing a wide-brimmed hat. I liked the hat, but I wasn't sure of its purpose until multiple people suggested it might hide little dragon horns underneath – an idea that I adopted into Candle's final design. In order to better visualize Candle's transformation from human to dragon forms, I made a series of animations.

Both Wren and Candle required simplification as I decided upon a final art style for *The Wishing Stone*. I designed these characters to be animated, so their shapes needed to be simple and easy to draw repeatedly from different angles, in different poses. They both have large eyes, allowing their expressions to be clearly readable, even from a distance. I decided on a five-headed figure for Wren and a four-headed figure for Candle.

In order to finalize the designs, I drew turn-around sheets for Wren and both Candle's forms. These display what the character looks like from different angles. I also drew both characters in different poses which convey their personalities, as well as poses showing how they interact together.

I also drew up some designs for secondary characters who will play a role later on in the story.

Sets and Props: The Clock Tower

The clock tower has its origins back when I made initial concept art for the Undercity. It was only part of the background, but I thought about it more and decided that behind the clock face would be an intriguing place for Wren to live. This clock differs from traditional clock towers; it conveys not only the time but also information about the weather and stars to those living underground. I researched astronomical clocks, including a famous astronomical clock in

Prague. I researched clocks and how they work, and I collected images that fit my ideas.

I decided to focus on the clock tower's interior first – specifically Wren's room, in which she'd be spending a fair amount of time. I started with just some general concept drawings and ideas regarding the colors of the room. I wanted the room to come across as warm, welcoming, and lived-in. I'd like it to be characteristic of this fantasy setting – but also distinctly familiar. To better visualize the room, I built a 3D model in Sketchup, a 3D modeling program used by architects, comic artists, and set designers.

Wren's room lies behind the clock face. Maps and charts cover the walls, and shelves are laden with objects Wren has collected. None of the furniture matches, for most was scavenged by Wren or acquired from second-hand shops.



Sets and Props: The Armchair

One of many props in Wren's room is the armchair. The armchair, for some reason, has been a staple of my conception of this world. This ties back to my desire to create a relatable world. My hope was if I can create a fantasy setting where an armchair is normal, the world will feel familiar enough.

After looking at images of different kinds of armchairs, I created nine armchair concepts. The chairs were meant to be kind of beat up, used, lived-in, a piece of second-hand furniture Wren probably nicked from somewhere. Upon soliciting feedback, I realized everyone has different connotations associated with different chairs based on their own experiences. Wren's chair needed to reflect her own personality and experiences.

In the end, I combined my favorite elements from all the designs into a single, final design. Wren's armchair has seen better days. It's worn, beat-up, and losing its stuffing in places – but Wren loves it. Its cushions are comfy and embracing. She loves to lay sideways and drape her legs over the armrests. She falls asleep in it often.



Sets and Props: Wren's Belongings

I collected images of attics and thrift shops for inspiration for Wren's room. I brainstormed a list of items a 14-year-old treasure-hunter might have in her room: from items she discovered on her own to a few treasures once belonging to her father.

Through the objects in Wren's room, I hoped to reveal bits about her character and more about her relationship with her missing father. The objects also carry imagery associated with birds and flight, a callback to Wren and the themes I discussed before. Transformation is also a theme I hope to explore further, which relates back to Candle. In the case of Wren's room, the armchair's clawed feet reflect this theme.

Story

While I designed *The Wishing Stone* to encompass a longer narrative arc, each episode also needs to include a self-contained story. This format reminds me of chapters of a novel – a format I'm familiar with due to my creative writing background. For the sake of my IP project, I decided to focus my energy on the development of episode one. Episode one is crucial, for it needs to introduce the characters, reveal the setting and tone of the series, and set up a longer narrative arc by leaving some unanswered questions to build tension.

One question I had: through whose eyes do we experience this story, or at least this first episode? Of course we'll be free to hop around to different characters' point of view. That's one of the advantages of this medium: we're not confined a first-person or close-third-person point of view as with some books. But even so, we have to begin with one character and follow them into

the world. This is why I was concerned about beginning with Candle; I would like Wren to be the main lead in this story, with Candle as a secondary lead. So would beginning with Candle's escape, and learning right away that he's a dragon, undermine Wren's importance?

In the end, I decided to tell Wren's story through Candle's eyes, at least at the beginning. Candle is timid, and because he's lost his memory, he knows as little about the world as we do. We can learn about the world through him. And Wren is the cool-older-sister figure whom we want to learn more about. I decided to reveal Candle's nature as a dragon right away, but I hold off on revealing everything about Wren. I keep some of Wren's backstory and motivation a mystery, which Candle tries to work out – and through him, the audience too.

To start planning episode one, I started with a series of "beat boards" – black and white sketches illustrating each important moment in the story. This helped me plan out the narrative from start to finish and visualize some key moments. Revisions were made after receiving feedback regarding the point-of-view conundrum mentioned previously. Having the beat boards be loose, quick, and easy to replace made story revisions simpler.

In regards to story, I made a few changes to the process a real animated show would follow. I didn't write a script for the episode. I stopped at the outlining stage. I did this for a few reasons, namely time. I didn't feel I had enough time to fully flesh out a script to the best of my ability. I instead decided dedicate my time to the visuals, which is the main focus of my project.

I did, however, decide to storyboard a short segment of the episode. I chose scene two, in which Wren and Candle meet. I added camera motions and movement to the boards, added sound effects and voices. (Video is online: <https://vimeo.com/155178433>)

Colors

Lighting and color are important aspects of my work. In order to explore Wren and Candle visiting different environments, I made some color studies such as this one. These serve multiple purposes: they show examples of different landscapes the characters might encounter, exemplify how color and lighting affect the mood of the scene, and serve as experiments in different artistic styles.



Using the episode one beat boards I developed earlier, I chose twenty key moments and made a color script. A color script is a series of paintings meant to show the shifts in color as the story progresses, highlighting the ways color contributes to the story.



Creative Work

I presented my final project in the form of an art book. The book is divided into four sections: characters, setting, story, and process.



The “characters” section contains information about Wren and Candle, their personalities, and the way they interact with each other. The “setting” section describes Dalterra and the Undercity, Wren’s home, some key props, the wider world, and information about magic. The “story” section contains a walk-through of episode one’s plot as well as ideas regarding additional episodes. Finally, the “process” section contains documentation of my influences, early sketches, and the thought process involved in creating the final product. I believe this section is very important, as it provides a glimpse into my thought process behind the creation of various narrative elements.

I decided a book would be the best way to present my body of work. In a small physical area, I could display a large collection of art related to *The Wishing Stone*. Rather than just leaving readers alone to interpret the work, I would be able to guide them through, explaining important aspects of the story. The order of the sections, as well as the introduction, are designed to explain story elements one step at a time, starting with the characters, moving to the world and the characters’ interactions with it, and ending with how those elements function within a larger narrative.

I originally intended the book to function as a pitch bible – a book one would present to studio executives in order to pitch a TV show idea. However, I considered that this book would

be seen in a gallery setting for the senior show and read by people unfamiliar with animated TV shows. Instead, I decided the book would serve as documentation of my project and the progress I made over the year.

In total, the book is 104 pages long. It contains over 300 images and over 6000 words. It is hardcover, and I used a website called Blurb.com to print it. The graphic design of the book was carefully considered, and all the text was workshopped and proofread.

For the senior show, I printed eight images that I thought best represented the project. I had them dry mounted on foam core and installed in the gallery. The book sat on a v-shaped shelf fixed to the wall in the middle. This arrangement was designed to draw viewers in through the wall images and invite them to flip through the book.







Conclusion

Following the senior show opening, I received a lot of questions along the lines of: “Why I didn’t see your work at the Michigan Theater showing?” and “Will this be animated?” The truth is, I feel I made a good choice not attempting an animation. Animation is very time-consuming and easily would have demanded an entire year’s worth of time. This project allowed me to explore the characters, setting, and story to the best of my ability.

That being said, while IP may be over, *The Wishing Stone* isn’t. I’ve come to realize that the scope of this project exceeds the scope of IP. This year, I’ve built a foundation for future stories involving Wren and Candle. I hope to expand the story further, work out still-lingering plot holes, and complete a longer narrative arc.

I am still deciding which form would suit this project in the long run. While I could keep it as simply a visual development project, I could also make a webseries with moving storyboards (more feasible than full animation but still time-based). Or perhaps I could develop a webcomic, which would allow me to work with color and employ my love for illustration.

Either way, I intend to continue. Over the course of the year, I’ve been fortunate enough to develop somewhat of an online following for *The Wishing Stone*. Knowing I have an audience interested in the content I publish has been a huge motivation for me, and I know it will continue to be.

Consider this project as only the beginning of a longer journey I hope to embark on.