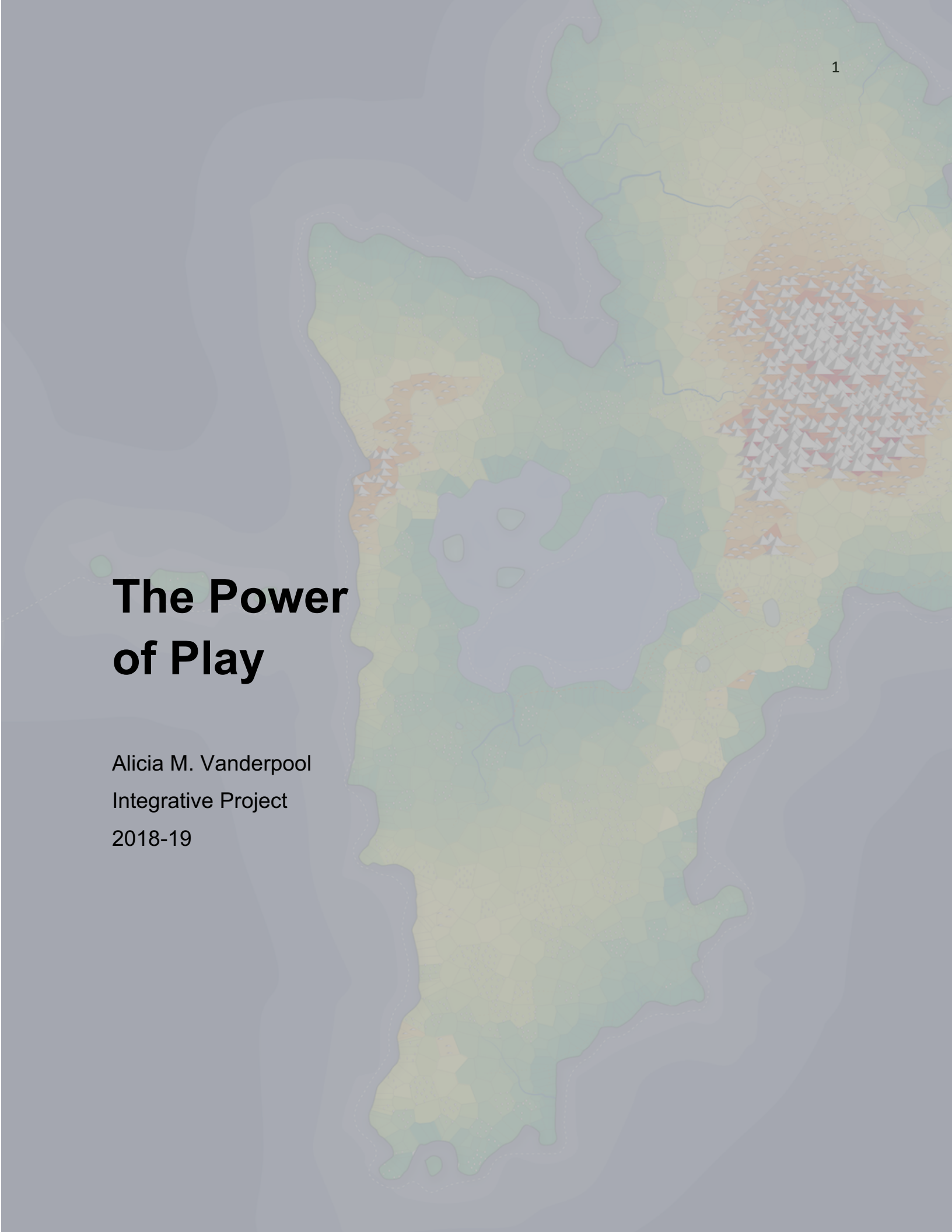


The Power of Play

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Introduction

I remember running up the stairs to my room at night, locking the door behind me, and emptying the contents of my toybox on the floor in front of my bed. I would dig through the pile, throwing the unwanted figures beside me, until I found my favorite character—the pretty blonde who lived a happy and healthy life full of the love and admiration of her friends and family—then holding her close to my heart before I began my descent down into her world. It wasn't that my family and friends didn't love me, it was more that none of them seemed to have the time or patience for me. I'll admit that I was a little more than a handful at the age of eight, but that was only because my tiny mind didn't know how to process all of the emotions that were swarming through it at the time. I was anxious, especially as a child, and hearing my mother laugh in my face whenever I would tell her I was feeling stressed put a toll on me. I felt alone and full of fear, something which I decided to keep to myself, locked behind my bedroom door with myself and my box of toys. At least when I descended into her world and into her shoes, I could feel the comfort of normality for a short while. I allowed myself to become her and with that, I allowed myself an escape from the crumbling family situation awaiting me on the other side of my bedroom door.

My toybox was my sanctuary and a place I could completely be myself—anxiety and all. At a certain point, it became routine for me to lock myself behind my bedroom door whenever I was feeling upset just so I could feel the comfort of my giant stuffed rhino Rocky's arms around me. Whether I wanted to venture down into my favorite Barbie doll's life and pretend that the world around me was as perfect as hers was or threw myself into the shoes of a misunderstood villainous action figure to live out the negative relationship between my family and I, I was always able to find a way to vent my frustrations through the therapeutic comforts of play. My

world was so full of negativity and it was nice to be able to pull away from that—even for just a moment’s time—and just enjoy being me.

Whenever I stepped foot outside of my room it felt like a mask was being put around me as I continued to hide my growing anxiety and negative emotions from my family for fear they would laugh at the very idea that someone so young could be going through so much pain. Both of my parents lived their own lives of stress, working day and night to keep a family of five alive and well on our borderline poverty income. My dad worked odd jobs, often getting his cashflow through mysterious manners that I’ve only now as a 21-year-old come to realize, while my mother worked hard for minimum wage at the local McDonalds down the street. They both did a lot for both of my brothers and I, always making sure we had food to eat and toys to play with, but neither of them ever really seemed to realize how badly we were all starving for their connection. And where my brothers found solace in each other’s lives, I always seemed to find myself left out and on my own. It put a lot of weight on my young mind, leading me to believe more often than not that I just wasn’t worth it. I didn’t have any friends at school or in the neighborhood around me, and I didn’t seem to have any waiting for me back at home either. At least, not outside of the grey tote bins sitting behind my bedroom door.

The ability children have to lose themselves to the life and world of the toys that surround them, as well as the ability toys have to bring children to a place of therapeutic comfort are the two leading factors that lead me to the creation of my thesis. *The Power of Play* is an autobiographical project created with the overarching goal of reaching out to children ages eight to ten and helping them cope with their negative emotions through the process of self-reflection

and play, as they struggle through tough situations like growing up in a broken home without an adult or parental figure to look up to for help. Through the process of self-reflection and digital fabrication, I hope to create a line of toys that encompasses all of the comforting qualities I found in my own personal collection growing up—and still find in the figures I surround myself with today—while also serving as a point of critical self-reflection on my end. *Toys that Make Me* will present a series of struggles I have faced in the past and showcase how I was able to manage personal trauma through escapism and play. These personal accounts will be contrasted with different play therapy papers and studies that explore more deeply how different toys can be used as tools for child development, marrying personal and scientific research and aiding in the creation of a singular therapeutic toy-line.

Contextual Background

Psychology of Play

Terry Kottman spoke in his book about the historical evolution of play therapy and how its structure has changed over time. What began as a very loose method of therapy, observing children play in the early 1900's, soon evolved into a well-developed practice with several different branches to explore. When most people think of play therapy, structured play therapy is what often comes to mind. This particular branch of play therapy explores a therapist's relationship with a child and their following of specific instructions, playing out different scenarios with toys placed in front of them. When relating play therapy back to my own experiences, however, I often think of how nondirective play therapy: the more child-centered approach to play.

Looking back on my experiences with self-directed play therapy—something I did as a personal outlet without the help of a therapist—I find it interesting to learn just how powerful nondirective play can be for children struggling to find their self-worth, especially since this particular therapeutic approach is one of the least practiced according to studies published in *Play Therapy with Adolescents*. Because this method of therapy uses the child’s imagination as the main building blocks for the session, experiences within it all stem from the child’s past personal experiences with both positive and negative emotions. These experiences manifest in a dreamlike state for the child as they place life onto the objects around them, just as I would place my negative experiences with my family onto my own toys as a child.

Growing up longing for my family’s attention, I struggled finding peace within myself and truly feeling a sense of belonging. I was constantly stressed and anxious, feeling as though I had no one to look up to or love—something author Virginia M. Axline found to be fairly commonplace in children in similar broken home situations to my own. Axline goes on to explain that more than anything, children want to feel belonged and worthwhile—something that both I and the children in her book sorely lacked growing up. Without proper attention, children go on to find their self-worth through withdrawal, escaping to a world of dreams much like the world I would often escape to behind my locked bedroom door. And just as I found comfort in the toys that I surrounded myself with, Axline found that children who went through various sessions of play therapy “acquired the necessary feeling of personal worth, a feeling that they were capable of self-direction, a growing awareness that they had within themselves the ability to stand on their own two feet, to accept themselves.”¹ Play allows children to be everything they want to be and experience everything they want to experience. When you engage in play, you’re accepted completely.

Aesthetics of Play

Outside of psychological, hard research, I also spent quite a bit of time researching existing toy-lines that I wanted my final product to fall into place with on a store shelf. Even though the end product of this project is intended to be completely personal, I still wanted to create a finished product that could be seen next to existing toys in the marketplace. This in turn lead me to design my final pieces around the aesthetics of toys such as Barbies, Nendoroids, and Funko Pop figures—all toys that I either used to keep in my toybox or am currently keeping on my shelf at home.



Aspects of all three types of figures were used to create my final two figures, Mettal being based off of Barbie and Sabohr being based off of different design aspects seen in both Nendoroids and Funko Pops. I wanted to use the more realistic, almost too perfect look of the Barbie doll to help highlight Mettal's design and how I would use figures similar to her when I was growing up to escape the imperfections of my own life at the time. The more exaggerated, cutesy figures were used as inspiration for Sabohr's final design and helped convey my longing for attention, making the viewer feel empathetic for how down and out the figure seemed to be.

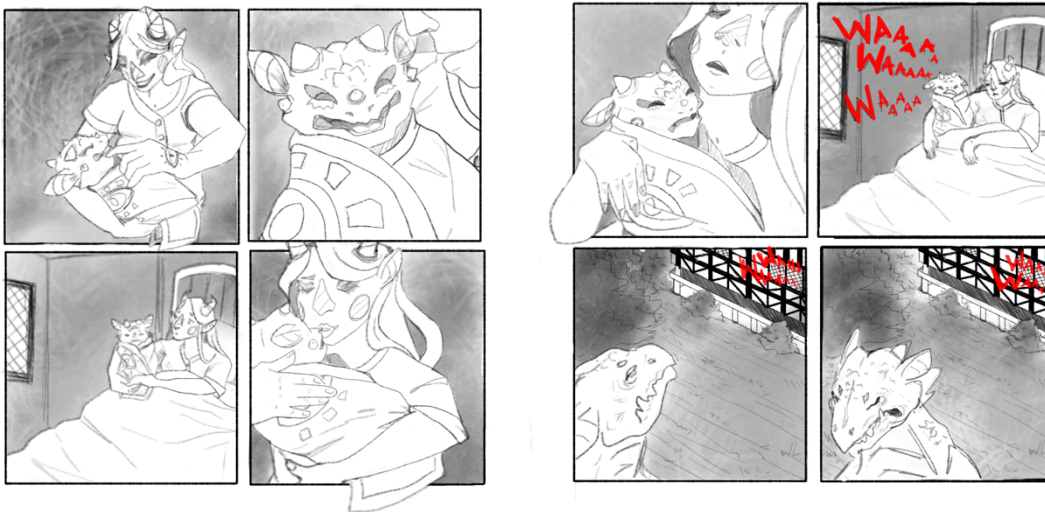
Methodology

Where the overall project methodology followed a fairly linear timeline from character design, to 3D models and fabrication, and eventually to story development, *The Power of Play* has made an incredibly long journey from its original concept to reality. Sprouting out from my initial love for adventure games and fantasy worlds, I drafted my first sketch for the project which through several critiques, edits, and heart changes evolved into the self-reflective toy-line that it is now. From *Dungeon Diving* to *Heart of Fire* and finally resting on *The Power of Play*, this is how I got here.



Dungeon Diving

The initial concept for *The Power of Play* was known instead by the name *Dungeon Diving* and was meant to be a comic-based toy-line for college-aged adults around 17-21 years old. I wanted to focus on creating my own unique line of figurines akin to something one would see sitting next to products sold by Funko, Wizards of the Coast, Good-smile, and the like. Sorely lacking in originality and personal style, this concept eventually twisted itself into a more autobiographical realm centered around my own interest in toys and their incredible importance to me growing up. Drawing from personal experiences of going through different hardships like growing up in a broken home, I developed my first story draft for *Heart of Fire*: a comic centered around the life of a young dragonborn child growing up alone in the world.



Heart of Fire

Heart of Fire was meant to take my personal struggles with different hardships I grew up facing as a child and put them into a cartoon, child-like perspective for younger audiences to

connect with and understand. I developed an entire project around the characters involved in the story from sketch, to model, and eventually to full on digital fabrication and production.



I wanted to use the little dragonborn boy Dart as my voice and connect with other children suffering through similar situations to my own. Unfortunately, I ended up spreading myself thin trying to create something that connected with both my younger self and the children around me today that I lost sight of what my project was supposed to be.

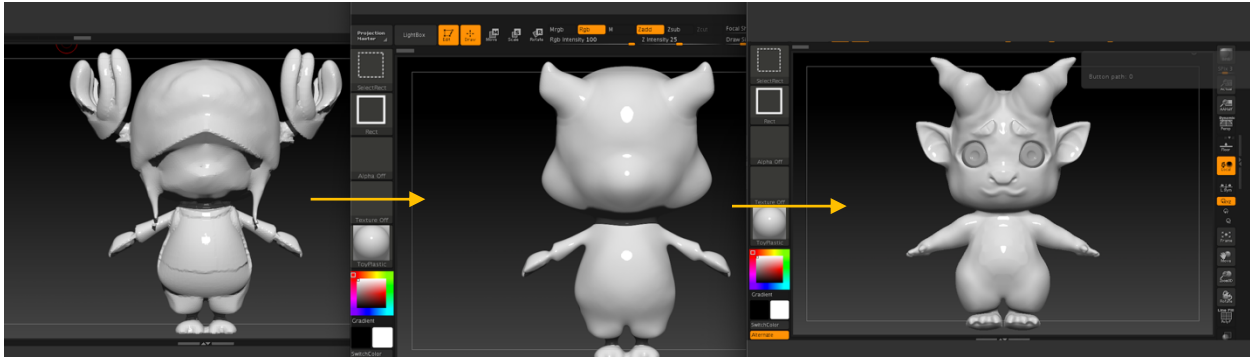
The Power of Play

After the collapse of *Heart of Fire*, I forced myself to take a step back from my project and think about how I wanted to approach the subject matter from that point forward. Meaningful talks with various professors and visiting artists lead me to the ultimate realization that I needed to create a project for me. I was so caught up on how I could market my toy-line to other children or how my story could connect with others that I lost what the project ultimately meant to me on a personal level. This realization led me to the creation of my final iteration, *The Power of Play*: a digitally fabricated toy-line created to reflect upon the ability toys have to bring children to a place of therapeutic comfort and how I was personally able to, as a child, loose

myself to the world of the toys around me. The ultimate goal of the project was to create the ideal line of toys for my eight-year-old self—one that drew upon the physical features of the toys I surrounded myself with as a child, as well as the emotional stories and lives that I placed onto them. This resulted in the creation of two figures, each with their own life and story reflective of the different means of escapism I would place onto my toys as a child.

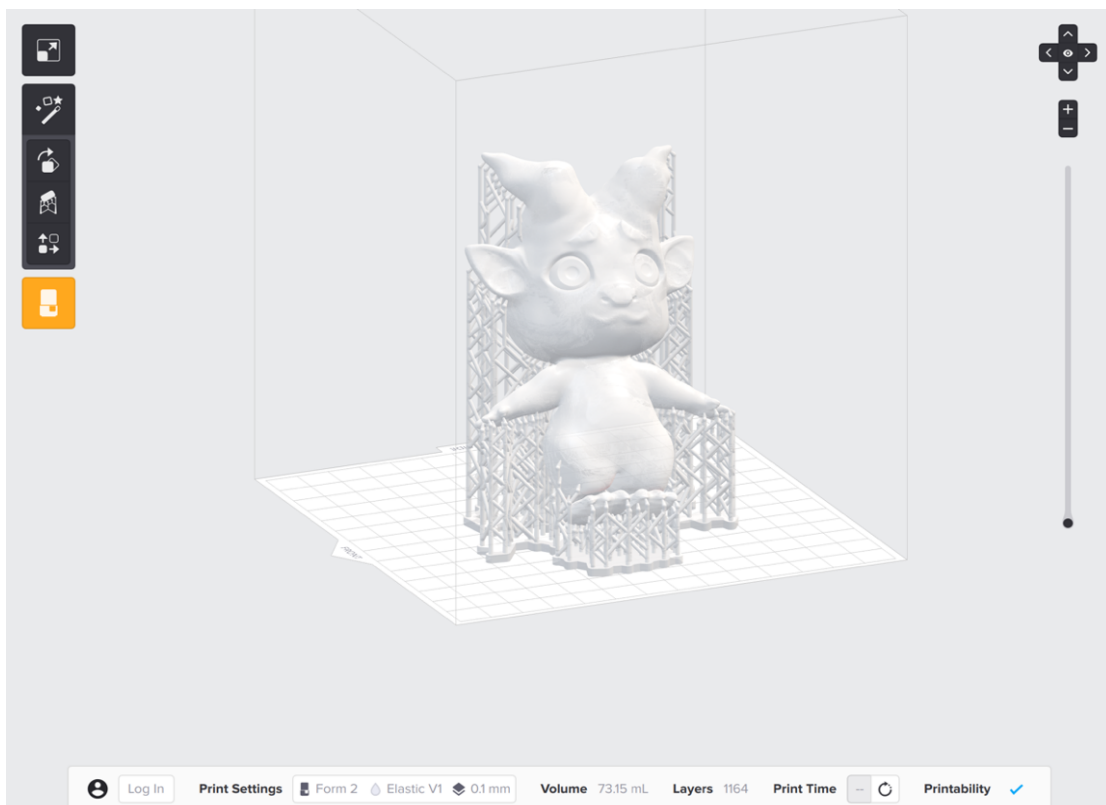
The key piece in beginning my final iteration was to begin crafting the story background for each of the two characters involved. Unfortunately, still feeling a bit defeated by the failing of my last crafted story, *Heart of Fire*, I put myself into something of a creative slump. Taking some time to mull over what creating the figures meant to me as a whole, though, I eventually came to the decision that each character would represent a different part of the personal story of how I connected with toys as a child. Sabohr—the misunderstood Tiedfling character—represents how I would connect with the villainous figures I collected and the relationship I once had with my family and friends. Mettal—the beautiful, respected Tiedfling character—represents the pretty blonde figures I surrounded myself with and the world of perfection and happiness I would often escape to. Both figures are created as personal reflections of the way I would use the toys as a form of loose therapy as a child; escaping to the world of the figures around me, venting both my hopes and fears through the act of play.

Designing the overall look of the figures in the toy-line was my second big step in bringing this project to fruition. Wanting to dive head-first into the completion of this project and gearing the overall designs toward toys I've collected personally in the past, I began digitally sketching out the designs in my 3D modeling program: taking something I've modeled in the past and modeling over top of it to make it into something entirely new.



Repeating this process over with my second figure, I eventually came to the final designs for each character, then beginning the fabrication phase.

From digital model to physical form, the first step in bringing any fabrication project to life is first setting it up in the right program.



After carefully setting everything up and getting my files ready for printing, I sent them over to the SLA printer and waited patiently for their completion, then taking the prints out of the machines, cleaning them up, and eventually bringing them to completion in all their silicone, squishy glory.

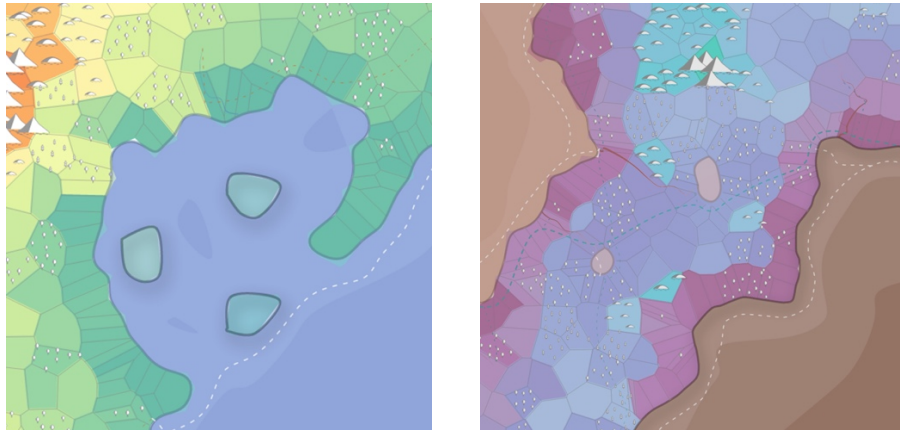


When each figure was successfully completed, I then moved onto the third step in the realization of each character's connection to me and my childhood, through the creation of two short booklets.



Designed digitally with the stylistic guidance of Professor Joe Trumpey in mind, each booklet was then UV printed page-for-page onto separate blank cardstock booklets, each with their own unique design corresponding to each character.

And from there came the final piece of the puzzle—the stands for each character and their respective booklets to stand on. Instead of opting for a boring, plain-white pedestal, I decided to create two wall shelves depicting a height-map of the world the characters live in and have them standing atop of that as a source of context and world-building.



Each shelf was created first as a digital image, then as a height map, and finally as a cnc-routed real-life object. To finish things off, I went back to the UV printer, coating the tops of the shelf with their original colors and finally crossing the finish line, marking all four elements of *The Power of Play* finally completed and strung together.



Creative Work

In the gallery space, viewers are able to sneak a look into the past—into my past—and see how play has been such an incredibly powerful tool in my development, both as a child and as an adult struggling with past trauma.



Each figure is placed atop their respective shelving with their character booklets facing outwards for people to browse through while examining the squishy, playfulness of both toys. Upon first glance, the figures embody a fun, whimsical nature as they seem hardly anything more than a child's toy-line. This in turn makes the ultimate realization of the project's serious nature all the more powerful as the viewer takes in the message of self-discovery and buried trauma hidden within the colorful pages of each tiny booklet.

The Power of Play is a digitally fabricated toy-line following the stories of two different characters: Sabohr and Mettal. The toys sport different characteristics such as pose-ability, hug-ability, and customizability. Each toy is equipped with a story card and a set clothing unique to their character to help bring the underlying concept of escapism to life. Below the feet of each

figure lies an intricate map of the world they live in—designed from the layout of the room I would lock myself into as a child. The end result is a line of toys that tells the story of struggling eight-year-old Alicia and her ability to connect with the toys around her.

Conclusion

The Power of Play encompasses everything I've come to learn here at the University of Michigan, both academic and personal. The work I've created here is far from anything I would really call finished, as there is still so much more I want to explore in the world of play therapy and toy design as a whole. As time rolls on I hope to expand this project further, pulling focus away from my own personal story of play therapy and honing in on how my experience can be used as a stepping stone for developing therapy-focused toys for other children struggling through their own broken home situations, as that was ultimately the original overall concept for my thesis in the first place. My one true hope for this project as a whole is that I'm able to touch the hearts of those suffering through tough situations and let them know they're not alone in the world. You're not alone in the world.

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