

Sequential Design as a Tool for Exploration: Perception of the Unknown

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

The purpose of this piece is to use narrative design to explore academic and philosophical concepts effectively. Unlike written papers, or graphs and models, the visual aspects of this piece are not merely carriers of the concept, but are integral parts of the process of exploring them, so I sought out to create piece of work that put that idea to the test. The research delved into the realms of both philosophy and design. Philosophy because, like a goblet without wine, my medium was empty without an idea to explore. Yet without design, the concept was merely stagnant information, instead of a tangible experience. I settled on the philosophy of Perceptual Relativity as applied to the perception of concepts. As for design, sequential narratives take many forms, but I settled on the more specific medium of a graphic novel. These two are appropriate because given the inherent structure and artistic freedom within the medium, the concept would have plenty of areas where it could be studied, conceptualized, and given shape for readers to interact with. Within this piece I was able to conceptualize and explore Perceptions of the Unknown through character design, storytelling, paneling, and visual metaphor, suggesting an effectiveness of the chosen medium of sequential narrative design. I also gained insight into the exploration not just as a reader, but more effectively through the process of creating such a work. This success implies the possible place of Graphic Novels, among other sequential narratives, in the realm of academic conceptual exploration.

Conceptual exploration of theories and philosophies are almost exclusively carried out in modes of literature. Researchers and thinkers will write endless papers to pass back and forth for peer review. Personal theories are tossed to and bounced back by different minds in the form of new editions of articles, written and uploaded speedily to the vast audience of the internet. When students desire to learn about a particular topic in their field, they read the latest released edition of a text, while graduates and researchers carry out their own exploration and pour their latest findings into an even newer one. While literature is no doubt a vital component within the act of research and presentation, its stability as a medium can be seen as a creative handicap. Ideas are thought about, assembled, and presented in predetermined and repetitive formats without the chance to be explored in a more creative sense.

It seems that when it comes to conceptual exploration in academia, there is little room for more creative fields like graphic design, which seems counter-intuitive given the inherently curious and creative nature of academia. What cramped space design may take up is purely presentational, serving only as a carrier of information previously provided in the text. Regarding graphs and models, the purpose of art and design is not useful in the exploration of a concept itself, but simply the vessels of stagnant information to a wider audience. Their creation is no more influential over the findings than the audience observing them. Power point presentations, video essays, decorative designs meant to attract audiences by making information palatable suffer the same treatment. Artistic creativity is not a core tool aiding in shaping the findings, but

instead they are entirely dependent on them. This is a challenge to that, offering insight and shedding light on the value of the artistic process as a core component of conceptual exploration.

In order to even begin my artistic journey, a concept that could be brought to life and examined in a visual manner was paramount. It needed to be a concept that would not only be enhanced by the visuals but would interact and be interacted with through these visuals. It was when I was wrapped up in researching Daoism as a possible conceptual path that I'd stumbled upon a theory¹ that was full of potential. Perceptual Relativity² was a concept that delved into a variety of different senses. Touch, smell, sight, sound, and taste would produce different perceptions when applied to the same object. A piece of paper feels different than it smells or tastes. It appears white and has a distinctive noise when being ripped. Perceptual Relativity offered the idea that it is impossible to rely on these senses to understand the 'true' nature of the matter around us, simply because they differ from one another, from between different individuals, and between species. This concept would provide the framework for my piece, and so I rearranged it and built upon it further.

Instead of having the senses be reliant on a physical object with an unknown yet predetermined set of 'true' properties, I flipped that idea on its head. What if the objects we perceive were fundamentally and physically changed depending on our perception of them? What if those objects were the manifestations of broad, universal concepts? What if they were alive? After fleshing it out, the main concept would become The Perception of 'Unknowns', of broader

¹ James B. Glattfelder, "Subjective Consciousness: What Am I?," SpringerLink (Springer, Cham, January 1, 1970), https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-03633-1_11.

² Rodney Julian Hurst, The Problems of Perception, 1959,

concepts that would harbor the greatest uncertainty, and thus have the greatest possibility of having multiple visual manifestations.

My chosen method for using art to explore this concept ended up being that of sequential narrative design, or more specifically, a graphic novel. Exploring this idea would be easier by reinforcing linear thought through a linear sequence, that is, by working within a structure that had a beginning, middle, and end. This implementation of linear structure would lay down foundations for me to build up upon during the production of the piece, whereas a looser method such as creating a single painting would have had more freedom in its process, yet far fewer opportunities to visually explore the core idea.

Exploring the concept through character design was one of these examples. The main antagonists within the main story are what are known as ‘Unknowns’ and are representative of the metaphorical ‘concepts’ that would be changed upon interacting with the main protagonists. These three ‘Unknowns’ are pictured below.

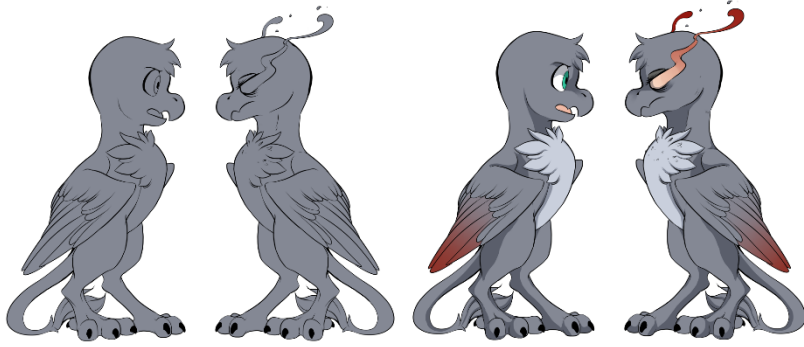
The Unknowns, K'resh, K'loss, and K'thuung, represent the broad concepts of the future,

natural phenomena, and truth, respectively. I believed that these three concepts were universal,

and thus would have greater potential for driving the story. K'resh, being the Unknown of the

future, would take on the form of the in-world observer and reflect their greatest anxieties, hopes,

or



expectations of what their future held. The future is full of uncertainty. It is never what one expects, and one expects quite a lot from something they can never truly experience. Because the future can only exist as a thought before it becomes the present, I wanted to make K'resh's 'true' form un-observable, and entirely dependent on the observer. K'loss, being an Unknown of natural phenomena, would display behavior in line with the observer's philosophy regarding nature itself, becoming violent should that philosophy depict nature as such. This is in line with the fear one can feel surrounding natural events that seemingly have no explanation, and the dissipation of that fearfulness once that phenomena becomes explainable. And K'thuung, my personal favorite Unknown, is the physical manifestation of truth. Now, truth may seem like a concept that is 'known'. After all, the truth is reliable. It is a constant. However, referencing perceptual relativity, truth can never be truly known, although by searching for it we do uncover secrets and perspectives we hadn't had before. K'thuung's form is constant, and his role is both a guide and a goal for the protagonists as a reflection of his base concept. These characters, the Unknowns, blend design and concept in a way where neither is neglected, both providing support for the creative and explorative process.

The protagonists of the story were designed with the role of observers in mind. Idealism and realism, optimism and pessimism, and positive and negative attitudes were important to relay metaphorically. Vale and Kippa, the main protagonists, became an amalgamation of several different animals in order to represent their respective roles. Kippa would, over the course of time, become a mish-mash of animals: A fox, a lion, a unicorn, all topped with a gleaming blade. The fox and the lion represent pride and cunning, with the unicorn adding a touch of idealism to his character. Pride, intelligence, and idealism would be the base personality for Kippa. However, while these aspects of his personality seem to be very 'type-A', there were several

other things to consider within his design and how that would affect his concept. The fact that all the animals included were land-based animals would lead me towards giving him an air of pessimism. He would be more grounded in reality, and less likely to be optimistic about any situation. In order to keep his pride and idealism intact, this pessimism would have to be directed outwards, as it is in the first script when he takes a stance of displeasure with the concept of nature in favor of personal, man-made comforts. His idealism, cunning, and pride, directed inwards, would lead me to adding the single, metal horn. He would rely on his own ingenuity and inventiveness rather than that of others, which is why the horn is comprised of an alloy that must be reheated and reshaped at the will of its handler, and not a more readily available, natural material like bone or wood.

Vale's design would be less of an amalgamation, but a more sure, straightforward blend of creatures. The most prominent features of Vale would be a bird, namely an eagle, with the tail of an ox. The eagle design was chosen mostly for size purposes to emphasize the main proponent of his character: his wings. Giving him the power of flight made him an optimist. His idealism and willingness being represented through his casual ability to soar. His ox tail is a subtle yet important reference to his persistence in any given situation, making his character a positive and persevering type. Yet, unlike Kippa, whose prideful energy is directed inwards, Vale's optimism is directed outwards. The inclusion of his tinted goggles was a decision that aided in this development, being an important icon of his habit to see the world through a tinted lens. This also means that his greatest vulnerability could be challenged by an Unknown removing said lens, forcing him to look inwards without his shield of optimism. This happens within the second script, allowing his character to interact with K'resh(the future) in a very human way.

Physically creating the graphic novels was an arduous task, and one that would have taken an estimated three years to complete in full. However, through the production process I was able to successfully implement both concept and design at levels with equal importance. Below are the scripts of the adventures, as well as the artistic portion of the first.

Script 1 Story Beats

1.Kippa and Vale begin their journey to find ‘The Guardian’ K’thruung and open up in a frozen wasteland called The Frigid Fields.

2.Open scene in the Frigid Fields. Kippa thoroughly expresses his distaste for the cold, snow, and ice, and his desire for creature comforts such as books and a warm bed. Vale gently reprimands him, reminding him to ‘stay on task’.

3.Kippa just wants to hurry through this, which is made apparent (pay attention to posturing)/

4.As they hurry along, they are startled by a noise.

5.They discover that it is an old bird(character) trapped in some branches, prompting the two to try and help the poor bird from freezing in the cold.

6. Upon freeing the old bird, a few comments are made. One, an exchange that offers the protagonists direction towards their destination (the Guardian K’thruung), and two, an exchange between the old bird and Kippa:

Kippa- “...then nature reared its ugly head. You should find somewhere indoors, away from this freezing waste...” (-conversation-)

Old Bird: “...And some advice for the furry one. Try and take this place for what it gives, not what it takes. Nature is a fickle thing. You’ll make life much easier if you learn to work with it, rather than against it...”

7. Cut to next scene-

8. Kippa and Vale are weathering a blizzard in search of shelter.

9. Vale cites old bird's philosophy in an attempt to remain lighthearted, which frustrates Kippa.

10. Supplies are blown off of Kippa's back and off into the storm. This is the straw in the camels back, and Kippa's frustration hits a peak. He swears against 'this place' and 'nature', stating that they only take.

11. This statement is a triggering event: K'loss, form hidden in shadows, makes his appearance. (Keep shadows until Kippa makes verbal affirmation of his opinion) K'loss strikes at the two, Vale asking what it is and Kippa making the statement "dangerous, that's what!"

12. At the statement the shadows are dispelled, revealing K'loss' dangerous form.

13. K'loss attacks, seemingly going after both protagonists but in actuality is merely aiming for Kippa alone. Kippa is cast far into the air, caught by Vale, and the two make a speedy escape.

14. Cut to the inside of a cave.

15. Protagonists have just arrived. Old Bird is there and welcomes them, revealing he had found their supplies (this is a nod to the idea of give and take, the supplies being "given" to old bird).

16. Protags. Inquire about the 'monster' in the woods, only to have a tale weaved about a nature spirit named K'loss.

Old Bird: "He raised these mountains and dug these caves for the animals to roam. He sprouted the saplings that would become the ancestors of the great forest, and each spring he calls the fish to the streams, providing food and water to feed his children."

Vale: "K'loss sounds more like a generous spirit than a monster."

Kippa: "Then why did it attack us?"

Old Bird: “Perhaps he doesn’t care for those unappreciative of him.”

17. (zoom on Kippa, put on the spot) Kippa takes offense at the prospect that the attack was caused by his attitude.

18. Kippa takes half of the supplies and storms out, telling Vale to meet him when he gets out of the forest.

19. Cut to Kippa in flurry, monologuing. He’s pointing out the unfairness and cons of nature. The cold, the uncomfortable living conditions, (brings in the fate of the fish to be petty). Asking how anyone could appreciate *that* over the creature comforts of the artificial.

20. Contemplates his words. In the flurry, he stumbles across another character lying in the snow.

21. This character is gravely injured yet lucid, causing Kippa to rush to their aid. However they desire only to be placed next to a tree nearby.

22. An exchange ensues, kippa trying to convince her to go with him back to the cave for warmth and care, which she denies. She explains that the tree had housed her in her youth, and she wishes to return the favor. Reluctantly he complies and carries her into a hollow within the tree.

23. There she tells him stories of her life in the forest and the ‘gifts’ it had given her (Cold=fur. Mountainous terrain=strength and claws. Time alone=insight) and her wish to return the favor by nourishing that very tree.

24. The exchange is heartfelt, the flurry still raging outside, and they fall asleep. When Kippa wakes up, she has passed away and is covered with snow (symbolic reclamation of this character).

25. Kippa is startled as K'loss appears, however the spirit is less monstrous. K'loss reaches out into the hollow and touches a single claw to the character, where a tree sapling sprouts (VERY IMPORTANT! PAY ATTENTION TO LIGHTING)

26. K'loss carries Kippa to the edge of the frigid fields. Kippa's perspective had changed, prompting K'loss' form to take on a more majestic one. They part ways.

27. Vale arrives with his half of the supplies. A brief exchange is made before they continue on.

END ONE

Script Two Story Beats

1. Our two protagonists continue their journey through the Calamitous Canyon. It is dark, and the landscape is punctuated by sharp spikes that jut every which way. There is heavy fog, and light is dim.
2. It is getting dark out, Vale wishing to make camp early so they will have energy the next day. His optimistic eagerness is made apparent through his mood.
3. Cut to camp. A fire is getting dim and Kippa is quick to turn in. They express their eagerness about meeting the guardian soon, however Kippa voices a few casual doubts.
Kippa: "I hope this guy gives us the advice we need," (lightheartedly) "I mean, we've come a real long way."
(See of doubt is obviously planted)
Vale: "well, he's not a legend for nothing..." (nervous)
4. Vale snuffs out the light and the two turn in for the night.
5. A noise awakens Vale in the early morning. He discovers that his goggles are missing (important, note paneling) and quietly begins to search camp. He sees his goggles lying at the edge of camp, where he tries to retrieve them.
6. They are teetering on the edge of a small spike ledge and fall as he's about to grab them.
7. He follows it down, the goggles tumbling further and further away from camp, when they finally stop. Just as Vale is about to retrieve them, he spots a shadowy figure.
8. He turns to return to camp, but he is now trapped in the fog...
9. Cut to kippa waking up in camp. He goes to look for his missing friend.
10. Kippa follows footprints...

11. Cut back to vale. K'resh has taken the form of him and is trying to convince him to stop his journey.(Visions of failure ensue, each worse than the last) (Keep K'resh in front of lighter fog, while Vale is in front of darker fog to suggest uncertainty)
12. These visions grow worse with each attempt to convince Vale to stop. (show Vale's goggles on the ground, showing the lenses off.) Final vision convinces Vale, and he's left surrounded by shadows.
13. Kippa finds Vale, tries to convince him to continue his journey. Kippa sees Vale's goggles on the ledge of a spike and goes to retrieve it to cheer Vale up, and slips!
14. Vale is pushed to rescue Kippa, and as he is about to pull them up an exchange is had (Kippa reminding Vale about how far they had come, and of Vale's optimism). Vale has to fight back visions of himself and Kippa in order to actually pull him up.
15. He wins! The two are pulled to safety, and K'resh disappears along with the fog.
16. Vale's goggles are returned, and the two continue their journey.

END TWO

Journey of the



