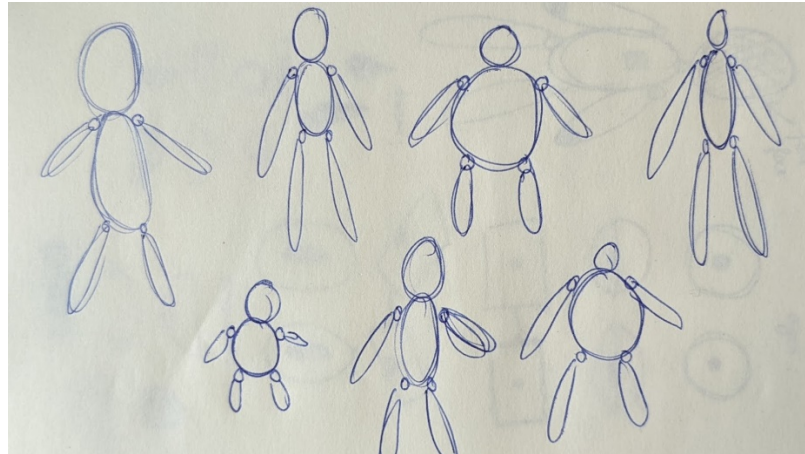


Designing the Puppets



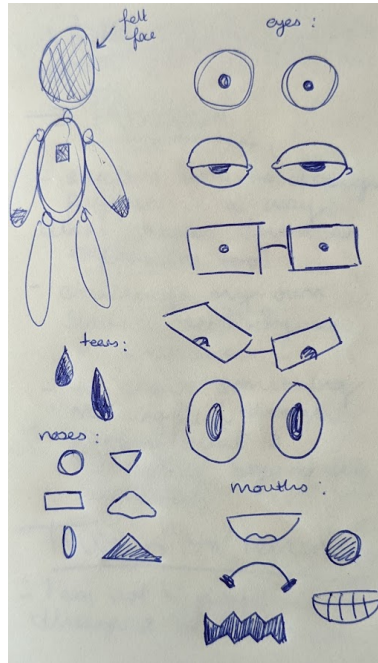
I started off with basic sketches, trying to convey a neutral but varied body shape for the puppets, and leaving the faces blank for further exploration. The freestanding ragdoll-like figure was inspired by the brown paper puppets demonstrated by Mervyn Millar in his book, *Puppetry: How to do it* (2018). They are a simplified bunraku puppet that is stripped back to a basic figure to allow for more focus on expressing emotions; they are mainly used for storytelling as there is no aesthetic or predetermined characterisation. I experimented with miniature tissue paper variations of the puppet, to explore how they could influence my own creations.



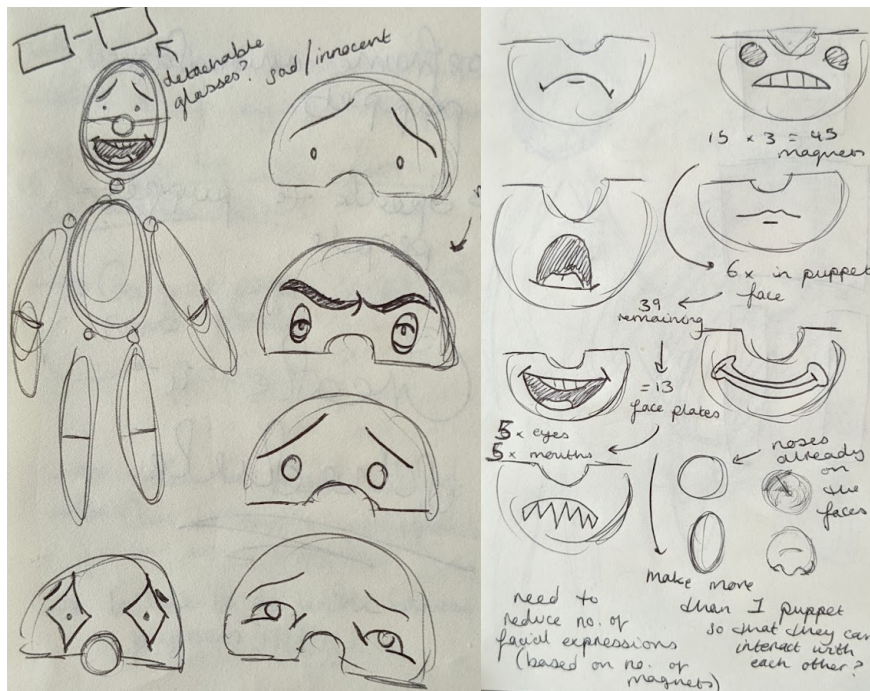
I liked how there was a freedom of expression with these figures; with no set expression or form, they were versatile in the way that they could be used for storytelling. You inherently need to focus on the body language and control over the puppet. This seemed perfect for therapy puppets, as they are not dressed up as any recognisable character- they become a clean slate for self-expression. This approach to my exploration slightly strays away from the commonly used archetypal figures in play therapy, but I was intrigued to see how I could use this style in a way that was engaging for younger children.

Although the faceless figures are interesting, I felt that children would find characters with a face far more approachable. I thought back to the film *Life, Animated* (2016) and how the most useful tool for Owen to understand his own emotions were the character's exaggerated expressions. I found a useful video from 1969 in which Jim Henson demonstrates how children can make and personalise

their own puppets and give them personality and expression. He uses household items and sticks different things like eyes, hair, and hats to the materials he is using (Iowa PBS, 2009). I realised I could use this idea to create neutral, blank, faces with different features for children to also “stick” on and use to personalise the puppet. I began to sketch up different eyes, mouths and noses that could potentially express different emotions.



Although I liked the concept, I remembered what I was told by the reddit user earlier about how some children will struggle to engage with the personalisation so I needed to make it more simplified and accessible. Whilst thinking about alternative options, I explored the figures used in stop frame animation which need to have their expressions changed constantly. One example would be Paranorman; the artists at Laika studios 3D printed thousands of different faces that could be switched out between frames to allow seamless facial movement (Roper, 2012). These face plates were in two halves; one for the upper face (eyebrow movement), and one for the lower face (mouth movements). I thought it would be perfect to explore a similar concept for my puppet faces; it would potentially be more limited than smaller features to mix and match, but there was also weight to it being more inclusive and easier to use.



In the sketches for these face plates, I tried to get a balance of positive and negative emotions. It was my plan to have sets of two that corresponded with one another but could also be changed to express deeper emotions – such as worry mixed with sadness, or shock mixed with happiness. I decided to mock up a couple of expressions using modelling clay before investing in materials. Being able to visualise the puppets in 3D was extremely useful; I could see that I would be able to achieve those exaggerated, cartoonish expressions that I had planned for, and so following these testers I moved onto creating the final faces.



I originally wanted the face pieces to be curved around a spherical head, like the mock sculpts, but the fimo I chose to carve with wasn't suitable for this without making the faces too thick. Plus, the clay can sometimes warp in the oven which was something I also needed to take into account. I adapted the planned structure slightly to correspond with my budget, and I was still very happy with the result of the sculpt and bake. The faces were sanded and then painted, using bright primary and secondary colours to help the expressions pop – especially for children with visual impairments as I chose colours commonly associated with the different moods and emotions to match accordingly.

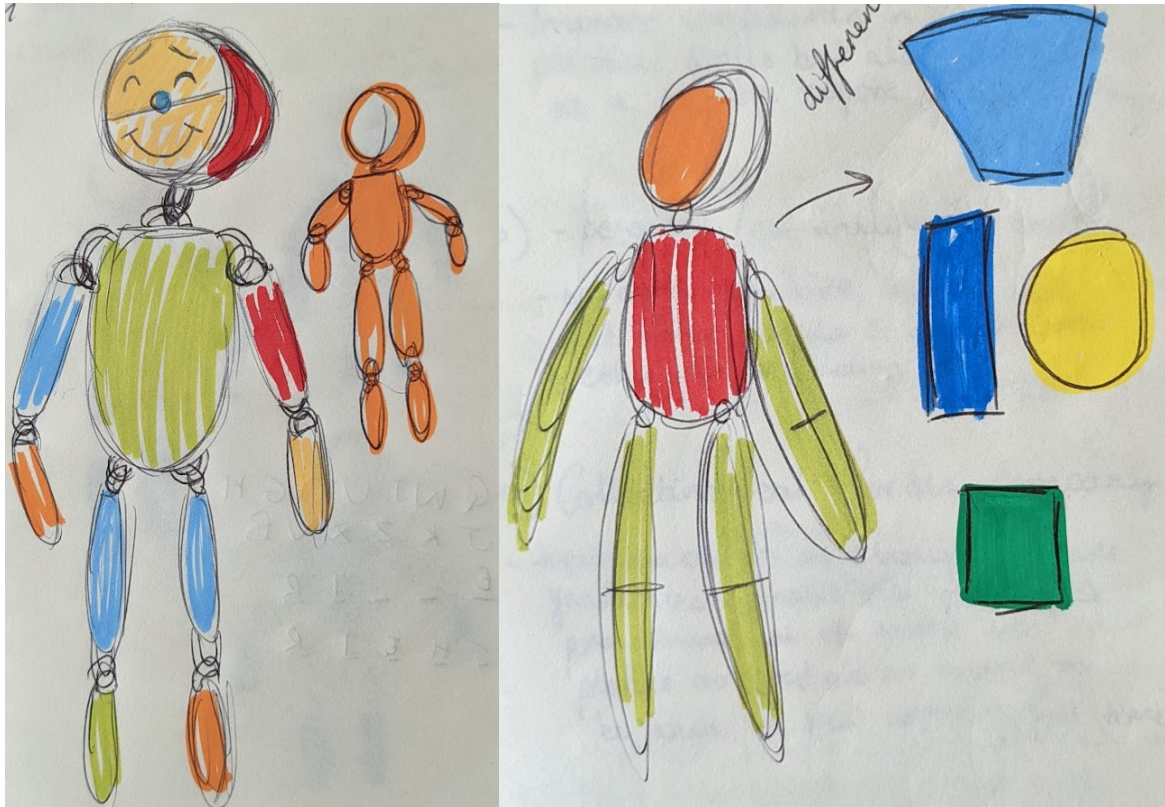


Having finished the faces, I moved on to designing the bodies. Now that the front of the face was going to be flat, I couldn't have a full sphere head. But, I did want there to be some structure so that the puppets were easy to hold and also to give them cohesive proportions. In order to achieve this, I first opted for polystyrene balls that matched the radius of the faces, which were then cut in half. The first attempt at connecting the faces to the head was using magnets. Upon experimenting, I found that it was difficult to line the magnets up, and they just weren't strong enough through the test fabric to keep the face secure. Although I found it to be a less aesthetically pleasing solution, I opted for strips of Velcro instead, which proved to be far more secure.



I decided to approach the bodies in the same way as the faces – cohesive, varied and somewhat neutral, but with a method of customisation. I wanted to make a series of different shaped and sized bodies that could be interchangeable. I decided a simple mechanism for joints would be loops (much

like how paper chains are constructed) secured by Velcro so that if the children do want to mix and match the limbs, torsos and heads, they can in order to make the body type more “familiar”. This is a simple way of adding more potential freedom for customisation in a non-compulsory way for children who may find that too complicated; they can be used as they are originally built, or swapped around for those who want to.



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