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Three Key Words: Character, Semiotics, Story

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Proposed Question for independent inquiry: How illustrators use their visual language to create characters?

This proposal will explore the three key words; character, semiotics and story. *Aveline Stokart* described a character designers' goal as "to design an engaging character." She further states that "its important to create a background story, this will help define who your character is and what they look like." (*Stokart*, 2019, p. 17). This is reflective for all artists I shall explore in this proposal as my aim is to analyse how illustrators use their visual language to create characters? And how those characters alongside their worlds influence the viewers understanding of story within videogames. This proposal will focus on the creation of culture for characters within series such as: *The Legend of Zelda*, *Splatoon* and *Mario*. By analysing these titles, I intend to learn and develop skills to improve my own character design work and gain an understanding of the creative process of combining characters, world and story. This research and analysis will then be used to support my independent project.

Characters.

Nintendo's series *The Legend of Zelda* has a plethora of characters many of those which have had their appearances adapted to reflect the game's story.

Species designs have also evolved over the years of development. The Rito species is an example of a large change from their first appearance. Below features an illustration of the Rito, Medli. The Rito are avian creatures who initially feature human features as seen in Medli's design with the only avian features being her beak and talon like feet.



Figure 1: The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker, Nintendo, 2002.

However, in the latest instalment of the Zelda series, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, the Rito return but their designs have evolved to a fully anthropomorphic avian form which informs the player that *Breath of the Wild* takes place after *The Wind Waker* and that both in game and in design the Rito have faced evolution. In *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild – Creating a Champion*, Lead NPC artist, *Hirohito Shinoda* expands on the race's redesign:

The Rito first appeared in *The Wind Waker* but their appearance has changed dramatically since then. The biggest reason for that is that I wanted to emphasise their bird-like silhouette and have their unique characteristics stand out more as a race.

(Shinoda, 2018, pp 129).



Figure 2: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, Nintendo, 2017.

Revali is one of the main characters within *Breath of the Wild*, his personality is very prideful throughout the game and he seems quite narcissistic during the

majority of his dialogue. However, both within the story and design Revali exhibits pride for his village. The illustrators show this pride through his clothing and weapon predominantly. Revali's outfit has a similar corset and shoulder pads to other Rito Warriors.



Figure 3: The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild – Creating a Champion, Nintendo, 2018, pp.129.

Despite being a Champion, Revali prides himself on being a warrior for his village throughout the game and spin off series. "How is Rito Village Faring" (*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, 2017).

"Rito Village is my home, whilst I'm here you won't be getting any closer." (*Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity*, 2020). During development of *Breath of the Wild*, materials, patterns and styles were explored for each species and town which created a cohesive feel to each village and town. By the illustrators doing this it creates culture for the characters and world itself. All Rito weapons, furniture and

clothing have similar colour pallets, and fabrics which was something the design team did to reflect that “all of the Hyrulean races have created their own unique equipment specifically suited to their physique that also reflects their culture.” (Nintendo, 2018, p. 5).

The illustrators also show the importance of characters based on colours and clothing. Within *Breath of the Wild*, the Royal Family and the Champions are shown wearing the same shade of blue. This blue is described as “sacred” and visually shows unity across these characters. (*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, 2017.)



Figure 4: The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild – Creating a Champion, Nintendo, 2018. pp. 33

The game series, *Splatoon*, is set years after the extinction of humans, there are multiple different sea creatures, many of which are humanoid. Within the game series there are two main species, Inklings and Octolings which are humanoid squid and octopi people who can transform into a 'swim' form which further resembles the sea creatures themselves. In design the Octolings look quite different from the Inklings and due to their past wars and culture differences Marina Ida is a main Octoling character who left the Octoling army and began to live above ground with Inklings, though initially in the game her species wasn't said explicitly, both in design and concept art the differences are apparent.

Below is an illustration by lead director *Seita Inoue*, it features the idol group *Off The Hook*, which has the Inkling rapper, *Pearl Houzuki* to the left and Marina Ida to the right. Their visual differences are the suctions are on the outside of Marina's tentacles whereas they're on the inside for Pearl's, Pearl has an eye mask type design around her eyes whereas Marina's eyes are not connected.



Figure 5: Off The hook, Splatoon 2, Nintendo (Seita Inoue), 2018.

Other design differences which is less noticeable within this illustration are teeth placement and finger shapes. These differences are the same between each Inkling and Octoling within Splatoon as seen below. These differences show the differences in evolution and connect the designs closer to the real inspiration of squids and octopi.



Figure 6: Splatoon 2, Nintendo, 2017.

Marina's influence for her culture is further exhibited within her design and the stages she creates in the games. The final map design she creates gives the largest insight into her character as the map has references to the *Hyper bombs* she creates within *Octo Expansion*, the NIHLS statue and *Off The Hook* are seen flying above before Pearl descends to assist the player in fighting. These assets gives a visual look into her character and story outside of her own design. By the illustrators coming up with these concepts it gives the player an insight into the importance of both Marina's Octarian culture but also Inkling Culture.



Figure 7: Splatoon 2, 2018, Nintendo.

Semiotics.

Semiotics and shape theory are an integral part of the design process and informing the players on how to go forward within the game. Though semiotics and shape theory refer to every character within any animated series it is very noticeable and important with antagonists. Within the *Super Mario Bros* series, the main villain is Bowser. Across the games Bowser is represented by his emblem below.



Figure 8: Bowser Emblem, Mario Kart 8, 2017, Nintendo.



Figure 9: *Picture this: How Pictures Work*, Bang, p. 39, 2016,

In Molly Bang's *Picture this: How Pictures work*, she explores creating a piece on *Little Red Riding hood* and experiments with colours and shapes to capture the feeling of fear. Both in *Nintendo's Bowser Emblem* and *Bang's Little Red Riding Hood*, they use black, red and sharp shapes. This combination of colours and shapes incites the feeling of fear and danger, Bang explains that: "Somehow red excites us." and that "Part of the reason may be that we associate red with blood and fire." (Bang, 2016, p. 38). This reasoning applies to the *Bowser Emblem* and informs players of all ages that this symbolises danger. Similar to semiotics, is the study of Shape Language, often in character designs circles, squares and triangles are used to "convey a range of different emotions." (Stokart, 2019, p.7). Aveline Stokart

explains that “The sharpness of the triangle implies dangers and inspires mistrust and fear.” (Stokart, 2019, p.7).

Despite this not all characters will follow this design convention, and some will only feature elements of this shape theory. For example, DJ Octavio from *Nintendo's Splatoon* series. DJ Octavio is one of the main villains from the series and is not as triangular as characters such as Bowser. DJ Octavio is a round Octopus who has a sharp scar, angled eyes and in his redesign for *Splatoon 3*, has Triangular safety Glasses, his eyebrows are also furrowed into a triangle-like shape. These elements imply he is an antagonist despite being rounded elsewhere. His smaller pupils and eyebags also inflict danger.



Figure 10: Splatoon 3, Nintendo, 2022.

Outside of physical designs, semiotics is used both by the player and designers to inform players in exploration. In *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, during the loading screen the player is met with multiple tips one of which states “**Smoke Signals:** A plume of smoke in the distance is a good sign that you might find someone at its origin.” (*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, 2017.) This correlation is an example of Pierce’s theory of index and implied association of smoke equals fire, (Occam’s Answers, 2018), the player uses their understanding of Pierce’s theory whilst exploring the world of *Breath of the Wild*. Games also create

their own implied associations through symbols, colours and materials for example, in *Breath of the Wild*, the game designers use orange and blue for shrines to show whether or not they have been completed by the player, they also show icons on the map to highlight if a shrine has been completed or has just been discovered. This blue is used throughout the game, as previously mentioned it is used for the Champion's Garbs, the blue is also used when saving the Divine Beast from corruption and finally the blue is used for all Sheikah technology. By having this specific shade, it informs the players on which characters and items are in assistance to the main character, Link.

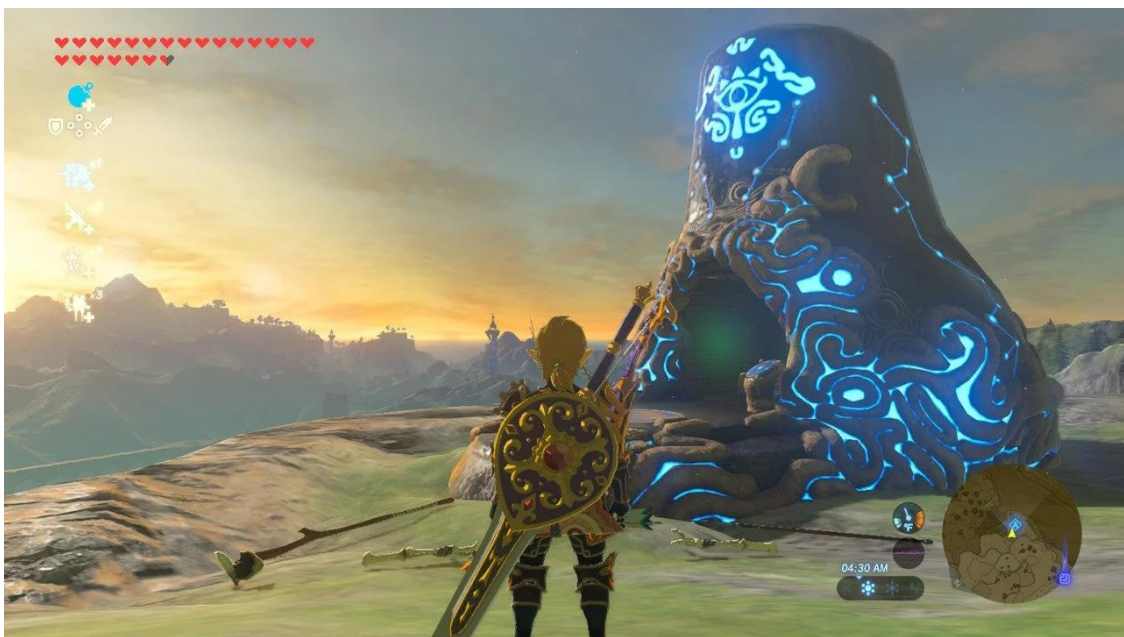


Figure 11: The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Nintendo, 2017.

Semiotics and shape theory are more relevant within my proposed practice as key techniques will be used during the development and design process of proposed practice. Stokart discusses the theory behind creating during her section of CDQ in *Behind the Coverart: Aveline Stokart*, Stokart instructs that finding inspiration is the best place to start, *Stokart* instructs that to start on a project the aim is “search for visual inspiration in books or on the internet.” and that “your aim is to create a library of references that can help you later.” (*Stokart*, 2019, p. 6). *Stokart* also discusses

creating a background story for a character and to think about things such as: the species, age, personality, gender and where the character is based. (Stokart, 2019, p. 6, 7). On top of this she suggests exploring shapes, playing with silhouettes and features. I will use Stokart's advice during my project in third year as the project will be very character and scene based.

Similarly to Stokart, Daniel Tarrant provides an insight into creating, specifically, unnatural characts, in his issue in CDQ, *Otherworldly Characters*, he discusses key points such as: Natural Inspiration, Making friends with Your Character, Extraordinary Evolution, creating evocative costumes and playing with Alternative Colours. (Tarrant, 2019, p. 16-18). Tarrant pushes the reader to ask questions about their characters to create a better understanding of the characters environment, motivation and any quirks the character may have. Tarrant was inspired by vultures for the design of the character below and it is very noticeable from the hunched neck and sharp nose. Pose inspiration from real creatures is very interesting and is something to explore within the project.

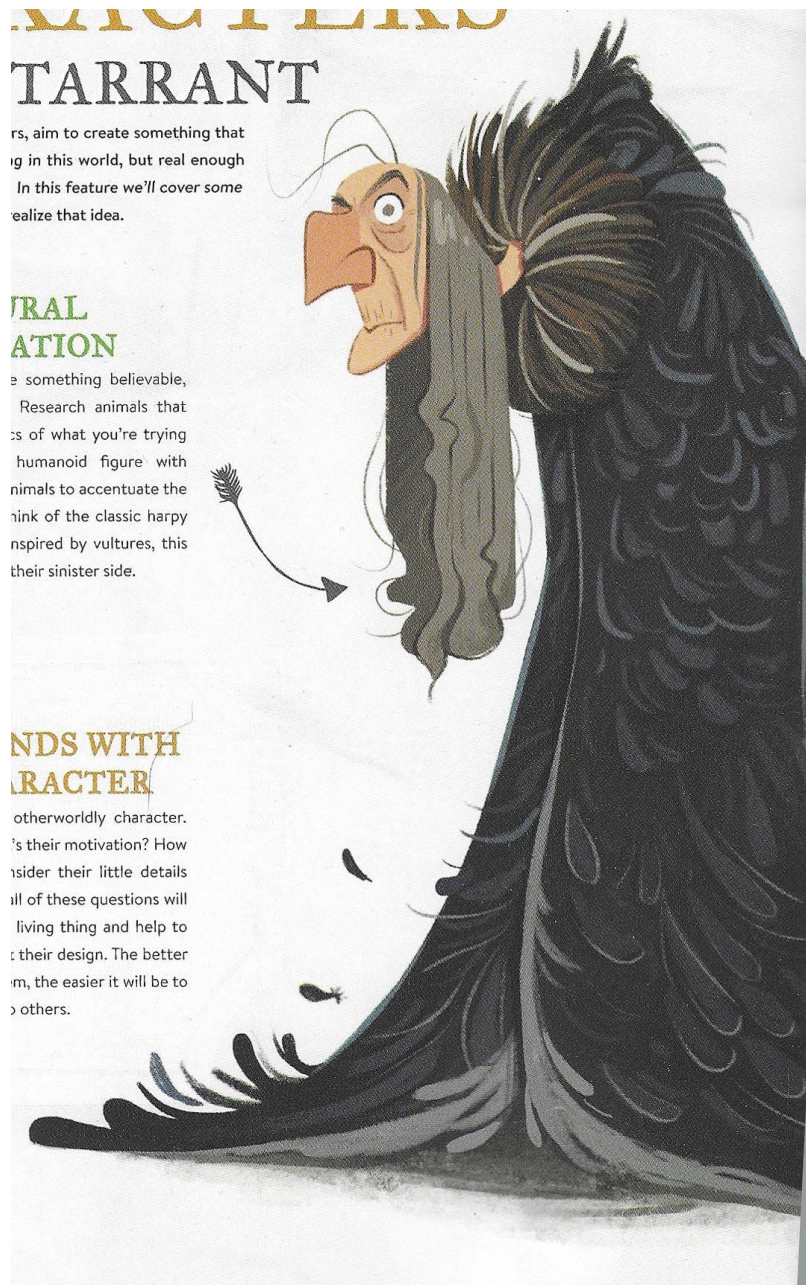


Figure 12: CDQ: ISSUE 9, Tarrant, 2019 p.16.

Story.

The story is arguably one of the most integral parts during the design process as it directly influences the visuals of the games. Videogames inform the player on which paths to take or what method to use subtly through clues and visual motifs. *Alessandro Soriani and Stefano Caselli explore story within videogames in their article Visual Narratives in Videogames: How Videogames tell Stories Through Graphical Elements.*

Users do not only 'activate' and use videogames, but at the same time exercise their personal freedom within them and are free to 'make' their own meaning of the videogame experiences.

(Soriani and Caselli, 2022, pp 480).

This statement is very present within recent titles that are open world games, for example, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. *Breath of the Wild*, allows the player to explore the entire world with no barriers after the tutorial area in the *Great Plateau*. The game doesn't limit the player by claiming they are too inexperienced but instead allows the player to explore and choose how to overcome obstacles. Upon the player arriving to either of the four main villages they're informed to visit, a short cutscene introducing a large mechanical beast and a screech plays. Once this cutscene is over however the player is free to continue on how they would like and are never forced to go investigate the beast. By doing this *Breath of the Wild* allows the player to "exercise their personal freedom." whilst also providing enough hints to inform the player about the main quest if they wish to follow the story of the game.



Figure 13: Divine Beast Vah Medoh, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, 2017, Nintendo.

Soriani and Caselli describe “enacting visual narratives’ as visually mediated narratives staged by designers that aim at suggesting players’ actions to perform or narratives to enact.” (Soriani and Caselli, 2022 p.491). An example of this could be Mario’s cap throw during the game *Super Mario Odyssey*, as the main gimmick of the game is Mario using the hat, Cappy in order to transform into enemies or objects around him. “Cappy’s special technique. It allows Mario to take over an enemy or object, controlling it as he sees fit”. (Nintendo, 2019, p. 031). This mechanic is hinted at during the opening cutscene and then again during the cutscene where Cappy and Mario team up. This provides the viewer with the visual clue to learn this playstyle.

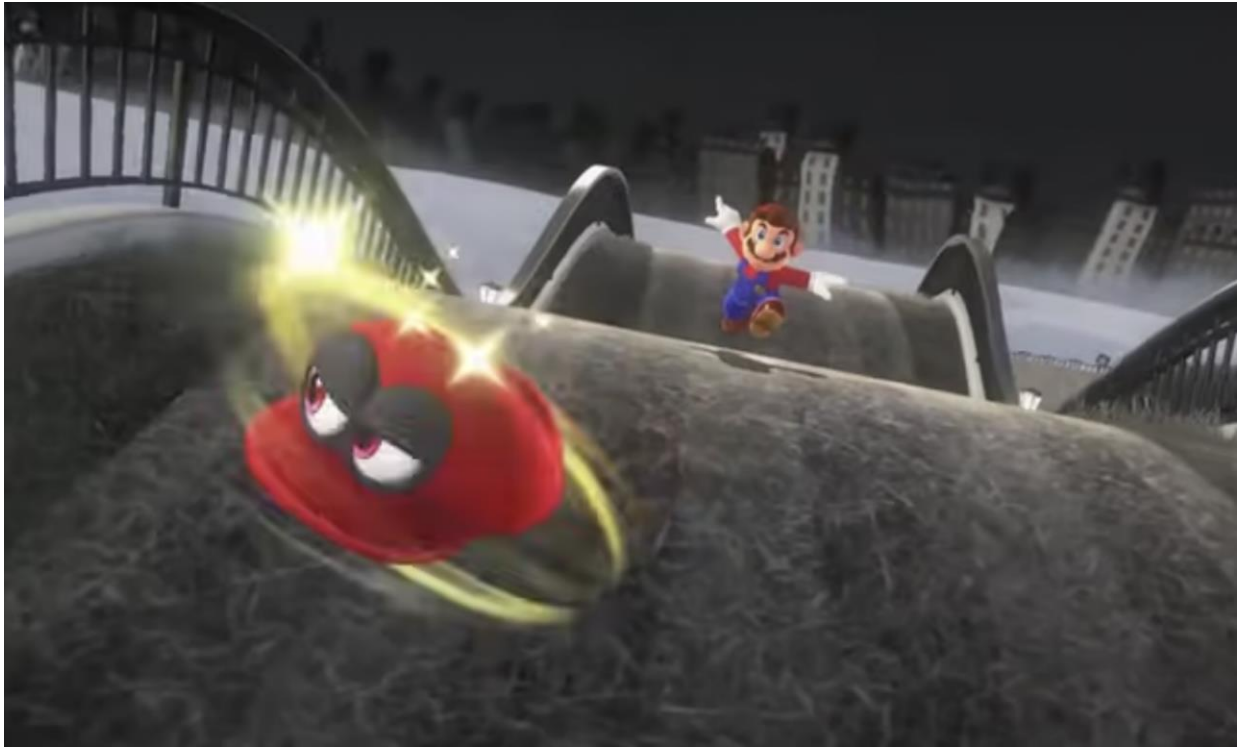


Figure 14: Super Mario Odyssey, Nintendo, 2017.

For my third-year project I intend to create a series of illustrations of character concepts, scenes, world designs, and in-world props. This series of illustrations will be comprised into an art book of concept art to support my portfolio and highlight the type of work that matches the videogame industry. Alongside the concept art I shall produce reportage pieces and focus on capturing a range of personalities and poses. In *Force: Character Design from Life Drawing*, Michael D. Mattesi, explains the benefits of life drawing and exaggeration for character designs, as “pushing poses help you define character.” (Mattesi, 2008, p.1). During third year I shall use Mattesi’s study on life drawing to strengthen poses within my pieces.

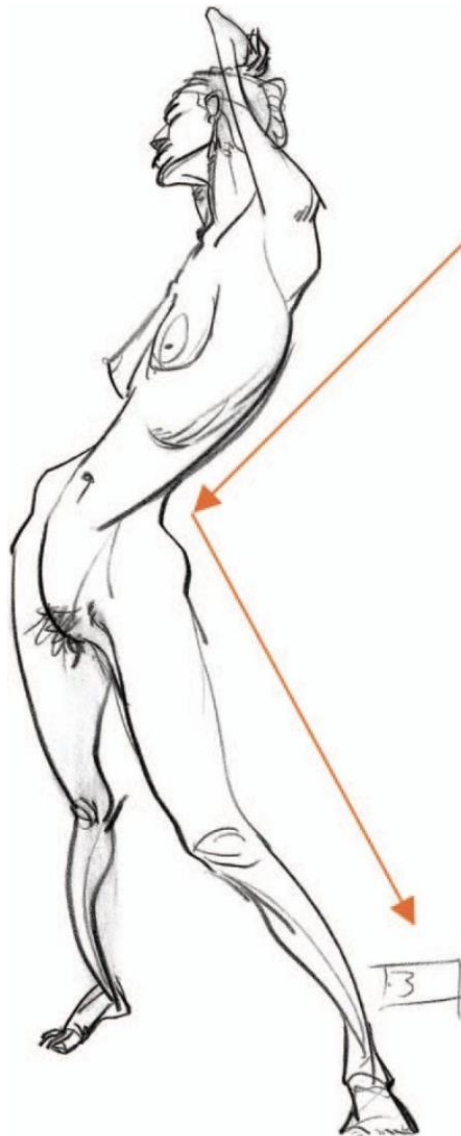


Figure 15: Force: Character Design from Life Drawing, Michael D. Mattesi, p. 30.

Other inspiration will stem from the videogame series mentioned within this proposal alongside artists such as; *Jack Burke*, *Monica Lu* and *Andrea Blasich*.

Jack Burke is a concept artist who focuses on fan made designs inspired by series like, Pokémon. Burke's art has a shine to it and he often replicates the style of the series which would be an important skill to have if going into that company.

Because of this he will be one of the main artists focused on during the third-year project.



Figure 16: Quetzillian, Burke, 2021.

Andrea Blasich is a clay sculptor who created studies of characters from *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish* during the development of the movie. *Blasich's* studies capture the 3D animated style and create a physical turn around to see all the details of their design. During the my third year project I would like to create clay studies of my own character designs in order to see how the design translates into a physical form.



Figure 17: *The Art of DreamWorks Puss in Boots: The Last Wish*, Ramin Zahed, 2023, p. 90.

To conclude during my third year project I intend to create a concept artbook of character designs using visual language to influence their design and story.

Image List.

Figure 1: *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, Nintendo, 2002. Available at: <https://zelda.fandom.com/wiki/Medli>

Figure 2: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, Nintendo, 2017. Available at: <https://zelda.fandom.com/wiki/Revali>

Figure 3: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild – Creating a Champion*, Nintendo, 2018, pp.129.

Figure 4: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild – Creating a Champion*, Nintendo, 2018. pp. 33

Figure 5: *Off The hook, Splatoon 2*, Nintendo (Seita Inoue), 2018. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pearl_and_Marina

Figure 6: *Splatoon 2*, Nintendo, 2017.

Figure 7: *Splatoon 2*, 2018, Nintendo. Available at: <https://twitter.com/NintendoVS/status/1142145422850502656>

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Figure 10: *Splatoon 3*, Nintendo, 2022. Available at: <https://youtu.be/JXsjYI8dpls>

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Figure 12: CDQ: ISSUE 9, Tarrant, 2019 p.16.

Figure 13: *Devine Beast Vah Medoh, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, 2017, Nintendo. Available at: [https://zelda.fandom.com/wiki/Divine_Beast_Vah_Medoh_\(Quest\)](https://zelda.fandom.com/wiki/Divine_Beast_Vah_Medoh_(Quest))

Figure 14: *Super Mario Odyssey*, Nintendo, 2017.

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Figure 16: *Quetzillian*, Burke, 2021. Available at: <https://www.deviantart.com/subjectively5/art/Quetzillian-868886355>

Figure 17: *The Art of DreamWorks Puss in Boots: The Last Wish*, Ramin Zahed, 2023, p. 90.

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