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For the third year I want to focus on character design as my primary practise; after completing my degree I want to work as either a character designer or storyboarder, and I felt character design gave me a better opportunity to improve upon my weaknesses while exploring new techniques, themes I wouldn't usually choose for my own art, and strengthening existing skills in my chosen field. My project will explore everything that goes into designing a character for any type of media. Nashville Film Institutes page on character design identifies the three key elements of character design as *silhouette*, *colour palette*, and *exaggeration*.

Word 1 - Industrial

The first key word I have chosen to explore is 'industrial'. While it may stick out in comparison to my other keywords; it's an integral descriptor in the theming I'll be using to develop my character designs. I chose this word as it came up frequently during my research on retrofuturism. I felt using the word 'retrofuturism' itself was much too broad; it covers multiple genres and not all are applicable to my project as they feature very different visual styles.

The book '*Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*' played an important role in my research; it explores science fiction as a genre, looking into its history and aesthetics. It also covers science fiction as a medium, exploring music, film, comics, and videogames. It's not limited to these mediums; however, I chose these in particular as they are all mediums in which characters will likely be a main focus, as will their designs. I want to use this book more thoroughly during my third year project to aid my research and character designs.

Science fiction is a very popular genre, so I decided to collect references from multiple types of media which were heavily influenced by industrial and retrofuturism aesthetics. Games like *Final Fantasy VII*, *Fallout*, and *Portal* are all relevant titles that will feature in my research. There are many films that are considered to have dieselpunk and industrial influences, but personally I felt the influence on the character designs themselves were not obvious enough to be included.



Fig 1

I had not considered that I would find any music that had any relevance to my themes, however after coming across the band *Steam Powered Giraffe*, I am relieved I made the effort to look. The characters portrayed in the band have since become a huge source of inspiration for me, and while most of their costume designs fit steampunk aesthetics more than that of diesel punk, I still think it's a valuable example of character design with both industrial and dieselpunk influence.

Characters who are androids, cyborgs, or have designs incorporating technology/machinery into their clothing are frequently found in media with an industrial sci-fi theming. *Steam Powered Giraffe*, as seen in Fig 1, shows characters depicted as robots and have their faces painted to complement their outfits and accessories and make it clear who they are, giving the viewer a sense of their personality before even hearing them speak or sing.

While the word 'industrial' has multiple definitions, it is largely associated with large factories and the businesses surrounding them. This is not something I'd usually opt to use in my work; being a fan of fantasy that utilises brighter colour palettes and more light-hearted theming. However, as my research has progressed, my fear of working with something so different has gradually subsided as I've seen ways in which other artists depict industrial themes.

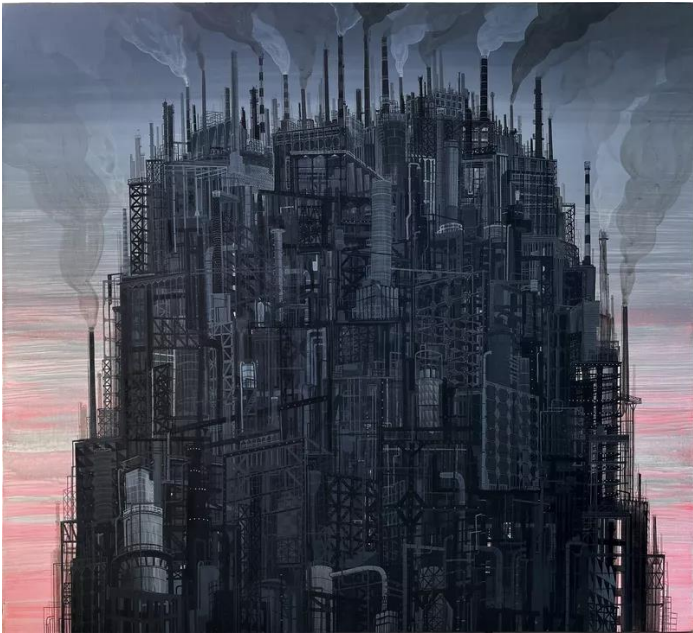


Fig 2

I chose this image despite it lacking any type of character design elements because I felt it was still relevant. It has a very strong and obvious industrial theme and gives me a feeling of 'organised chaos'. Despite the image having no characters present, you can imagine the types of characters you'd likely come across in an environment like this. The colour palette and the almost overwhelming amount of detail is what achieves this. When thinking about the characters I could imagine, it made me realise that the environment in which a character is placed can play a large role in the character's image. Not only how the environment affects the design process itself; but how the environment affects the characters' look in the scenes they appear in. For example, if I designed a character with my keyword industrial in mind, using the above image as a reference for the environment they would exist in, they more than likely would end up with a muted colour palette and clothes fit for navigating a factory. Placed in an alternate environment, such as one using my next keyword, *silkpunk* as a reference, they would not fit in as well - however the new environment would use new lighting and a different colour palette, altering the feel of our character.

Word 2 - Silkpunk

Silkpunk is a term created by author Ken Liu as a way of describing a combination of fantasy and sci-fi; specifically inspired by East Asian culture. Contrasting to my last keyword, Silkpunk takes no inspiration from steam punk or technology (or more industrial themes in general), which I thought could be used as a good starting point to exploring character designs of characters who do not embrace the more industrial themes within the story. The artist *Yuko Shimizu* was one of the artists I came across while researching this keyword. Her work stood out to me for a few reasons; notably her unique style and her flawless use of both Japanese culture and contemporary styles to influence her work.



Fig 3

One or more characters are often the focal point of her pieces; but she does not limit herself when it comes to the type of character, as shown in Fig 3. Throughout her portfolio she showcases a diverse range of characters; superheroes, astronauts, rockstars, and fairies are just some character types I noticed when admiring her work. I feel like the ability to adapt like Shimizu is important in all disciplines of art, and character design is no exception.

Shimizu is the artist for the covers of JY Yang's series of silkpunk novellas; *Tensorate*. The illustrations on the cover alone portray the characters as powerful and confident women; and the detailed backgrounds only add to this feeling. Shimizu's art played an important role in Yang's book, and I feel this brings me to another important point of interest I'd like to explore during this project, which is designing a character based on a brief. It's one thing for me as an artist to sit down and design a character to fit into my own stories, however designing the look of an existing character that has such visual depictions is another type of challenge that artists working for studios or agencies will often face.

The ability to use descriptions and someone else's story to make a character's design is important once. Using *Nashville Film Institute's* article on character design as a point of reference, it explains a variety of ways artists can use the information available to aid the design process. The article on character design said the following on the importance of the origin of the character:

"When creating a character, it is suggested to examine the century or location. This is a crucial step since it establishes the tone for the character's future environment and backdrop. A fully armored knight, for example, would be appropriate for a Renaissance fortress. A space marine in full battle gear would be suitable for a future space battle. Consider the period: the style of clothes and personality in the 1980s is substantially different from that in the 1920s." (NFI, no date)



Fig 4

The next artist I chose to look into is Rinotuna. While she is not known for silkpunk or dieselpunk artwork, I felt figure four was a unique example of character design that could be considered sci-fi fantasy. The character, while based on a kiwi, has a green hued colour palette and appears to be a wind-up doll. I felt this was notable as it made me consider how more fantasy themed characters could interact or connect with robots and characters made for an industrial setting. I feel like such contrasting ideas could be difficult to merge or pair, though I feel it presents an interesting challenge.

Throughout my third year project I'd like not only to focus on improving my character design skills; but gaining knowledge on new techniques and character design and concept as a whole, not just my technical skills. While my ability to create characters with an effective use of colour and style is important, understanding the process of designing a character and the theory behind the work is just as important. The research that precedes the concept lays an important foundation for a well-rounded design and a character with life.

Word 3 - Dieselpunk

While Dieselpunk and Silkpunk are both under the umbrella of the term retrofuturism, dieselpunk utilises an aesthetic similar to steampunk. While industrial influences can also be seen in dieselpunk, I felt it was an important key word due to dieselpunk being heavily associated with 1950's retrofuturism; and my research has proven multiple character design trends which I felt were worth exploring in my project.



Fig 5

This brings me to my next image show in Fig 5, an illustration by Alejandro Burdisio. While his work does not have a primary focus on the characters featured in his pieces his use of both human and robot characters intrigued me. The piece above showcases what I mean perfectly; there are several humanoid characters in the scene, however what caught my attention was the bipedal robot pulling the cart. While I have no confirmation this robot was intended to be a character itself, I personally feel its design gives it enough personality to feel like it is one.

In the past I have exclusively focused on human/humanoid characters, and this has rarely been an issue, so I've had no need to challenge it. However, the more I considered it, I was able to come up with multiple occasions in which the main character was not a humanoid. Wall-E is a good example of this, as are Disney's *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo*, where countless non-human characters are featured. I think my 3rd year project is an invaluable opportunity to explore non-organic life in character design.

Another aspect of his work I admire is the style itself. I'd describe it as stylised semi-realism, and while it's very different to my personal style, I certainly appreciate its value, particularly in dieselpunk as a theme. As stated previously, dieselpunk adopts a retro-futuristic look often with a focus on diesel powered technology, hence the name. His use of colour and lighting does a wonderful job at setting the tone here; the combination of muted oranges and blues is almost reminiscent of an abandoned American gas station full of rusty cars in an apocalypse movie. Which, considering the key word *dieselpunk*, is the kind of feeling I'd want my art to give.

A lot of media using dieselpunk theming could also be described as industrial. So many titles I found have already been mentioned in my proposal, however films and TV shows such as *Blade Runner*, *Castle in the Sky*, and *Disenchantment* are all examples worth mentioning here. Character design is just as important to film and TV as it is to every other media type and looking into Dieselpunk themed media has allowed me to see how a variety of artists use this theme to create concepts of characters.

Dieselpunk is the only keyword from my chosen words that gives me a more specific time period. While I was not searching for keywords that gave me a time frame to base my designs on- the fact one appears here is a notable one. As mentioned previously, the time period plays a part in how a character's design turns out. While it's not a necessity to identify a specific time period or date for a story to have successful character design, it does impact how a character's design turns out. Even if the overall theme is silkpunk or dieselpunk, the characters outfit, hair, accessories, even colour palette would differ between a story set in 1920 and one set in 1960. Despite there being an overall retro futuristic theme, retrofuturism would still differ between the time periods, thus changing the design.

Throughout my proposal, I have discussed my chosen keywords, multiple artists, and a variety of important facets of a character's design, with an overall goal of proposing a more in depth look into what goes into a good character design, and what factors affect the designs outcome.

I want to use my keywords, *industrial*, *silkpunk*, and *dieselpunk* as the primary themes for the characters I will design throughout this project. Each keyword has also brought its own questions and given an opportunity to explore non-organic life forms as characters as its own focus.

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