

Alex Webb

PORTFOLIO CONTEXT PAPER: *SHE KILLS MONSTERS* PROP DESIGN

The first semester of this work was done remotely, which included the research, drafting, and designing elements. The second semester was done when I had returned on campus, and this was the time that was taken to build the full version of the blue snake sword, and the smaller scale versions of the other weapons and the Tiamat archway.

One of the design elements I focused on was color associations with the characters. As is revealed at the end of the show, each of the main party members, as well as the dungeon master, become Tiamat. As such, each character controls one of the heads. Some of the associations between the species of dragon and their colors compared to the party members were more obvious; one character is a big red demon, so naturally, one would associate that with the red head. I chose to associate Kaliope, the elf, with green, because of her association with nature. Lilith is a demon princess, so it makes sense that she would be associated with the color of dragons that are called “skull dragons.” By the time I thought of this idea, I had already made the renderings for the weapons, so it would seem intuitive to have Tilly be associated with blue. Because blue dragons are storm dragons, that gave me the idea to make some of the changes that I did to the design of Tilly’s sword; notably, the addition of lighting and sky-related elements. Of course, that would leave the dungeon master the white head, also known as the ice dragon. I found this satisfactory, because the facets of the dice one uses in dungeons and dragons could be seen as similar to ice crystals.

One of the biggest obstacles that productions of this play run into is figuring out how to pull off the Tiamat puppets, as all 5 heads are supposed to be involved in the action sequence of fighting with Agnes. When I was researching the ways that other people made similar puppets, I came across the idea of having loops of material represent the dragons' body, as opposed to needing a more concrete interpretation. Other productions have done similar things, but what makes my version different is that the necks of the dragons fasten onto the scenery, so the actors will have more movement capabilities.

In addition, I think that adding the archway to the set contributes to the interpretation and significance of the play as a whole. The audience suddenly seeing the archway used in a way that subverts their expectations can be exciting, and only compounds on the plot twist at that point of the play. In addition, the archway can be used as a portal between the worlds of real life and dungeons and dragons. The script can change between the two settings without much warning, so having the characters use the archway as a way of symbolizing entering and exiting the world makes the change more palpable. This both serves the audience as creating an easier way to understand the events of the play, as well as making the event of crossing over more climactic in and of itself; especially the first and last times that Agnes crosses between worlds.

On top of the color associations with the other primary characters, I have made a color association with Agnes, despite her not transforming into a five-headed dragon goddess. It may be more subtle, but I have made her sword and shield an autumnal orange. Her sword and shield are given to her at the start of her dungeons and dragons

adventure, and part of the joke is that they are poor beginners' weapons. As such, the sword is plain and rusty, and the shield is simple and small.

If my designs were to become part of a bigger production, I would be excited about how to continue the use of the symbolism in the colors and the archway through other elements of the show: such as costumes, lighting, directing/blocking, and the rest of the scene design itself. I do not consider this script to be well written. But, the first time I thought through the ideas of how the archway could be used to heighten certain moments in the play, I found myself being emotionally moved by that visualization, in spite of the script (at times) actively working against having the emotional beats it wants to hit.

This show is loved by a lot of people; some for the sake of the 90s nostalgia, the love of dungeons and dragons, or the relationships between the characters. The best reason I think someone could like it would be because of a version of the play they saw. This means that, in spite of what that production was given to work with, they are able to turn it into something better than it is because of their passion and skill.

A huge amount of my time and effort has been devoted to this honors project over the last year, and it seems unreal that it can be coming to a close now. I have learned a lot about the design process, gotten to know my own creative and working tendencies better, and have been learning to overcome the obstacles that prevent me from focusing and moving forward. The two most recent semesters have also been two of my hardest at ECU, for a veritable bouquet of reasons, but I am glad that I was able to devote my time and effort to this project as a way of determining the skills I get to work on. Having to

carve out time to devote to this learning and creation process has certainly not been easy, but I believe in the long run, I will have gained more than lost.