Washington University in St. Louis

Washington University Open Scholarship

Spring 5-10-2023

Monster Planet Bounty Hunter

Arthur Santoro
ajsantoro@wustl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/mfa_illustration

Part of the Game Design Commons, Graphic Design Commons, and the Illustration Commons

Recommended Citation

MONSTER PLANET BOUNTY HUNTER

by Arthur Santoro

MONSTER PLANET BOUNTY HUNTER

by Arthur Santoro

In this paper I will be discussing my personal interest in games and art as well as my experience and process working on my original board game: Monster Planet Bounty Hunter. I will also discuss my visual influences, how I approach making games and why I think games are an important form of art.

Me, Games and Art

Games have always been a huge part of my life. From playing extensive games of tag on the playground to late nights of lego star wars, games were always on my mind. Sure I loved movies and tv shows, but the worlds these properties took place in were always more interesting to me than the stories. Watching narratives play out in beautiful fantasy settings like star wars and lord of the rings was fun, but I wanted to be an active participant rather than a passive viewer. Board games, video games and physical games all allowed me to be that participant.

I loved (and still love) to play games, but I have also always been an artist. For as much time that I spent playing games I also spent time making things. Drawings, sculptures, various lego and bionicle creations. I created things and used them in a way that allowed me to participate in other worlds. I wouldn't just make a new custom bionicle figure because it looked cool, I would make it so that I could pretend to fight it as one of my favorite lego characters. For me, the act of creating art has always been a way of immersing myself in another world. A world with excitement and adventure, preferably one of my own creation. I never drew "fan art" for any of the games or movies that I enjoyed, I wanted everything I made to take place in a world that I set the rules for, not reality or a world invented by someone else. It had to be mine for me to care about it.

Making Games

One of the earliest games I remember coming up with was buildup-freeze tag. The concept was simple, it was a merging of buildup tag, where one person started off as "it" and everyone they tagged would join them one by one until everyone playing was "it" (or just until recess ended), and freeze tag, where one person was "it" and the other participants would stand frozen in place when tagged (until freed by another player). Buildup-freeze tag merged these two games into one, where the first two times you got tagged played like a normal game of freeze tag, but the third time you got tagged you joined the tagger as another person who was "it." While an extremely simple example (I did come up with this one in 3rd grade) I think it illustrates how I approach making games in general. I took the mechanics from two different games me and my friends enjoyed playing and combined them into one. I took the same approach when making the board game that would eventually become my thesis project: Monster Planet Bounty Hunter. All of the mechanics, themes and characters that exist in the game are taken from some other

sources of inspiration such as other board games, video games, mythologies and biology.

Why make Board Games?

For me, art creation and engagement is a necessary act of therapeutic escapism from the modern world. So naturally I most enjoy making and engaging with art that takes place in a setting other than our modern reality. Settings in the distant past are of a particular interest to me, and boardgames can serve as a unique window into that past. In his book "It's all a Game, a short history of board games" author Tristan Donovan writes: "People first began playing board games centuries, maybe even millennia, before the development of the written word and they have been with us ever since" (Donovan 5). Games, and board games specifically may have been around about as long as modern humans. So just as playing a board game might be immersive in a sense of drawing players into the game world, the act of creating a board game can also be an immersive window into an activity that humans have been participating in for thousands of years. Board games can also function as a break from our increasingly digital world. Donovan continues "It is that ability to bring people face-to-face that is helping board games endure in an age of Playstations, Facebook, and iPhones" (Donovan 5). Board games can bring people together, and can do so without any screens, electricity or wifi. So in a world of digital mass consumption, I believe that board games are more valuable now than ever.

Above
The Royal Game or Ur was created in ancient Mesopotamia during the early third millennium BC, making it the oldest known board game. (Donovan 13)

World Building

Outside of the nuts and bolts mechanics of MPBH and the illustrated content within the game, the game also takes place in a fantasy world of my own creation. In the following section I've outlined some of the information I've invented to enrich the world of the game, and explain the premise that fuels the gameplay. While most of this information isn't necessary to know when playing the game, I believe that the best fantasy worlds have a significant amount of depth in terms of their lore. Thus making this writing, a worthwhile exercise for a project such as MPBH.

History

On an earth-like planet set the technological equivalent to 13th Century Europe, human societies were thriving. As the top of the food chain on the planet, the only large scale conflicts were caused by other humans. And sadly they caused many. But all of the petty squabbles between people came to a halt with the sudden arrival of a new enemy. From the deepest depths of the wilderness and the ocean, monstrous violent creatures began to suddenly emerge. And along with them, a strange but harnessable energy that came to be known as magic. Some believed the monsters and magic were sent from the underworld as a signal of the end times, others believed the anomalies had come from the sky. The result of a falling star. The arrival of monsters and magic on the world eventually became known as "The Calamity"
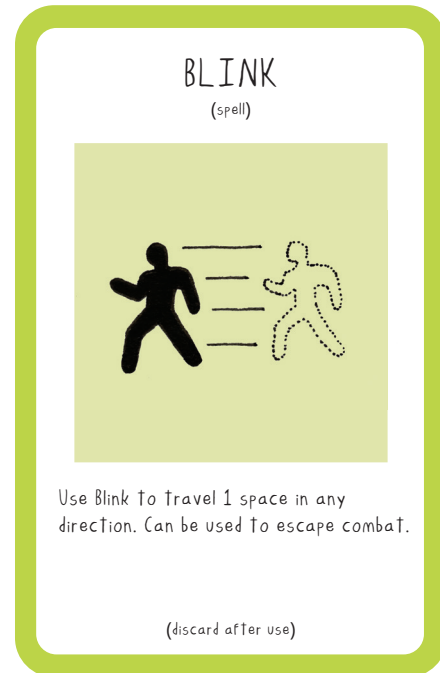
People fought back against the monsters as best as they could, but within a decade, the human population had decreased by 90%. The last remaining people gathered in well fortified cities. These cities were crowded but well resourced with urban gardens that had begun growing surpluses of crops, many suspected due to the arrival of magic. The weather had also changed in the last decade, summers were warmer and longer, and the seas had begun to rise. Hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions were all common. But the strongest cities persevered. Two decades after The Calamity, the planet began to settle down. The remaining cities had become self-sustaining societies that eventually learned to trade with one another despite having to navigate the monster filled outlands. While the monsters were strong, they could be killed. Most of them were no smarter than wild animals, although it was rumored that some of the most intelligent monsters had learned to use human weaponry. Nevertheless, Humans found ways to defeat them. Magic was commonly found out in the wilderness, and with enough training, people had learned to harness it to combat the monsters.

Economics

The economy of Monster Planet is largely reliant on resource trade between the various remaining cities. While cities are generally self-sustaining, resources such as metal, stone and livestock are commonly traded between cities that specialize in one particular resource. Traders between cities utilize a network of roads and magical portals built to teleport trade caravans across longer and more dangerous distances. (The nuances of teleportation are not fully understood by the residents of monster planet, no teleportation spell or enchantment has proven strong enough to transport people or caravans more than around 50 miles, any given portal will also only lead to a finite amount of other portals so roads and trails are still necessary for long distance travel.) Oceanic trade routes are also sometimes still used on Monster Planet but the world's oceans are home to the most aggressive and dangerous monsters, making nautical travel much riskier than travel by land. However, landbound trade routes still carry their fare share of danger on Monster Planet so different cities have come up with different methods of keeping their roads monster free. The most successful of these methods came to be known as the "Monster Planet Bounty Hunt"

The Hunt

The "Monster Planet Bounty Hunt '' commonly referred to as simply "The Hunt '' is an annual competition where different bounty hunters compete to kill monsters along the various roads and trade routes of Monster Planet. Monsters are assigned a "star value" based on how dangerous they are, the first bounty hunter to kill "ten stars" worth of monsters and reach a designated "endpoint" location along the path wins the competition. Bounty hunters are also allowed to attack or trade with each other during the course of the competition, but there can only be one winner.
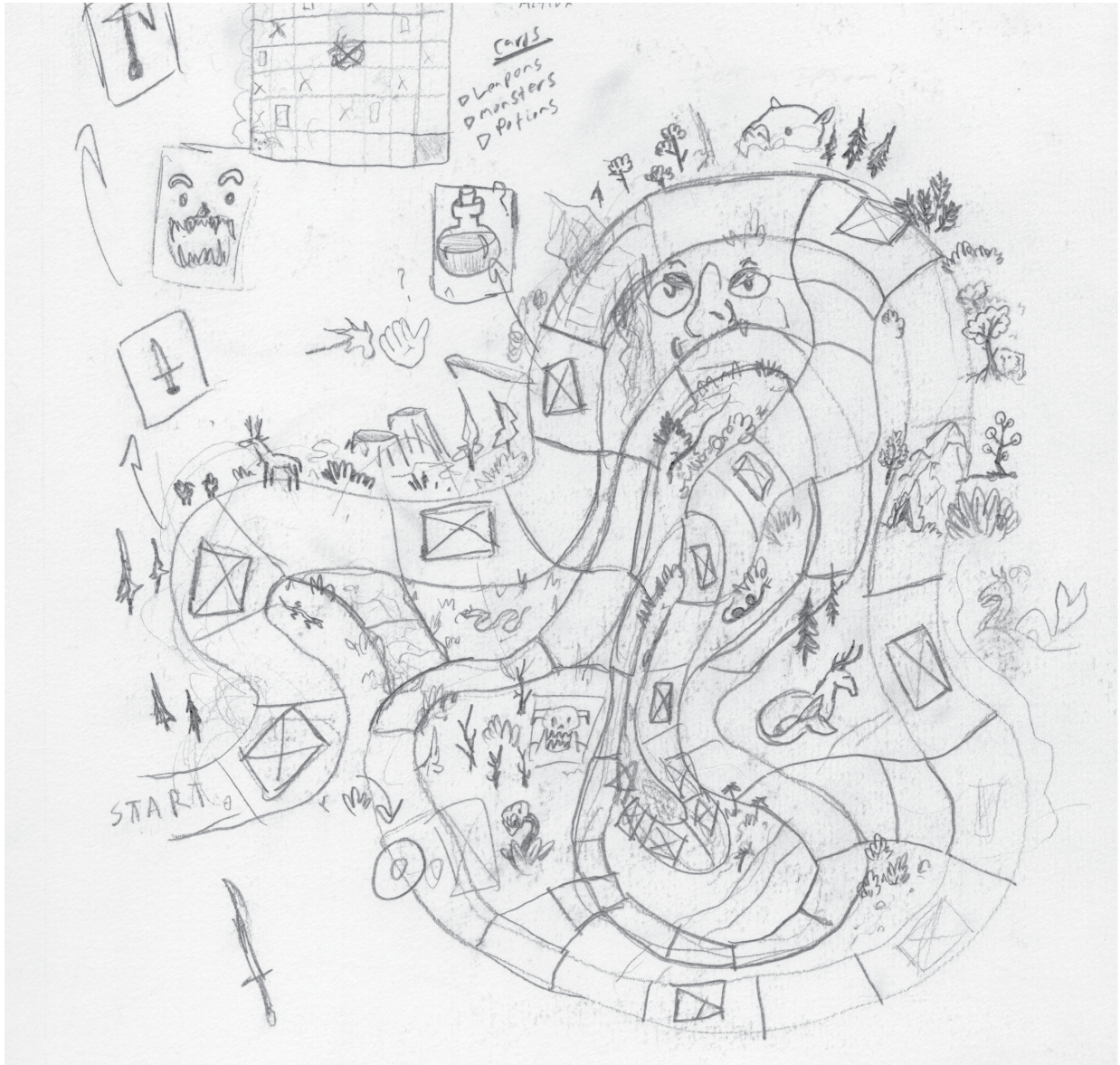
THAGMOIZER

Attack	2
Defense	1
Value	★ ★

BLINK
(spell)

Use Blink to travel 1 space in any direction. Can be used to escape combat.

(discard after use)

Magic

The term: "Magic" in the world of MPBH refers to a specific semi-physical substance that suddenly appeared in the world during the calamity. Magic is commonly found out in the wilderness manifested into colorful orbs of light that drift aimlessly throughout the environment. These orbs can be gathered, stored, and utilized for a variety of different effects. The three known categories of magical effects are spells, enchantments, and mutations.

Spells: Magic that produces temporary effects are known as spells. Different spells can be utilized by people for specific effects such as telekinesis, long or short range teleportation, the enhancement or diminution of physical abilities, and more.

Enchantments: Some magic can be bound and forged to existing objects such as weapons and armor to grant the object magical effects such as the summoning of fire or lightning, enhanced durability, increased potency based on regional location and more.

Mutations: Mutations in the world of MPBH refer to animals and monsters that possess magical or unexplainable abilities and aspects. These can be as basic as amplified speed or strength or as complex as possessing the magical effects of spells and enchantments.

Making Monster Planet Bounty Hunter

My initial idea for the game was based entirely off of the type of content I wanted to create. I wanted to illustrate a board and a set of cards. I felt like an entirely card based game, or a board centric game for that matter wouldn't be satisfying enough for me on its own. This was the first time that I really had a chance to design a board game for a class project, and I wanted it to be the biggest, best thing it could be. The combination of cards and a board would also give the game plenty of room to grow after the initial three weeks we had to work on it, I could always add more cards if I wanted to scale up. Additionally, the merging of the large format of the board juxtaposed with the smaller format of the cards was interesting to me on a purely visual level. I loved the idea of a cohesive set of cards that accompany a board, all illustrated in a specific and coherent visual language.

After deciding that the game would at minimum contain a board and a set of cards I got to work brainstorming how the two elements would work together. I started by working off of a game that utilized both: Monopoly. In Monopoly, when players land on the "chance" and "community chest" tiles along the game board path they draw a card from the respective "chance" and "community chest" decks that sit in the center of the game board. This was the perfect start for me. As players would move along my game board they would draw cards from different decks based off of the tiles they landed on at the end of each turn of movement.

Monopoly (Hasbro Games)
Monopoly is an economically themed board game in which players compete against one another to purchase property along the game board, when all other players are bankrupt the last remaining player wins the game.)

MPBH first sketch
My first concept sketch for Monster
Planet Bounty Hunter, April 2023

The idea to have different decks for different tiles along the game board path immediately got me thinking about the different types of cards that would go in the game, which then led me to determining the theme of the game. I thought back to the type of content I wanted to illustrate for this project and decided on a medieval fantasy world setting. The game could be about hunting fantasy monsters while traversing an illustrated game board. The content for the cards then came together pretty quickly. Since players gained cards from landing on specific spots along the game path, I would make the cards things that would be useful for players to fight monsters such as spells, weapons, and armor. These three categories of cards would remain consistent throughout the duration of the game's
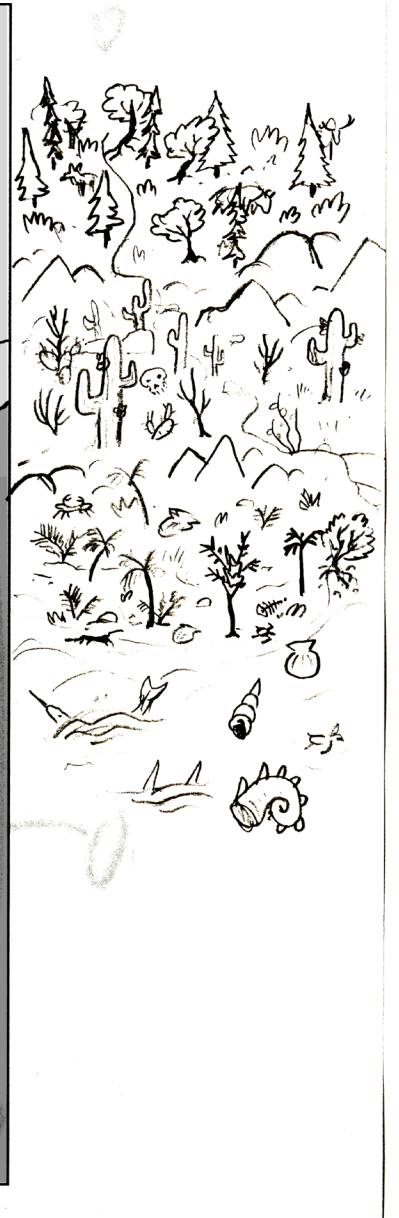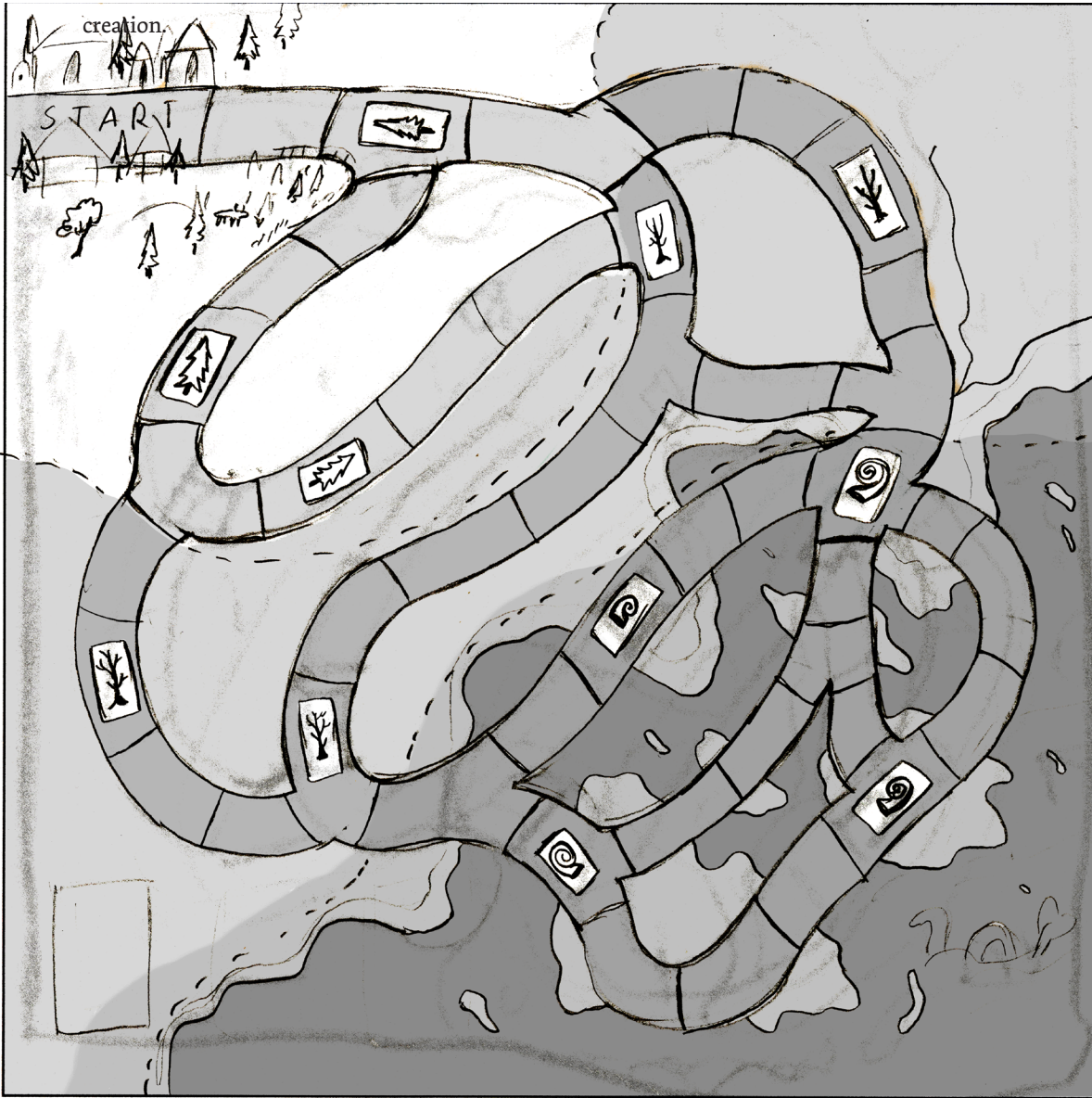
MPBH Map Version 1.0

Next I needed a way for players to encounter the monsters that they would be fighting. I brainstormed some ideas such as the monsters living as static illustrations along the board, or as 3d miniatures that could be placed along the board when encountered, but I decided on a simpler solution that also solved not only the problem of how but also when players would encounter monsters. The monsters would exist as a fourth category of cards alongside the weapons, spells, and armor. All four types of cards would be mixed together in the decks that players would draw from. This format allowed for the act of drawing a card to function as both a way of acquiring items and spells and as the way in which players encounter monsters. Drawing a card would be a "random encounter" of sorts, it might be a helpful item or a deadly monster. Players would have to weigh the odds of risk and reward before choosing to draw a card.

After determining that the card decks within the game would contain all four different types of cards I then moved to determining what would differentiate each deck. I liked the idea that the game would "scale up" in difficulty as players moved further away from their starting point on the game board. Additionally, I realized that a way to visualize this progression of difficulty could be portrayed by geographic region on the board. The regions further out from the starting space would contain better items/spells as well as more dangerous monsters.

In the first playable prototype map for MPBH, I initially started with three regions that corresponded to three levels of difficulty. Players would start the game in the forest region. A lush forest seemed like the appropriate choice for the starting area of the game, as forests are generally associated with an abundance of fresh water, life and resources. The "intermediate" difficulty region would be desert. A rocky cactus filled desert automatically seemed like the perfect choice to contrast the relative safety of the forest as deserts are generally perceived as much harsher environments. The third and final region would be a coastline archipelago. While the islands and beaches themselves may be relatively tame, the depths of the ocean inspire mystery, exploration and in the context of the game: danger. In addition to the base sketch for the paths and regional boundaries, on the right hand side of the map I also sketched out some ideas for what the illustrated content of each region could look like. I imaged the entire map covered in dense illustrations with the path of the game board functioning as the only true negative space.

If players knew to some extent what to expect when deciding where to go on the game board, the amount of randomization within the gameplay would be reduced, thus allowing for more strategic and skill based gameplay decisions. As I began to hammer out the nuts and bolts functionality aspects of the game I realized that another goal I had was to create a board game that was not only fun, but also rewarded skill and strategy over luck. So I chose to pursue game play mechanics that would maximize player choice. One of the first choice base mechanics I included in MPBH was variation in path movement. Board games such as monopoly only include one path and one direction of movement around the board, players roll a die and then simply move their allotted number of spaces. In MPBH I decided to keep the base mechanic of movement based on dice rolling, but then split up the path so that players could choose both what direction to move in and what turns to take.

STEEL PLATE HELMET
(Armor)

Defense   +3 🎲

Combat

    I had determined early on how players would encounter monsters (by landing on the regional card deck spaces and drawing a card from the corresponding deck) but I still needed a way for combat to function between players and monsters. I chose to take inspiration from the table-top game Heroscape that utilizes turn based combat. In Heroscape, different characters have different defense and attack values that correspond to the amount of combat die they will roll in a given encounter. For instance, if a character with an attack of four is attacking a character with a defense of five, the defending player will roll five dice and the attacking player will roll three.

Heroscape Character Card
A character card from Heroscape
(Hasbro Games 2004)

A combat encounter in heroscape can generally have two different outcomes, either the attacking player rolls more skull side up die than defending player rolls shield side up die, thus resulting in 1 damage to the defending character. Or the defending player rolls an equal or greater than amount of shields to the attackers skulls, thus blocking any damage from the encounter. In MPBH combat works similarly, with sword and shield die icons. I also chose to simplify combat by removing any sort of damage system from the game. Combat encounters in MPBH can end in either a draw, or the death of one of the two combatants. I added this game function so as to speed up gameplay and make combat encounters more meaningful. However, I didn't want players to ever be out of the game upon losing a combat encounter so I decided that upon death, players will lose two cards from their inventory and respawn back at the "home" board tile. On their next turn they could venture back out into the game world to try and catch up.

Heroscape Combat Die
Combat dice in Heroscape each have two skulls, three shields and two blank spaces).

Creating the Map

Throughout the process of creating and playtesting MPBH I created many different iterations of the game board, which I began to refer to as the "Map" since it was just as much a process of determining geographical features as it was about creating a playable board. Everytime I created a new iteration of the map with a new path layout I had to playtest the game to make sure that everything still worked. For instance, if some areas had too many or too few spaces set along the path, gameplay would be slowed down or sped up. Neither of which was necessarily bad, but it took a lot of playtesting to determine which areas of the map should be faster or slower to navigate.

I created six versions of the map that I used for playtesting throughout the process of creating MPBH. Version one was a very rudimentary mock up that I created for my first round of playtesting. It was 28x28 inches (a size that would remain consistent for every version of the map) and contained three draw-card tiles in the forest region, four in the desert and four in the ocean. After just a couple playtests with some of my friends I realized a few issues with the layout of this early map. For one, the draw card tile right outside the starting point in the forest region could end up with a monster on it, which would then block any players who respawned back at the start. Another issue I found was that three draw-card tiles was too few for the forest region. As the easiest difficulty region in the game, most players preferred to gain some cards from the forest before venturing out into the more hazardous regions. Draw-card tiles would also quickly fill up with monsters as players continued to land on them thus making it difficult for players to gain new items and spells in the forest. I found that an easy solution was to simply make all three regions contain four draw-card tiles, which I executed in Version two.

Version two also included three regional pattern designs for the non-playable areas of the board. My plan for the final product of the game was always to create original illustrations for every inch of non-playable land on the board but for the purposes of playtesting patterns did a great job of converting visual interest and geographic specificity across the three regions. I realized early on that since the game board was the first thing the players would see before starting the game, it had to pack a punch visually to get players excited to explore the game world. This realization led me to a more saturated color palette for version two, as well as more pathing branches between regions.

Version three of the map contained some large steps forward for MPBH, after more rounds of playtesting I had determined that the map needed an "end point." In versions one and two players would win the game by gaining ten monster stars and returning to the home tile. This created an issue, since players also get sent back to the home tile upon losing a combat encounter. So a player with ten stars and a few extra cards to spare would be incentivised to die so as to respawn back at home and win the game. It was confusing, counter intuitive and didn't fit the spirit of the game. So in version three I added a volcanic island as the final region and a tile with a star on it at the edge of the map to serve as the end point. The volcano island would contain monsters that were even stronger than those on the coast and a couple items that were also extremely powerful. Upon adding the volcano island I determined that visually, the map would also benefit from one more region, and I reveled in the opportunity to come up with more monster designs. So split the desert region in half to add in a swamp region. A swamp felt like the appropriate choice as it balanced out the perceived humidity of the map. The desert and lava island were both dry, the swamp and coast were both humid, and the forest was a happy medium. In terms of gameplay, the swamp would be the same level of difficulty as the desert but would contain more spells, whereas the desert would have more armor (both contained the same amount of weapons and monsters).

Version four of the map was a step in a different direction for MPBH, I wanted to try a hexagonal grid format to give the game a more modern aesthetic and standardize the orientation and placement of the draw-card tiles. I also sketched out the draw card tiles as "Monster Dens" and began to refer to them as such. (the concept being that when players draw cards they are investigating a monster den which might contain a helpful spell or item, or a deadly monster).

In version five of the map, I maintained the hexagonal grid for the monster dens but brought back the more organic paths which fit the theme of the game better than the triangles. I also removed the card deck placement blocks from the board so as to make more space for each region to contain the optimal number of four monster dens. Version six of the map is the last map I made for playtesting purposes before moving on to the final map design. I added in some of the final line art that I had created, and rough color mockups for each region.
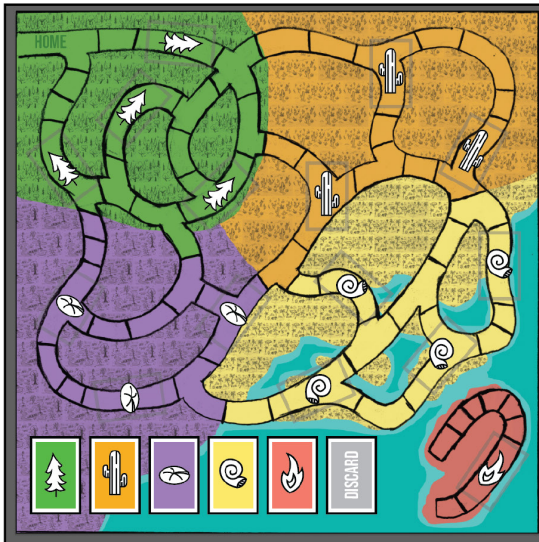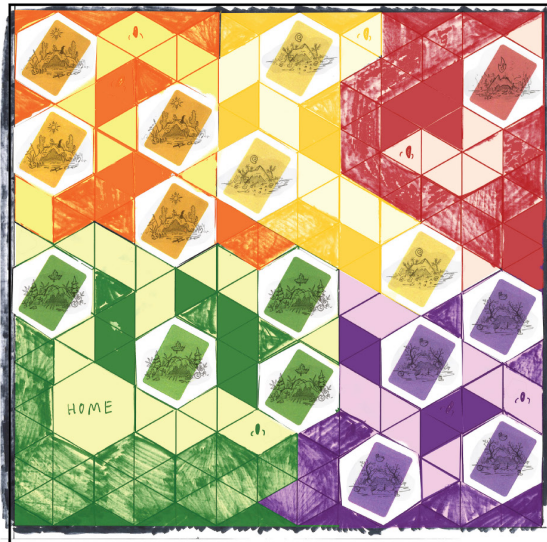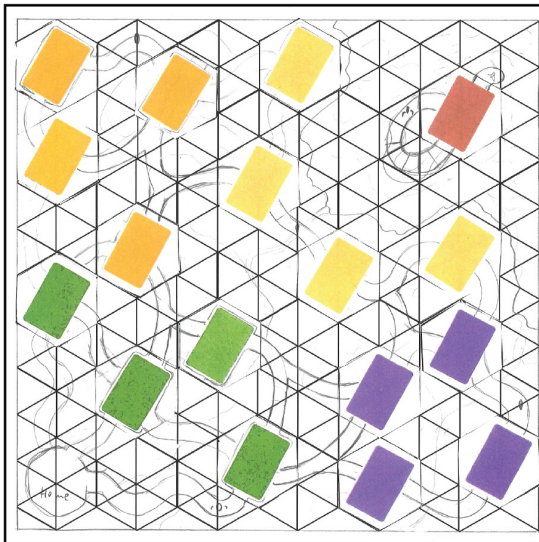
Version 1.
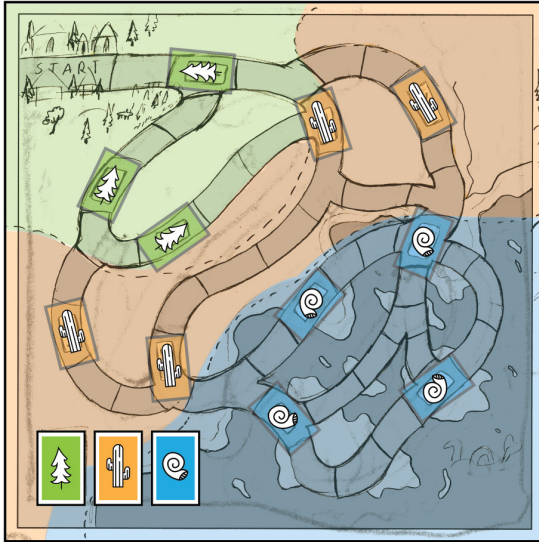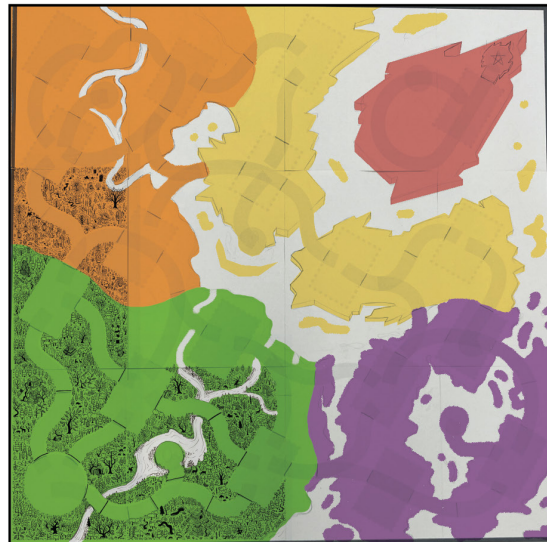

Version 2.
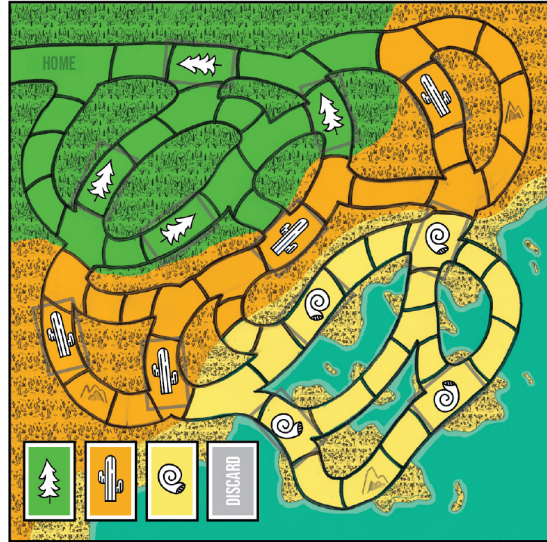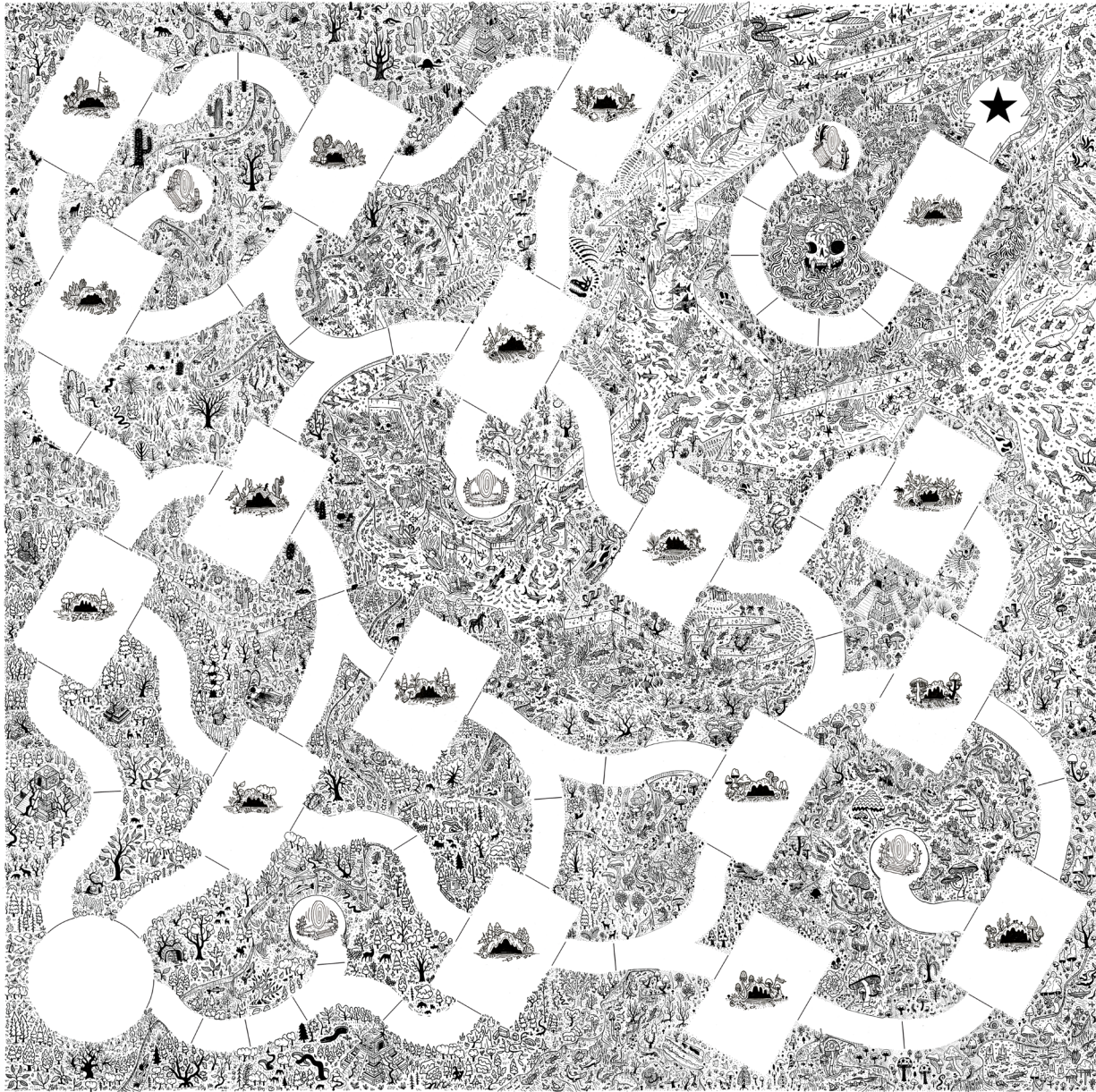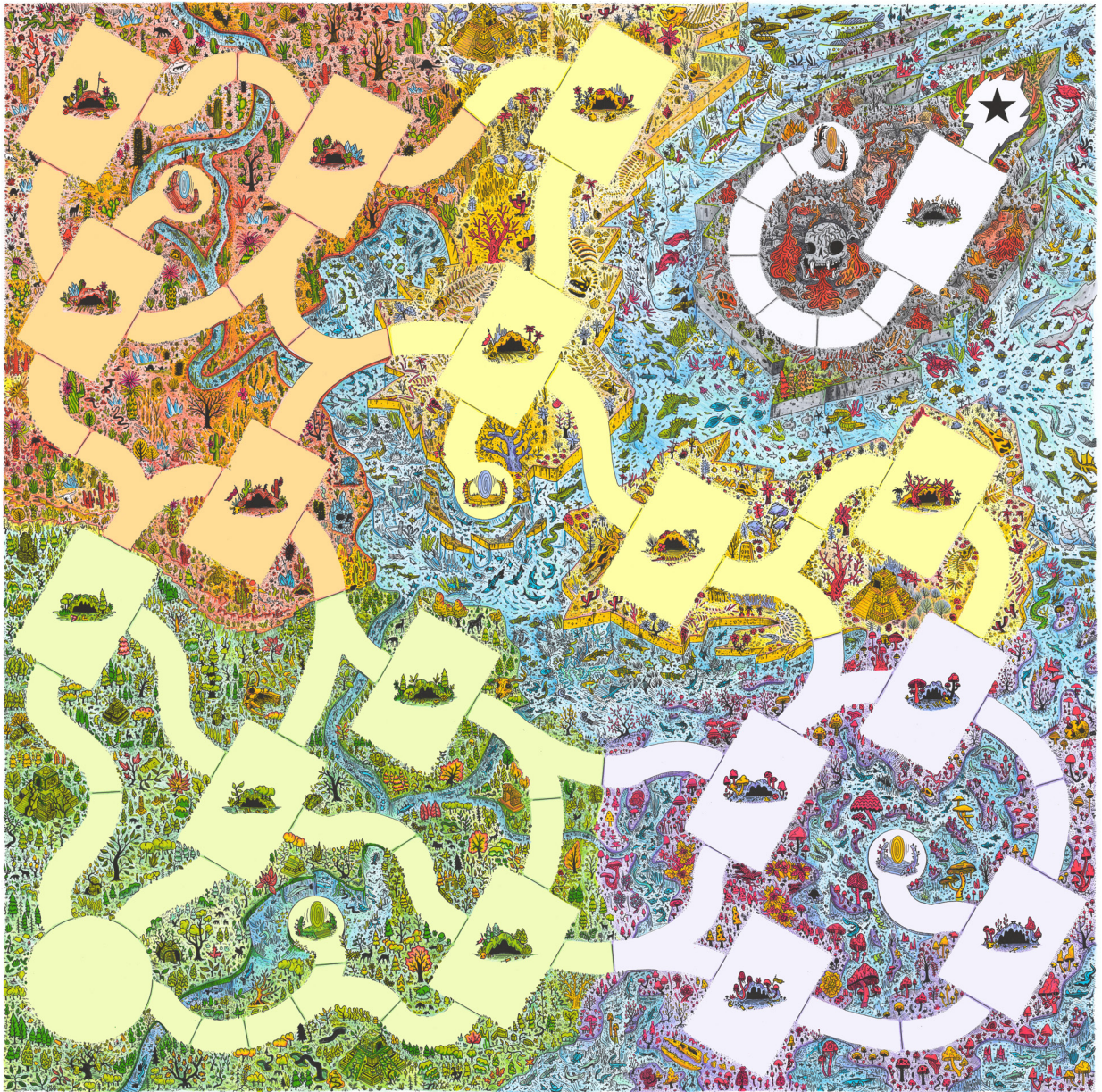

Version 3.

Version 4.

Version 5.

Version 6.

My final map for MPBH black and white (left) color (right). I split up the base sketch of the map into twelve different 8.5 x 11 inch chunks that I drew over on a lightbox with a micron pen. There are no repeated illustrations on the map, all monster dens, portals, trees, fish, rocks and everything else is a unique drawing. I created it this way to maximize the visual depth of the map. I want players to see something new every time they play a game of MPBH.

Influences

Outside of board games that I took mechanics from to create MPBH such as Heroscape and Monopoly, many fantasy games also influenced the world building aspects of MPBH. Fantasy as a genre has always been the most interesting form of storytelling and worldbuilding for me, as it has essentially no rules for what is possible. In her essay "Core Collections in Genre Studies Fantasy Fiction 101", librarian Charlotte Burcher writes: "Although fantasy does have escape value and is enjoyed by many readers for exactly this reason, it is a mistake to think of this as the genre's only appeal" (Burcher 227). For me, the biggest value of the fantasy genre has never been escapism, but rather the unlimited creative potential of worldbuilding. The following games are all examples of well executed fantasy worldbuilding that have directly or indirectly influenced the world of MPBH.

Bugdom 2

Bugdom 2 (2002) is an action adventure game set in and around a suburban house in the early 2000s. The player controls a grasshopper named Skip who travels throughout the game world in pursuit of a bumble bee who has stolen his knapsack. What Bugdom 2 lacks in its graphical qualities or narrative depth, it makes up for with a unique and exciting game world that the player character can explore. Each level of the game is set in a different part of the house or surrounding green spaces such as the backyard, front yard, sewer, playroom and closet. Within each level there are many unique objectives, puzzles and enemies that keep the game interesting.

The exploratory elements of Bugdom 2 were always my favorite aspect of the game. I was always super excited to see what was in store in the next level/location because they were all so unique, yet also all made so much sense in the context of the game world. No level feels out of place, yet they all have very distinct qualities that separate them from each other. In MPBH I wanted to emulate the excitement I felt to explore the world that Bugdom 2 generated. So in MPBH, each region also has its own specific ecosystem, visual qualities, and challenges/rewards similar to the level designs in Bugdom 2.

Skyrim

Skyrim is the 5th installment in the action/adventure role playing video game series known as "The Elder Scrolls." The Elder scrolls games all take place in the medieval fantasy continent of Tamriel, of which Skyrim is the continent's northernmost province. While there are a great deal of medieval fantasy role playing games on the market, Skyrim remains one of the most unique and well executed in terms of worldbuilding. Even long after its initial release in 2011.

The world of Skyrim is cold, dangerous, and strikingly beautiful. From birch and pine forests to icey mountain tops and steamy hot springs, the environmental aspects of Skyrim are one of the game's greatest strengths. The map of Skyrim is divided into nine distinct regions known as holds, each hold has its own unique flora, fauna and personality. While they have their differences, the holds all work together to build a cohesive and fleshed out world. The warmest regions in skyrim still feel and look like they belong in a colder environment, and the coldest regions look and feel just as frigid as one would expect from the specific environment the game is set in. The architecture and people who populate skyrim also reinforce the specific setting that the game takes place in. The towns and cities of Skyrim are hardy but run down, the architecture is reminiscent of Medieval Scandinavian cities. The people are tough and hard working, but also rugged and run down from the dangers of their world.

Specificity is one of the key factors in successful fantasy world building, if Skyrim was set in a generic European Medieval fantasy setting, the game world would feel much less unique and the game as a whole would be weaker for it. So the game developers took a more specific approach to what the atmosphere of the game would be. Specificity in environmental design is something I've strived to create in the map of MPBH. The flora, fauna and architecture found throughout the map of MPBH create a cohesive world while maintaining distinctions between each region. I strove to achieve this by including some plants and animals throughout the map that appear across all five regions such as snakes, shrubs and grasses, and other plants and animals that only live in specific regions such as pine trees, cacti, mushrooms, deer and crustaceans.

Outside of its environmental aspects, Skyrim also utilizes a number of game mechanics that I have brought into MPBH. In both MPBH and Skyrim the player character collects items and spells as they move through the game world. Both games also have a limit to the amount
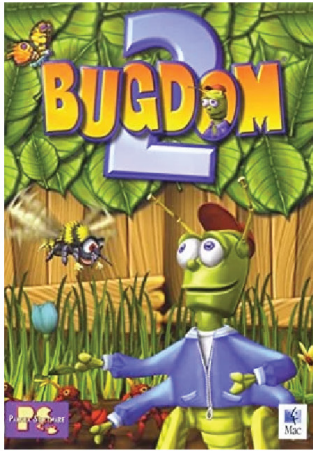
of items/spells the player can have equipped at any given time. This forces players to make decisions about what to have equipped and when, as some items/spells are more useful in certain situations than others. Decision making is the core of any game, so as I have designed MPBH I have strove to incorporate many options for player choice making, while not overcomplicating the game play.

Spore

One of the first games I got really invested in was Spore 2008. In Spore, the player character starts off as a single celled ocean dwelling organism and then eventually evolves onto land. The end goal of the game is to keep evolving through the different stages of life: cell stage, creature stage, tribal stage, civilization stage, the final stage: space stage. In creature stage and cell stage, the cell/creature the player controls is fully customizable throughout the game, and the player can unlock new biological features such as mouths, hands, feet, spikes and claws by exploring the game world and hunting/foraging. The player can choose to play as an omnivore, carnivore, or herbivore. Each of which has different strengths and weaknesses. Tribal stage, civilization stage, and space stage also feature player choice and customization in terms of what sort of culture, architecture, and eventually entire planets that players can customize.

Player choice and customization was always my favorite part of Spore. The game's "creature creator" specifically was always one of my favorite elements of the game because it allowed for so much creative freedom in the design of the character that I would play as. I took a lot of direct visual inspiration from the creatures I made in spore into the creatures in MPBH.

Conclusion

As of writing this paper MPBH is still a work in progress. One take away I've had from this entire process is that it can be very difficult to juggle making the rules and mechanics for a game and the final art for the game simultaneously. However, the process of making MPBH has also been incredibly fun and rewarding. I'm going to finish the game soon, and one day I hope to get it published.

Works Cited

Burcher, Charlotte, Neil Hollands, Andrew Smith, Barry Trott, and Jessica Zellers. "Core Collections in Genre Studies: Fantasy Fiction 101." Reference & User Services Quarterly 48, no. 3 (2009): 226–31.

Bugdom 2. Pangea Software. PC/Mac 2002

Bethesda softworks. The Elder Scrolls 5 Skyrim. Bethesda Softworks. PC/various consoles. 2011.

Craig Van Ness, Rob Daviau, and Stephen Baker. Heroscape. Hasbro. 2004.

Donovan, Tristan. It's All A Game: A short history of board games. London: Atlantic Books, 2017.

Spore. Maxis. PC/Mac. 2008.

Lizzie Magie, Charles Darrow. Monopoly. Hasbro. 1935.