

Eleanor Topper
Illustration SP26
Thesis Oral Defense

Intro

Hello! My name is Eleanor, you can call me Ellie. I'm an illustration student hoping to work in editorial and publishing. My creative work is rooted in a love of storytelling and art history. And I would love to welcome you to...

Slide: welcome to wildhart

Wildhart! Wildhart is a 20 page Dungeons & Dragons adventure module in which players must navigate a rapidly growing enchanted forest without going mad themselves. Our story begins in Farewood, a small town on the edge of Wildhart forest. The forest has recently begun to grow faster than seems possible, expanding around the town and threatening to swallow it and its people. You, the players, set against the clock by a game mechanic involving randomized cards that transform everyone into a different creature, must find Lady Ada. She is the mysterious half-woman, half-deer who lives at the heart of the forest and is the only one with the power to break the curse. Along the way, you will encounter the whimsical Beasts of Wildhart forest, who might give you riddles or challenges in exchange for Fragments of the curse. The adventure ends when you battle the 13th Beast, a powerful ghostly stag. He is revealed to be Lord Aldor, Lady Ada's father, who created the curse because he wanted to protect his daughter from Farewood's cruelty. Lady Ada breaks the curse with the help of the collected Fragments and restores the forest and you the players to your natural states. Through the gameplay, story, and illustrations, this game explores themes of transformation and the lengths we will go to to protect ourselves.

Why the adventure module?/ context

Slide: family

For a little bit of context, I've been playing Dungeons & Dragons with my family since the pandemic. My dad writes his own campaigns and runs them for my sister and I. He's also an indie adventure module connoisseur. It was really his interest and understanding of this niche that led to my interest in it as an art form. I got his help in developing Wildhart's game mechanics. I've never done any kind of game design before, so he was really Wildhart's engineer.

Slide: why adventure module

So, why the adventure module? And also what is that? If you don't know, an adventure module is a rulebook for a tabletop roleplaying game (or TTRPG) that establishes a world and rules to create a short, self-contained adventure. They're primarily used by the Game Master (or GM) as a reference for rules, but just as importantly, they serve as the GM's creative inspiration. The illustrations come into play by setting a mood and building a world that the GM can expand upon.

Slide: ragged hollow

So even though players typically don't see the adventure module while playing, the illustrations and design have a heavy influence on the atmosphere, tone, and creative direction of the game. While adventure modules are a niche product, they have a built in audience of people interested not just in the game but in the publications as collectible art objects. They're often independently published, which allows for creative freedom both in game design and visuals. I wanted to create something that was of interest to this audience, but also just a fun art object for anyone's shelves. The adventure module's format, which allows for creative writing, game design, illustration, and graphic design all in one standalone book, made me really excited to create a thesis project that spanned across multiple interests and practices.

Slide: hobbit

I'm really interested in the relationship between text and illustration, and how text can inform visual art and how they work tangentially to enhance a reading, or in this case gameplaying, experience. Some of my research for this project was about book design in the fantasy genre. One thing that stood out to me was Tolkien's perspective on illustration: visual art can create too much specificity and may prevent the audience from forming their own imaginative interpretations of the world and story. He was reluctant to apply illustration to his own writing. Tolkien's goal with his own drawings was to create *desire* for a fantasy world without *defining* it for the viewer. This dynamic between the job of the text and the job of the illustrations creates an interesting tension. The text influences the illustrations, and yet the illustrations must avoid stepping on the text's toes. But when coming together successfully, they create an immersive reading experience. The element of this being a rulebook for an adventure game creates an added layer of relationship between the book as visual art and its influence on an experience that's more unique and collaborative than just reading, which was an exciting element of this project for me. In my own artistic practice text and illustration tend to be pretty inextricable. I was able to play with function and form, creating a book that is both illustratively beautiful as well as a useful tool, balancing illustrative complexity with clarity of information design.

Influences

Slide: title

If you know me you know I love medieval art. During my time at PNCA, I've returned to the medieval era of art history for inspiration quite a few times. I enjoy when historical influences and modern sensibilities are intertwined in one project.

Slide: unicorn and marginalia

I think that medieval art, despite its often religious nature, was kind of a foundation for the fantasy genre. For this project I wanted to draw from both the richness of design and from the whimsy and strangeness of medieval tapestries and book design.

Slide: morris

William Morris, a primary figure in the British Arts and Crafts movement, was also really interested and inspired by medievalism. He considered it to be the "golden age" of book design. His design work distills the ornamental sensibility of the medieval period while using only the flat black and white that the moveable type printing press was capable of. This lends it a graphic nature even though it's still insanely complex. I think his book design work is really cool because it serves as kind of a mid-point between medievalism and modern design sensibilities.

Slide: dropcap

As you might have noticed, these influences are very visually elaborate, and my project is not. My goal with Wildhart was to incorporate some of these decorative and design elements while staying true to my own artistic voice, which tends to be on the more graphic and simple side. There is not a whole lot in my project that directly references medieval or medieval-revival design choices. My initial plan was to create drop caps, page borders, and an overall more complex body of design. I ended up scaling back on this, partly for the sake of time, but also so that the illustrations had a bit more room to breathe.

Slide: book photos

So instead, I focused on making the text and illustrations balanced and complimentary to each other. In the end I kind of wish I had pushed these references further, but I do think I succeeded in creating a visual language that was well-rounded and specific to Wildhart.

Process

Making the game

Slide: title

To create this project, the first order of business was writing the game. I wanted to work on it over winter break and have the text finished before the semester even started, but that was ambitious and of course didn't happen. In fact, I was continuing to edit the text as I was doing the illustrations. Even though this frustrated me a little, I think it ended up working to my benefit. I was able to be really flexible in what I scaled back on or expanded about the project as a whole because the game itself was still malleable during the semester. In fact, the project went from 12 pages to 20.

Slide: bestiary (sketchbook?)

Developing original game mechanics was a fun challenge. Although the game is designed for D&D for ease of playing, I wanted it to feel separate from and more my own than traditional D&D. My goal was for it to feel like you've stepped from a world of modern fantasy into a medieval fairy tale. The first and maybe most important step was creating my own creatures; I didn't want to include any pre-existing D&D critters. I created a bestiary of twelve creatures inspired by medieval marginalia, each a mishmash of at least two different animals and all with their own abilities and spells. The driving force of the game is transformation. This is already a big aspect of tabletop roleplaying; literally playing a game as someone else; and transformation is also a theme in the medieval art I'm referencing. To support this theme, I came up with a game mechanic that transforms players into the creatures of the bestiary over the course of the game.

Slide: cards

When players enter Wildhart forest, they must each draw a Bestiary Card from the deck at random. This is the Beast they'll be transforming into. Each time the players enter a new hex, they lose a Transformation Point, further changing them.

Slide: character sheet

They track these points on their Wildhart character sheet. I also included spaces for portraits at each stage, so you can draw your character growing horns or what have you. With each progressing stage of transformation, players lose some of their normal abilities, but they also gain some abilities and spells based on their Beast. At the final stage, they are full Beast, and can no longer communicate with the rest of the party.

However, they now have all of that creature's abilities and can communicate with the other Beasts they might encounter, allowing them to reason during instead of fighting, learn secrets, and complete challenges or solve riddles given to them by Wildhart's colorful creatures.

Slide: fragments

Each of the Beasts that might be encountered by the players guard a "Fragment" of the curse. When a Beast is defeated, rather than dying, they surrender their Fragment to the players. Players must gather at least six of these Fragments and bring them to Lady Ada so that she can break the curse. That was a lot of information I just threw at you. The gist is that I wanted there to be advantages and disadvantages to transforming. My goal was to create fun and varied gameplay; for example, some party members might be interested in fully transforming to gain a spell and speak to other Beasts, while others might want to retain their current abilities. Each creature has a different set of abilities and every card drawn and creature encountered is random, giving it the potential to be a different experience every time it's played.

Process/visdev

Slide: title

Now I'd like to talk a little about the artistic process.

Slide: Ada sketchbook

I often don't really know what a project is going to look like until I start. This is kind of a weakness, but during my time at art school I've learned that it's something I have to work with and not against. If I have too detailed of a vision or plan a project down to its itty bitty details, it will inevitably not look like what I intended, which is frustrating and blinds me to possible solutions. I now understand that my process is more intuitive and I can adjust as I go.

Slide: ada BW

Because of this, this project does not necessarily look like how I envisioned it when I pitched it last semester. For example, I did not plan for it to be grayscale and red. I made this choice as I was starting the illustrations and the illustrations told me what they needed, so to speak. But I'm always a fan of a limited color palette because it creates a unified, recognizable visual language. It also simplified the process, especially with printing in this case. Being primarily black and white also lets the illustrations "speak the same language" as the text.

Slide: stag

It's been a long road to understanding and learning how to work with my own artistic process. With this project I feel like I was finally able to streamline it into something that was both fun and efficient.

I like to use a combination of analogue and digital techniques for the texture and originality that analogue lends, and the precision that digital lends. At the suggestion of my mentor Zach, I tried a new approach of doing my sketches digitally, printing them, and using a lightbox to make lineplates with brushes and ink.

Slide: tools

The brushes took a while to get used to, but I supplemented with regular illustration pens (much more my speed) for detailing while I learned. In a matter of weeks I was able to do a lineplate in sometimes as little as an hour. I was impressed by how quick this new process was and also how much fun I was having.

I also used ink to create texture and value washes for each piece. I kept these elements on separate sheets of paper in case I majorly screw something up, which happens at least once per image, often more.

Slide: ada sketch

So for each illustration, I start with a grayscale sketch to determine composition and values.

Slide:

I then print this out to be traced using my lightbox. This is my favorite part, even though I often have to do multiple attempts.

Slide: ada with texture

It was also at Zach's suggestion that I started making textures and ink washes specifically *for* each piece. Previously, I would have a variety of analogue textures on hand that I would digitally cut pieces out of and collage into images. While this is a nice effect, making all analogue elements unique to each piece helps to unify them.

Slide: texture

I still like to add some non-specific texture just for flavor. I make something like this and then have it on hand and reuse it in multiple illustrations.

Slide: ada finished

Once my analogue elements are done, I scan them, adjust the values and clean up the lines, and compile them digitally in Procreate. I add the color at this stage too, which for this project was just a flat red. I like to keep my color flat and simple when there's a lot of texture and variety elsewhere.

Slide: screenshot

Once my larger illustrations were complete, I started designing. If I had to do this again I would actually do all the design at the very beginning; it's much easier to work with a more developed draft than a rough layout. But it turned out alright. Like I mentioned earlier, I scaled back a bit on the design choices. I focused on designing the text to be easy to read and coexisting with if not directly interacting with the illustrations. I chose a textured serif font for the headers to look a little old timey, and a cleaner serif font for the body text.

Slide: font

I had wanted to do more hand lettering for headers. In fact, I considered making an entire original font specifically for Wildhart last semester. But this would have been so time consuming I had to forgo it. I compromised by hand lettering the Wildhart title. It came out of a lot of sketchbook development. Maybe sometime in the future I'll spend a stupid amount of time developing a font for Wildhart just for fun.

Slide: assets

I also compromised for the lack of drop caps and more involved decorative elements by making smaller, simpler assets like these little floral moments and using them in multiple places. I'm trying to work smarter, not harder.

Future of the project**Slide: title**

My goal was for Wildhart to be a complete and fully playable game by the time of my oral defense. I realized pretty early in the semester that this was overly ambitious. So rather than perfecting gameplay, I used the opportunity of thesis to create a fully formed visual project. The adventure module format was a framework to further develop my skills in illustrating and designing to create an atmosphere, theme, and world based on text. Because the game is still in its early stages, I would love for Wildhart to be evaluated as an illustration and design project first and foremost.

Slide: book pic

That being said, I would love to finish the game in the near future. Over the summer I am going to continue developing the story, game mechanics, and do playtesting to ensure it's as fun as it can be. I'll also create more promotional and/or game material to create a well-rounded product and try independently publishing it via Kickstarter. Although indie publishing is not necessarily something I want to pursue as a career, I

think it will be great experience and an opportunity to market myself more. Wildhart is an example of exactly where I'd like to be in the illustration world. I would love to do editorial and publishing work in the future. This thesis has allowed me to do the character illustration, worldbuilding, and book design that makes me feel confident in what the future holds.

All that being said, I would love to take you through each finished spread.

Slide: cover

Fantasy, especially in the world of Dungeons & Dragons, is not necessarily the most inventive genre. It certainly can be, but after 200 years of fantasy novels and 50 years of tabletop roleplaying, it has its tropes. That's not a bad thing, though. In fact, I think that's one of its greatest strengths. Its cultural presence allows it to be like a shared language. I can describe my project to you in a few words, and you already kind of just get it. You can tell me about an imagined world, and I can slip away into it with you, because I already understand its foundational magic.

One of my biggest hangups about my creative work has always been originality. I get so obsessed by the idea of something having been done a thousand times before, or worse: that my really specific concept has already been done by one other guy and he did it way better than I could. I end up overthinking my projects to the point of convolution.

You will be pleased to hear that for this project, I let it go. For maybe the first time in my life, I didn't worry about being original, and I came up with a concept that was *fun* for me, which I've come to understand is far more important.

There's a reason that unicorns and knights and fair maidens with magical powers have stood the test of time. I think there's something really fascinating about returning to ideas, visuals, and themes that have been done thousands of times by thousands of artists. By leaning into the tropes and using them like a roadmap, while also bringing my own voice to the table, I've created something entirely *me*, even if it's not entirely "original", like I was searching for.

Wildhart engages with art and literary history in a meaningful way that I've been searching for during my time at PNCA.

Writing a game, illustrating it, and designing it into a completed book was an ambitious choice for a four month thesis. But this combination of creative practices has been such a dream project. Creative writing and drawing and design are all like one big beloved creature to me. It's been such a treat to get to do all of those things at once; to challenge myself, to expand my skillset, and to finally have fun doing it.

Thanks

First I want to thank my mentor Zach Meyer for his invaluable guidance and support on this project. Thank you to my roommate and good friend Katelyn without whom I would still be genuinely illiterate in InDesign. Thank you to my friends for being cool and awesome and supportive, but also for letting me into your processes and watch your theses come together. It's not necessarily easy to share art, and I feel lucky to be a part of that. Thank you very much to my mom, who has always believed in me and supported my creative endeavours unconditionally, and who helped me put my display together and remained calm while I freaked out. And of course thank you very much to my dad, who helped me bring Wildhart to life with his advice, editing, and game design skills. This project would not be what it is and I would not be who I am without his creativity, imagination, and patience. Last but not least, thank you to all my lovely classmates and professors for creating such a supportive environment here at PNCA. I kind of wish I could just go to school with you guys forever.