

Laura Livingston

Thesis Defense Speech

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Hi everyone, and thank you so much for coming- I'm here today to recap and elaborate on the work I've done this past semester to bring to fruition a concept that marries two strong beliefs that I've had prior to even entering this school building four years ago- One, that presentation and design are key to our ability to understand and connect with anything we consume, and, two, that the way we raise the next generation now is absolutely essential to the way the world's future is shaped.

I want to take a minute to talk about the world right now. This past election cycle, I saw a shocking 46% of my generation, once dubbed compassionate and worldly to a fault, cast their democratic ballot- many of whom were voting in their first ever election- towards a presidential candidate who openly has represented and promoted ideals of hate, exclusion, and intolerance towards struggling and minority communities. Like a lot of other kids from Generation Z, this was eye-opening for me on a personal level- I had always just assumed that as the world progressed, people would always just generally become more understanding of the inequalities in the world around us, and while there would obviously always be obstacles, the situation would always eventually push back in the right direction. And maybe this is true, but as I'm looking at it right now, I'm personally feeling incredibly disheartened in the way America is choosing to educate and inform our youth- Not just through the school systems, but the way we promote and instill our core human values- How can we ask children to treat each other with kindness and respect if we can't understand and apply these same values as adults?

The sentiment behind this statement is what spawned the idea of Qalaxii for me. I've always been a lover of children- I feel strongly that while we all have our natural struggles, everyone is born innocent- It's the way we choose to shape people's minds and environments in their early years that creates the

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core understanding they have of themselves and the world. So the question becomes, in a world of screens and broadcasts and opinions, where from the moment you can think, everyone is trying to tell you *what* to think- How do you maintain independence that can foster that initial innocence? With this project, I'm going to argue that that answer lies in play.

Children understand how to play the same way we understand how to breathe- For the most part, it's completely natural. Sure, not every kid's playtime *looks* the same, but modern psychology generally agrees that in the early stages of life, children's connection and ability to express their imagination and concept of the outside world through play and pretend is incredibly important to their cognitive development- Many pediatrics now even share concern over the intense overscheduling of most children today, explaining that too much adult-driven activities and an absence of unmonitored and unfiltered play by children can lead to an absence in the development of creative thinking and problem-solving for young children. So, if we can understand that imaginative play is incredibly important for young children, but too much adult interference can create cognitive blocks, how do we affect play in a way that creates positive results in personality without interrupting the natural process? I believe that answer lies in toy design.

Galaxii as a line of dolls strives to be completely unique to existing products on the market by creating friendly faces for children to connect with that don't resemble the world they're already familiar with- Thus creating an opportunity for a child to connect emotionally with a completely different visage and experience through imaginative play. These dolls don't look anything like your typical fashion doll, and that's the *point*- Exposing children to empathetic "play catalysts", as I've referred to them in my research, challenges them to feel understanding and create memories with someone they might not relate with- Creating a comfortability in this practice of empathy when they come across real

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people that are also unlike them.

This line of unique and vibrant dolls are ready to accompany children across the farthest reaches their minds can imagine, teaching them that we don't have to look, sound, or even think alike to form lifelong connections. Each Qalaxii member has their own unique build and special characteristics that help them to conquer the unique challenges of their environment and make them special in their own way, and every child can learn to embrace what makes them special alongside their new intergalactic friends in this new journey of friendship!

When moving into the more tangible goals of the project, I looked at popular trends and markets across different age groups for toys and found that the toy I wanted to build found its home most neatly in ages 7 to 9, with children who were still playing with toys naturally, but had developed a little more understanding of language and community, allowing them to more firmly understand the key concepts of Qalaxii. Since I had founded the concept on its goals, I was able to more easily move into my exploration on the project's overall tone- I wanted the energy of these dolls to feel light and somewhat tongue-in-cheek when presented to parents and children, to avoid any feelings of virtue signaling or over-complexity that might make the line unapproachable for buyers and kids. I also wanted the project to land in a world of its own, with enough story backbone to stand on its own as a concept, but still leave room for more development if opportunities for licensing and storytelling content came about. As a whole, I wanted to make sure the star of my thesis project lay in toy design, and stayed true to the initial concept of creating toys that enhanced play and created positive results, as opposed to falling too deep into creating a world for a show or marketing. I also felt that too much development in character personalities felt antithetical to the idea of creating toys for imaginative play- I wanted a base structure, not to write a play instruction

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booklet. So I settled on a final project of some base design and worldbuilding, and a deliverable of a cast of fully designed toys with play features and concept sheets, that in theory could be delivered directly to a production company for work.

For those who didn't attend my proposal, I'll keep it short- When I last presented, a majority of my work was based in ideation and potential cast design. I knew what my final work would look like stylistically, I knew my key deliverables, and I knew what reference projects I was looking up to- I referenced fantastic children's projects like Pokemon and My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic, commending their fantastic storytelling, design work, and broad play appeal among different age groups and genders. As the second semester started, I pushed into the more tangible side of my work- I scanned and compared the many brainstorming designs I had thrown at the wall, and I looked for design elements and personality that I thought would resonate well with children, as well as stand out from the rest of a selected cast. Early brainstorming had given me a lot of options, but they were majorly scattered and ununified in design elements. Many had strong ideas within them, but the majority needed to be tweaked, so I picked a few that I felt had the strongest pull, and I threw them into workshopping, contrasting them against each other in cast lineups. In the end, I settled on six distinct designs and pushed on to create further ideation for their personalities, and how I could convey this through their designs. I worked closely with my mentor Cody, pushing myself to write and bounce ideas off of him for how each design might fit into a home planet or culture, and how different design function could factor into a fun and unique toy.

After creating a first draft for the design of each character as well as some rough ideas for their home worlds, I pitched my work in progress to my midterm panel, and was able to get some solid feedback from those with more

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experience in the toy world. While I was much closer than I had been at the proposal, feedback told me the designs certainly weren't finished and I needed to reconsider the designs more so as a group than individuals in order to present them as a more unified cast of characters. I was trying to walk a tightrope of having the characters stay true to my initial vision of being truly unique from each other in order to create a sense of diversity, but I had pushed so far to one side of the spectrum that the dolls looked like they were from completely different projects. I also received feedback suggesting that I push my target age demographic to either swing younger or older and change the tone on the project accordingly. I put a lot of weight into considering this specific comment and discussed it at length with Cody- as I had started to develop the project and do market research, I had begun to notice the strong lack of product designed for what is sometimes called "the forgotten age" - children 9-11 (although this group used to be significantly older, closer to 11-13), who were beginning to become envious of the more mature lifestyles of younger teens and thus, being pushed to "grow up faster" by peers and new perspectives in social media, were becoming less and less respondent to anything branded explicitly as a toy. While I had not developed the toy line for this market, and I still don't consider it the primary target age group, I felt undecided about specifically pushing away from appealing to this group, remembering my deep love at that age for My Little Pony, a franchise also explicitly marketed towards younger girls, and the internal conflict I had had over worrying that my enjoyment of this sort of content meant that I was not maturing at the correct speed, and that I was going to be left behind socially by my peers for my childish interests, despite the fact that I was academically performing well. I expressed these concerns to Cody, worried that I was potentially compromising the marketability and brand appeal of my project because of a personal connection. However, Cody sympathized with my desire to keep the brand more

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openly approachable to different age groups, remarking that the branding as it was made sense for the age group I initially had envisioned and I didn't have to commit to certain changes in tone if I felt like it was going to isolate a group I connected to if I thought it would potentially also connect with them. With this advice in mind, I continued the project as I had- creating design tweaks and furthering the united design of the cast of characters with design choices that I felt had enough broad appeal to stimulate the desires for vibrancy and cuteness that drew in younger children, while keeping them streamlined enough to make sense outside of the scheme of the toy aisle, and adding story details I thought would resonate with older children looking for well-established and interesting characters.

In the physical design of the toys, I used examples of product sheets I found and some given to me by Cody to compare and contrast the information vital to clarify design and construction for different types of toys. I researched the pros and cons of different materials, learning a lot about different types of plastic and vinyl used by many major toy-making companies to create certain elements and effects in toys, such as durability and bendability, as well as their ability to handle different types of paint for printed design and overall cost effectiveness. While ultimately these choices could be changed by a toy production company if the project was pulled into a larger marketing campaign, I wanted to do enough research into the understanding of how the toys would feel and move with their unique designs and functions to give a strong sense of how they would play in the visual pitch and ground them as toy designs that excite and beg to be produced in a physical form. I initially also wanted to redesign and display a sample of the box design I initially created in the proposal semester, due to time constraints I had to focus specifically on the design of the toys, although you can see graphic design elements from the box on display in this deck, such as the logo, brand colors, and font choices. After

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months of back and forth, research and redesign...

... I have my final cast. My six labors of love are ready to be on display today for all of you- Each toy is designed to be rendered with soft vinyl bodies to prevent damages and provide durability, while screen painted with cute, sparkling eyes and unique designs. Each character also has a unique pillar of community attached to their character- A foundational value that contributes to the vitality of a community, something that makes us “human” when we engage with it. I want children who engage with these dolls and their personalities to find a value that speaks to them, and that can inspire their curiosity as they find their life purpose. Let’s take a moment as I briefly walk you through each!

My first final design was Enkinna, my ambassador of Science. Enkinna’s homeworld is well-known among scientific communities for its amazing ability to cultivate life- Its lush flora and fauna resemble a giant version of Earth’s rainforests. Because of this amazing capacity for life, biological studies of all kinds have made a hub on this planet for research, and native communities often work closely with foreign scientists to make sure all testing is safe and effective. Enkinna in particular is very shy, despite her towering appearance, and is sometimes selectively mute when she’s not entirely comfortable. However, she’s known among friends and family for her giant heart and her love for nature throughout the universe. Enkinna’s toy design highlights her dexterous nature by attaching small suction cups onto her front feet, allowing her to balance entirely on her strong front arms and tuck her smaller back feet up to swing back and forth.

Xetarious, my ambassador of History, lives on a planet known as one of the most dangerous natural atmospheres in the discovered universe- A dangerous desert biome with a proclivity for raging storms and whipping winds, the community of this planet has adapted to the harsh conditions

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surrounding them by evolving to have protective tendrils on their necks that guard their face from sun and sand. These people live in a deep system of connected tunnels and homes underground, where they add and refer to their ancient communal library as a way to track and learn from their past. Xetarious, like her parents, is quite bookish and stoic, often presenting as guarded to those she doesn't know- But behind her sometimes jarring first impression lies a passionate thinker with a love for stargazing. Xetarious's doll hones her identifying rainbow tendrils, each made with bendable aluminum covered by thick sleeves of neon rubber, allowing for them to be posed in tons of different and expressive ways, and allowing for a better look at her offset eyes, which allow her to observe and journal simultaneously.

From a home planet with a very low level of gravity, Cheilith, my ambassador of Exploration, lives in a community that has developed a very positive relationship with travel- With very little solid land to build homes on, this group has developed a nomadic lifestyle as they build homes on foundations stretched high from the sea to avoid collapsing due to enormous tsunamis. The low gravity allows them to glide in the air with their lightweight, fan-like arms, but outside of their planet, they need assistive technology in order to balance and move around. Despite this, Cheilith dreams of exploring the farthest corners of the galaxy and befriending all life in the universe, just as her ancient ancestors once explored the whole of her planet. Cheilith's doll comes with her very own mobility aid- A small, tilted rolling platform hiding a magnet bar that, when pushed under the opposite-pole magnets in Cheilith's wingtips, allows her to float around and move gracefully, even in Earth's higher gravity.

Inhabiting a remarkably beautiful planet rich with mountains, waterfalls, and flowing mists, the humidity-adapted species that Rhorenn, my ambassador of Wellness, hails from prefer to spend their days engaged in play and relaxation, having found a strong communal value in peace and inner

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harmony. Tourists from across the universe travel to this world to enjoy the bliss of hot springs and spas while learning how to understand and manage their strongest emotions, and often end up becoming a spectator of one of the many famous athletic competitions hosted on the planet. Rhorenn is young and still has a ways to go as far as learning to control her temper, often letting her competitiveness get the best of her- But despite this, her loyalty to her friends and her love for her sport and planet make her a force of nature. While Rhorenn's doll can be easily posed to spring into action, her unique feature consists of her signature flowing coat of dense cloud sprouting from her neck, elbows, and tail - These parts are made of sleeves of opaque blue thermoplastic rubber and filled with slime and small polystyrene foam beads, creating a light sensory texture good for relaxing oneself.

Having evolved on a planet alongside an amorphous giant blob of cells, Alizath, my ambassador of Engineering, belongs to a species that created a giant stride in the technological capabilities of their community a few hundred years ago when they finally found a way to more effectively communicate with this peaceful cohabitant, named the "one Slime", by creating devices allowing for independently moving "pieces" of this cytoplasm to be trained by users of Alizath's species and aid them with their ability to morph into different shapes at will. Similar to service dogs on Earth, these "service slimes" can live fulfilling and independent lives in harmony with their companions, while aiding them primarily as grabbing devices in place of where other species might have arms. Alizath's community is renowned for its incredible engineering innovation, and Alizath herself is incredibly proud of their homeworld and the challenges their people have overcome to thrive as they have. Their two "service slimes" are their closest companions (although one is known to misbehave on occasion). Alizath's faithful companions are attached to their doll with locking PVC components that clasp onto their shoulders. The slimes themselves are made of a thermoplastic

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rubber casing in transparent orange and filled with clear slime, while neon pink polystyrene pieces resembling a skeletal structure serve as their nuclei.

Finally, Whimizera, my ambassador of Art & Culture, is from one of the most famous planets in the entire universe- A world of performers, renowned for centuries for this community's unique proclivity for creating touching art in a variety of forms. Their artwork and shows are widely broadcast to almost every discovered planet, and the members of this community take a lot of pride in their appearance and personalities- It's a longstanding tradition to paint their bodies in different patterns and colors in order to bring "pizzaz" to their otherwise plain visages. Whimizera is determined to help their small family bring innovation and renown to the classic genre of art known on Earth as "music", an innovation widely known in the Qalaxxi to be a tradition belonging uniquely to Whimizera's world. Whimizera's loud and showy doll design is only made more extravagant by her luxurious acrylic faux fur tail, always sticking up in pride as she slithers around with her segmented ball-joint body.

As much as this project has been a joy to work on, I can't help but to see how far I believe it could truly go with the right support. I have a lot of faith in children to be inspired and drawn to projects and design that are created by people who truly want to communicate with children, not just entertain and distract them, and that's what I've set out to do with these dolls. I think children know, especially nowadays, when they're being talked down to, and I think this specifically comes off noticeably in a lot of children's media, which I think is why a lot of kids nowadays will take early interest in projects that are not specifically designed for their age groups- Because nothing of *quality* is being promoted to them, so they can either choose to ironically enjoy unsubstantial content that belittles their intelligence and attracts by being annoying and distracting and overstimulating, or they can idolize the stories that older kids love, which can sometimes lead to them ingesting stories with

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nuances they might not be able to fully comprehend without talking it through or having it explained, which can lead to a warped understanding. While I don't think that the kids I'm targeting with this product are quite old enough for the bulk of a story about diversity and how important it is to face the world around them with kindness in its full intensity, my hope is exposing them early to these values as subtexts in the toys they play with will lead them to become older kids, teens, and adults that are more comfortable with these kinds of narratives when they encounter them in the future. On top of this, I've intentionally left several structures in writing and toy design that I think could be great opportunities to merchandise on, like creating playsets involving doll's homeworlds, the sweet rides they travel the Qalaxii with to hang together, and of course the ever-popular modern tie-in of a an animated YouTube clip show, Tiktoks, or a genuine children's TV program! If the character's canon personalities and interactions became popular with kids on the older side of the target age group, I think it would also be a great opportunity to create merchandising more targeted towards ages outside of the play market, like blind-box collectibles, which are incredibly popular with ages 18 and up as well as younger children. As far as furthering my career, I think this project serves as a great backbone to my portfolio as far as showcasing not just my technical and design-related skills, but also my creative abilities as far as being able to actualize and create big-picture pitches for creative campaigns with strong foundations and compelling supporting research. I think Qalaxii as a whole was huge confidence booster for me as far as showing myself my own capabilities of ideating and working on long-term illustration and development projects, as well as rediscovering my pure enthusiasm for projects full of heart, and my desire to work on design and creative projects that have a greater purpose to inspire joy and betterment in the world- Which is why I chose to bring myself to Portland, Oregon four years ago.

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Before I finish today, I wanted to take a moment to thank some people who I would not have been able to stand here with this finished project without. First and foremost, thank you to my mom, who is watching me from across the country today- You provided me with this amazing opportunity and believed that I could make it through, even when I was at a point where I wasn't sure myself. Thank you so much for being so supportive, even when you don't totally understand what I'm even doing or why I'm doing it. I hope to keep making you proud. To all of my teachers, Thank you for always pushing me to work harder and find more places to improve, even when I'm exhausted and frustrating, and thank you for always making me feel like I'm enough to be in this industry, especially in a world that constantly makes people feel like their creative work is not enough, I feel so lucky to be seen and supported by a group of professionals that are so good at helping students to find their own version of a strong portfolio, even when the goalposts are constantly changing. I also obviously want to thank my mentor Cody, who got to watch me take this project from just a few sketches to the fleshed-out version I'm presenting today. Thank you so much for being so positive throughout the process and having so much enthusiasm and faith for my creative vision, even when a lot of it wasn't on paper yet. In a semester that felt so chaotic and stress-filled, it was so nice to have a mentor that reacted to work I was unsure of with positivity instead of jumping to critique first (not to say that I don't appreciate the critiques, too). My community and my closest people, who sat through a lot of complaining from me during this process, thank you so much. You know who you are. Finally, I want to thank the rest of my graduating class, and congratulate them on an amazing journey. Your projects are all such an amazing example of how much you've learned and grown, and I'm so thankful to have learned what I did in a room full of such talented people, who always reminded me that I had more to learn and more ways to improve.

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Regardless of what happens, I am so, so happy I chose to see this project through and I hope it will allow me to go on to continue to create and design in what I see as one of the most impactful industries in the world right now. Thank you all so much for coming to celebrate my work with me, and I hope when you think about the future of the next generation, you'll remember that when coming together, we can reach the stars.

Thank you so much for your time, if you have any questions that don't get covered today or would like to reach out to me, my contact information will stay on the screen. THANK YOU!!