

Hello, my name is Buddy Skaggs. I am an illustration major. Welcome to the thesis defense for my tabletop roleplaying game, *What a Lovely Island*.

The story of how this game, my thesis project, came to be, begins about a year ago, with my last game.

As a part of the Capsule Collection class, I wrote *Out for Delivery*, a one-player journaling game about delivering mail on a fantastical island of animals. At the end of the semester, while selling the game, someone reached out to me for a copy. I ended up trading them for a couple of zines and, most importantly, a copy of *The Summer Book* by Tove Jansson.

I was already a big fan of Jansson's work as an illustrator, having recently become familiar with the Moomintrolls. I find Moominvalley, where the Moomins live, so compelling as a setting. It is a place of love and magic. It's been an inspiration of mine since I became familiar with it, and I'd been turning in the back of my head how I could bring the energy of Moominvalley to my own creative project.

I read *The Summer Book*, a series of vignettes focused on a young girl and her grandmother, living together on an island inspired by Jansson's childhood in the gulf of Finland. At the time, I worked at a mall kiosk, which often felt like an island of safety within a sea of people. This is where my island began.

Over that summer, I did an Independent Study course with Zack Rau, with the goal of taking a game idea and developing it into something I could consider making my thesis project. I spent these months going through several phases of rough ideation: researching other games, as well as creating rough mechanics, concepts, and illustrations.

As the fall semester began, I knew I wanted to try bringing this game to life for my thesis. I quickly asked Cody Williams for help. I know Cody from being advisor to the Zine Club, which I've run for the past year and a half. After having successfully made a game in his Capsule Collection class, I knew I wanted him to be my thesis mentor. Together, I learned more about the basics of game design, and was able to narrow down my ideas and give the game actual structure. I spent months trying to get the game's text as solid as I could, in time for my thesis proposal.

All that work became this game: *What a Lovely Island*, a demo of a tabletop game about lonely characters, discovering a living island during the last summer of its life. Players will collaboratively draw out the island's map, acting out scenes with their characters, who are each searching for something to ease their loneliness. Then, as the summer ends, the players will act out the island's death, destorying the place they came to know. All of this is supported by analog, tactile illustrations that evoke the island's nostalgic nature.

You might not be familiar with tabletop roleplaying games, but if you are, you likely know about D&D. “Dungeons & Dragons” from Wizards of the Coast dominates the tabletop game space. It’s the entry point for many people, myself included. It is usually hard for me to explain to people my interest in tabletop games unless I can connect it to D&D. Its popularity feeds itself: it’s the game people know the name of, so when they want to explore the hobby, it’s the game they turn to. However, there is a rich, thriving indie games community, both online on platforms like “itch.io” and in local gaming stores.

What a Lovely Island was written with that community in mind. When I think of my audience, I think of my own gaming group: a bunch of twenty-something, queer nerds who enjoy telling interesting and emotional stories. To do this, we look at games whose rulesets accommodate more for character interaction than for combat. What a Lovely Island is one of these kinds of games.

It is *not* D&D: it is small, quiet, meant to be played in a single session and a single day. You cannot earn experience points or “level up.” Instead, your reward for playing is the experience of the story and connecting with your fellow players. A lot of people go into D&D with expectations of rich storytelling, when its mechanics instead heavily favor focusing on lengthy, complex combat encounters. My game provides an alternative to players who are looking for a storytelling experience that is less mechanically complex.

My inspiration for creating tabletop games, and this game in particular, are the other interesting indie games I have played over the years. There are a few games in particular that were major inspirations to me:

Wanderhome by Jay Dragon is another game within the category of “No Dice, No Masters.” In it, players take on the role of animals wandering the lands of Haeth, a kind and peaceful place. Wanderhome is a huge success in the world of TTRPGS, raising over 300 thousand dollars via Kickstarter back in 2022.

The Quiet Year by Avery Alder is another map drawing game, where players take turns drawing cards and following the story of a community before the game ends to “The Frost Shepherds,” an undefined force. This game is a classic in indie games spaces, having earned many awards with its release back in 2013.

Stewpot by Takuma Okada is a mini-game collection. Players act as retired adventurers who have begun running a tavern together. Each mini-game acts as a unique scene, with its own mechanics and challenges, playing out slices-of-life for the crew. Stewpot was funded via Backerkit about 2 years ago, raising over 200 thousand dollars.

These games, as well as the many others I've played over the years, have shaped my ideas of what a tabletop game can be. Like many people, I started not as a designer, but as a player. Back in 2021, while taking a break after my first year at a different art school, I wanted to do the art and design for a TTPRG rulebook. Without any connections to people making games, I decided to write my own game to "practice".

Since then, I've written ten different games. Each of them are unique, and they have all helped to shape my skills both as a visual designer and a game designer.

My experience getting into tabletop games is closely tied to my experiences with the queer community. It was through playing games with other queer people that I made many long-standing friends, including my partner, and came to better understand my own gender and sexuality. Tabletop games seem to be a haven for queer people to come together. It's community based, playful, and creative. Last semester, while designing *What a Lovely Island*, I also was able to research more into the idea of "queer play."

Roleplaying games in particular are a weird medium for discussions of "representation." While it is possible and important, ultimately each player has a unique way that they think of their character. Are they a series of stats and numbers that allow the player access to this fantasy world, or are they their own persona and identity? There is an element of performance that takes place, allowing for players to experiment with different scenarios and forms of expression. This is where queer play emerges.

I am specifically interested in the idea of "queering" the structure of games themselves. Games studies scholar Bonnie Ruberg talks about the idea of "no-fun games." It is often assumed that playing games is meant to be fun, and in order to achieve this fun, you have to play the "right" way. But fun isn't a universal concept. It's both personal and cultural. If queerness is about "being different and desiring differently," going out of the way to reject the "right" way to play and finding alternatives is a place of queer potential. It opens us up to new ways of thinking and playing.

Ruberg has five categories of "no-fun games": disappointing, annoying, boring, alarming, and sad. Each has their own values and ways of impacting a player. *What a Lovely Island* is definitely a Sad game: from the start, there is a tragedy, a death, that the players know is coming. The more players put into their characters and the Island, the sadder this death can be. To me, this opens up a way for players to connect through vulnerability. I would love for players to feel that sadness in a community of others going through the same grief.

As Ruberg puts it: "*No-fun is also a call back to our bodies, a call to feel what we aren't supposed to want to feel, a call to resist the normative thinking that tells us that the only games*

*that matter are games that are fun, and that the only players who matter are the ones who have fun playing them.”*

Approaching games from an intentional perspective of queer play is new to me. My early interests in storytelling, in part, came from an interest in representation. It was in stories that I discovered modes of queerness and transness that resonated with me. As I've continued to develop as an artist, this has become a lesser focus within my work. I continue to challenge myself to think critically about what I create, but I also know that everything I make, intentional or not, is shaped by my many identities. Being queer, trans, mixed, and disabled informs how I think and how I see the world. This vision will always make its way back to my work.

For example, while making *What a Lovely Island* over the last two semesters, I've found myself relating more and more to the Island as a character. The timeline of this project overlaps with a process of burnout that led to me being diagnosed with both autism and ADHD. My experiences as an autistic person often leave me feeling out of sync with the world around me. Much like the Island, I am often unable to communicate effectively and spend a great deal of effort trying to cope. However, I am also very interested in the work of community building and connection. The idea that the Island can exist both as a place of sadness and a place of joy, is important. It is a space that brings people together. It creates connection, even if only for a moment.

In creating this game, I also wanted to explore the feelings around the idea of place, or home. I moved to the Portland area from Texas, where I grew up and most of my family still lives. Since moving back in 2022, the state has enacted policies that mean I could not safely live there as a trans person. Even traveling to visit family is not recommended and would put myself at risk. My grief finds its way into my work as a storyteller, where I like exploring questions about what a home can be. In this project, players and characters will develop a bond with the island they create, knowing it will soon be lost. What does it mean to find home in a temporary space? Is home a place, or is it people? I want to prompt players to explore these questions and the emotions that come with them, such as nostalgia and melancholy, within the experience of play.

In addition to exploring themes that resonate with me, I wanted to make this game as a portfolio piece. I want my thesis to show what I'm capable of in a published project, whether that be a tabletop game or otherwise. In my picture book classes, my professor talked about the benefits of both writing and illustrating a picture book even if you didn't necessarily want to be an author. By doing both, you are able to show others exactly what kind of project you'd like to work on.

I want *What a Lovely Island* to do that for me. I like telling stories with strong emotion that explore fantastical worlds. My work is introspective and thoughtful, even when it's cute and charming, and I'd love for that to come across to potential collaborators and clients. I also think

this game demonstrates a number of skills, including game design, visual design, creative writing, and, of course, illustration.

(pause)

In *What a Lovely Island*, players take on the roles of lonely characters, who are visiting an island for the summer. The island is separated from the world around them. It is quiet. It is alive, and it is kind. Each character is searching for something, and is hoping to find it here.

To explore the Island, players are able to choose one of five different “Diaries”, more commonly referred to as “playbooks.” These playbooks represent a character archetype you can inhabit. They each come with their own unique description, characteristics, and actions that they can take throughout the game. What they all have in common is a loneliness, something missing that they are looking to the Island to fulfill.

There’s the Wanderer: a free-spirited tourist. They never stay in one place for too long, and as a result have nowhere solid to land when they need to find their footing. While they have a wealth of experience as a result of their travels, they have very few deep connections.

The Stray is untrusting and on-guard, having learned to rely on themselves for survival for too long. They are searching for safety: the connections and the freedom that they wish they had.

The Weathered is someone at the end of a difficult journey. Perhaps they were a pirate, or maybe just a fisherman who’s finally gotten a chance to retire. They’ve left the familiarity of their old life, and are now seeking rest and refuge.

The Collector is a passionate outsider, inspired by my own experiences with neurodivergence. They struggle to connect with ideas of “normality,” and have pursued the expansion of their prized collection to this strange island.

The Caretaker was once deeply connected to someone else, and defined by that relationship. Now that the relationship has ended, they’ve become adrift, and are looking for the space to find themselves again.

The drama of gameplay comes from how these different characters interact. There are only four players per game, and five different Diaries in this version of the game. There are a range of different dynamics that could appear and develop throughout the course of play.

The Weathered is someone who is tired of people, of connection. What happens when they are paired with the Caregiver, whose sense of self comes from being connected to others?

The Collector is often a solitary character, but full of passion and joy. What happens if they open up to the Stray, another solitary figure, but one whose survival instincts have left little room for wonder?

The Wanderer collects a broad range of shallow experience, while the Weathered has a very narrow, yet deep experience. What conversations could they have?

To explore the Island, players will take turns drawing Location cards. When it's their turn to explore, a player will draw two cards, then decide which one they'd like to roleplay a scene in. Each card comes with different prompting questions, dependent on the month, or round, of gameplay. These questions are written to begin prompting scene ideas, something for the characters to focus on. Once a player selects a Location, they will draw it onto the map.

Drawing is a major component of this game. I love creating art, and I want art-making to be accessible to others. I also understand that drawing is a skill that comes with experience, which many people don't have. While there are illustrations meant to inspire and encourage players, it is explicit that the drawings do not have to be "good". To quote the book, "As long as the table can understand what it represents, it's good enough."

After drawing, the player will consult their Diary. Each one comes with a unique list of actions or scene prompts for the player to choose from. These are based on the characteristics of the archetype. For example, the Wanderer can choose to start a scene about "sharing stories." The Stray can "uncover a secret." They will invite other characters into the scene with them.

If a player is not playing their own character in a scene, they will take on the role of the Island, occasionally narrating what happens in the environment around the characters. This keeps everyone engaged in the moment, and in the storytelling, throughout the course of the game.

While the players know from the beginning the Island is dying, this is never made explicit to the characters. The prompts shift, slowly, through three themes: discovery, transformation, and release. Events on the Island become stranger, more bleak, but death is never made clear to them. The dramatic irony creates an interesting dynamic: the characters don't know that this window of time is special, so they are not "optimizing" their time. Their actions are things like doing chores and playing games, nothing that can change the fate of the Island. From the players' perspective, there are only three scenes that they get to initiate. They must use them carefully, deciding what parts of the story they want to explore and who they interact with.

After each player takes their turn during a month, the round ends with a Holiday. The Holidays are mini-games that invite all the players into a set scene with new mechanics.

The month of June ends in the Solstice, a time where characters gather to share a potluck of homemade treats.

July ends in the Storm, an event that divides the Island into areas of destruction.

August ends with the Journey Home: how the characters feel as they say goodbye to the Island and to each other.

After all three months, the main portion of the game comes to an end. The characters leave the island, and their stories are done. The Island's story must also come to an end, but in a much more violent and involved way.

In the Epilogue, players stop inhabiting their character, they take on a detached role, and play out the degradation of the island. They will draw over and cross out the Locations they've added to the map, leaving them with a ruined Island. The "ideal" version of the Island will only exist in their memories.

The methods of destruction are determined by the actions the characters took in the scenes they started. There are seven categories for these actions: Give Something, Take Something, Talk to the Island, Beyond the Island, Exploration, Relationships, and Personal. Depending on this, and how much time the characters spent at each Location, what takes place will change.

Despite this being an Illustration thesis, a lot of time and energy went into writing, long before any of the final art was made. I knew from the beginning that I wanted distinction between the three months, and for the overall narrative structure of the story to be in three acts. The original vision was a mini-game collection, similar to games like Stewpot and FireBrands. However, the idea of designing about 15 games, even if they were smaller, was very overwhelming. The results of these minigames were connected to drawing on the map anyways, so I opted to narrow the scope down to 3 minigames, one per month, and have the core structure of gameplay revolve around roleplaying scenes.

I had many ideas for character playbooks, but ended up limiting myself to developing 3 fully for my thesis defense. Other ideas for Diaries included the Shade, a monstrous figure who's been cast out of society, and the Artist, someone tunnel-visioned into their work and finding their "muse". I hope to explore these, as well as the Stray and the Collector, more post-thesis.

Within the structure of the playbooks, or Diaries, I knew I wanted to introduce an opportunity for queer play through gender expression. I researched the work of queer games designer Avery Alder. I already mentioned her game, *The Quiet Year*, but she also created *Monsterhearts* – a game of teenage cryptids in which a character’s attraction is determined by dice roll as opposed to player choice– as well as *Dream Askew* – an apocalyptic story whose characters can inhabit genders such as “ice femme”, “raven”, “transgressing”, and “void”.

I knew I wanted to open the door for players to experiment with gender identity. Each Diary has a few descriptive phrases they can choose from to build their character. This is a common feature of many roleplaying games. Most of the descriptions in *What a Lovely Island* are intentionally non-gendered, such as weary legs, a young face, or strong hands. Each playbook also has a masculine and feminine description. Players can choose one or the other, both, or neither. This allows for queer play based on what the player is interested in exploring.

This project challenged me to create a broad range of illustrations. I knew I wanted to have my art creating process be as analog as I could, keeping time in mind. I came into thesis tired of making digital art. I miss the tactility of paint and paper, especially when AI art continues to saturate the internet. I wanted the *Island* to feel alive, and felt that physical media was the best way for me to do that while I continue pushing towards analog in my professional work.

Throughout this project, I used watercolors for color, pencils and colored pencils for line, and as water-soluble crayons and watercolor pencils for texture. I also used digital processes in Procreate and Photoshop to speed up the process.

I found a consistent workflow for my illustration work. I always began with a digital sketch in Procreate, which allowed for quick edits and adjustments. I would either do color studies directly on top of this digital study or by swatching materials in my sketchbook. I would then take the digital sketch and trace it onto watercolor paper via a lightbox. Depending on the illustration, I would either use graphite or colored pencils for the lineart.

From there, I would do most of my coloring and rendering with watercolors. Once the paint dried, I would add texture back in with watercolor pencils and crayons. From there, I would scan and edit my illustrations in Photoshop before adding them to my InDesign layout.

For my thesis, I knew I wouldn’t be able to create all of the art I want to be in this game. Both the *Collector* and the *Stray* are essentially completed Diaries as far as text goes, but neither have been illustrated yet. The *Stray* was initially going to be one of the three I featured in my presentation. I even began creating the final character art for it. At my midterm panel, it became clear that the *Stray* and the *Weathered* were characters with very similar themes. The *Caregiver* was a better show of the range of characters available to play, so I pivoted to including them instead.

I also made the choice to create three illustrations fully digitally. The art for each month– June, July, and August– was all created in Procreate, mimicking the analog processes I had developed over the course of the semester. I was struggling to achieve the results I wanted at a reasonable scale with my physical media. At a later date, I would like to come back to these illustrations, and make them with the same process as the rest of the art.

Over the course of the last year, while developing this game, I have created a lot of art. On top of the final pieces, there are sketches, studies, warm-ups, and concept work. I have amassed quite a collection, and wanted a unique way to display all of the work that went into the final product at my thesis defense.

At my proposal, I pitched a wall spread, very similar to the one on the wall now, with papers overlapping one another. By have pieces intersecting like this, I wanted the process to be conveyed, rather than prioritizing the “final” pieces. While chaotic, this layout is not random, I did several “test runs,” assembling the display many times before deciding a final layout. I then mounted the pages onto the wall with museum putty.

When I proposed my thesis project, I knew I wouldn’t be able to have a finished, publishable product. Not only is this the most structurally elaborate game that I’ve designed, I also wanted it to be highly illustrated, an amount of work I knew that I could not achieve in a single semester. My proposed plan was to have a “demo” version of the game, where you could play through some of it and get an understanding of the overall experience, even if it wasn’t “finished.” To accompany this, I wanted some of each “type” of illustration that would be in the final game. This included the cover of the zine, the map, Location cards, art for each month, and 3 completed character playbooks.

While I was able to achieve most of this, I still experienced some challenges within the project’s scope. For instance, I had initially proposed 2 illustrations for each month: a full-page and a spot illustration. In laying out the book, it felt a lot like I was trying to jam the illustrations in, rather than them fitting naturally into the rulebook. As a result, I ended up dropping the spot illustrations, as it felt unnecessary to create art I wasn’t going to use.

I also ended up adding more art to the Diaries than I had anticipated. In addition to the cover and character art, I also added a frame for players to draw their own characters, and a spot to the back spread, where players can take notes of their session.

I wanted to spend most of my time this spring focusing on illustration. As a result, the rules are not as polished as I had hoped. I have still achieved my goal of having the game be “testable,” but will need to spend more time writing to make the game stronger.

Balancing the writing and illustration processes was a challenge for me. In the early stages of conceptualizing What a Lovely Island, I went back and forth between the two a lot,

letting each influence the other. Once the school year began, I decided to split my focus. I prioritized writing in the fall, and creating art in the spring. Since I'm an Illustration major, I wanted the semester I was creating my thesis to be focused on illustration. I also needed to know what illustrations I had to create, which came from the writing.

Overall, the writing process was a huge learning experience for me. I've studied very little creative writing and game design. Most of what I've learned has been in the last year or two. Where my art process has become standardized, I had to discover my writing process as I went. As a result, when it came time to finally create art, I had spent a lot of energy writing, which meant I had less to put into my illustrations. While I ultimately wish I had found a better balance, I've learned a lot about my own capacities in this project. I definitely prefer illustration to writing, which makes sense. I know in my career as a storyteller, I will need the skills to do both, and this game has helped me develop those skills greatly.

So what's next? What a Lovely Island has been a huge undertaking for me. I've spent the last 12 months developing it. The first thing I plan on doing is taking a break. Not only will this help me recharge, it will allow me to come back to the project with fresh eyes. Once I am back, I am going to focus on playtesting the game. This is an important part of the game design process, which has only gotten more important the more complex the games I make have become. I need real players to play the game so I can get feedback about how the game actually plays versus how it reads as a book

I will also spend my time preparing to bring this game to a crowdfunding platform such as Kickstarter. Many indie tabletop games, including inspirations like Wanderhome and Stewpot, are funded this way, but I have never done it before. As such, I will need to spend time researching and advertising the campaign to ensure its success. Once I have the final product, I hope to reach out to Indie Press Revolution, a games distributor I've worked with in the past. I trust that they'll be able to get this game out into the world, where more people can enjoy it.

What a Lovely Island couldn't have come together without all of the people who have supported me along the way.


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Thank you to Zack Rau, for helping me develop this game last summer for our Independent Study.



Thank you as well to my panelists, for being here today, and to everyone else who came to learn about my little game. I hope you've enjoyed your time on the Island, and hope to see you here again someday. Thank you.

Now, we're going to begin with questions from the panel, who will eventually open things up to the rest of the room.