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CREATING AN ALIEN VISUAL COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Art, Studio

Jeremy Swanston
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2018

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
Art, Studio have been completed.

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In most major successful science fiction movie and video game franchises, there is commonly a form of a foreign visual communication system that either consciously or subconsciously aids in the viewer's experience. I have found that these "alien languages" enhance the authenticity of the world of a film or game by providing it with a sense of reality and depth. When designed with a purpose and implemented with intent, these languages can spawn excitement and enthusiasm about the franchise that could not be achieved by any other means. For this research project, I set out to develop my own process that would aid in the creation of a unique alien visual communication system that could be found in a science fiction franchise.

Having previously experienced franchises containing these types of languages, I initiated the process by deconstructing how movies like Star Wars, Alien, and Arrival, as well as games like Overwatch and The Legend of Zelda, created their visual communication systems. I quickly discovered that a majority of these fabricated languages used either logograms or alphabets that were made of a base set of smaller shapes and symbols that were pieced together to create a larger word or letter. Having identified this tendency, I began working in Adobe Illustrator on developing a set of small shapes that I could build my language out of. I chose to keep my symbols moderately simple, bold, and rounded in attempt to give the final product a futuristic industrial aesthetic as well as separate it from any languages currently used on earth. However, as I progressed I found it increasingly hard to give my language meaning and make it translatable. To surmount this challenge I chose to develop it as a logographic system where each symbol would represent a word rather than a character in the alphabet. I then created a 3x3 grid to place the small symbols and established three rules that each logogram must follow to help the set look consistent and artificially manufactured like a computer language or Morse Code. Each logogram had to begin with the square in the upper left corner, have at least one empty space, and contain one conjoined shape. With the assets made, the parameters in place, and the visual style determined, I created my set of alien logograms.

This project was a learning experience and overall I believe that it was a success. I was able to achieve what I set out to accomplish visually and I learned what I hoped to discover during my research. However, I do feel that this project could be taken further. With more time, I could make the language decipherable or translatable, thus giving it interactivity with the viewer. Working on this project has given me experience and information that I can use regularly when working with typography and could even be applied if I develop my own font in the future. I enjoyed working on this project and it gave me a better understanding of creating visual communication systems that I can utilize moving forward in my career.