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Wonderland

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WONDERLAND

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural & Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

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BFA, Louisiana State University, 1997

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ABSTRACT

Wonderland is a film about a fictitious, alternate dark society, free of original thought and action. The people toil day to day in a mechanized fashion. All characters are predictable and unquestioning except for our protagonist. He seems to think something is not quite right, and possibly he discovers it too late.

Wonderland is a world in which the people work, sleep and repeat this procedure daily with no end until retirement. The story takes place on the last day before our hero's retirement. What is the next adventure to come? It must be better than the past comprised of daily toil at the factory and little other stimulation save the drive home and his fancy dual television set.

Wonderland explores themes drawn from my personal life and observation in a film representation created from a digitally collaged world comprised of everything from fantastic machine designs to references of constructivist based design merged with grotesque architecture and blocky typography. The viewer is challenged to deciding whether or not *Wonderland* can be seen as malevolent or benevolent, a vision or reality.

INTRODUCTION

Wonderland is a film encompassing two days in an individual's life leading up to his retirement from the *Factory*. He lives in *Wonderland*. This world is comprised of a society filled with complacent citizens, enacting monotonous, repetitive actions in a complete semblance of conformity. *Wonderland* is a world devoid of creativity or expression, in which its characters enact the same rituals, day by day, until their retirement. Our hero, however, seems to think something is not quite right.

I bring this world to life by a process that is not unlike my professional practice in corporate graphic design and advertising. The creative process is the same but the intent is different. When creating *Wonderland*, I try to use the process to generate a personal expression rather than client-driven design. Although the film portrays my frustrations with themes like conformity, society, and social norms, they are a backdrop to the central idea which is the individual within a conformist society.

I travel through life collecting this and that, images and trinkets, photos and letters, sometimes other's possessions, sometimes my own. This *wunderkammer* is a picture view into my inspiration for designing and bringing order to my universe. These references help inspire the machines and places and characters in action within *Wonderland*.

A universe such as this needs a brand, a unified look. In advertising, brand is everything. It is a mark that unifies your position to your market. Think IBM, Walmart, Microsoft. The government of this land is monolithic, like a large corporation and requires a bold brand like the Russian Constructivists or the National Socialists of Germany. Conformity abounds in this land in which the *Factory* has the same brand as *The Burbs*. This level of visual conformity, as in a corporate brand, unifies the masses in *Wonderland* to the point of conformity represented in an ant colony.

I chose the motion picture format because of the mechanized nature of the society depicted within the story. Drawing inspiration from German Expressionist classics such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and early animators like Ray Harryhausen, the themes presented in these early film experiments are also coupled with films from my own generation: the *Star Wars* mythologies and existential films like *The Matrix* just to name a few.

Wonderland is in essence a psychological and philosophical regurgitation of the Kierkegaardian angst contained within the early to late twentieth century film-makers experimenting in the new genre of science-fiction and fantasy films. These themes reoccur, time and time again within the genera and are expressed in their creative approaches in imagery. Films ranging from *Metropolis* to television series such as the BBC's *Doctor Who* express the underpinnings of escapism. *Wonderland* is my retelling of the aforementioned ideas and themes in a miniature world governed by conformity and unoriginality.

WONDERLAND THE FILM

Mundus Vult Decipi, Ergo Decipiat—*Petronius*

ACT I

Wonderland is a film about a world in which everything seems mechanized with little visual stimulation or interpretation in life. The film begins with the protagonist inserting a token into a vending machine. The camera follows the coin into the coin slot for a transition that reveals the title sequence that sets up Act I. This title sequence resolves with our hero finishing his coffee at the end of his last day of work before retiring, in the break room of his *Wonderland Factory* job.

Exiting the break room he walks down a long hall resolving into a lengthy queue filled with characters which all look like our main character in both dress and appearance. All of the characters advance in the queue until we lose the uniqueness of the protagonist altogether. All moving in a mechanical, synchronistic fashion, we learn the queue terminates at a car park. As the next car approaches, the next character enters the car as though he were entering a ride at an amusement park. One of the cars we see exiting the factory triggers a sign proclaiming our hero *retired* as he leaves the garage bay of the *Wonderland Factory*.

The camera then shifts to worm's-eye view, factory exterior, to receive the flood of cars leaving the *Wonderland Factory* with a bearing to the central hub of the *Wonderland* highway system: the *Wonderland Toll Booth*. It seems all traffic must pass through the *Toll Booth*. The main character selects *The Burbs* at the *Toll Booth* kiosk and is whisked off in his car with the factory and work behind him both physically and metaphorically.

After the forest of highway billboards, the viewer is presented with an image of *The Burbs* being inundated with cars of the same make and model entering a gated development in which the dwellings vary by three designs. The main character's car parks in front of his house as do his neighbors, and the cars continue to flow like clockwork automatons. Although his house looks fairly normal from the outside, it resembles a prison cell from the inside. Our character walks inside and flops down onto the only luxury item in his house which is a recliner facing his two televisions.

Pressing the remote control brings images to life on both screens. Visions of Apocalypse flood the screens as images of primates riding bicycles merge with atomic detonation sandwiched between human sex education diagrams, the result being the sum total of his nightly and repetitive entertainment schedule. After turning the televisions off our hero lies down in his simple bed.

ACT II

Act II begins with our protagonist waking and getting ready for his day of retirement. While reading the newspaper he confirms that today is indeed the day. After taking his daily pill, because of course, everyone in *Wonderland* takes their daily pill, he grabs his car keys and exits his abode.

We follow the protagonist out of his house, through the gates of *The Burbs*, past the forest of billboards and approach a large building, as giant as the *Factory*. The viewer is presented with their first images of *Retirement* as our hero's car zooms through the highway overpass, the road straightening out to show *Retirement's* megalithic edifice. His car continues its approach along with numerous other vehicles and enters the hulking building. The view shifts to inside *Retirement's* parking bay. The cars seem to resolve not in a parking garage but at a simple dead end marked by a red octagonal sign. The car door opens. Our hero exits the car and enters a hallway marked *Enter Here*. As he does so, the viewer learns where the surplus of cars are located as the floor drops from under the vehicle propelling it downward and then resetting the mechanism for the next one to enter.

The viewer is then presented with a survey of our hero's next destination: a large room filled with vintage valve tube television sets with what seems to be a "Tunnel of Love" boat styled amusement ride already filled with other patrons awaiting his arrival. After taking his seat, the gondola travels through the "This is Your Life" tunnel sign. Arriving in the first room marked "Childhood," the hero is inundated with TV screens displaying a barrage of images from what is assumed *his* childhood. But how can this be when it is the same set of images displayed for the whole boat? At this point in the movie the images are the most colorful presented in *Wonderland*. This is unlike the set of imagery displayed in the next room marked "Adulthood." Our hero passes the wall of cathode ray tubes he see images based on the drudgeries of his adult life. Coffee machines, queue after queue of people and traffic being the most prevalent.

The gondola ride terminates at yet another queue that seems to spiral down amid wires and vacuum tubes. Large fans near the ceiling oscillate in rhythm with the forward motion of the cue. The viewer loses the protagonist once again as the line, moving ever downward, pushes forward like clockwork in time with the pressure gauges mounted on the wall. Finally, a light at the end of the tunnel places the hero in what is to be assumed his final queue. There is a large set of doors at the end of the line with a large mechanical number counter that counts down one number as the door opens and closes. Eventually it is our hero's turn and the camera follows him through the door where our final act begins.

ACT III

Act III opens on a concrete precipice with large gears grinding and churning on either side. As our hero walks the pathway, industrial lights turn on casting pools of light to guide his path. This path leads to a cul-de-sac with a one-button kiosk of simple design reading "Press here to retire." Our hero presses the button and a trap door opens beneath him and he plummets out of sight down a black hole as the camera follows and wipes to a black screen.

* * * * * WARNING: SPOILER BELOW. ENDING OF FILM REVEALED * * * * *

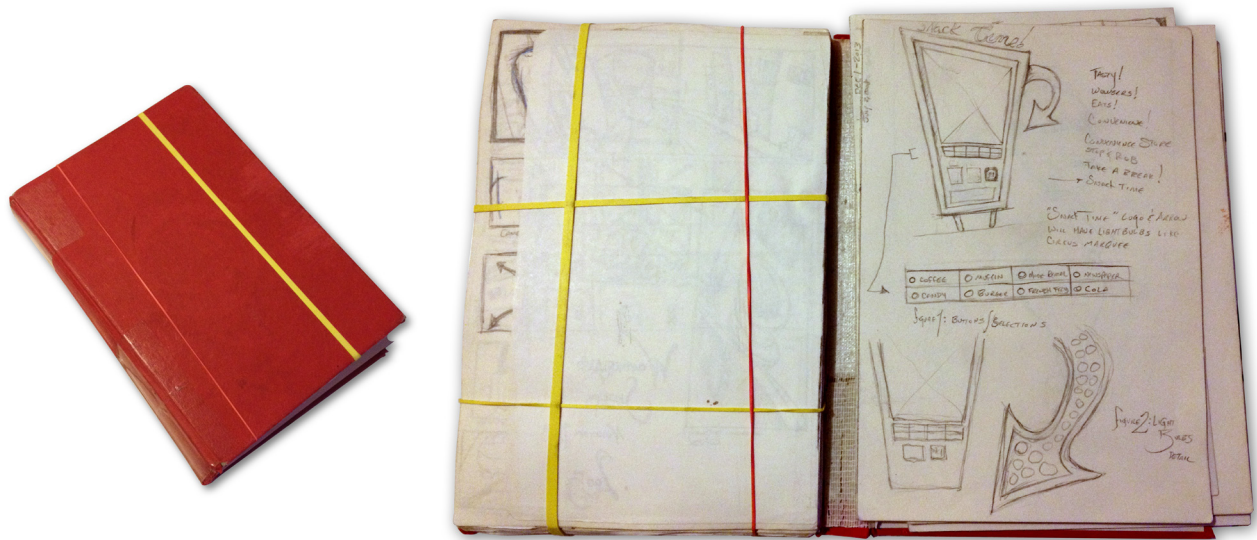
The camera pulls back from the darkness, out of a coin plate on a vending machine resembling the same machine as in the beginning of the film. From above the coin plate we read the words "Retrieve toy here" as the camera pans from the coin plate slot to left where we see a chute and a toy doll resembling our hero falling down the chute, landing listed and motionless. We then see a hand, a coin, a coin slot, and the pressing of the "Start" button. The camera pans back and we see a figure that looks like the characters from *Wonderland* staring at an arcade automata with the name *Wonderland*. As the machine starts up we see a tiny model of the *Factory* and *Tollbooth* mounted on a miniature globe turning on its axis. A miniature version of the story the viewer just watched begins again with the final shot being our character's doppelganger smiling as he watches the machine produce another toy doll from *Wonderland*.

FIN.

CREATIVE PROCESS: THE BOOK

Wonderland was created using several software packages ranging from the Adobe Creative Suite to Maxon's Cinema 4D. I wanted to use the tools I normally use professionally but shift the intent from the corporate arena to the realm of art. But as in most art, the process does not begin with the computer, it begins with the mind, pencil and paper. This book (Figure 1) in particular has served as the *Wonderland* hub of ideas since 2002 when I first conceived the notion of creating a film and possible thesis based on the film. All of these ideas served as a glue to help unify and finally propel the film forward.

This process began with what's formally known as a *treatment* or abstract of the plot and action. What then follows is a rough storyboard to pre-visualize the action and rough-in camera work. Even though the entire sets, actors and props are virtual, creating a fully CG film still requires knowledge of the arts of photography, lighting, set design, prop design and much more. The pre-vis storyboard helps with the mapping of all of these tasks.

Figure 1: *Wonderland*

CREATIVE PROCESS: THE FINAL STORYBOARDS

Without a storyboard, there is no film. No sequence of events to tell. After initial storyboards are created, edited, rearranged, deleted and possibly redrawn, the final storyboards can be created. These can be as tightly rendered as Boris Vallejo fantasy paintings or as loose as napkin sketches. As long as they describe visually items such as camera movement, camera view (worm's-eye, birds-eye *etc*), action and important items that go into each shot. In the case of *Wonderland*, I developed a taxonomy that would start with the storyboard and continue down the production pipeline ending with the file name of the computer movie file relating back to its analog sketch. The taxonomy is as follows:

<act number>-<shot number>-<shot name>_<version: <number><letter>>

Which looks like this in practice:

01-08-CupDrop- The storyboard name

01-08-CupDrop_01a.c4d – The Cinema4D file

01-08-CupDrop_01a.ae – The Adobe After Effects file

01-08-CupDrop_01a.mov – The final QuickTime file

By using a unified taxonomy, last minute errors are kept to a minimum by tracing errors in the computer process back to the storyboard as in the example in Figure 2 below.

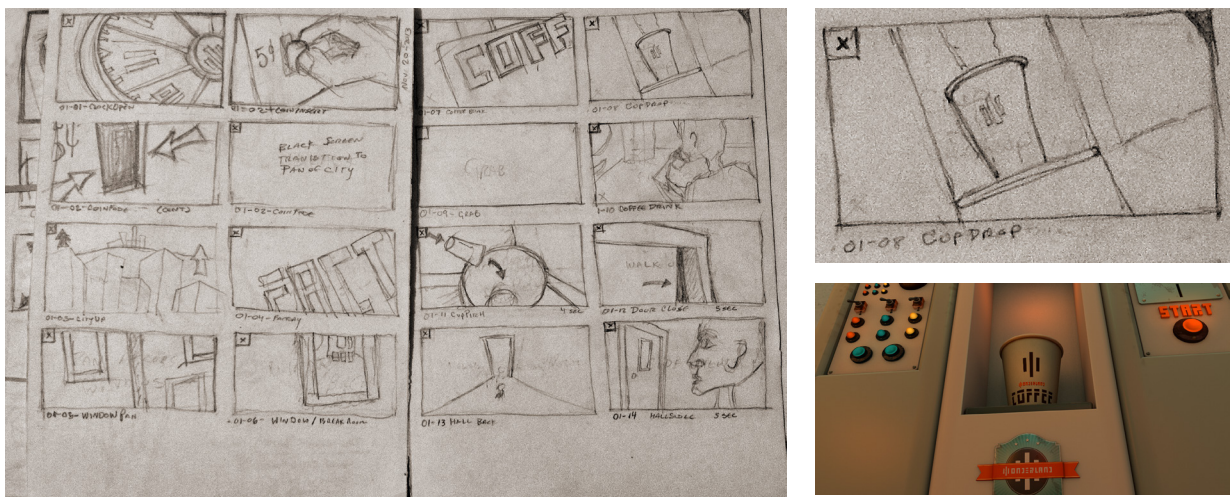


Figure 2: Frame 01-08-CupDrop (storyboard top right) corresponds to movie with the same name

CREATIVE PROCESS: PROP CONSTRUCTION

Out of all the processes involved in working in three dimensions, prop construction is my personal favorite and forte. *Wonderland's* esthetics are derived from objects ranging from the 1956 Bendix G-15 computer, to old amusement park kiosk designs from the early 20th century which is evident in the design of the *Wonderland Coffee* machine as seen in Figure 3 below.



Figure 3: 1956 Bendix G-15 (left) and Wonderland Coffee machine (right)

Since the Coffee machine is the main prop to set up the first scene, it needed to contain a lot of detail. Not details that made the prop more 'real' but rather details that help set up the *Wonderland* brand overall for the subsequent shots. All props and scenes begin with a schematic as viewed in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Original *Coffee* machine sketch (left). Rendered in-scene prop with other break room props (right, bottom).

The *Coffee* cup in particular received a bit of detail since it is the first consumer product of *Wonderland* the viewer encounters. Below is a page from the style guide created to help maintain brand cohesion while designing multiple props from different scenes of the film simultaneously. The page offers multiple views of the *Coffee* cup design including texture map and geometry described in Figure 5.



Figure 5: *Coffee* cup prop sheet displaying brand colors, prop art, geometry and final lighted renders.

Details of the *Coffee* machine and its component parts with geometry are contained below in Figure 6.



Figure 6: Front panel detail of *Coffee* machine with component models and wireframe geometry below.

CREATIVE PROCESS: CHARACTER DESIGN

There are many different modeling techniques involved in the creation of 3D objects. Although most of the props are modeled using an image projection map technique where the texture is projected onto a plane and the model sculpted from the form being projected, the character was designed using what is generally referred to as “box modeling.” Box modeling literally starts with a six-sided polygonal cube in which the form is blocked out like an artist’s possible model. Once the dimensions are arrived at from head to toe the detail can be subsequently added with the final stage being the surface material mapping. Below are excerpts from various stages of the character’s modeling sessions. The object being designed in Figure 7 below is the early stages of the hero’s shirt, created from one cube.

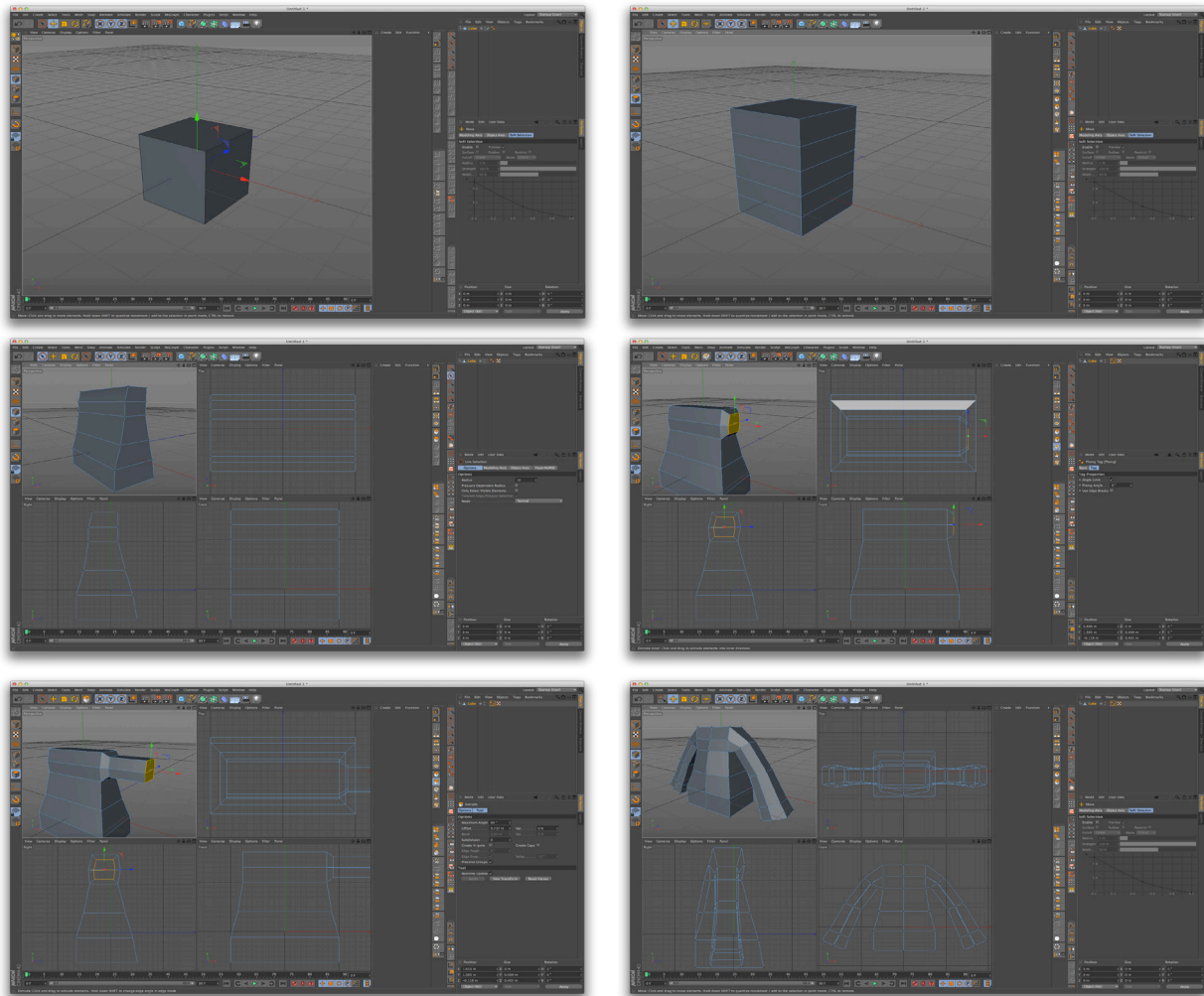


Figure 7: Box modeling process stills during the creation of the hero’s shirt.

After the modeling phase of the character, he is then image mapped and rigged for motion using a system of mesh deformers called appropriately enough, bones. Below in Figure 8 are production stills of these processes.

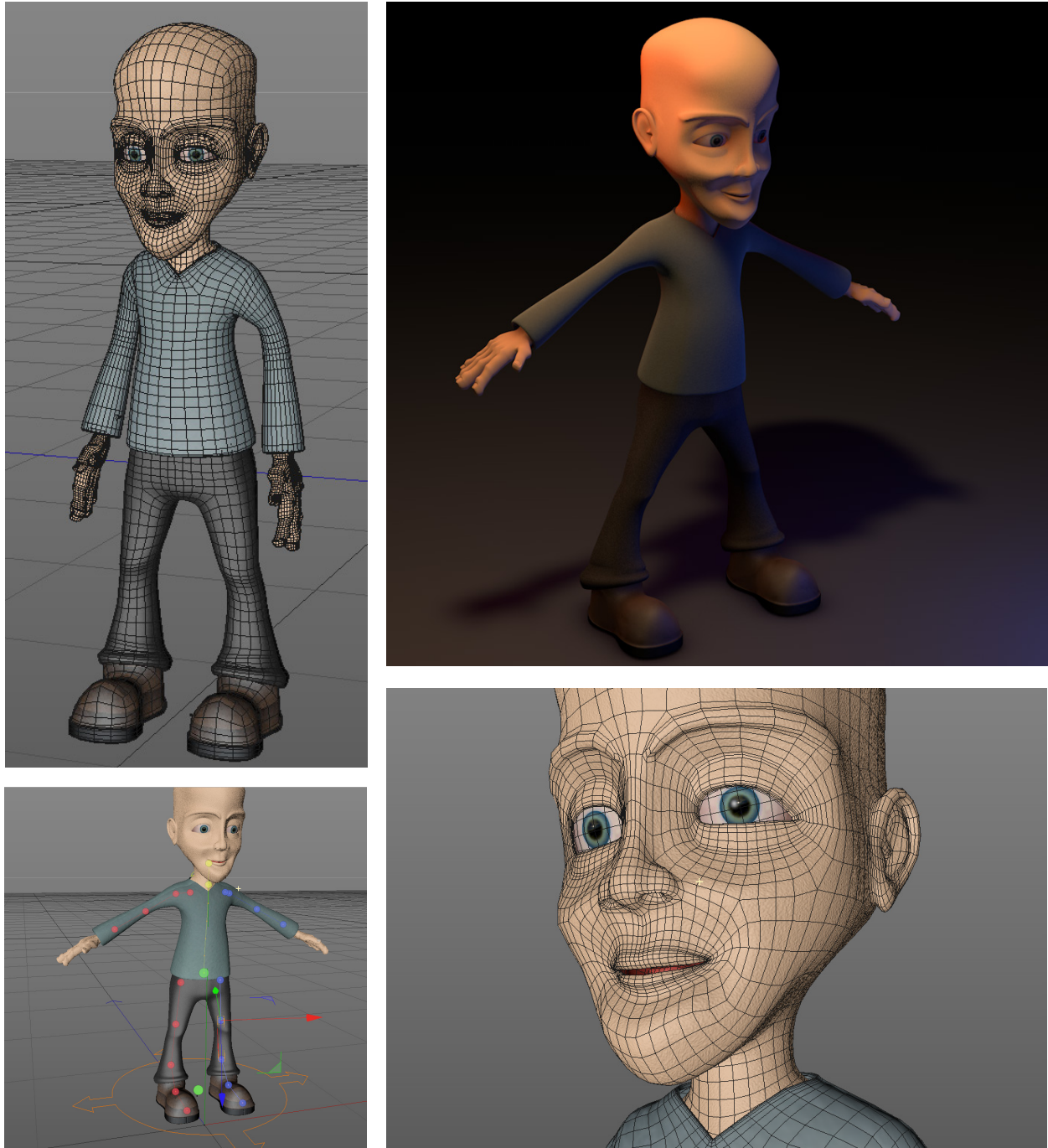


Figure 8: Various character details. Bones illustrated at bottom left.

Many test poses are designed before being integrated into final scenes as viewed in Figure 9 below.

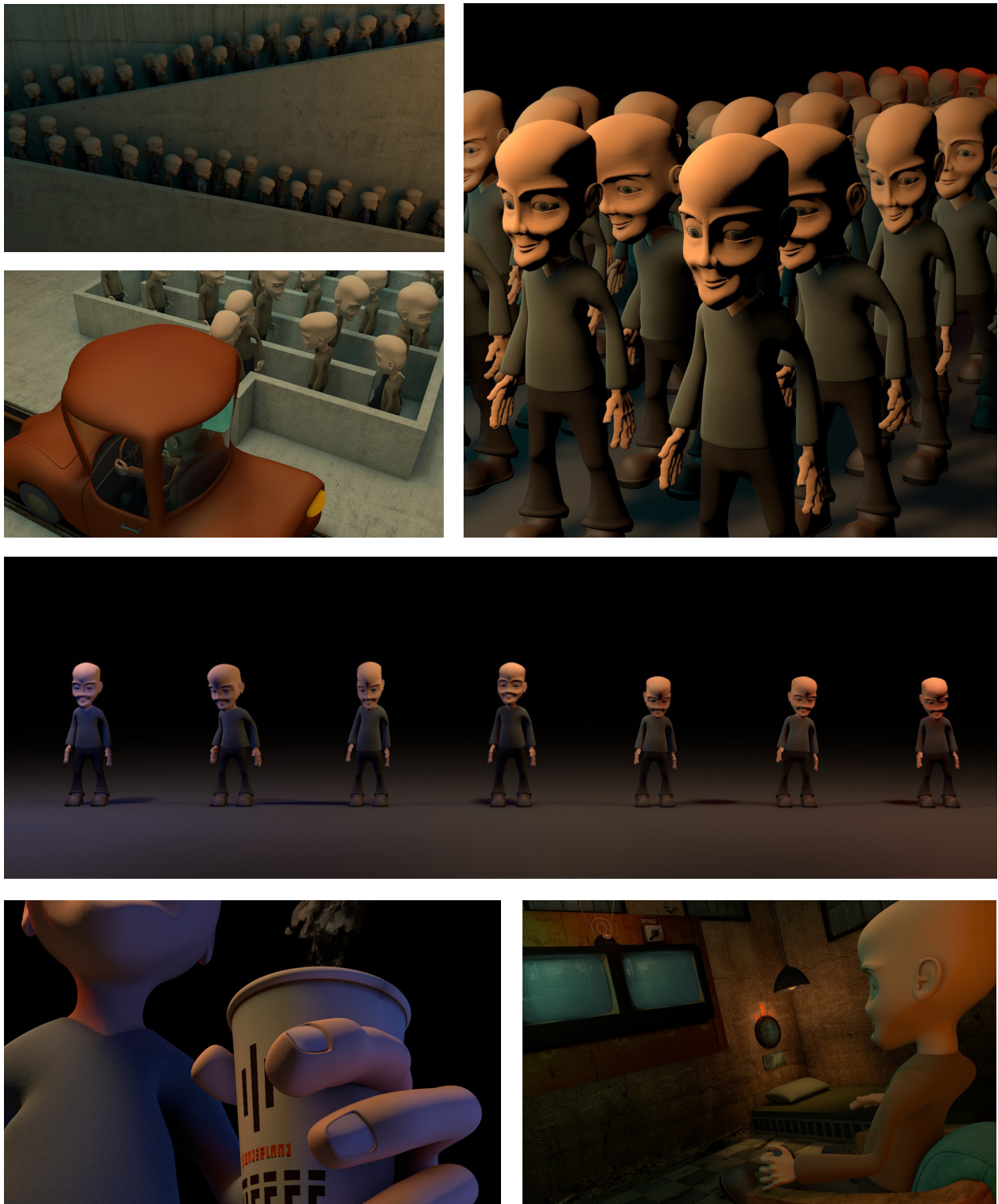


Figure 9: Various character details and poses.

CREATIVE PROCESS: SCENE DESIGN

After the props are built, they are then assembled into the scene in preparation for the filming and rendering process discussed later. All of the scenes begin with the storyboard framing it along with other drawings to get a feel of the frame space. When looking at the storyboard frame to construct, I assess the level of detail. How much detail is usually dictated by the amount of time something will be on the screen. Where extreme close-ups are necessary, more detail is added. If the camera is zooming past a prop in his car then not as much detail is needed. These decisions help keep the viewer focused on the action of the film. Figure 10 describes this process visually.



Figure 10: The *Toll Booth* set from concept sketch, to wireframe render, to final render for compositing and editing.

Since scale is relative to the scene, model sets can contain huge amounts of props or very few depending on the necessity of the action and interaction of the protagonist. Figure 11 illustrates this point.

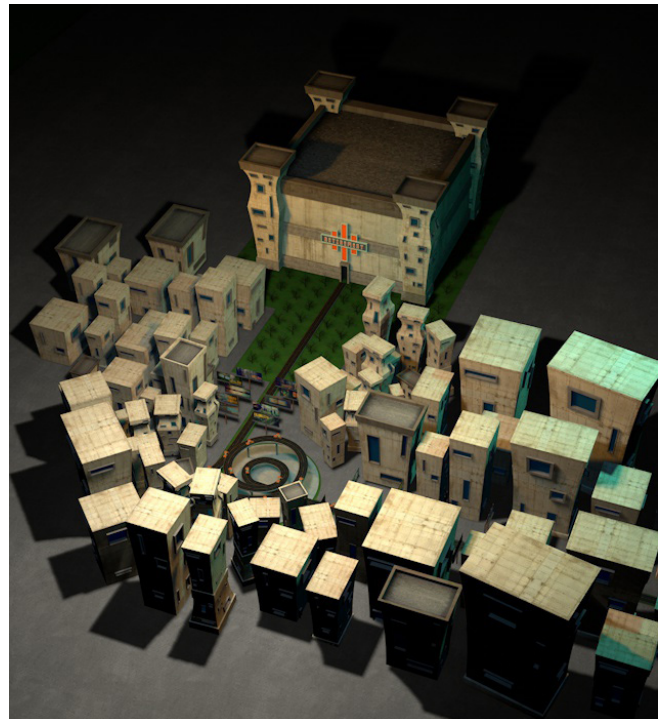


Figure 11: The *Factory* break room set (above). *The Burbs* set (below). Retirement set (bottom right). Spiral set (bottom left).

LIGHTING DESIGN: APPROACH & TECHNIQUE

Since *Wonderland* contains a fairly constrained color palette of aqua blues and red oranges, the lighting had to serve to enhance the palette. The lighting process begins by using a standard three light set up which consists of a warm key light usually above left at 45° aiming downward shown in figure 12. A bottom right fill is then added to illuminate the underside with a cooler aqua color angled up at 35° . The final touch is what I consider ‘painting with light’ and it involves a back rim light to cast a reddish-orange tint upon the prop or character being lighted. Most sets are so large in the production that other lights are needed, but they are all added with this approach in mind. Most lights are added to show more detail on a prop or set apparatus. Below, in Figure 12, is a screen shot of Cinema 4D and how it represents lights for reference with the render panel showing the light cast and shadows upon a rounded form.

Lighting is a very tedious process because in order to view the lighting properties, such as shadows, radiosity and ambient occlusion, the artist must wait for the computer to render the scene.

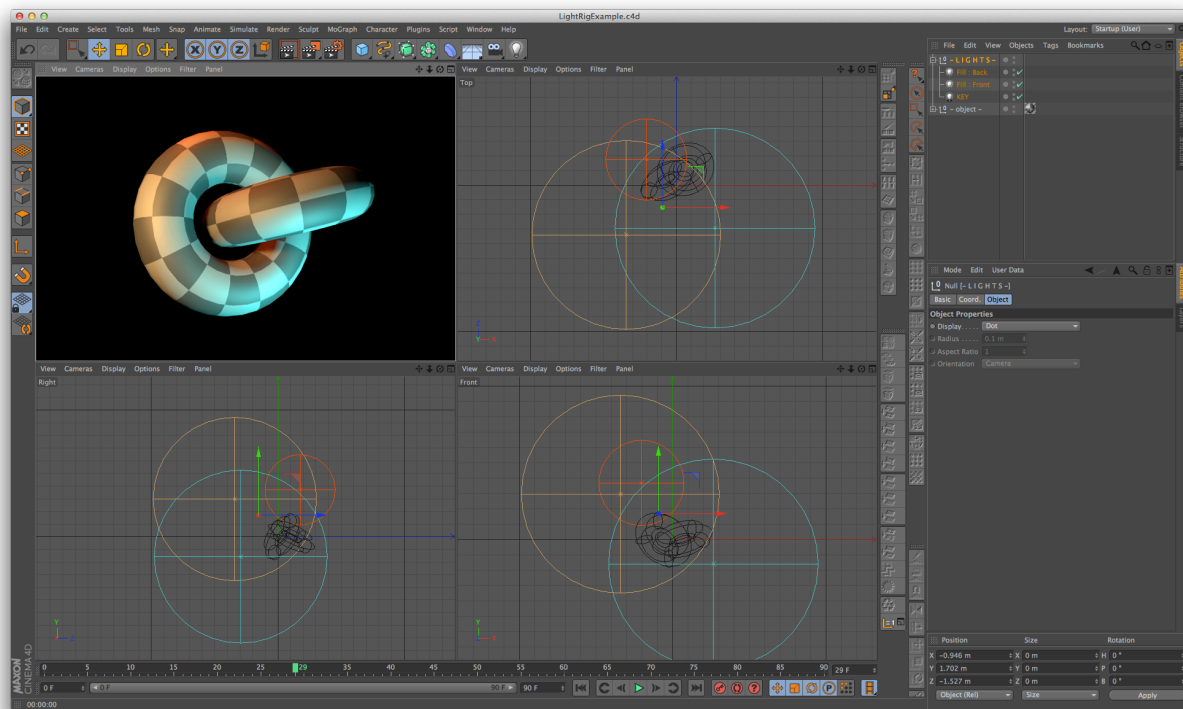


Figure 12: Cinema 4D's lighting environment illustrating a simple *Wonderland* lighting rig.

CAMERAWORK & RENDERING

After all of the props are set and lighting designed, the camera is placed, and rendering can occur. This is a tedious process, as lighting may sometimes have to be rearranged to suit the camera framing. In the scene below, the camera is panned from a negative Z axis (top of screen) to a forward Z position (bottom of screen) as though the camera were on a dolly.

Rendering is a function of the output process which all of the lights, textures, and shadows are outputted into a single final frame. In a simple scene that may only take twenty-five seconds, however in a complex scene it may take up to five minutes per frame. So every time a lighting check is made render time must be calculated into the test. Figure 13 is a visual representation of this process.

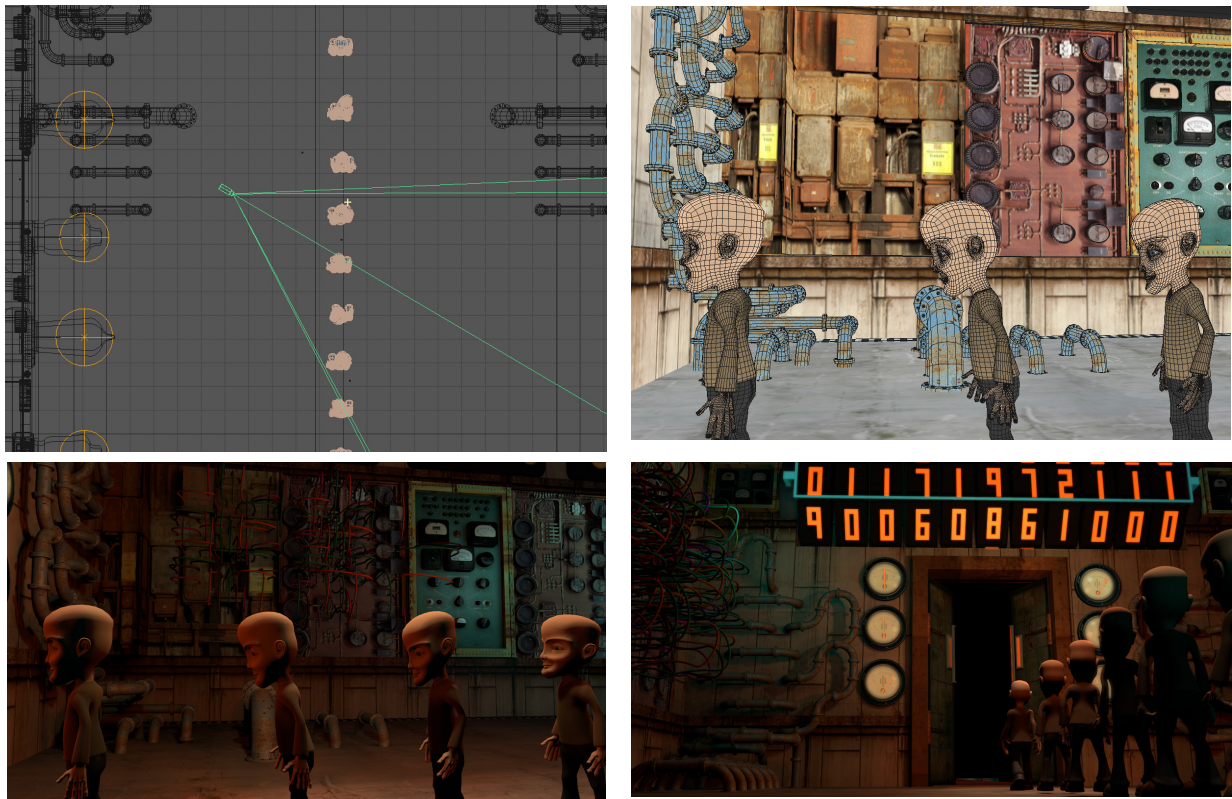


Figure 13: Cinema 4D's top view of the “numbers” set showing camera (green) placement (top left), wireframe view of what the camera ‘sees’ (top right), and final render (bottom left). An alternate camera view of the same set facing negative Z axis is also used for another edit using the same set but with a different camera angle (bottom right).

COMPOSITING & EDITING

Compositing in Adobe After Effects is the final aesthetic stage before editing (see Figure 14). Compositing is a term that encompasses many different arts. It can mean anything from sandwiching two movie clips together to form one scene, to color correction, green screening, and any item within the motion graphic realm that needs to be placed within the context of another. In the case of *Wonderland, After Effects'* color correction was heavily relied on in order to maintain the dominant colors of the movie consistently from the first frame to the last. There were very few film composites because I wanted to create everything in-camera if possible. This is a very unorthodox way of creating CG animation because it usually limits the artist in adjustments down the pipeline. I was more concerned with the feel of making tiny props and filming them inside a scale down model set. When I create commercial motion graphics I rely more on compositing for production time sake and to suit client changes in a timely fashion. Producing this way has a different feel than the aforementioned approach.

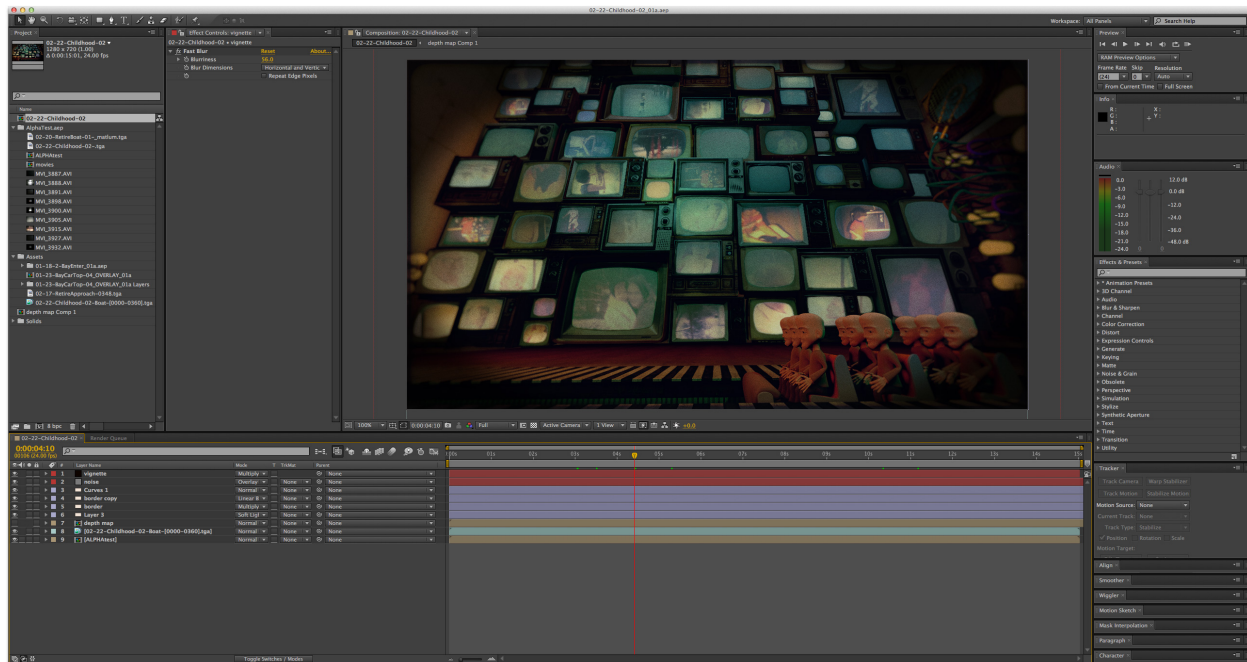


Figure 14: Adobe After Effects compositing environment. In this frame there are two film layers stacked. The gondola and floor contain an alpha channel (clear background) and is layered on top of the background layer which contains the back wall and television props. The background television layer is itself a composite which contains all the movies displaying in the screens.

THE SCORE & AUDIO DESIGN

The score to *Wonderland* was created with Propellerhead Software's *Reason* (Figure 15) which is a DAW (digital audio workstation) used in professional audio creation and production. I chose Reason because of an add-on Propellerhead released called *Abbey Road Refill* which is a hyper-sample collection of all the keyed instruments the british rock group The Beatles used in recording their hit records. A hyper-sample is a way to record instruments for playback using multiple microphone placements instead of the standard one microphone, one sound paradigm. The multiple microphones can be controlled in various ways to achieve a flexible sound during mixing. The hyper-samples are triggered with a standard MIDI keyboard controller which looks like a piano. In essence, the MIDI piano is played like a normal keyed instrument, the software records the key information then triggers the hyper-sample. Since all of the samples were captured inside Abbey Road Studio One of *The Beatles* fame, technically the score was recorded at Abbey Road. This process was important to me because so many of the sounds from *The Beatles* albums have helped shape the way I compose music. *Wonderland* was no different. Within the score can be heard the flute from *Strawberry Fields*, the Harmonium from *For the Benefit of Mr. Kite* and the piano from *A Day in the Life* just to name a few.



Figure 15: Reason's production environment including, left to right, the Virtual Rack, Master Channel, and Sequencer.

THE BRAND: COLOR & SHAPE

The *Wonderland* brand started with a mood board¹ consisting of color, shape and text which serves as a visual qualifier throughout the creation process (Figure 16). I chose blue and orange as a dominant color theme for the simple reason that I had been sketching a lot of the *Wonderland* ideas with a blue line pencil. I would then use orange as a way to insinuate lighting direction. These colors became part of the *Wonderland* landscape and ultimately its color palette.



Figure 16: Color sheet for *Wonderland* branding.

1. "How to create mood boards: 40 pro tips and tools," *Creative Bloq*, accessed on February 4, 2014, <http://www.creativebloq.com/graphic-design/mood-boards-812470>

Figure 17 below contains image maps and type specimens for the various Wonderland brand names.

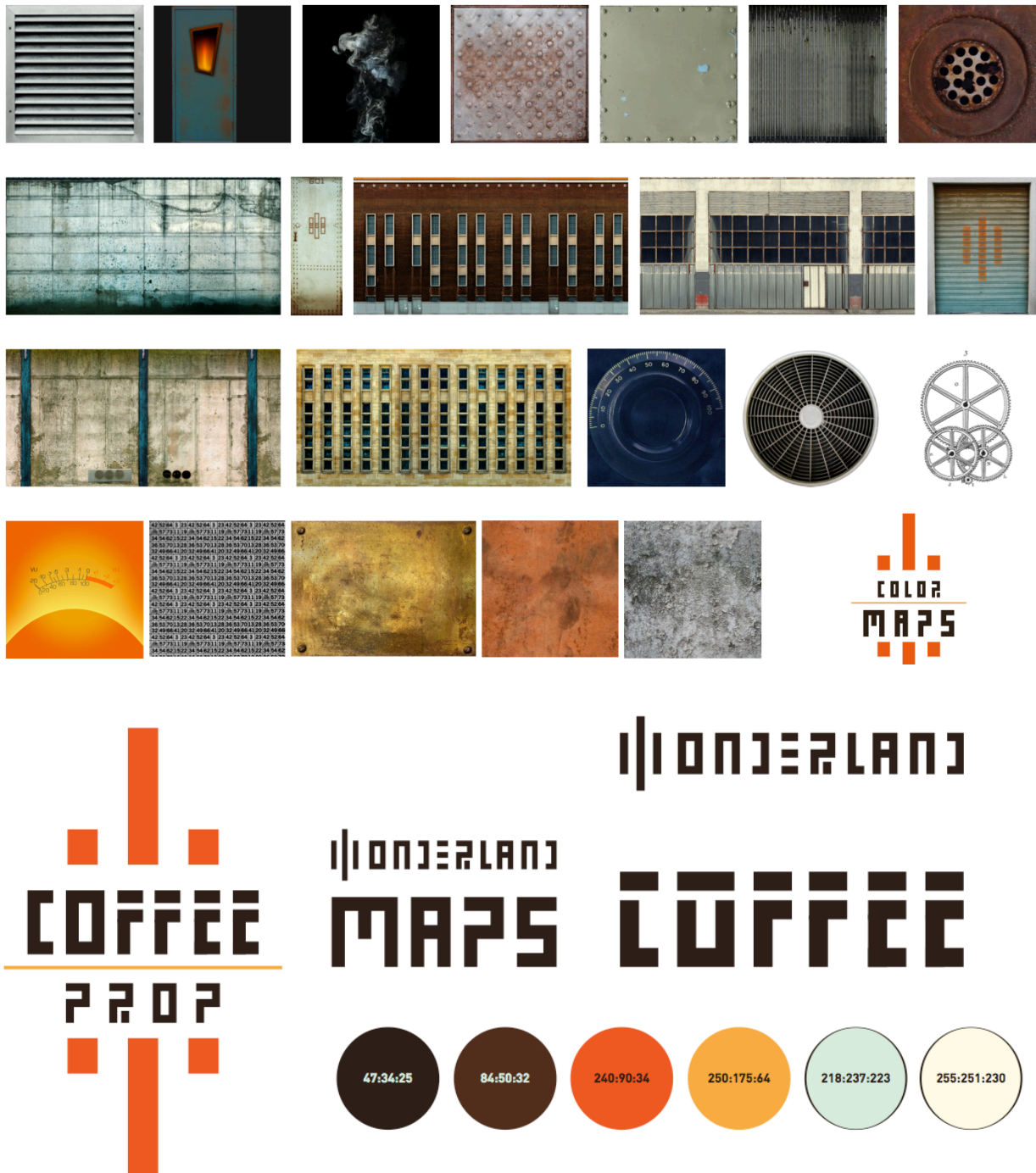


Figure 17: Wonderland mood board containing type, color, and texture elements.

THE BRAND: WONDERLAND THE TYPEFACE

This is the typeface named *Wonderland* (Figure 18) created for the movie. It is based on a simple grid where the height is 5 units high and 3 units wide reflecting constructivist type of Russian design in the 1920's.



Figure 18: *Wonderland* type specimen poster.

The Wonderland typeface's influences can be seen in the Alexander Rodchenko and Vladimir Mayakovsky poster *The Best Nipple* (1923)² as well as other constructivist posters from the same time. Below are images from the creation process (Figure 19).



Figure 19: Alexander Rodchenko and Vladimir Mayakovsky poster *The Best Nipple* (1923) with *Wonderland* type designs.

² "Constructivism (art)," Wikipedia, accessed on January 9, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructivism_\(art\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructivism_(art))

CONCLUSION

The themes presented in *Wonderland* are expressly meant for the viewer to resolve within their own life and construct. The ideas are all autobiographical in nature based on what I consider to be both a common experience among westerners in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, combined with my own personal experiences and day to day activities. Although it took roughly a year and a half to produce *Wonderland*, it took well over a decade to realize. The images presented seem very malevolent in nature as life sometimes presents itself. I firmly believe one can break that cycle if one chooses. I always try to view the world as benevolent and I believe it is even possible to see *Wonderland* as such. One can be damned to keep repeating Sisyphean actions that can be detrimental to one's well being and mental state, or one can choose a more simpler solution such as to stop pressing the start button. In the end, the choice is always the individual's to make and for them to suffer or enjoy its consequences. *Wonderland* was presented to the public in Foster Gallery at Louisiana State University (Figure 20).



Figure 20: *Wonderland* gallery exhibition at LSU, Foster Gallery.

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VITA

Jeremy Grassman graduated with a BFA in graphic design from Louisiana State University in 1997. Since receiving his degree he has worked for various firms including DDB Needham, the Richards Group, and Targetbase just to name a few. Jeremy learned business while working in the advertising field and helped launch a \$6 million dollar media agency named *Indoor Direct* which was later sold for \$22 million to *Premier Retail Networks, LLC* (PRN), a *Technicolor* company and global leader in digital place-based media services including *Walmart's* in-house advertising network. Jeremy has worked with many global brands & talented people in the advertising world from Pepsi to Seagate, and Steven Heller to Seymour Chwast. Currently, Jeremy is planning to receive his Master of Fine Arts from Louisiana State University in May 2014.