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Preparing an Animated Series Concept for a Television Ready Pitch

A culminating experience

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Digital Media

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Art in Digital Media

by

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May 2023

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Keywords: concept art, television pitch, animated series, character design, environment design

ABSTRACT

Preparing an Animated Series Concept for a Television Ready Pitch

by

Weston Hooper

Television pitches are the first step towards launching a series. This paper focuses on that process and answers the question, “from developing concept art to preparing a polished and professional pitch, what are best practices for winning a network contract?” Getting a pitch requires several steps, such as finding an agent or a producer, and presenting the story, character relationships, and artwork to show your vision. Using my project, “Dynamite Decoys,” to create a story line, sketches, turnaround sheets, and key art scene pieces, I put it all together to formulate a television-ready pitch.

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to several individuals who have led and guided me along my journey as an artist. The first individual is my late mother, Courtney Hooper, who always believed in me as an artist and was a major proponent in my love for film and music. Without her introducing me to so many bands growing up, I don't think this project would've happened. The second person is my father, Brent Hooper, who has been another key individual in shaping myself as an artist and who has given me lots of feedback, advice, and ideas throughout the years. Other artists include Cheryl Cornett, who has encouraged and helped me to shape my craft as an illustrator, Jonathan Hounshell who has guided and provided meaningful feedback with illustration and graphic design, and Saritdikhun Somasa, who has given me suggestions on perspective and lighting.

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First, I'd like to thank all of the individuals who helped and encouraged me along the way in my journey as an artist. From elementary and middle school, to high school and college. I'd also like to thank my friend, and fellow graduate student, Steven Overton, for encouraging me whenever I was stressed. Lastly, I'd also like to thank my fellow graduate students who are very inspirational and who have encouraged me along my way as an artist.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Since I was a child, I've loved cartoons. As I got older, I especially loved the different styles, and wildly spectacular stories of Adult Swim, who started producing cartoons geared for a slightly older audience. Some of their earlier shows, like *Ghost: Coast to Coast* (Lazzo et al., 1994-2008), *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law* (Ouweleen et al., 2000-2008), and *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (Crofford et al., 2000-present) were, and still are some of my all-time favorites. Growing up in northern Georgia, it always fascinated me that these shows were made in Atlanta, just an hour and a half down the road from where I lived.

I also love rock and roll. As a child, I remember hearing rock music on rides in the car with my parents. I became a huge fan of KISS. It started in 2006 while I was on a family vacation to Myrtle Beach, where I stepped into the now defunct KISS Coffeehouse and was immediately captivated by their mighty visuals and thunderous music. Over the years, and as my taste in rock and roll grew, I became a fan of Van Halen, Rush, and Alice Cooper, which all were impactful on me as an artist and person.

Having both mediums in mind, I created the basis for an animated series through concept art that could then be pitch-worthy, to answer the question, "from developing concept art to preparing a polished and professional pitch, what are best practices for winning a network contract?" This paper will explore what I learned as a concept artist about what to include in putting together a pitch using my project "Dynamite Decoys," an adult animated series about a futuristic creature band inspired by the 70's going through their daily life.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 - The Adult Animated Series

A very popular type of animation is geared toward adults, especially in the United States. It provides a comedic representation of the social and political fabric of America, sometimes both (Demina, 2021). Many of these shows specifically utilize adult humor, which usually goes against the norm, which in turn is appealing to the adult audience (Falvey, 2020).

Nicolas Holm, a media and creative communications professor from New Zealand, wrote an article highlighting Adult Swim as one of the key studios producing and airing various adult animated series today. What made Adult Swim unique in its earlier years was that most of its initial shows were repurposed “from the raw material of the Hanna-Barbera animation archives” (Holm, 2022, p. 364). Unlike other networks, Adult Swim focused on contemporary types of humor, beginning with, *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast* that “provided the template of radical stupidity that its later productions would build upon” (Lazzo et al., 1994-2008; Holm, 2020, p. 364). Now, Adult Swim remains at the forefront in cultivating “a wide appetite for new forms of humour” (Holm, 2020, p. 365). For the show idea I have in mind, Adult Swim naturally suits my property.

2.2 - The Animated Series Pipeline: Concept Art and the Concept Artist

The production pipeline for a 2D animated series comprises several essential stages that culminate in a completed show. Concept art is a crucial part of the pipeline, serving as the primary starting point for the development process of not just television, but also film and games. Concept art is primarily concerned with the look development part of the property that ensures that the vision of the creator or director is expressed as closely as possible. Scholar Sol Lewitt provided a detailed account of what concept art is in an article he wrote. According to

Lewitt, the primary focus of conceptual art is “to engage the mind of the viewer rather than their emotions” (Lewitt, 1967, p. 15). He also added that “in conceptual artwork, the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work” (Lewitt, 1967, p. 12). This statement is particularly relevant to television, film, and gaming production, where production only occurs when a concept is worth pursuing and producing.

Scholars Catherine Winder, Tracy Miller-Zarneke, and Zahra Dowlatadi in an article about animation production, wrote, concept artists help “to conceive the overall look and style of the project under the guidance of the director and production designer/art director” (Winder et al., 2012, p. 83). They added that they are expected to have “a strong aptitude for character and location design” (Winder et al., 2012, p. 83). Concept artists produce artworks ranging from character designs, including turnaround and attire design sheets, and environment artworks with key art pieces to prepare for an animated series.

2.3 - Steps to Getting to the Pitch

To even have a pitch meeting at a studio, you need to have an agent. Researcher Stephen Zafirau from the Department of Sociology at the University of Southern California discussed this in his article, stating that the agent finds work for clients by “negotiating deals, work which they typically perform for a 10% commission” (Zafirau, 2008, p. 105). This 10% comes from money taken out of contracts signed, like a “multi-million dollar acting contract, to the less lucrative sale of scripts, to the smaller fees collected when a client makes an appearance at a convention or corporate event (Zafirau, 105). In the case of a pitch, the payment would come from selling the show, as well as from residuals that the creator they represent would be getting as the show is being produced season after season.

The Duffer Brothers who created *Stranger Things* (The Duffer Brothers et al., 2016-present) gave a Masterclass video lecture called, “Developing an Original TV Series,” saying that the agent is the bridge between the artists, writers, and creators and the studio, and finding one is often the most challenging part of the pitching process (Masterclass, 2022). If you want an agent to represent you, one way that you can gain their respect is to work under them at first, through an internship or other position to get your foot in the door and show them your skills and commitment to the industry (Masterclass, 2022). Other ways to network and find an agent would be to attend industry events where agents are present, and there you can speak to them right on the spot (Honthaner, 2005). You could also reach out and see if you could attend media production meetings to network, because you never know who might be there. Once you’ve found an agent, the next part is to look for a producer. Your agent will reach out to various producers on your behalf, and those that express interest will be considered, and they will help you select the best producer based on their connection to your story (Masterclass, 2022). After you’ve narrowed down your options and selected a producer, it’s time to start pitching. This consists of presenting your idea to the producer and explaining why it’s worth their investment.

In Nickelodeon Cartoon Universe’s video, “Developing and Pitching your Cartoon | Animation 101,” Kari Kim, Daniel Wineman, and Neil Wade emphasized that you should consider several key things to prepare before getting the pitch: have concrete knowledge of the network that you are pitching to, know what types of shows the network is producing, and determine what audience they are servicing (Nickelodeon Cartoon Universe, 2020).

2.4 - The Pitching Procedure

There are several things that you should present within the pitch. Note, your story doesn't have to be fully fleshed out, but it's a good idea to have a two-to-three-page story treatment that highlights the key points of your story, especially if you're working with a writer (Nickelodeon Cartoon Universe, 2020). Additionally, consider including artwork to help bring your idea to life. This artwork should be high-quality.

On the importance of story, the more specific you are, the more reach you'll have for an audience because more people will relate to it (Nickelodeon Cartoon Universe, 2020). Your pitch should start with a brief logline that gives a quick synopsis or rundown of what the story is about, the reason why you want to tell it, and a few short storylines drafted out to give context as to where the story might go (Nickelodeon Cartoon Universe, 2020). A description of each of your characters should be given, along with their relationships to other characters, and the themes that your show will present to the audience (Nickelodeon Cartoon Universe, 2020).

The Duffer Brothers presented several parts for a pitching process. Those parts include the introduction, where you would discuss why you wanted to create this project and define its significance, what makes it stand out, what inspired you in the creation process, the setting of the story, and the mythology that encompasses it (Masterclass, 2022). You then go on to the story structure where you talk about storylines and what they might consist of, a walkthrough of characters in which you give the who, what, when, where, and why that's behind them, and the culmination of all these parts (Masterclass, 2022).

To gain insight into Adult Swim, I viewed a live stream pitch event that they hosted in 2020 on their YouTube channel featuring the head and creator of the network, Mike Lazzo, and notable animator for the network, Genndy Tartakovsky. The goal of this event is to allow for

three to four individuals to join in on the live stream with these executives to give them a ten-minute pitch to win a cash prize for the continued development of that person's show idea. The executives may choose to actually buy the show right there on the spot. In speaking on his own experience pitching, Tartakovsky used very limited pieces of artwork when he pitched his show, *Dexter's Laboratory* (Tartakovsky et al., 1996-2003), in the mid-1990's, and he used a salesman's approach to sell his idea to Cartoon Network (Adult Swim, 2020). Lazzo stated that you should attempt to sell your show idea in any way possible by refining your pitch until it's the best it can be (Adult Swim, 2020). Genndy added that you need to have the best possible knowledge of the show's material and convey what has meaning and will make your audience care about the characters and story (Adult Swim, 2020).

In Film Courage's video from YouTube, "What Do Executives Want to See in a Television Series Pitch?" notable screenwriter and producer, Erik Bork, stated that for your pitch, you should be aware of what a typical episode for your show would look like (Film Courage, 2019). Bork iterated that not every episode should be thought out in your pitch, however, you should determine the situation that can be repeated and reiterated for every episode that can keep the series moving forward (Film Courage, 2019). The life issues of your characters can be the guide to pushing your story even further (Film Courage, 2019).

Jim Agnew, an individual that has successfully pitched several shows, in "How to Sell a Television Show," echoed that you need to cover "what the show's about, the characters, the beats in the pilot, and where it's going the next few seasons" (Film Courage, 2021, 0:45). He also provided information on preparing the pitch bible, the document that "explains the characters and the show to create continuity in the writers' room and from episode to episode"

(Film Courage, 2021, 6:11). This gets created “once the show has been ordered” (Film Courage, 2021, 6:04).

Heather Kenyon, Vice President of Project Development and Sales at Starz Animation talked more about the importance of a pitch bible in the video, “How to Make an Animation Pitch Bible That Sells Itself” for the 2010 CTN Animation Expo. She explained that this document should include key details that executives would want to know, such as the target audience and outlets for the show (Grupovoznaweb, 2013). She adds that showing artwork in the bible is essential to making sure your style as a creator is fully absorbed by the production team. (Grupoyoznaweb, 2013).

A 2D animator from WildBrain Studios who has experience pitching told me that one of the most important things to know and express is who exactly your characters are so that you can present why they’d be watchable week after week (R. Brown, personal communication, February, 18, 2023). In addition, it is necessary to explain how or why your characters interact in the story, by knowing the environments where episodes take place, and how it all contributes to the narrative (R. Brown, personal communication, February 18, 2023). One thing that everyone has said: you have to know your story.

2.5 - Other Forms of Pitching

It’s important to discuss pitching as it relates to other situations outside of the entertainment industry because you are essentially presenting a business idea with pitching a series. In their article, “Pitching a Business Idea to Investors,” scholars Ruben Van Werven, Onno Bouwmeester, and Joep P. Cornelissen discussed the process of pitching an idea for a business. They stated that the most popular way for entrepreneurs to begin their pitch to investors was by highlighting a problem by “describing the current state of affairs in their target market”

(Werven, et al., 2019, p. 203). The next step is to present their solution by discussing how their product or service can “solve the problem” (Werven, et al., 2019, p. 203). The problem that you must solve when pitching a series is giving executives the answer to why an audience will come back time and time again to watch, and presenting something that they will pay for.

The pitch should bring attention to how the product will create revenue by demonstrating its appeal to the target audience, and to help investors grasp the potential profitability that the product has (Werven, et al., 2019). The pitch should discuss the experience and reliability of the artist making the product that they are selling, such as the quality of the artwork and education. By highlighting the qualifications of the workforce, the pitch can grow the investors’ confidence in the product’s quality and potential success (Werven, et al., 2019).

Oleg Redko and Oleksandra Moskalenko discuss several techniques to enhance the psychological impact of a pitch in their journal article, “Psychological Strategies in the Process of Pitching New Business Opportunities.” One of the important factors that you should have whilst doing your pitch is charisma, since it affects the sound of your voice and shows investors that you have a passion towards what you are wanting to sell to them (Redko & Moskalenko, 2021). Another thing is to be ready for potential rebuttals or doubts from investors and develop truthful responses that emphasize the benefits (Redko & Moskalenko, 2021).

2.6 – Summary Statement

To summarize, the essential pieces of information that someone with an idea for a show should know in regard to pitching it are getting an agent, networking, knowing the network you want to pitch to, knowing your target audience, and having items prepared such as the logline, story, setting of the story, mythology that surrounds the story, description of your characters and their relationships to other characters, life issues of your characters, what a typical episode looks

like, themes, showing artwork, and highlighting your qualifications as the artist. By incorporating all of these parts into your pitch, you'll be on your way from seeing your ideas go from the drawing board to the television screen.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 - The Story

To craft a great pitch, you need to have a handle on your story. The executives want to make sure that what you're presenting to them has resonance and can garner an audience. If they understand and resonate with your idea, you will have a greater chance of getting your show picked up.

From the start, I knew that I wanted to include my interests in the story, such as rock and roll, following your passions against all odds, and representing the unique characteristics of the Appalachian culture I grew up with. The story goes as follows: in the year 2472, humans still populate the world, but at a slower rate than ever before. These creatures are animal hybrids and have been developed by a scientific corporation called Zoolacorp, who co-exist with them. At each facility, they splice together DNA from the different animals found in the surrounding areas. The goal of this is to continue to have intelligent beings populating the world, who have unique personalities, and can carry out tasks to keep things running just like humans.

The story focuses on four friends who have grown up together in the Zoolacorp facility located at the old Oak Ridge facility in Tennessee, and now work for the same lab. They dream of being in a rock band. They include Bobby, a red salamander, long-eared bat, and bobcat hybrid. He is very adamant about achieving his goals, is logical, and one of several lead researchers at the lab. He's also a know-it-all, which tends to annoy people.

Ray is a rodent and moth hybrid. He instructs first-time flying creatures at the lab and is the most wild and outgoing of the group, and is made fun of by his peers for being rambunctious and being loose with rules, especially when he's been scolded for doing so.

Vincent is a hybrid between a hog and a raccoon. He is the head chef in the lab cafeteria, and is the most humorous of the bunch, but is sometimes put down by others because of being constantly hungry, and by his cringey jokes.

Eddie is a great horned owl and barking tree frog hybrid. He is also a lead researcher but is more unreserved, charming, and vocal about his ideas, but isn't taken seriously by his peers because of his height in being short stature.

Raised by scientist Daryl Edmonton, who instilled in them the important attributes of scientists, such as the research and scientific process, honesty, work ethic, and being humble, kind, and caring towards others. He also introduced them to his love of rock and roll. He didn't know that the four had been coming to his office at night and listening to his vinyl collection of rock music.

True to their upbringing, they researched rock and roll history at the city's archival library by listening to recordings and watching projections of old bands, and became fans of 70's rock. The group decided that they did not want to stick with their expected professions for their entire life, but rather become rock musicians, even though that genre had been long gone. The group named themselves the "Dynamite Decoys," with "dynamite" referring to blowing out of cages, or in their case ejecting themselves from their typical routines in life and being a band. The "decoys" part symbolizes the alter-ego of a rockstar over a scientist. They used parts from the scraps of scientific equipment, like moisture analyzers, robotic armatures, and MRI parts, that had been stored in an area of the facility for storage to create instruments, and they practiced at night in that same area.

Their perfect moment arrived when it was announced that the city would host a music competition, which finally gave them the chance to introduce their band. Going through several

auditions to make it to the final battle with two other rival bands, one an electronic funk band, and the other an electronic jazz band, the funk band continually attempted to disqualify them, claiming that their music was no longer popular. Despite this, the judges didn't reject them. The Dynamite Decoys were able to successfully move forward and prove everybody wrong. This scenario could serve as the pilot, launching their challenging journey to becoming rockstars.

In future episodes, the band will have the usual challenges an off-beat band might have, while also dealing with bizarre and humorous events that disrupt their lives, such as needing to remain popular by writing impactful songs and making memorable performances, booking gigs at venues that will allow them to play, managing finances, and maintaining their jobs at Zoolacorp.

One idea for an episode would be that a character accidentally drinks an experimental concoction that one of the other characters whipped up in the lab that causes them to grow super small, resulting in the band coming up with a unique fix, shrinking down the drumkit by pouring the concoction on it, and amplifying the sound that comes out of it. Another episode could be that two of the characters fight over the same love interest, which happens to be the manager of their rival band, almost causing the band to break up in the process. Another could be about a lab student that wants to perform with the band, but isn't a good musician. Since the lab student is the child of a higher-up, and if the band refuses, they would be at risk of getting fired. The group doesn't want to deal with them so they use a projection of a fake show and have them play to it not knowing that they're being bamboozled. Having episode ideas in your pitch is great because executives can see that you have a roadmap in mind for your story.

All episodes will emphasize the threads that flow from episode to episode. The morals that are highlighted are trusting facts and science, caring for others and trying to do the right

thing, hard work, following your passions, and dealing with failing to succeed. Audiences can relate to the characters' personalities and identify with them, their love for rock, and their passion for wanting more out of their lives.

On a personal note, I wanted this show to serve as a love letter to the rock genre. Being from Appalachia, I also wanted my creatures to be hybrids of some of my favorite animals from the region by showing my appreciation for the region. This show takes place in East Tennessee, and these four characters have Appalachian traits, such as their dialect, values, and traditions, which other people from that area can relate to. I also wanted the show to present the unique features of Appalachian life in a charming and positive manner to get viewers who are not from the area interested in and accustomed to it.

3.2 - Importance of the Artworks

When creating a show, you've got to think about the concept art. This consists of concept pieces like turnarounds sheets of your characters, attire sheets, object sheets, and key art scene pieces to create the look and feel of your show.

Several shows inspired me artistically in creating Dynamite Decoys. Futurama (Groening et al., 1999-present; Chapman, 2023), because of its unique color pallet and lighting, Courage the Cowardly Dog (Dilworth, J., 1999-2002) and Hanna-Barbera's use of linework, and the spoof shows from Adult Swim that repurposed Hanna-Barbera content with Space Ghost: Coast to Coast (Lazzo et al., 1994-2008) and Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law (Ouweleen et al., 2000-2008) for their outlandish storylines.

In the development phase, I created artworks that included turnaround sheets for the characters, design sheets for the attire they wear for both the lab and stage settings, design sheets for the instruments they use, and key art pieces depicting environments in the story. Making

these pieces (see figure 1) puts you, the concept artist, one step ahead in the show’s development stage since you’ve made the artwork that’s created once the show has gone into production after it’s been bought by the executives. Once you get to putting together the pitch, you’ll have variety of designs available to choose and pick from to include and show to network executives. This material is helpful to have for the pitch bible.

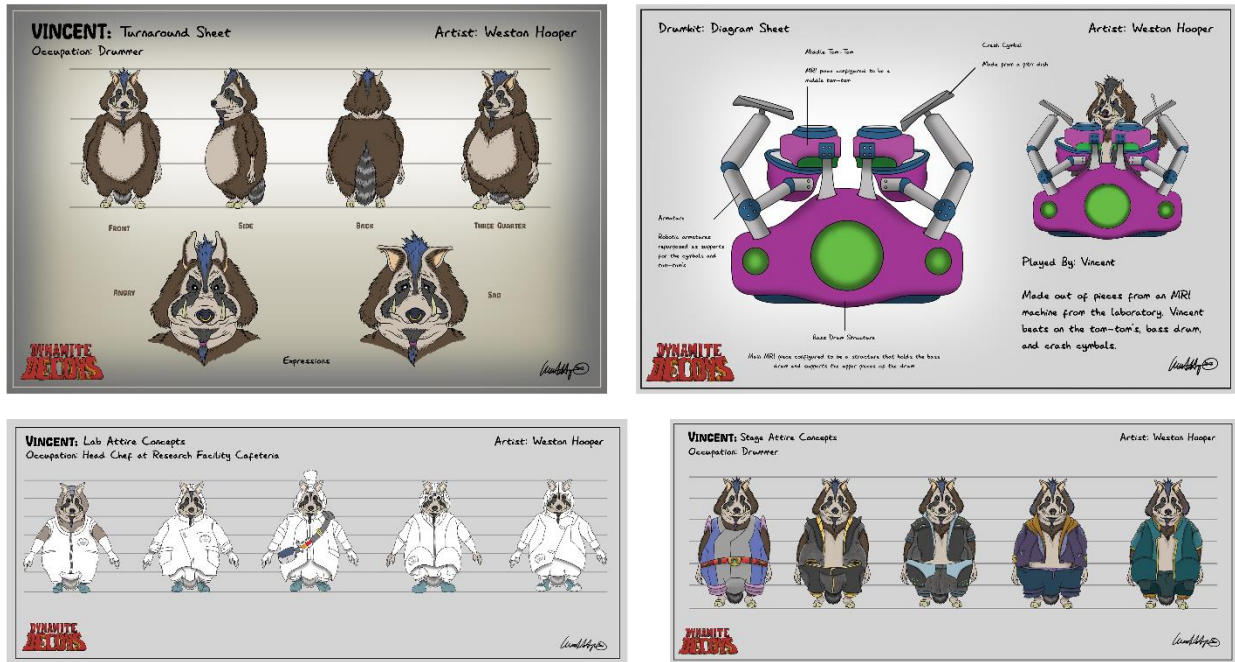


Figure 1 – Example of Design Sheets for Vincent: Character Turnaround Sheet (Upper Left), Instrument Design Sheet (Upper Right), Lab Attire Sheet (Bottom Left), and Stage Attire Sheet (Bottom Right)

Chapter 4. The Pitch

4.1 - What to Include

For the pitch, you need to include the logline, basic information about the story, and final versions of the character and costume designs, props and objects, and key art scenes depicting various moments in the story. This is so executives can see and understand the look and feel of your show. You should also include merchandising options. These will be compiled into a PowerPoint that you will use when you are pitching (see appendix).

4.2 - Key Art Scenes

Key art scenes are very important pieces of artwork to include in a pitch, since they show executives the locations that audiences will be seeing week after week of where the characters hang out. They also show the series' look and feel with the interaction of lighting and colors. The more refined these pieces are, the closer the finalized look of the show will be. The key art scenes I created showcase several scenes in the pilot.

These scenes depict moments in the band's early days. Three of these scenes show the characters building their instruments in the lab, with one scene of Ray and Eddie in the lab, where Ray is building his guitar while Eddie searches for supplies (see figure 2). Another scene in the lab shows Eddie examining a box of materials that have just arrived while Bobby checks a blueprint of his bass guitar to ensure he's following the build design correctly (see figure 3). The last scene in the lab displays Vincent assembling his drumkit while Bobby helps him (see figure 4). The other two scenes show Vincent and Bobby researching rock stars and bands from the 70's in the archive center (see figure 5), and the other depicts the band performing on stage (see figure 6), where I incorporated elements from the band's concept album, Pieces of the Velvet Orb, into stage pieces.



Figure 2 – Ray and Eddie in the Lab

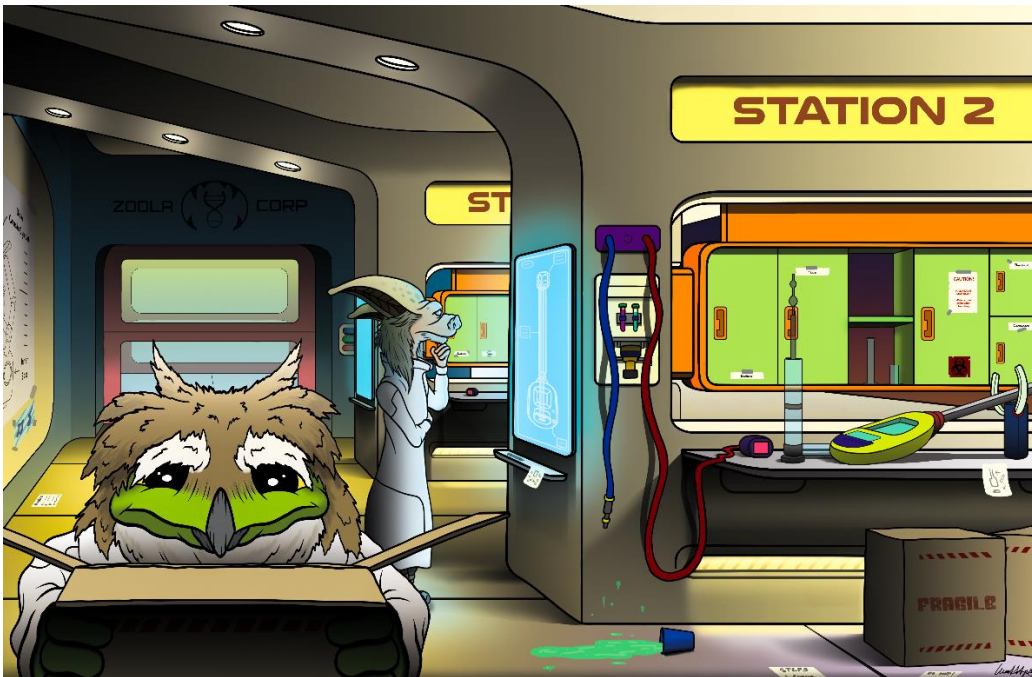


Figure 3 – Eddie and Bobby in the Lab



Figure 4 – Vincent and Bobby building the drumkit



Figure 5 – Vincent and Bobby in the Archive Center



Figure 6 – Dynamite Decoys on Stage

4.3 - Merchandising Options

Other good things to include in the pitch are examples of how the show can make income and increase viewer engagement. I designed two album covers to showcase the band in different ways, with a debut album cover and a concept album cover. These covers represent the possibility of full-fledged albums with music by the band as a marketing tie-in. A self-titled debut album is the band's first release, while the concept album with a story-driven narrative came later. Most iconic rock groups of the 70s had both types of albums.

To draw inspiration for my designs for the debut cover, I studied album covers from artists such as KISS, Alice Cooper, The Who, Cheap Trick, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and David Bowie. A few bands that I looked to for inspiration for the concept one was Pink Floyd, The Who, and The Beatles. The finalized debut design featured the band members leaning against a wall in the futuristic city they reside in, looking towards the viewer in order to engage with them (see figure 7). Many of the reference albums I studied had band members looking towards the viewer, so I

wanted to incorporate that element into my designs. In terms of the concept album, I envisioned it as a story centered around an object. I came up with the velvet orb as my object. My finalized cover design consisted of each of the four members consuming and living off the energy of the velvet orb as they are living in containment cells that are connected to it (see figure 8). Other pieces of merchandise you could include are t-shirt and toy designs.



Figure 7 - Dynamite Decoys: Debut Album



Figure 8 - Dynamite Decoys: Pieces of the Velvet Orb Concept Album

Chapter 5. Conclusion & Future Research & Plans

5.1- Conclusion

In conclusion, to stand out in the pitch process you should know what is needed to get the pitch, such as getting an agent, networking, knowing the network you want to pitch to, knowing your target audience, and having items prepared such as the logline, story, setting of the story, mythology that surrounds the story, description of your characters and their relationships to other characters, life issues of your characters, what a typical episode looks like, themes, showing artwork, and highlighting your qualifications as the artist. You should know what items to include in your pitch such as the logline, basic information about the story, and final versions of the character and costume designs, props and objects, and key art scenes depicting various moments in the story. You need to also put together a PowerPoint that you will use when you are pitching and should practice from it beforehand. Additionally, you must understand the steps involved in transitioning from a pitch to a final product, including legal requirements (contracts, copyright, lawyers, etc.), along with creating a pitch bible that provides the development team with a comprehensive understanding of your unique style as an artist, thereby ensuring that it is adequately represented in the final product. This information is extremely useful for someone with an idea for a show to know how to pitch it, especially a concept artist. Incorporating all of these parts into your pitch will get you one step closer to seeing your ideas on the television screen.

5.2 - Future Research & Plans

My plans for this project are to attend conventions where pitching to executives takes place, and to better understand the pitching process, and find an agent. I found several conventions that offer individuals the chance to pitch, like the ATX TV Festival who has a pitch

competition and the Screencraft Writers Summit. I also want to join in on Adult Swim's livestreamed pitch meetings, to meet and talk with executives from the network, and pitch this show to them. I'd also like to make an animatic to incorporate some movement into my characters, along with more artwork to expand the show.

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APPENDICES



Dynamite Decoys
Pitch Presentation V

APPENDIX: Dynamite Decoys Pitch Presentation

VITA

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