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The analysis of female Indian bodies in *League of Legends* to develop techniques towards purposely reflective visual design.

By Taliah Naidoo
Student Number 1974958

Master of Arts by Research: Digital Arts
The University of the Witwatersrand
WSOA 8000A

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Supervisor: Andrea Hayes
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Abstract

This dissertation examines how the representation of Indian feminine champions in *Riot Games' League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) perpetuates stereotypes of over-sexualisation and underdevelopment. *Champions* refer to the playable characters within the game. *League of Legends* presents three champions, *Nidalee, Karma* and *Nilah,* who are Indian females, which I have analysed to showcase how they perpetuate stereotypes. Using theories of representation, fetishism, and character design, I have created a creative practice that showcases how *Nidalee* could be visually redesigned to depict more accurate Indian representational elements, retaining the fundamental components of her, such as her backstory and in-game mechanics. The visual aspect of challenging the stereotypes is presented in a creative practice. The creative practice was

where I showcased the process of brainstorming and developing different visual concepts to showcase the experimentation and development of visually redesigning *Nidalee*. This dissertation brings in different characters from different video games to reinforce the theories of underdevelopment, sexualization, stereotyping and fetishism. However, this dissertation's core focus was on the female Indian representation of the *League of Legends.*

Plagiarism Declaration

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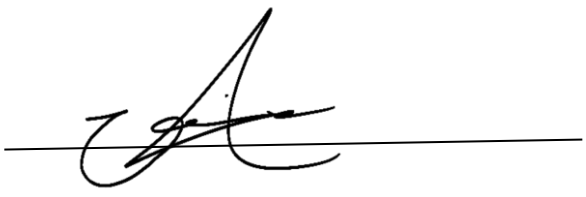
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Acknowledgments

A Master's is something you work alone on, but need the support of others to complete. The process is difficult, demoralising, and sometimes seems nearly impossible. It feels like it goes from something you are passionate about to something you may even grow to hate. But then some people see the value, interest and passion you put into this work, and it makes you want to complete it. So I would like to dedicate this page to them.

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Chapter One

Finding Yourself In A Video Game

Can one find representations of themself in a video game? Or does one have to make the character in order to feel represented?

As a young Indian woman completely consumed by games from a young age, I had always wanted to find aspects of myself within games. Anything ranging from the story to the setting, but what I had longed for most was to feel visually represented by a character in a video game. Growing up, I had never encountered characters who looked like me, shared the same beliefs that I did, or had backgrounds that I could relate to. However, as I grew older and my knowledge and range of games grew, I started to notice a rising development of characters that did look like me in video games, but they never seemed quite right. There would be aspects of their designs that didn't make sense; they had physical features that did not seem entirely appropriate for them, and, at most times, a combination of the two. Furthermore, their inclusion was purely there to add some sense of diversity where needed while still having little to no impact on the game or its story. However, in my early years of university, I discovered a game called *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009). I had only found the game in 2019, and it was released on the 27th of October 2009, so by then, it was already ten years old. Upon seeing it, it piqued my interest as the first online game I had ever played, and I am still just as excited to play it now as I was in 2019. I currently have a playtime of 6570 hours and am ranked 43,993th of 2,245,275th worldwide for the time I have played. I enjoyed and still enjoy the game very much; I even became the captain of an amateur team in 2022. Because of my consistency in playing the game, my knowledge and understanding of it have grown aptly, yet even through this enjoyment, I see the game's flaws.

I found this game interesting, as, at first glance, it was a game where every champion had equal impact and opportunity. Further investigation made it seem like the characters exist solely to create meaningless or flat diversity. However, they existed in a game world crafted perfectly for them, yet they still lacked meaning and representation. Each region within *League of Legends* encapsulates different cultures and cultural themes drawn from real-world inspiration. This

enabled designers to use pre-existing materials to add depth and detail to their characters, but this is not always the case and is explained later in this chapter. There are many characters, taking different forms, races and species. It seemed so limitless. However, despite having 169 different characters, I could only find wisps of myself in three of them. Moreover, even in these three, I questioned their designs so heavily. Despite their being there, I did not feel represented by them. The believability of the characters existing in the game where they were supposed to conform to a specific demographic felt almost absent (Bembeneck, 2015, pg 41). It felt as though I had nearly arrived at the feeling of being represented, only to be disappointed. Moreover, with further nitpicking at their designs, I felt more misled by that initial glance I took. I had clung to misrepresentations unhealthily and had not realized till I was older that the misrepresentation of video game characters can be harmful as much as it can be inspiring.

Video game characters have the ability to reflect a sense of oneself within games when players have the chance to feel represented by them. Video game characters have the potential to create meaning for the player and, furthermore, allow them to feel represented in a different form of media. However, it should be noted that, to make a video game character, is a more complex task than one might think, and to make a character from pre-existing ideals, morals, culture and race, even more so. This dissertation aims to investigate video game characters from a pre-existing game where the characters were based on real-world understandings. *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) and its representations of female Indian characters was the core focus of this dissertation. The investigation of this game and its characters within this dissertation aimed to answer and frame the research of the analysis of female Indian bodies in *League of Legends* to develop techniques towards purposely reflective visual design. This dissertation will explore and deconstruct the designs of *League of Legends* characters *Nidalee, Karma* and *Nilah*. These are the three female Indian characters present within the game currently. The information gathered from their analysis enabled me, in my creative practice project along with this research, to visually redesign *Nidalee* who was the first female Indian character to be present within the game. Furthermore, the analysis provided me with a means to redesign *Nidalee* with a more informed and accurate approach using the teachings from various scholars that are discussed throughout the dissertation. There will also be an additional character being analyzed, which is *Akhsan* (Riot Games, 2009) who was the game's first Indian male character.

The method of research followed the use of theoretical methodologies to deconstruct the visual appearances of the characters and use the information gathered from this to have a more informed visual redesign. There were numerous core focuses addressed in this dissertation such as representation, fetishism and stereotypes which were covered by teachings from Stuart Hall (1997), Edward Said (1978) and Dibyesh Durham (2001). Stuart Hall's (1997) teachings on representation and depiction of the "other" were used to frame why the characters have been depicted in the manner. Edward Said's (1978) teachings on Orientalism and the depiction of the Orient within media were used to frame and situate my arguments better from a more racially relevant standpoint. This tied in well with my research from a race and gender perspective. Dibyesh Anand (2007) and Vladimirovna and Olalere (2022) provided me with teachings on different character design approaches I took on the visual development and redesign of the *Nidalee.* Production and interpretation of characters and their designs were covered by the teachings from Stuart Hall (1980) which enabled me to express the possible meanings behind the character's design choices. Orientalism was a core focus in my research as all of the characters that were discussed were Indian. Said (1978) and Durham (2001) have teachings that directly relate to my research which allowed me to unpack the characters through their teachings on the displacement and symbols of South Asian females and the negative portrayals of them. Character design and analysis was a methodology that was crucial to working towards a visual redesign of *Nidalee*. Lee Sheldon (2023) and Jesse Schroter (2014) enabled me with their teachings on analysis during the process I underwent of deconstructing the visual design of video game characters. They offered teachings on different character types, tropes and the meaning of their presence within games.

League Of Letdowns

The American game studio *Riot Games,* in late 2009, developed *League of Legends*. It is a game that prides itself on the constant care and consideration of its players base. If players encounter issues, they have means to address them directly with a *Riot* employee. The *Riot Games* website has a ticketing system where players have the ability to log their issues, provide evidence and

converse with their employees based on what the player needs (Riot Games, 2009, https://support.riotgames.com/hc/en-us). This includes varying topics that can be selected such as to report a player, request a refund, a general query, login assistance, account recovery and even requests for your accounts data (Riot Games, 2009). Furthermore, players who subscribe to the newsletter have opportunities to review and give feedback to the company based on their experiences within the game. Players also receive a personalized yearly certificate which shows them all their accumulated achievements they had received within the year, and they make it quite personalized. The game also offers an opportunity for players to draw a doodle to receive some of the game's paid-for currency if they are short of buying something. These aspects shape the perception that the company does a great deal for their players. However, Riot Games do not always listen to their player base. All the systems are in place for a great player-to-company pipeline, but there has been little evidence of the company acting on the reasonable requests of the players, which are discussed later in this dissertation. This makes it feel as though *Riot Games* do the opposite of what they suggest at times, creating a trend where players seemingly feel heard and well-treated but are let down knowing their feedback and suggestions were not incorporated into bettering the game and its community in any way, therefore leaving their players feeling let down. Their most recent letdown was when they decided to remove the acquisition of free loot for players, essentially leaving free-to-play players without any means of obtaining paid items. After some resistance from their players and a worldwide strike, they have still not implemented the acquisition of free loot. They had released a video on their official YouTube page acknowledging that they were unaware the free loot meant so much to players and were working on a fix to re-implement it. This had the players excited to receive the loot once again, but this never happened, leaving players feeling let down. Additionally, players were informed that a rarer currency would become more available to them through playing the game, again generating global excitement. However, the players were not informed they would need to pay $10.99 every time they wanted to obtain the currency and the amount they would get would not be enough to purchase anything. Another instance was the game's tournament they held for casual players. Players may enter the tournament if they want and play against other teams entered to gain rewards. The tournament had experienced technical difficulties which left people stuck in the game's tournament menu for six to eight hours. Riot Games then announced that they would grant players a free loot crate to apologize for the game breaking during the tournament, but once again, the players did not receive

anything from the company. It is instances like these where the game promises to show the players grace and support but does not meet their end of the bargain. And given that this was *Riot Games* first release and has remained popular running for so long, players might expect more care and understanding from the company.

As previously stated, the studio's first creation was *League of Legends*, which was developed three years after its establishment. The gameplay includes various game modes, the most popular being a ten-player game mode where players are divided into two teams of five, and each team member conforms to a specific role. The game falls under the MOBA genre, Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (Tyack, Wyeth, & Johnson, 2016, pg 313). *League of Legends* is a 3D, top down, isometric game with a semi-realistic appearance. There are over 160 characters that the players can choose from and in *League of Legends* they are called "champions". Throughout this dissertation, I have referred to the *League of Legends* characters as champions. All champions have four abilities, three minor abilities and one ultimate ability. These abilities will be on a cool down after being used whereby the cool down timer is dependent on the champion's kit and items they have built.

As stated before, the game is played from a top-down perspective, where the champion's field of view is what the player sees when their camera is locked on the champion they are playing. Players may also unlock their camera and move their camera around instead to make their field of view more comfortable for them. Players can also zoom in and out using the scroll wheel on their mouse, but this is not recommended as it limits the player's field of vision. The "multiplayer" aspect of the MOBA comes from the game's reliance on the social interaction of multiple people in order for the game to be played. The "online" aspect of the MOBA requires players to have an internet connection to connect to the game's servers in order to play. These games cannot be played offline unless the player uses the practice tool or training mode where other players need not be present. The "battle arena" aspect comes from the nature of the game using the confined space it has created for the player; in the case of *League of Legends* (2009), it is called *Summoner's Rift*. *The Rift* is the area in which gameplay occurs, and as it is a contained space, it serves as the arena component of the MOBA (Tyack, Wyeth, & Johnson, 2016, pg 314). *The Rift* is also symmetrical to ensure no unfair advantages for either team.

The ten players, divided into the two teams, are sent to *The Rift*, which looks like a jungle with different pathways leading to and from three main paths called ‘lanes’. The players occupy each lane, and the number of players allowed in the lane depends on their role. Although it is recommended for players to remain in their specific lanes, they may roam to other lanes to assist their allies if they choose. The objective in a lane is to kill *Minions* to earn gold, prevent your enemy lane opponent from pushing past your towers and entering your team's base. *Minions* are soldiers that enter the lane in waves. They spawn every 30 seconds and are the player's key source of gold within the game. In the case of the jungler, their minions spawn in the form of *Monsters*. *Monsters* occupy camp spaces in their top sided and bottom sided jungle and are the jungler’s key source of gold. The gold that is earned by players is used to purchase items from the base. These items grant statistical advantages to the player.

Minions push past turrets and meet in the middle of a lane, allowing both teams and laners equal opportunity to come forward and kill *Minions* for gold. *Turrets* are present within a lane and act as a means to protect their laner and the team, as well as act as a line of defense to the base if the team has been killed by the enemy. *Turrets* are structures used to create lane balance as they protect the laner but need to be protected. They can deal damage to enemy laners if they damage an ally laner within its detectable radius. *Turrets* are also plated and destroying plates grants the enemy team gold if they contributed damage to destroying the plating. After ten minutes, the *Turrets* lose their plating which means players can no longer acquire gold per plate taken and the *Turrets* become easier to destroy. Additional structures include the *Inhibitor* and the *Nexus*. The *Inhibitors* serve as means to protect the team’s base, acting as almost the last line of defence. There are three *Turrets* and one *Inhibitor* in each lane, apart from the jungle (Maymin, 2021, pg 11). If the enemy team destroys an *Inhibitor*, their *Minions* become stronger, gain health and deal extra damage. They then become *Super Minions* as slaying these minions grants extra gold to players. When players take down these structures, it brings them closer towards destroying the enemy team’s *Nexus*, which is the key win condition of a MOBA (Tyack, Wyeth, & Johnson, 2016, pg 313). The *Nexus* is ultimately a team's life source within the game. It is also classified as a structure because it can be destroyed. When a *Nexus* is destroyed by the enemy team, they win the game (Maymin, 2021, pg 12).

The roles include a top laner, a mid laner, a jungler, a support and an attack-damage-carry. Each player or laner has a lane, except the support and attack-damage-carry sharing a lane, collectively called the bottom lane. The jungler will be playing in their lane called 'the jungle' (Donaldson, 2017, pg 429). With the creation of the laning system, came the creation of specific champions curated for them. Pools of champions are required to play in specific lanes due to how they have been mechanically developed. However, players may still choose to play any champion in any lane, though it might be a significant disadvantage if the champion was not designed for that lane. For example, the primary role of the jungler is to assist the lanes and claim "objectives". Objectives come in the form of large monsters, such as dragons and giant serpents, that need to be slain. Upon being slain, they grant a buff to the team that slayed it. A buff is a statistical advantage to players. It varies depending on the type of dragon that has been slain, but will grant the team additional statistics to give them an advantage in their lanes. The top-laners primarily consist of tanks and bruisers, so when the game state allows players to leave their lanes and start playing together, the top laners are usually the team's frontline. The middle laners are primarily assassins or mages; these champions are designed to deal high amounts of damage and are usually supposed to eliminate the enemy team's attack-damage-carry. The attack-damage-carry is the team's glass cannon, offering large amounts of damage at the cost of having extremely low health points. The support can vary from dealing damage, offering sustainability or acting as a frontline for their team. Supports are also responsible for ensuring their teams stay alive during fights (Maymin, 2021, pg 12).

The teams play on either side of the map, the red or blue side, meaning that an ally and enemy of that lane occupies each lane. For example, the top, middle and jungle lanes will have two laners occupying that space on their side of the map. The bottom lane has four players: two support and two attack-damage-carry players, each playing for either the red or blue team. The ten players compete to capture shared objectives available on the map, beat their lane opponent/s, or win by having stronger members on their team, allowing them to steamroll past their enemies. However, various factors are in play when it comes to winning the game; the ultimate victory is declared by destroying the enemy team nexus (Thavamuni et. al, 2023, pg 1). Alternatively, players are allowed to forfeit if a majority of them feel they are in an unfit position to win the game. They can declare a vote, and players can accept or decline the vote. By accepting, the team's nexus will self-destruct,

allowing the enemy team to win. A visual representation of the laning system and overall map can be seen in figure 1 below.



Figure.1 *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) laning system and map. This image showcases the blue and red team locations.

The release of *League of Legends* (2009) led to the studio's fame, popularity and overall establishment (Lucht, 2019). Due to the genre of the game and its online nature, players queue up for a game and are randomly assigned into teams based on the data the game captures regarding their skill level. However, by being one of the first of its kind, the game grasped the attention of many gamers on the scene, and its popularity skyrocketed even more. It is still one of the most popular games. Statistics provided by Airtel in November 2024 showed that *League of Legends* is the 9th-ranked most popular online multiplayer game. Furthermore, ActivePlayer (2024), a website that tracks online games' player counts and statistics, showed that the game had a base of 150 million registered users, which indicated that the game has one of the highest player counts.

Many aspects of the game allowed it to grow in popularity. One of the major aspects being its online nature. This allows players to play with their friends and connect with others from anywhere around the world as long as there is a stable internet connection, they are on the same game server and their device meets the minimum hardware requirements to play (Zakaria, Ali, and Aziz, 2022, pg 2511). Additionally, the game is not highly extensive in its playability requirements, making it accessible to people who do not have elaborate or high-end gaming equipment. This allows the player base to build a connection with people they share similar interests with and gives players a sense of community regardless of their background, finances and location (Luton, 2013, pg 16). This is promoted through the in-game friend request system. If players enjoy playing with others on their team, they are able to send out friend requests to those players. Once in a lobby, the room or hub that players are invited to allow them to use the in-game party chat to text or voice chat with one another. This deepens the sense that the game wants its players to interact with each other and build the community. Despite this, it still has one of the most toxic communities in the world (Cabal, 2023).

The toxicity of the game's community stems from the interaction players are allowed to have with each other. The same way they could make friends with their teammates, they can definitely make enemies. There have been countless times where random players on my team have text chatted horrendous statements, going as far as death threats. Even when not targeted at me, I witness text-based fights like this multiple times a day during the time I play. I realized that the moment a game has availed a means of communication for its players, it is most likely going to be used with ill intent rather than meaningful, collaborative communication. In most cases, the insults that get thrown around between players are often associated with derogatory terms relating to females. It is worrisome given that the sexual identity of the player is hidden, yet the insults are automatically targeted as if the player is a woman. Apart from this, players do not realize the real-world consequences it may have. Jeremy Thomas Miner (2023), a communication studies scholar, expresses that this type of behavior can have real world consequences. Players never know what is happening to the person on the other side of the screen, and the one toxic comment could be the last straw that pushes them to severely harm themselves (Miner, 2023, pg 1). This also causes people to learn and practice these behaviors, creating a never-ending cycle (Miner, 2023, pg 52).

This is reminiscent of the Gamergate incident that occurred between 2014 and 2015. Which still according to Caitlin Dewey, an American journalist and cultural commentator, will be an everlasting issue. Gamergate was an internet culture war that targeted and harassed female game-makers and critics for advocating towards greater inclusivity within games. On one side are the women who vote for inclusivity and on the other side a mob of misogynistic, anti-feminist people who believe that games should not change at all (Dewey, 2014). This incident started due to the publishing of a free game called *Depression Quest* which was not deemed as traditional based on the traditional ideals of what a game is. The game was rather a series of watching a story unfold through visuals. The game was deemed too artsy and lacking in challenge and content compared to other games (Dewey, 2014). However, the issue was more so because of the publisher, Zoe Quinn and her relationship with her ex-boyfriend in which he claimed she cheated on him multiple times. This was the initialization of Gamergate, however it started growing into a trend whereby women within the gaming industry were being targeted and so severely harassed, they would have to leave their homes (Dewey, 2014). The growth and development of women in gaming had caused such a great discomfort within men that they sought to harass and target women for no reason beyond their gender difference. This particular behavior is extremely prominent within *League of Legends*. Instances where others or I had been invited to play games with people who seemed decent and upon hearing just your voice their behavior becomes aggressive or demeaning. The sound of a woman's voice in a game can be so unsettling to a male that they resort to insults and harassment rather than treating them like any other human being. Gamergate is a key example of the violent and abusive nature that women in gaming face all because they advocate for inclusivity. There are measures that people are taking to resolve and minimize this issue such as the proposal from Andreas Zecher, a game maker from the studio *Spaces of Play*. Zecher advocated through the “open letter to the gaming community” (Dewey, 2014, pg 5) and received thousands of signatures which served as a promise to stand up for members of the gaming community if they were facing issues of abuse and harassment (Dewey, 2014). Zecher wrote, “We believe that everyone, no matter what gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or disability has the right to play games, criticize games and make games without getting harassed or threatened” (Dewey, 2014, pg 5) and “It is the diversity of our community that allows games to flourish”(Dewey, 2014, pg 5). Through campaigns like this, there are means to resolve future damage and make the space more approachable and safer for women.

Similarly, *League of Legends* has implemented measures to protect its players which can be appreciated. Much like the game's friend request system, there is also a reporting one. This allows players to flag the different types of toxic experiences they are having and report them using a predetermined checklist and adding any additional notes. It is interesting how there is a predetermined checklist to report from, as it appears the developers already know what types of behavior they can expect from their players.

Additionally, a factor that adds to the game's popularity is its accessibility; it is free to download, and players are not required to spend any money on the game to receive customizations. The game is also almost always functional and playable. If there are issues with gameplay, they are often remedied quickly, and players can continue to play as normal. However, when it comes to cosmetics the game's distribution of cosmetics and customization are done so randomly through the game's in-built loot system. Therefore, a player may not precisely receive what they seek. If players desire a cosmetic or premium reward from event passes, they can make in-game purchases to avoid the bad luck of the random distribution system. An event pass is a predetermined system that follows a tier reward system. Upon completing missions, players move up on the event pass, which grants them rewards per tier (Almodovar Alegria, 2022, pg 24). With the game constantly growing and developing alongside the players, content is always generated to cater to various players (Jarrett, 2021, pg 106). The loot system is not fair unless a player puts money into the game, but there is still a chance for everyone to get something frequently (Jarret, 2021, pg 105). However, one might find the acquisition of these cosmetics exciting. The system is curated for you to have to spend money. The likelihood of receiving something truly wanted is extremely low. There are 169 champions, each with multiple cosmetics in a pool from which a player may hope to get a specific item. For example, if each champion were to have ten cosmetics, that is a total of 1690 cosmetics available. A player hoping for one specific cosmetic has a 1/1690 chance of receiving the cosmetic without factoring in that they may receive a duplicate of those 1690 cosmetics. This means a player has a 0.06% chance of getting the cosmetic item the player sought out. This showcases how unlikely they are to receive what they want unless they are fortunate. Although I have stated that the game's accessibility is a factor that draws players in, the loot system works against the game's accessibility as there is no means for players to make back any money

they may have spent on the game in the form of its paid currency. Other games like *Overwatch* (2016) and *Apex Legends* (Respawn Entertainment & Panic Button, 2019) have paid currency set in different tiers of the events passes they offer, allowing players to make up the currency over time even if they are not putting any money into the game. With *League of Legends*, players cannot earn money back in any way. This sort of system can deter players from the game as they is no actual reward for playing and putting money into the game. Despite this, the game is still accessible and players seldom gain rewards for participating in events and other game modes.

Although previously discussed, *League of Legends* has game modes for players who want to play for fun and enjoyment and for competitive players who want to showcase and develop high skills within the game. A few other game modes are standalone but under the name of *League of Legends*. The game offers accessibility through the various game modes it presents to its players. The most popular mode is the ten-player game mode on the map shown in Figure 1 (Riot Games, 2009). There is also a ten-player game mode where players are split into a red and blue team, each with five players, but all occupying one lane. This mode is called All Random All Middle, or ARAM (Riot Games, 2009), implying only a middle lane exists. In this game mode, the players are restricted to a random pool of champions, as there is only one lane they will all be occupying (Donaldson, 2017, pg 435). This game mode also disregards the need for specific roles, so all champions can be given to a player to use in ARAM regardless of role or position. The ARAM Map can be seen in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2. An image of the ARAM Map from *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009).

The game's various modes and seasonal events would cater to many different types of players, such as the competitive modes where players can put their skills to the test to achieve a high ranking within the game and be awarded for it. This is an aspect that drives players to be consistent with the game because of the appeal they find in bettering themselves as players, mastering different skills and having their skills acknowledged (Wang & Sun, 2011). These modes contribute to players wanting to come back; then maintaining and upholding the popularity of the game, all whilst branching out to different audiences to expand it even more (Wang & Sun, 2011). There are different options for everyone, and most *League of Legends* game experiences will differ. This is what makes the game replayable and the reason the game still has a large player base to this day.

Beauty Before Brains

As the title suggests, but framed differently, this section of the dissertation explores how the champions' appearances overtook the logical and meaningful application of representative design elements.

Now that the outline of *League of Legends* has been explained, I want to focus on this dissertation's aim of exploring the feminine Indian representation within the game. Adrienne Shaw (2015), a game studies scholar and professor, explains that players are more willing to engage and play as a visually appealing character. Because of the variety of champions that *League of Legends* affords its players based on what champion they can pick, we can assume they aim to cater to the appeal of their players as this is the game's easiest way to generate income (Jarrett, 2021, pg 106). However, my analysis indicates that the visual designs of some of the champions need to be updated to make them more generally and realistically appealing, as well as approachable to a variety of audiences. Regarding what it means to be generally and realistically appealing, I understand that the visual appearance of something is a subjective factor. I want to preface here,

that when I make claims for characters to have realistic appearances, I do not mean they should be detailed realistically. Rather their appearances should be more logically aligned with the purpose they serve within the game. Not all people or players will find the same things appealing. So, instead, a character's appearance should visually align with what we have learned about them. For example, if a video game character is described as a hunter but is wearing an astronaut suit, one might question how realistic and logical that might be. This is not to say it needs to be as realistic as the real world itself. If the hunter was from an otherworldly planet where the jungle is filled with bright and colourful alien-like creatures, I might imagine the hunter wearing green fur with pink polka dots because that might be the realistic standard for that area. But the most important takeaway from these examples is the context and setting of the character itself. In exploring the representation of video game characters, I hoped to shed light on the fact that they can still be appealing whilst being represented logically and believably.

Given that the game was developed in the early 2000s, and its audience consisted of predominantly white males (Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy & Williams, 2015, pg 440), the visual design of the female champions was mostly oversexualized to cater to the audience (Tompkins & Martins, 2021). Creating an attraction to a character makes a player more willing to engage with them. Tompkins and Martins (2015, pg 4) also explain how sales pressures can contribute to the pressure of sexualized designs, as these types of cosmetics will sell to the game's audiences faster and draw players into engaging with the characters even more. A study conducted by Sohye Lim and Byron Reeves, two media studies and communication professors, in 2009 indicated that the choice in character, their visual design and the point of view from which players see when playing certain characters led to a specific arousal, mostly from males that play games (pg 348), therefore indicating that visual design entices players into choosing certain characters. The conformity of creating hyper-sexualized video game characters is damaging to its viewers. Mya Starr Tabares (2023), a scholar from The University of California explains that this imagery can be damaging for multiple reasons. Tabares expresses that this causes behavioral issues for developers as well as the audience of the game (2023, pg 2). She explains that gaming communities carry behaviors that are deemed harmful within that space, as I have previously mentioned, but even take those behaviors outside of it where it can be more dangerous (Tabares, 2023, pg 2). This causes a sense of hostility and inferiority towards women where they may even begin to harass them (Tabares,

2023, pg 2). When framing the hypersexualization of women through the lens of a woman, we can understand how the imagery they are being fed can be damaging to them. The female characters present within video games often bare unrealistic body proportions which creates body image issues amongst women which can lead to a higher rate of depression (Tabares, 2023, pg 2). The damage dealer itself, the developers, create a data pattern that monitors the choices, purchases and actions taken within a game to get an idea of what is bringing in the most amount of sales. The patterns detected are set for appealing characters, game functionality and the most important of all, fan service (Tabares, 2023, pg 2). This means the developers are giving the majority, which are mostly males, what they desire most as it is bringing in the most amount of money. There is no care or consideration between production and the community itself which allows for this vicious cycle of harm to continue. Furthermore, the hypersexualization and stereotypes of female video game characters has the potential to desensitize younger generations which leads to the normalization of this behavior (Tabares, 2023, pg 2). Tabares , states that the documentation of this cycle can be seen since the early 1980's and looking back at the incident of Gamergate, we can see it is a persisting issue that will most likely continue into the future if not properly addressed (2023, pg 3). The developers and communities that continue to foster this cycle create a hostile gaming environment for women. If a woman enters this space, she will be either harmed by the unrealistic depictions of what a woman should look like or be ill-treated by the men who enable the developers and their productions. *League of Legends* developers underwent this cycle and still are to some regard (Tabares, 2023, pg 10). Upon looking back at the earlier designs of most of the female champions, almost all of them have hypersexualized designs, unrealistic body proportions and accentuated breasts and thighs. If the intrinsic meaning of the design requires hypersexualization such as in the case of a succubus or other characters that represent sexuality, one might understand, but where it is not needed, it may cause great harm. *League of Legends* granted their players the opportunity to openly harass and mistreat people. Despite the system allowing for toxic players to be reported, there are no serious consequences for bad behavior within the video game.

However, in the representation of characters, regardless of the audience of the game, the character should always be represented with dignity, accuracy and believability, even more so when those characters are supposed to be representative of pre-existing cultures, values and well-established

history (Shaw, 2015). I also find it important to state that although gender representation studies are being expressed, due to the scope of this dissertation, I am focusing on the representation of female Indian champions within *League of Legends*. This is not to disregard other champions that are unjustly represented, but rather to focus my research, as the focus is not on gender studies.

Developing characters with pre-existing factors such as race, religion, and gender in mind is a process that I believe should be meticulous. When using pre-existing materials to develop characters, many design aspects can be easily critiqued and questioned as someone may conform or know what the design is trying to achieve. Even without using pre-existing material, audiences will always find something to critique, so the designers should always be prepared and open for feedback. Whether it exists in the modern day, the past or future, or is made from one's creativity, people who consume media always have something to say, good or bad. Therefore, designers should work and strive to produce characters that encapsulate their ideas. At the same time, the design lives up to the characters' motivations and goals and what they represent, if anything. This is where my research comes into focus, but more precisely, the focus on feminine Indian champions within *League of Legends* (2009) and how their visual design was and still is influenced by the aforementioned factors. In Chapter Three, I have described, explained and unpacked how the designers worked to progressively inform the designs of the later-developed feminine Indian champions compared to those who came before. There has been a visual progression of the champions as they have been released; this is what Chapter Three explores. The hindrances of the earlier designs, compared to the female Indian champions more recently designed, as well as the potential of the champions if they were to be redesigned.

Despite that, I have also focused on keeping in mind that there are champions that need attention and improvements made to their problematic designs. Working towards improvements as a means to redeem and do justice to those specific champions is a necessary and appreciated effort. Although the designers make choices considering what would be best for the game's economy, a champion should undergo reviewing, and only once specific ratings and checkpoints are met should they be released into the live game itself (Mitchell, 2012, pg 41). When thinking about what makes these champions problematic regarding the visual designs, I considered that their depictions

were meant to achieve a visual relay of their purpose within the game. The roles a champion plays in a game are fundamental to their visual appearance, as we can consider a popular statement of "showing rather than telling" (Nieminen, 2017, pg 7). The champions showcase minimal aspects of Indian representation, with the potential to showcase so much of it powerfully and holistically. What I mean when I say a powerful and holistic way is using aspects of the race and religion, they conform to elevate their designs and make them relatable. It feels as though there is no exchange between the visual representation and the champion's goal in a way that is meaningful and positively reinforced, therefore making the designs seem poor and under-considered. The champions I have addressed within the game are *Nidalee, Karma*, and *Nilah*. As stated in the order of their release into the game, they are further expanded upon in Chapter 3. They represent the regressive and progressive visual design of feminine Indian champions within the game. However, the development from one champion to the next showcases the ability of the studio to create progressive visual designs that encapsulate elements of Indian representation in a meaningful way. Hye-min Park and Gapyeul Seo, scholars in the game department of Hongjik University, explain that the visual design of the champion is the key influence on whether or not the player will engage with them (2018, pg 2186). "In addition, the game character illustration is made to attract attention for the user. In particular, the illustrations of game characters express visual characteristics that are based on various factors such as the use of body, fashion, accessories, weapons, and weapon's use in order to increase the user's game character selection rate", expresses Park and Seo (2018, pg 2186). This explains that users or players first engage with what they see, so what is depicted to players should be meaningful. "In conclusion, the modeling of the game character requires a lot of consideration of the expression characteristics to improve the visual preference and awareness of the game users. In general, it can be said that the colour and the form in the illustration of the game character have an important influence on the preference and the recognition of the game user as a main visual element expressed in a complex manner" (Park & Seo, 2018, pg 2186).

A Brushstroke In The Right Direction

League of Legends (2009) has existed for almost 16 years, and there has been progression with the design and development of the champions they create in recent years. This can be observed in many of the new champions. Their designs are rarely sexualized unless they tie directly into the story and background of the champion. Evidence shows the champion's visual form follows its function in the newer designs. Hagung Kuntjara and Betha Almanfaluthi, two scholars of visual communication, expressed that characters within games are a unique part of what makes the game. They are a representation of the player, as this is what the player chooses to go on their virtual journey. The character is the soul of what brings a story to life and vice versa. The image of the character enriches the story as much as their story enriches their appearance (Kuntjara and Almanfaluthi, 2016, pg 42). The character is the first tangible aspect we have of them when we open *League of Legends*. The illustration of the character acts as their poster, selling them to the players. This is accompanied by their story, which coincides with their appearance and overall makes the two fit together harmoniously, if the text and the visuals align well. Artists can seek beauty through functional design that also adds to the uniqueness of the character. This allows their visuals to relay the possible impact and abilities they may wield in the game. An example of this would be one of *League of Legends* (2009) more recent champions, *Hwei*. *Hwei* was released in 2023 and is titled "*The Visionary*". He is a champion whose abilities rely on that of his magical paintbrush, as he is an artist (Riot Games, 2009). Based on his visual appearance and functionality within the game, it can be seen that the two are aligned. He wields a large paintbrush as a weapon that decorates the illustration with mesmerising swirls of paint. The different colours and swirls represent the champion's array of abilities. The orange paint conveys his damaging abilities, the blue represents his sustainability abilities, and the purple represents his disengaging abilities (Riot Games, 2009). *Hwei*'s champion description reads as follows:

> "Hwei is a brooding painter who creates brilliant art to confront *Ionia*'s criminals and comfort their victims. Beneath his melancholy roils a torn, emotional mind—haunted by both the vibrant visions of his imagination and the gruesome memories of his temple's massacre. Hwei seeks to understand this light and dark, which drives him inevitably toward the artist who unravelled him. With paintbrush and palette, Hwei shapes endless possibilities as he draws ever closer to earning closure or embracing despair." (Riot Games, 2009)

An image of *Hwei* can be seen below in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Hwei, The Visionary. A screenshot taken from *League of Legends* (2009).

Another example would be *League of Legends* (2009), most recently added champion *Ambessa,* titled '*The Matriarch of War*' (2024). She was created as a war-hungry champion who fights for what she believes in, and once in pursuit of a goal, she is immovable (*Riot Games*, 2009). This champion can be seen in *Riot Games* popular TV show, *Arcane* (Linke & Yee, 2020). *Arcane* is a Netflix TV show based on a *League of Legends* story that follows existing champions within the game. The show follows the story of two sisters who endure a series of tragic events while growing up, growing apart, and rekindling their relationship when it is already too late. Apart from their story, others unfold throughout the show, where the stories of everyone slowly start to come together and intertwine. Within the show, viewers are introduced to *Ambessa* as an antagonist. She makes quite a stark first impression when she arrives in the city, where the show is set on a large warship. Viewers can see her strength, how battle-worn she is upon disembarking the ship, and

how unmoving her presence is. The illustration presented in the game does her that same justice. Her strong posture, battle-ready arms and soldiers all around her indicate her power and ferocity. The use of the deep red tones on *Ambessa*, the soldiers around her, and the architecture symbolise war, further deepening what this champion represents. Her visual designs align with her backstory; she looks like a strong, battle-ready war mother. As expressed previously, her visual illustration showcases her influence and readiness for war well. In this case, we had received both her visuals and her story from the TV show before we received her in *League of Legends.* The impression she left on viewers from the TV show had to have created pressure within the design team as the champion within the game had to live up to one presented on Netflix. There was also little room for error with this champion because everything about her was already presented to viewers and players alike. For *Ambessa,* the designers had a clear goal and set of ideas, which is what led to the visual design of this champion being so powerful (Kuntjara and Almanfaluthi, 2016, pg 43). *Ambessa*'s champion description reads as follows:

> "All who know the name Medarda respect and fear the family's leader, Ambessa. As a Noxian general, she embodies a deadly combination of ruthless strength and fearless resolve in battle. Her role as matriarch is no different, requiring great cunning to empower the Medardas while leaving no room for failure or compassion. Embracing the merciless ways of the Wolf, Ambessa will do whatever it takes to protect her family's legacy, even at the cost of her own children's love." (Riot Games, 2009)

Ambessa can be seen below in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Ambessa, The Matriarch of War. A screenshot taken from *League of Legends* (2009)

An important takeaway from *Ambessa* is how her rich backstory has influenced her visual design within the game. The release of this champion was highlighted because of the Netflix show, but her design itself shines because of the alignment between her story and physical presentation. She is not overly sexualized and very well-equipped to take on the fleets of armies she is said to defeat. What is refreshing about this champion is that she is a female person of colour who is strong and independent. She is a war-hungry matriarch, and players are able to see that. Even if the design remained without the prior creation of the Netflix show, *Ambessa* would still shine. She is not fetishized in any way, her physical appearance reinforces what we have learned about her through her story which makes her a rich and engaging champion (Kuntjara and Almanfaluthi, 2016, pg 43). This is the type of representation I had hoped the female Indian champions would have, but they do not. When comparing the champions I analyze to *Ambessa* it can be seen that her design is more up to date because of the care and time dedicated to their champions now. *Ambessa* as a female person of colour outshines the designs of the female Indian champions, and that should not be interpreted in a challenging way, rather a motivational one to reinforce the idea of having champions be meaningfully reworked and adjusted to create the alignment that we can observe within *Ambessa.*

Based on these observations, sometimes they have been dedicated to understanding new and different cultures and representing champions from them. *Riot Games* announced in one of their videos that they would take breaks between developing champions. This was decided to ensure that champions receive much attention during their developmental phase. Players did not receive it well, as they felt robbed of the excitement from the constant release of new champions, but this reduction was necessary. In 2024, only three champions were released (Riot Games, 2009), genuinely showcasing the time they put into each one. Furthermore, there would be moments for players to provide *Riot Games* with feedback on the champions so that it could be considered and used before the champion was released for the players to engage with.

An example is from one of their recent champions, *Smolder*, titled "*The Fiery Fledgling*" (2023). The players were unhappy with how the champion's face looked, so *Riot Games* considered that and adjusted before releasing him onto the game's official platform. *Smolder* is a baby dragon or fledgling, and the community said that even though he was supposed to look cute and anthropomorphic, it was far-fetched, and he needed to look more draconic. Especially since dragons already have a significant presence in the game as objectives (Moreira, Ramalho, Costa, Baffa, Ribeiro, Machado, Borges, da Paixão, Vale, and Pomba, 2017, pg 7). This also ties in well with the argument I made towards *Ambessa*. Although the dragons within the game are not playable champions, they act as a reference to draw from, further allowing the design team to work off of a framework using the pre-existing work they already have, thus making this kind of champion more executable. Despite this, they faltered with *Smolder's* design and the players made the designers aware of it. With the player's feedback in mind, *Riot Games* made the necessary adjustments to *Smolder*'s face. Figure 5 below showcases the minor changes made to *Smolder*'s face alongside the feedback from the employee, making players aware of them.

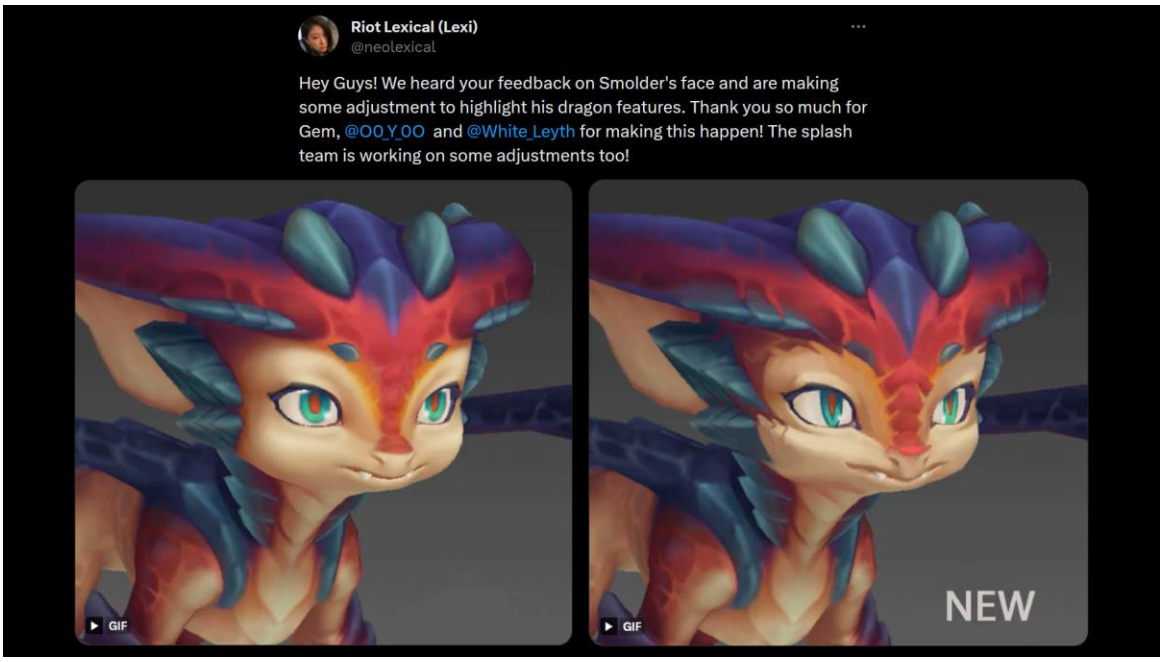


Figure 5. A tweet from a Riot Games employee showcasing *Smolder's* face adjustment (Allsop, 2024).

Conversely, in the past, the designers could have made time to develop the champions further and showcase more dedication towards portraying them as best they could. However, feedback systems were limited initially, as players were required to apply to play on the beta servers of the game. This made the feedback more specific and bug-related (Donalson, 2017, pg 440). This was done through a separate application for the game called the Public Beta Environment or PBE (Donalson, 2017, pg 439). Only a few years later, *Riot Games* allowed the *League of Legends* PBE to be publicly used and downloaded by everyone on the terms that the account was separate from their original. This change not only allowed players to deliver feedback on various aspects of the game before their official release, but also fostered a sense of community among them. These aspects include testing champions, cosmetics and game modes (Donaldson, 2017, pg 440). This was implemented so that players could better understand how these aspects worked before committing to spending money on something they might not enjoy (Jiang, Scheibe, Nilakanta, Qu, 2017, pg 3). It is, however, more so now than then, used to receive feedback from players before something

is fully implemented into the game, and it is no longer just limited to bugs (Jiang, Scheibe, Nilakanta, Qu, 2017, pg 2).

The game's player base during its early release stages was male dominated, suggesting that changing female champion designs was unlikely (Ratan et al., pg 455). When looking into the other cultural representations of certain champions and having a large majority of Asian champions often underdressed, it is an unsettling sight. These champions have the potential to be more intricately designed, and when they are not, the neglect of visual design starts to come into frame. It is important to note that the champion's design is the first form of interaction we, as players, have with them (Isbister, 2023, pg 5). Therefore, the champion's visual design should be taken seriously and worked on meticulously. When observing the core player demographic of white males, we can expect specific, mostly female champions to be heavily sexualized to appeal to them. Because as a seller with this specific type of market, the product cannot help but be crafted to drive their sex appeal (Isbister, 2023, pg 118). However, women were not the only ones subjected to stereotypical underdressing; in Figure 6, these are some examples of male champions who experienced the same treatment.

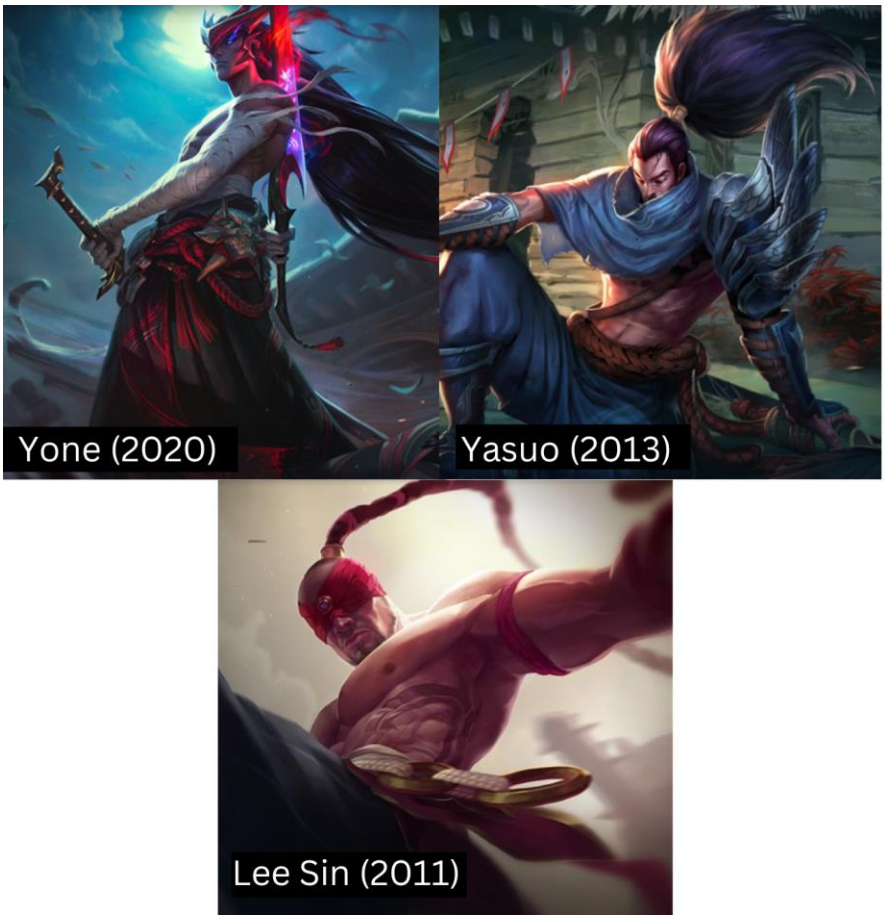


Figure 6. A collage of screenshots of Yone (2020), Yasuo (2013) and Lee Sin (2011) taken from *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009).

All three male champions are from the same region, called *Ionia* (Riot Games, 2009); although they represent different Asian cultures, their designs' approaches seem similar. They are all shirtless Asian men with minimal intricacy or cultural representation. Both *Yone* and *Yasuo* represent Japanese swordsmen (van Vuuren, 2023) who would require more cover in terms of attire to protect their bodies. When thinking about Japanese swordsmen, a specific type comes to mind, which is a samurai, which in itself, the word has been used universally incorrectly (Wert, 2019, pg 4). Samurai are universally known to be armored warriors who defend and protect their respective regions, often a class within an army (Wert, 2019, pg 4). Although misused in the media or portrayed incorrectly, given the story of the two brothers being raised to defend and protect their land (Riot Games, 2009), elements of traditional Japanese warriors could have been woven into their designs. *Lee Sin* is a Chinese monk who performs martial arts (Love Poems, 2024). I would argue that the lack of clothing is a means to ensure mobility, but even so, there is a lack of cultural representation and detail. The designs for these champions, although iconic, are somewhat pragmatic. This was especially so when I compared their designs to a champion with a well-understood background or culture. An example of this can be seen below in Figure 7, which shows *Garen*'s (2010) old and reworked illustration.

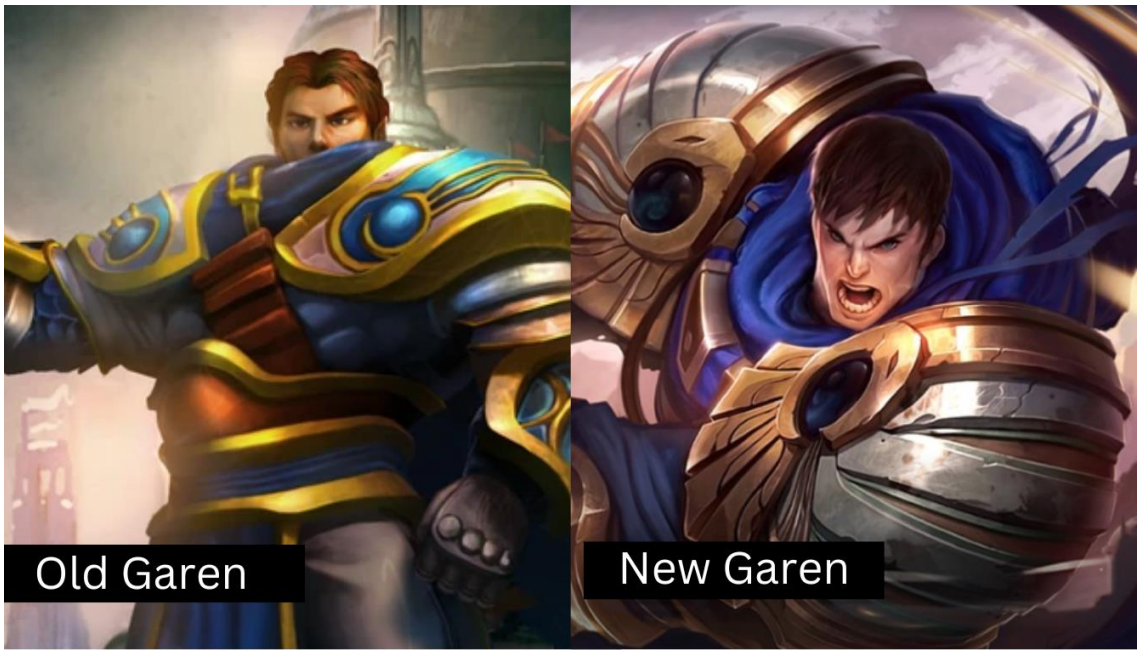


Figure 7. Screenshots of the old and new Garen illustrations from *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009)

Garen, titled "*The Might of Demacia*", is dressed to convey the role he plays in the game. His champion description reads as follows:

> "A proud and noble warrior, Garen fights as one of the Dauntless Vanguard. He is popular among his fellows, and respected well enough by his enemies—not least as a scion of the prestigious Crownguard family, entrusted with defending Demacia and its ideals. Clad in magic-resistant armor and bearing a mighty broadsword, Garen stands ready to confront mages and sorcerers on the field of battle, in a veritable whirlwind of righteous steel." (Riot Games, 2009).

Garen is a noble warrior, and his visual design heavily reinforces that. His gaudy, heavy armour, large sword and somewhat well-groomed appearance resemble a particular type of character commonly known as a paladin or knight. Gold and blues, commonly used to signify royalty and nobility due to their cost (De Bortoli & Maroto, 2001, pg 7), from which he descends, are also key factors in his design. His design has a significant amount of detail, as rather than conforming to a specific culture, he is modelled after a well-known trope. Moreover, considering that other games like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974) were still prevalent, there was a great deal of inspiration to draw from. Character tropes and stereotypes are a tool that can be used in a way to make characters more recognizable and memorable, whether this is done so problematically or in a way that highlights the design of the character is up to the designer itself (Isbister, 2022, pg 3). *Garen* portrays the stereotypical image of a knight or paladin. As expressed, prior, his gaudy armor and stocky appearance allude to that imagery. The execution of his design makes the champion more believable, and his appearance aligns well with what his story expresses about him. He shares the same in-game roles as *Yasuo* and *Yone*. These champions would typically be tanks or bruisers but are usually built for extended skirmishes which all three of them accomplish well (Riot Games, 2009). The tropes of a knight or paladin are easily recognizable, similarly to the portrayals of a samurai in the media. Samurai often take on the appearance of armored individuals with distinct masks. Although we have learned that the depictions may not be completely accurate, the armored appearance is an aspect of the design of a Samurai that could have been used to deepen the visual appearance of the

male Asian champions. This comparison once again reinforces that the white-presenting champions have more elaborate designs in comparison to the Asian ones. The imagery of both paladin and samurai are prevalent in media yet the Asian champions are still left with little detail to their designs. Even if their designs were meant to be minimalistic, there could have been a more subtle way of introducing elements of it within their design. Components such as broken armor, helmets, and fabrics had the potential to elevate their designs whilst still maintaining the minimalist elements.

To further argue that the designs of the Asian champions could have been more elaborate, it must be noted that *Garen* was also released earlier than the other three champions presented above and his visual design is more believable and aligned with his story. This observation further reinforces the idea that their choice to stem into diverse cultures, although appreciated, is not done so as extensively researched as it should be. There should have been some progression with the designs of these champions to ensure their visual representations would uphold and align with their backstories provided. However, with time, the designs have become more progressive. *Garen* also proves that *Riot Games* can alter their designs, even if it is just on their splash art to plan for the next model update. What is meant by this is that there is a means for the entire in-game champion model to be redone. Giving the champion a new and better represented appearance. The main reason for exploring the design of this champion is to showcase that champions can be updated.

The reason for mentioning these champions was to strengthen the argument that champions can and should be receiving updates constantly. They should be consistently researched to find newer, more effective materials to represent them better. Keeping this in mind and drawing focus back to the representation of feminine Indian champions. I have argued that the feminine Indian champions should have the opportunity to be developed and worked upon based on seeing the attention other champions get. Knowing that the design team is taking breaks to offer more well-refined champions should indicate there was also an opportunity to put that same effort into developing the champions that needed to be polished and represented accurately. This section serves as a means to showcase the available tools and materials that could be used to progress champions but are not being utilized to do so. It further shows that even when there is a prevalence of a specific

trope available in media, it has not been used resulting in specific demographics of champions left with little representation based on what they are supposed to portray.

Where Did The Work Go?

With an understanding of the possibilities available to visually redesign champions, especially those needing them, there has been no indication of upcoming developments. Instead, *Riot Games* chooses to rework newer champions with little to no problematic qualities within their designs. I believe that the selection of a champion to receive a visual redesign is based on the champion's overall age and design quality. Champions that are typically older are the ones that receive reworked to ensure the quality of the champion remains consistent with newer released ones (Riot Games, 2009). This could also be accompanied by the lack of popularity of a champion and having them be reworked to make them more engaging for players. *Riot Games* uses a system to monitor certain champions' play and pick rates and even allows a set of free-to-play champions weekly to determine this (Lee & Ramler, 2015, pg 3). However, even with this information, the champions that received reworks were questionable in terms of how they were selected. I find that the choices regarding the rework of a champion lack clarity of what makes them qualify for it. This is because even with these observations, older champions are left with their older designs. This inhibits them as players are still not interested in playing as them, but when champions are reworked and appear "new and shiny", players are more inclined to try them out. But again, the choice of champions that are chosen is questionable. An example of this would be the case of *Fiddlesticks*. The image shown in Figure 8 below indicates the champion, *Fiddlesticks* (2009), who was chosen for a rework despite having an already functional appearance due to its lore and story.



Figure 8. A screenshot of the old and new Fiddlesticks (Riot Games, 2009).

The champion shown above in Figure 8 represents a scarecrow-like entity. It is genderless and can only speak and communicate using what it has heard over its lifetime. *Fiddlesticks* is supposed to embody an entity of fear, which is achieved both by its appearance and its in-game abilities that allow it to fear other champions around it (Riot Games, 2009). *Fiddlesticks* champion description reads as follows:

> "Something has awoken in Runeterra. Something ancient. Something terrible. The ageless horror known as Fiddlesticks stalks the edges of mortal society, drawn to areas thick with paranoia where it feeds upon terrorized victims. Wielding a jagged scythe, the haggard, makeshift creature reaps fear itself, shattering the minds of those unlucky enough to survive in its wake. Beware the sounding of the crow, or the whispering of the shape that appears almost human… Fiddlesticks has returned." (Riot Games, 2009).

This horror-esque champion had a complete visual redesign because the players had asked for one based on an in-game poll displayed in the game's client. *Fiddlesticks* encapsulates the essence of horror and a scarecrow without needing a visual redesign. However, this champion took priority over those needing visual design improvements. Other champions could have been prioritized over this one, as *Fiddlesticks* visual appearance aligns well with their backstory. There is an opportunity to redesign a champion in order to deliver the best possible version of them at that time. It is also difficult to say whether or not *Fiddlesticks* was the champion selected from the poll. There are no live results for players to see the progress of the poll, nor is there evidence to suggest that the players even voted for it to be there. These polls could exist to encourage player engagement but could be meaningless if the developers already have a champion for rework in mind. Because the game itself lacks live systems to constantly show and update players on the possible champions that are being considered for a rework, it is difficult to say the process of a rework is fully transparent and in favor of what players would like to see. This makes it difficult to understand what it precisely takes to have a champion qualify for a rework and what the reason for the rework would be. In the case of *Fiddlesticks* it feels as though the unpopularity and age of the champion might have been the reason it qualified to be reworked. Although this is a valid reason for the rework of the champion, the same could be said about the female Indian champions that are also widely unpopular and need reworks too. If champions are made to be more engaging and present themselves to players with strong visual designs, players might be more inclined to engage with them and play them (Isbister, 2022, pg 11). Although he meets the requirements for rework, it can be argued that the other champions are deserving as well as they are in the same predicament as *Fiddlesticks*. However, their designs are worse in terms of the imagery and portrayals of specific demographics they carry. There is a contextual difference as *Fiddlesticks* might have qualified for the rework based on age and popularity, but the representation of the champion was far more appropriate than that of other champions. This is an important consideration that should be taken on by the design team, as if their goals are to update outdated champions, that should mean all of the earlier champions would be getting reworked too.

League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009) champions rely on players, giving them more than an initial look in order to be engaged with. They can be easily overlooked without meaningful and engaging visual design aspects (Isbister, 2022, pg 10). Some champions should be prioritized, yet the choices

made regarding which improvements are further overlooked when a champion like *Fiddlesticks* receives a redesign despite fulfilling their role based on what is known about it. If the polls are not involved, and players have no impact on the choices made, the chosen designs do not fully reflect thoughts of redesigning to represent something accurately but are instead done at random.

Similarly, the champion shown in Figure 9 below, *Dr. Mundo*, "*The Madman of Zaun*", was released in 2009. He was one of the first champions available to play in the game. He received his visual redesign quite late in 2021 after it had been in the works in 2020, but even so, there is alignment between the champion's backstory and his appearance. He is supposed to look like a deranged, chemically enhanced doctor, which he does when inspecting all the elements within his champion illustration. The champion's description reads as follows:

> "Utterly mad, tragically homicidal, and horrifyingly purple, Dr. Mundo is what keeps many of Zaun's citizens indoors on particularly nights. Now a self-proclaimed physician, he was once a patient of Zaun's most infamous asylum. After "curing" the entire staff, Dr. Mundo established his practice in the empty wards that once treated him and began mimicking the highly unethical procedures he had so often experienced himself. With a full cabinet of medicines and zero medical knowledge, he now makes himself more monstrous with each injection and terrifies the hapless "patients" who wander near his office." (Riot Games, 2009)

He holds medical transcripts, a body is on a cadaver table, and he wields a bone saw. This is why I do not believe his visual redesign was necessary in comparison to other champions. This can even be observed in Figure 9, as the older illustration bears a great deal of resemblance to the new one.



Figure 9. A screenshot showcasing the old Dr. Mundo alongside his visual redesign (Riot Games, 2009)

The *Riot Client* was used for polls to ask the players to vote on a champion that needed a visual rework. By using the *Riot Client* to reach out to the players, the company is able to receive and communicate with them on a more accessible level and process the information. That is why the usage of polls, voting and gathering information in the client is vital to the company's growth (Zhuang, Bharambe, , Pang, & Seshan, 2007, pg 4). However all the champions present on the poll were later released champions, each of them having forms that well-represented their roles and purpose within the game. The latest champion on the poll was released in 2013, and her design was quite indicative and intuitive for the role she played in the game (Lynch, Tompkins, Van Driel, and Fritz, 2016). Her name is *Quinn,* and she is an elite ranger-knight. This can be observed by her avian companion and armored suit. From here, I believe a trend also starts to appear. With her appearance not being heavily sexualized and suited for her purpose, she descends from *Demacia ,*the same region *Garen*, mentioned previously, whose appearance was also well-fit to his backstory. This can be further observed from the other women that descend from the same region. These are all the female champions from *Demacia*. They are well clothed, and have armour. The

dragon-like champion, Shyvana, is an exception to this, but this is because she can transform into a larger dragon and wears less armour because of it. This array of images has nothing exceptionally sexualized within it, but that is because these women are not deemed as the "other" (Hall, 1997). Stuart Hall. 1997, expresses "the other" to be a person that is unique and is visually different compared to dominant demographics. It is this otherness and difference that creates a sense of fetishization (Hall, 1997, pg 286) which I believe is explored through the female Indian champions. This is explored further in Chapter 2. The female *Demacian* champions can be observed below.



Figure 10. A collection of screenshots put into a collage of all Demacian female characters from *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009)

Drawing back to the poll to view the candidates for an update, S*karner, Nocturne, Quinn, Shyvana*, and *Udyr* can be seen from left to right. Each of these champions has visual designs that are well represented by their roles and roles within the game. Leaving other champions without an opportunity for improvement. Some of the art may not be appealing based on visuals, but the designs themself encompass what the champions are and do if you read their lore. With each of these champions having their backstory and lore, their appearances are cohesive to their story. I will not include their individual stories here, but I have included them in the appendix with the champion to the side so we can read their story and look at them to make the connections from story to design.

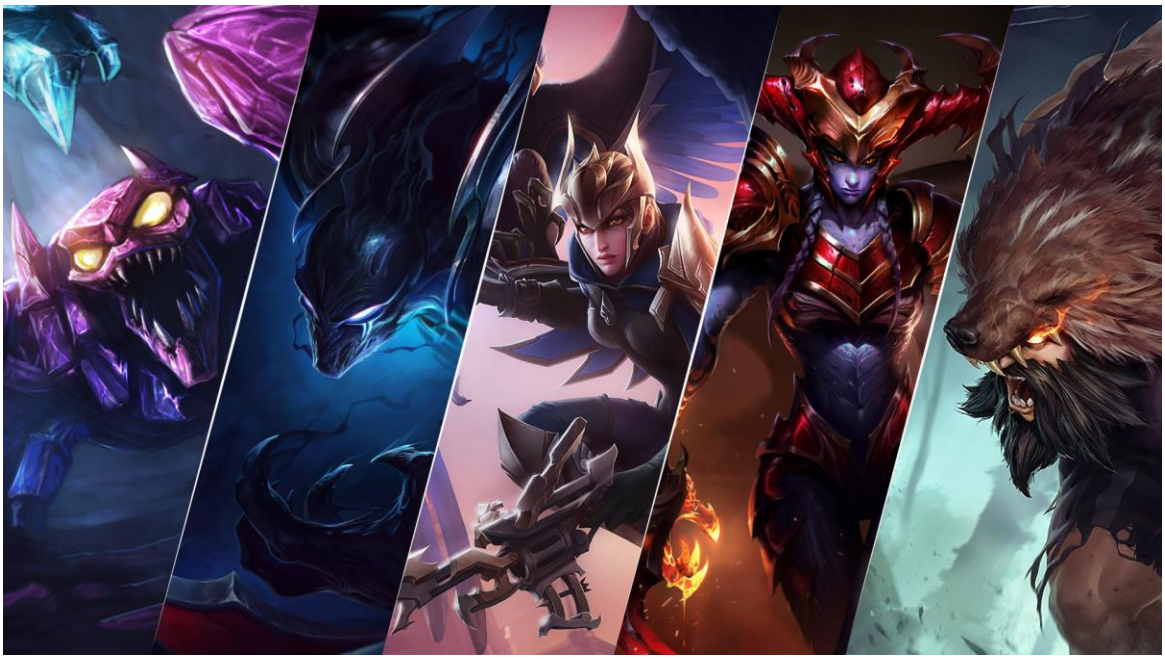


Figure 11. An image of the in-game used poll to determine which champion would be receiving a visual redesign (Riot Games, 2009)

To briefly explain each of their contexts, *Skarner* (2011) is a crystal scorpion that relies on gems for power. *Nocturne* (2011) is an aspect of darkness and nightmares. *Quinn* (2013) is an elite ranger knight with a bird companion to help her scout. *Shyvana* (2011) is a dragon halfling that holds the power of both human and dragon. Lastly, *Udyr* (2009) is a spiritual being with strong ties with

animals and is almost a druid-like champion (Riot Games, 2009). Based on what I have learned from Isbister (2023, pg 12), there are elements of stereotypes that can be done in a manner to visually guide a viewer. These elements include dress, build, posture, grooming, age, gender, race, speaking style and moving (Isbister, 2023, pg 12). They act as means to allow the mind to make attributive connections; therefore, when done correctly, viewers can make associative assumptions. However, these assumptions and cues come from one's memory (Isbister, 2023, pg 12). Therefore, based on the visual elements, we can see that the champions have traits that allow us to assign them to pre-known ideas of existing video game characters. For example, *Udyr* is druid-like, wearing the classic animal pelt as a headpiece. *Udyr* and *Nidalee* both share the representation of the primitive but are contextually different. As expressed by Isister (2023, pg 12) the usage of elements carry the theme of the character in either a positive or negative way, similarly to *Garen*, the visual imagery aligns well with the champions story. The elements within *Udyr's* visual design do not sexualize the fact that he is intune with nature and somewhat primitive. The focus is on the animal aspects that carry the viewer to him positively. With *Nidalee* her naturistic is what is used to sexualize and fetishize her negatively. Drawing back to the poll, these designs are intuitive of what the champions do in the game, making their appearance align well with their backstories.

Because of this, the polls may not be as well delicately considered as they should be. However, this may be because we, as an audience, do not know the criteria *Riot Games* has for their poll creation. I have discussed these polls because of their power and how much players enjoy partaking in them (Ferrari, Lessiter, & Freeman, 2011, pg 6). However, at the same time, any poll is so heavily dependent on the options that the users are given. In the same breath, polls are primarily used to construct social networks between the player and the game (Eklund, Johansson, 2013, pg 1.), so whether or not the reflection is entirely accurate or true is also something that cannot be discerned. The game's population does not have a say in what appears on the poll; instead, they decide based on the predetermined one. Even when presented with these polls, there is no consideration for the possibility of making amends to champions whose visual design does not do them justice. I use the term "justice" to explain that the champions are not being represented as best as they could be. After witnessing the various cases of *Riot Games* (2009) making adjustments

and bettering the other champions to do them “justice”, I believe there are more serious cases of champions who genuinely need visual redesigning.

This is not to say that the champions presented are unworthy of further development, but if they already visually achieve what they need to, rather direct attention to champions with baseless designs with the potential to represent something powerful. I could argue that all designs can be improved, but these improvements are to different degrees and seriousness. Game designers rely so heavily on stereotypes to develop designs for characters that they may not know too much about. This is where the negative stereotypes arise and the potential of their designs are overlooked (Isbister, 2022, pg 13). An example is *Tomb Raiders* (Core Design & Eidos Interactive, 1996) female protagonist, *Lara Croft*. *Lara Croft* is a brilliant and strong young woman who ventures on various journeys seeking artefacts no ordinary person can (Core Design & Eidos Interactive, 1996). However, her high intellect and skill come paired with a lack of clothing and a great deal of objectification (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009, pg 810). Laura Bacigalupo, a PHD candidate from the University of Toronto, explains this was a character that was designed for the appeal of the prominent male audience within games (2011, pg 4). Her clothing usually consisting of short pants, tight lycra crop tops and her overly accentuated breasts were something that made *Lara* iconic, but for the wrong reasons (Bacigalupo, 2011, pg 4). In the earlier variations of the game when graphics were limited and the sexualization was a necessary tactic in promoting sales, her breasts took on the appearance of large pyramid shapes. Rather than using the illusion of shadow to create a breast, designers were adamant on ensuring that her triangular breasts were at the forefront of the design because they knew who the game needed to be sold to. And if it was not the iconic pyramid breasts, it was the large balloons stuffed under her lycra crop top (Mikula, 2004, pg 10). *Lara Croft* is described as a conflicting character as she carries the duality of the representation as a feminist icon, but also bears the burden of satisfying the male fantasy (Mikula, 2004, pg 13). As mentioned prior, she is an extremely intelligent, strong and fierce woman that could act as a model to others, but her physical appearance might do the opposite by making women feel unworthy and body-shamed. Furthermore, in *Tomb Raider 2* and *Tomb Raider 3* she became more of a sex object that played into the male fantasy as the character has developed a strong intent to steal men’s hearts rather than catering to any female followers. It was also in these sequels that her design became more sexualized and was done so deliberately (Mikula, 2004, pg

60). With the increased sexualization of *Lara's* appearance came the rise in sales. Rowan Lucas, a digital humanities scholar, expresses that through studies done in 2012, there was a large amount of sales from games that presented a sexualized female character at its forefront (2019, pg 101). This is concerning as it goes to show that male players value the poster they see over and above what the gameplay presents to them. A game that pushes past this trope would be that of *Horizon Zero: Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017). This game features an un-sexualized female protagonist, *Aloy*, that is both intelligent and appealing. However, because she did not conform to the male gaze's fantasy, her visual design received backlash (Lucas, 2019, pg 100). It is more concerning that, because of this, Sony's Shuhei Yoshida considered that having a female protagonist for this game could be a serious marketing risk and that it was too risky (Lucas, 2019, pg 100). The notion that the gender and representation of the character could be considered a risk, especially so because the character is a female. However, *Aloy* proved them wrong. *Horizon Zero: Dawn* was extremely well-received and very popular, which even allowed the game to produce a sequel. This contributes to the argument that characters do not need to be sexualized to grasp the attention of a player, they should rather be unique, interesting and progressive (Kuntjara and Almanfaluthi, 2016, pg 43). Images of *Lara Craft* and *Aloy* can be seen below in Figure 12.





Figure 12. An image of old and new *Lara Croft* (Core Design & Eidos Interactive, 1996) and *Aloy* (Guerilla Games, 2017) character designs

Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009, pg 811) argue that with the constant depiction of sexualized imagery, it starts to become a societal expectation that is what one might encounter whenever they are interacting with a female video game character, which is distressing. This draws back to the champions I focused on in this dissertation, exploring how female Indian champions are overlooked in terms of their design while the champions presented in the poll released after them, with the form representative of their backstory, are already being promoted to have an entire visual and gameplay update or VGU as opposed to just a visual one. Game designers have the power to create and construct something important to players, which is the most apparent sign that your game has succeeded (Isbister, 2022, pg 20). If *Riot Games* were to go back and redesign their champions with the consideration of the power they truly have when visually developing them, they could make incredibly empowering champions.

More effort is required to redesign champions visually than I claim. However, there have been instances where champions receive model updates without any aspects of changing their in-game capabilities. For example, an old champion model was highly sexualized as her body was heavily exposed. This was the play on the champion being the sexy cop within the game, as she is the Sheriff. *Riot Games* then decided in 2021 to update the champion's model and her illustration without fundamentally changing how the champion worked. This visual rework corresponded with the Netflix TV series *Arcane* (2021) being released, with this champion, *Caitlyn*, one of its main protagonists. I believe that the idea of a protagonist having an extremely sexualized appearance between the ages of 16 and 23 years would not exactly suit the audience. For this reason, *Riot Games* was incentivized to rework the champion's visual model. Moreover, it did not take long to release either; after being announced in late October 2022, the model was released to the game's official platform in the first week of November. This included redrawing the various champion illustrations and model changes for them. Showcasing this can be done quickly and efficiently motivates the company to do this more frequently. *Caitlyn's* VGU can be seen below in Figure 13.



Figure 13. A comparison of the old and new visually redesigned *Caitlyn* (Riot Games, 2009)

This research into the various champions was vital in arguing that the champions I analysed in Chapter 3 need visual redesigns. The aforementioned champions brought my argument to light by showcasing that *Riot Games* can make changes to champions they see fit. By having this ability, the champions that need to be visually redesigned must be brought to light to prevent them from carrying their problematic and inaccurate representations through generations of gamers that interact with *League of Legends*. *Riot Games* has the potential to amend this, as can be seen in the various examples provided above, and with some direction, I believe these changes could impact the way players receive and interact with their female Indian champions in a more meaningful and accurate way. Digital media journalists Mario Vairinhos, Liliana Vale Costa and Pedro Cardoso express that cultural representations have the potential to carry down legacies, inspire, educate and break past stereotypes that negatively impacted the depiction of specific types of characters (2021, pg 6). Accurate representations of cultures furthermore have the potential to allow players and game producers alike to circulate, transmit and impact society in a way that shares meanings of concepts and makes them accessible to promote viewer understanding (Vairinhos, Costa & Cardoso, 2021, pg 6). This is what I hoped to achieve through my practical component. I wanted to highlight and showcase meaningful Indian representation through the experimentation of character design. My creative practice offers a detailed breakdown showcasing the process I underwent and the products that came from it. The practical showcases the intricacies of design through clothing, facial and body features, hair, animals and weapons, and furthermore explores how the attention to detail when it comes to representation makes for a meaningful character design.

A Place To Start

The various instances where champions have been visually redesigned showcase that *Riot Games* can make these changes without reworking the champion entirely. After receiving positive feedback on *Caitlyn's* art and sustainability update or ASU, *Riot Games* decided to develop more concepts for them. Megan O'Rourke (2023) stated that since the community responded so well to

the concepts of ASU, it was something that they wanted to develop further and implement more of. However, I still argue that some of the champions the ASU offers do not require them as desperately as others. Given the company's popularity and large workforce, they can work on improving many other champions and need the visual updates in a timely manner, yet they chose not to. I discovered that the *League of Legends* team held an "Ask Me Anything" thread on Reddit (Reddit, 2011). It was here where questions about champion redesigns had been raised. When going through the threads, the employees would say that VGUs and ASUs were expensive, and they did not think it was a worthwhile investment (Riot Games, 2009). I disagree with their reasoning because, as a frequent player of the game, their popularity is significant whenever a champion has been redesigned; it is almost impossible to play them. As a game designer, I understand how these types of processes can become expensive and extensive, but when development goes well, there is no need for improvements other than quality of life ones. Therefore, it becomes a long-term investment. I had found two separate occasions where *Nidalee* was mentioned regarding a rework. This showcases that others are also finding issues with the champion's overall design. The reasons might be different from player to player, but there is an apparent desire from players to have this champion reworked and even so, at the bare minimum of an ASU. It was interesting to find; it made it feel as though I was not the only one seeing problems in the representation of the Indian female champions within the game. Below are two screenshots of the thread I had found.

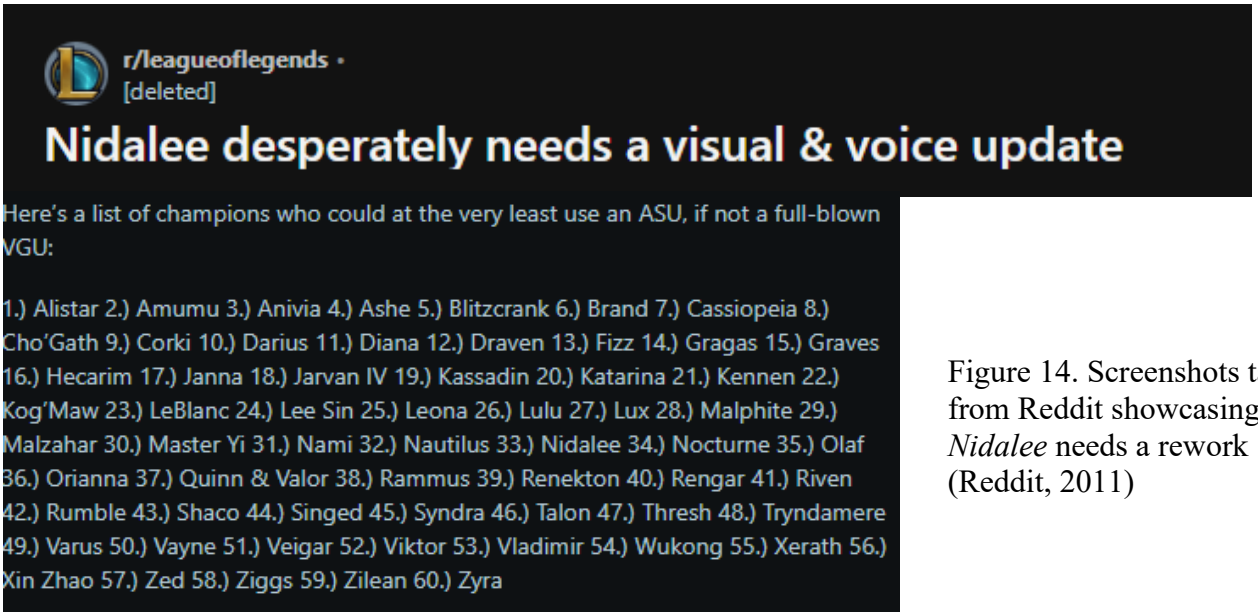


Figure 14. Screenshots taken from Reddit showcasing *Nidalee* needs a rework (Reddit, 2011)

When looking back at *Fiddlesticks* and *Dr Mundo*, I do not believe there was a strong need for a visual update, again leaving most of the champions that need them unchanged and underdeveloped. Observing the screenshot above, it can also be observed that those two champions were not considered for a rework, further expressing that their designs were not as detrimentally in need of a rework as others. The models and illustrations may look outdated, but representational accuracy should be prioritized over an outdated model. Katherine Isbister (2022, pg 23) explains that there is a great deal of information received from the first impression that a character gives you, both good and bad. However, we consider their purpose to discern whether they meet the requirements that their designers set up for them. By keeping this in mind and understanding that there is still subjectivity at play, there was no substantial evidence from their visual design to warrant their candidacy.

Even with the champions' semi-diverse race and gender types, they do not differentiate themselves and include much culture and history around them. The game could develop in-game-based regional polls if this were done with more detail. This could be designed to implement polls created for different champions per region. This gives various champions from various regions a better chance to get a rework and build towards better and more in-depth world-building. This would also give *Riot Games* a better chance at seeing how many or how few champions within specific racial and cultural categories exist within the game. Because there are few non-white champions, they could see what areas they need more diversity and use that to work from. The community may also appreciate the diversity because studies by Bopp, Muller, Aeschbach, Opwis and Mekler (2019) indicate that players enjoy resonating with a character as it builds attachment. If *Riot Games* were to consider this, they may even draw in more players with this diversity. When honing in on my focus being Indian champions, there are four within the game, which translates to only 2.5% of their champions being Indian.

These four existing champions consist of three females and one male (Riot Games, 2009). Each of them contains aspects in their visual design that accurately and inaccurately represent Indian culture. It is interesting in the sense that game developers are aware of different races and cultures

that exist around the world, but there is still a clear lack of implementing this understanding into the visual design of their champions. The sexualization and fetishization of these champions because they conform to principles of "otherness" (Hall, 1997) created inappropriate and problematic depictions of them. They are reduced to their femininity as if they had nothing else to offer besides their bodies. And when their champion descriptions are read, their visual designs let them down so heavily. These are champions that are strong, intelligent and powerful, but their visual designs present exaggerated gender stereotypes that do not align with their stories (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009, pg 810). This is further discussed and broken down in Chapter 3. It is important to consider that the choice of using varying races stemming from real-world places and cultures requires much research. These champions have been inspired from pre-existing cultures and places and that is reflected in their designs, but the degrees to how accurately it is done varies.

Where Did They Come From, Where Did They Go?

Upon exploring that some of the *League of Legends* champions are inspired by real-world cultures and places, it is important to consider the world in which the game sets itself. When looking at the map that the *League of Legends* world uses, the continents take on different shapes and structures, however, each continent is modelled to somewhat resemble that of the real-world (Landa & Thompson, 2023, pg 261). The *League of Legends* world is referred to as *Runeterra* and within it are there a few different regions with the major capitals being *Targon, Piltover and Zaun, Bilgewater, Shurima,, Demacia, Ionia, Ixtal,* and *Noxus* (Riot Games, 2009). The map of *Runeterra* can be observed below in Figure 15.



Figure 15. The map of *Runeterra* showcasing the different places and continents (Riot Games, 2009).

There are a few other regions, but these are the main ones that use more cultural and historical inspiration. Players all share similar notions of what each *Runeterra* region represents, and it is supported by the champions that inhabit the specific areas (Reddit, 2022). It is stipulated by many players using the evidence within the game that *Targon* represents Greece, where one could expect to see gladiator-like champions. *Targon* has a champion called Pantheon (Riot Games, 2009). *Demacia* represents the United Kingdom, where society functions and is maintained around a monarchy (Riot Games, 2009). *Ionia* represents Asia, but *Ionia* is an amalgamation of all real-world Asian countries; this can be observed through all its champions being of Asian descent and where its inhabitants are focused on the spiritual balance and harmony of the land. Furthermore, *Ionia* suffers from the constant invasion of other regions that want to claim their resources and people (Riot Games, 2009). *Ixtal* represents Africa, and *Shurima* represents the Middle East, as shown by its Egyptian and Arabic-influenced champions. Champions inhabiting this area share

similar appearances to those of ancient Egyptian Gods such as *Anubis, Ra* and *Sobek*. Lastly, *Noxus* represents Germany. This relation was made through negative associations, as *Noxus* is known for its war readiness and constant battles. The nation is known for its fearsome, brutal and threatening reputation (Riot Games, 2009). These have not been confirmed but are based on the observations of champions that inhabit these places and the means by which their society functions. Many *League of Legends* players have created Reddit threads dedicated to showcasing the regional distribution of real-world places in *Runterra*. This was mostly done using the champion's regions of descent and their visual appearances to create these linkages.

This shows an interest in including and engaging with pre-existing culture and ideals but, at the same time, does not show enough interest and attention to detail in the way they have implemented it, much like how they have fallen into implementing inaccuracies and stereotypes within many of their champions that represent certain places and cultures. I find this may be influenced by the lack of world-building and development or by using it as a justification shield. More prominent aspects of culture are usually developed in this process, so it could be that the champion's lack of depth reflects poor world-building and a lack of cultural knowledge. World-building is a key factor of many games, functioning as its primary form of immersion and engagement (Hashimi & Svanold, 2023, pg1). It is a tool used to create a world, but it requires much research into the world's culture, history, language, and geography, amongst other valuable elements (Hashimi & Svanold, 2023, pg 4). However, conversely, with world-building being a dynamic element of games, it can be changed and altered or even used to justify the backlash they may receive for portraying problematic content and deeming it as "part of the world". Furthermore, Roope Sorvo, a game designer, expresses that the altering and removal of components within a world can cause a marring gameplay experience due to inconsistencies (2017, pg 6). Exploring these regions that *League of Legends* has provided for their world allowed me to situate the female Indian champions better to understand their descent. They are not all from *Ionia*, but the place itself serves as a landmark to situate where *League of Legends* has created an environment they represent. This serves as a means to indicate that there is racial representation of Indian people despite them not all inhabiting *Ionia*. *Nidalee* inhabits *Ixtal, Karma* inhabits *Ionia*, and *Nilah* inhabits *Bilgewater*. Even though these champions are all representative of the same race, they live in different regions. Similarly, in the real world, race is not solely tied to a specific country, but relatively, countries can be racially

dominated. So, although not all three of the female Indian champions descend from the same region, they exist and are inspired by Indian culture and representation. It is also important to note that *Nidalee* has had her story altered multiple times to align with her roles within other game modes (Riot Games, 2009), this however makes her initial story difficult to trace back, reinforcing the lack of story-building and cultural knowledge.

Connecting The Dots

Upon having explored the various regions of *League of Legends* and being able to situate the champions, it can be seen that these different regions are inspired by real-world places, cultures and races. This allowed me to situate the champions better and understand their racial representations despite the three of them inhabiting different places. When looking at the three female Indian champions as part of my creative component, the purpose of using the female Indian champions in this dissertation is to analyse their designs and formulate a set of criteria used to visually rework one of them. Furthermore, to explain how I created my design in a way that is inclusive and considers the important aspects of Indian cultures and representation. Alongside this, I considered the purpose and role these champions play in their narratives to ensure that while their design remains inclusive, they are still representative of the purpose they have within the game and their stories. By using the information gained from the analysis, theoretical frameworks and the criteria I formed, I then aimed to use it on the champion, *Nidalee* (Riot Games, 2009), and offer a new visual design that honours her as a champion while still representing the culture that she is meant to be inspired by. *Nidalee* is part of the Pakka tribe within the game (Riot Games, 2009). This relation is interesting because of the existing Indian Pakka Tribe or Hakki Pikki Tribe. Deepak Jagadeesh and Sindhu Gowda, scholars of Indian tribe studies, explain that the Pakka Tribe are a tribe of Indian hunters that strive within the forest regions of Karnataka, usually by trapping and catching prey for their livelihood (2017, pg 2476). Karnataka is located in the south-west of India and is known for its lush and vibrant forests (Jagadeesh & Gowda, 2017, pg 2476) The Pakka tribe was known for their precision to trap and hunt animals without damaging or severely injuring them (Jagadeesh & Gowda, 2017, pg 2476). They were also known for their ability to create

healing salves and ointments using medicinal ingredients found within the forest (Jagadeesh & Gowda, 2017, pg 2476). Apart from these traits, they were known for their craftsmanship, producing finely polished beads, well-made vases and decorative flower pieces (Jagadeesh & Gowda, 2017, pg 2476). *Nidalee* has an ability that allows her to craft traps, similarly to the Pakka tribe, these traps do minimal damage and are rather focused on tracking the prey before capturing it. Additionally, *Nidalee* also has a healing ability which ties in well with the healing salves and ointments that are made by this tribe. These aspects relate well to *Nidalee* and the tribe's proficiencies even align well with her champion description that can be found below, as well as with what she is able to do within the game. Below Figure 16 showcases *Nidalee.*

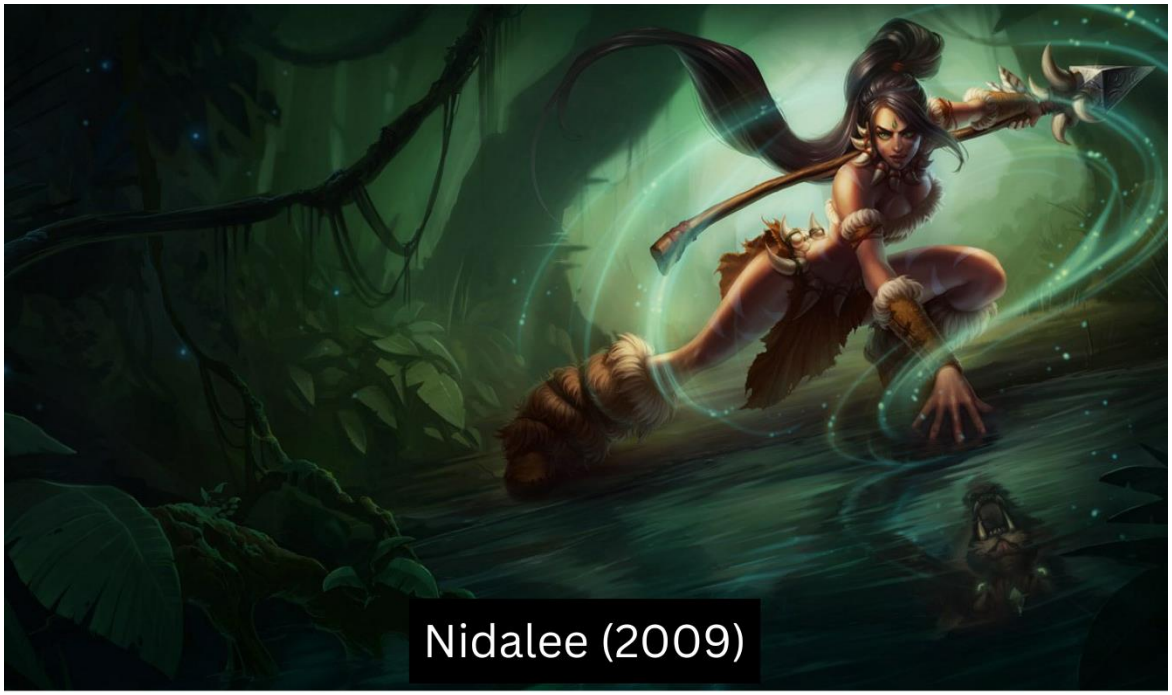


Figure 16. A screenshot of *Nidalee's* champion illustration (Riot Games, 2009).

League of Legends' first take on an Indian champion was *Nidalee*, titled "*The Beastial Huntress*" (Riot Games, 2009). She was created in 2009, meaning she was one of the game's first champions to be released. Just within this image, we can see there are some problems with her visual design. There is a strong sense of over sexualization within it. Many areas of her body are exposed, and

specific body parts are heavily accentuated. Her thighs and breasts are large, which, although it is not a problem, is not uncommon for some women may naturally possess these attributes. It is rather the way they are exaggerated and focalised in her illustration. This was a common trend for female video games where these sexualized attributes were idealised (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009, pg 809). I raise this point to not shame her body in any way, but rather the way it is being showcased. The shines and glows emphasise these features, acting as focal points to her design. This may even prevent viewers from noticing the cougar glaring back at her in the reflection of the water beneath her. Rather than highlighting her thighs, the reflection could have been an indication of her main source of power being the ability to transform into a cougar at her own free will (Riot Games, 2009). Her champion description reads as follows:

> "Raised in the deepest jungle, *Nidalee* is a master tracker who can shapeshift into a ferocious cougar at will. Neither wholly woman nor beast, she viciously defends her territory from any and all trespassers, with carefully placed traps and deft spear throws. She cripples her quarry before pouncing on them in feline form—the lucky few who survive tell tales of a wild woman with razor-sharp instincts, and even sharper claws..."(Riot Games, 2009)

I find it important to state that this observation is not aimed at promoting sexual inexpressiveness but rather to explain that this type of champion should not be so sexualized based on the purpose and role she plays within the game.

The second champion, *Karma*, was released in 2011. *Karma* was representative of the spiritual Indian. Therefore, she is called " *The Enlightened One*" (Riot Games, 2009). Her design has some problems, primarily in that she has been sexualized and does not resemble that of a spiritual guide. An Indian spiritual guide typically wears harem trousers, kurta shirts and is wrapped in fabric. Their faces are decorated with burned fruit ashes in various colours, but mostly white and red are used. Her champion description reads as follows:

> "No mortal exemplifies the spiritual traditions of *Ionia* more than *Karma*. She is the living embodiment of an ancient soul reincarnated countless times, carrying all her accumulated memories into each new life, and blessed with power that few can comprehend. She has done her best to guide her people in recent times of crisis, though she knows that peace and harmony may come only at a considerable cost—both to her, and to the land she holds most dear." (Riot Games, 2009).

However, despite still having problems with her visual design, it can be seen in just two years how the design has progressed from *Nidalee*. Although still sexualized, her design does not emphasize it as much as *Nidalee*. There was some insight into her design, but there are existing problems. Based on what she represents as an Indian champion, certain elements fall flat in her visual design. These will be further discussed in Chapter 3. An image of *Karma* can be seen in Figure 17 below.



Figure 17. A screenshot of *Karma's* champion illustration (Riot Games, 2009).

The latest feminine Indian champion, *Nilah*, titled "*The Joy Unbound*" (Riot Games, 2009), was released in 2022. She is a monster hunter that is only able to feel emotions of happiness and joy, a blessing and a curse given to her by a demon that she now wields (Riot Games, 2009). Her champion description can be read as follows:

> "*Nilah* is an ascetic warrior from a distant land, seeking the world's deadliest, most titanic opponents so that she might challenge and destroy them. Having won her power through an encounter with the long-imprisoned demon of joy, she has no emotions other than unceasing jubilation—a small price to pay for the vast strength she now possesses. Channelling the demon's liquid form into a blade of unparalleled might, she stands defiant against ancient threats long forgotten." (Riot Games, 2009)

Her representation is one of the strongest I have come across both generally from all games I have played that contain female Indian characters and within *League of Legends* itself, from a visual perspective. She embodies many traditional elements from colours, hairstyle and jewellery, overall representing Southern Indian culture in an accurate and honourable way. *Nilah* presents elements of Indian culture in a modern way. Her visual design possesses recognizable elements of Indian culture in a way that is not stereotyped or problematic, rather they are
highlighted and presented in a meaningful way. She can be seen below in Figure 18.



Figure 18. A screenshot of *Nilah's* champion illustration (Riot Games, 2009).

These three champions lay the foundation of my research. In analyzing and dissecting their visual design elements, I understood the techniques used for their development. Upon learning this, I could formulate my visual design techniques and apply them to *Nidalee*. This was done to offer a new visual design that includes the culture she is inspired by and a design that resonates with her purpose within the game. This was the creative component of my research. In this creative component, I aimed to showcase how she can be well-represented and inclusive whilst remaining appealing.

The Anatomy Of My Argument

The overall structure of this paper is as follows: Chapter One introduces my research topic, the game I focused on, the champions I focused on, and why. This chapter also reinforces the reasoning and exploration behind this dissertation by using *League of Legends'* other *Champions* and their visual redesigns. This chapter explored the game world, races, and cultural inspirations that helped me to identify the champions I analyzed. This chapter further worked to give context to what *League of Legends* is and how its systems work.

Chapter two focuses on the core literature used throughout the dissertation and consists of an explanation of the literature and materials I used to deepen my analysis further and formulate my techniques to create and develop progressive Indian visual design. Theoretical frameworks such as Stuart Hall's "Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practice" (1997) and "Encoding and Decoding" (1980) were used to situate my arguments on representation and "the other" (Hall, 1997). Teachings from Edward Said (1978) and Lagace (2018) on Orientalism and Indian representation were used to frame my analysis through the direct use of oriental representation. Frameworks from Sheldon (2023) and Schroter (2014) were used to guide my analysis and gave me elements to consider when deconstructing the visual design of video game

characters. Lynch, Tompkin, and Fritz's (2016) teaching allowed me to explore approach for Reconceptualizing *Nidalee* ensured that the champion was accurately represented regardless of her body shape and size.

Chapter three has drawn on the analysis of the three champions, giving an in-depth look into their designs and explaining what elements were well-represented and which were not and why. This was done alongside the aforementioned theoretical frameworks. Various teachings on representation, visual character design, fetishism and Indian representation have been used to analyze the three champions and their visual designs. This used a combination of frameworks, namely Hall's (1997) and Sheldon's (2023), amongst other frameworks. Hall (1997) and Said (1978) allowed me to explore these champions by first understanding their creations' context and the reasons behind their current representations. This was done using their theories on fetishization. Furthermore, Sheldon (2023), van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011) allowed me to analyze these champions from a visual character design perspective, expressing how characters' appearances should align with their backstories and what they are inspired by.

Chapter four showcases the application of my techniques to the creative component and provides a reflection and analysis of the product I created. Chapter four is accompanied by an art book, which shows the illustrations in greater detail. This creative component was done using the theories of the aforementioned scholars to ensure that I had not fallen into reiterating any stereotypes or problematic visual designs. Using the teachings and applications I gathered from my research into character design and Indian representation, I documented the process of my creative component from paper sketches all the way through to the final designs.

Chapter five has concluded my paper by discussing my findings and answering my research question. Through this dissertation, I hoped to discover and learn if the analysis of female Indian bodies in *League of Legends* allowed me to develop techniques towards progressive, inclusive and respectful visual design. Finally, this chapter also explores the successes and shortfalls I encountered throughout the creative practice process.

Chapter Two

Unlockable Skins, Locked Identities:

The use of literature and theory to support this dissertations exploration on representation of female Indian champions within *League of Legends*

This chapter focuses on the theoretical frameworks that inform this dissertation. Each core framework explains a specific topic that relates to my question. The main topics include representation, fetishism and stereotypes. When discussing the visual representation of the champions, the reasons for their visual design elements must be considered. The portrayal of oversexualized women who are also marginalized is a trend that needs to be understood and dissected in order to allow us better to understand the actual historical reasons for these occurrences. The topic of production and interpretation is important in many creative fields. As an individual who consumes media and makes it, I realized that I had no control over how people would interpret my work, but I always tried to be mindful of what and how I designed the content in my projects. Images and designs are artefacts that are perceived by those who view them, and the takeaway varies depending on the individual (Dickie, 1983, pg 69). The topic of Orientalism is discussed as it frames the reason behind why certain races have been depicted the way they have in certain types of media, namely Asian demographics (Said, 1978). Given that my dissertation was focused on the representation of Indian women, it was important to understand and realize why these images had come to exist and persist as stereotypes in the present. Said's (1978) teachings also worked well to have a more situated stance on the sexualized Asian woman, which is a key factor of this dissertation.

This chapter furthermore discusses topics such as character design and analysis. This is more focused on understanding how and what considerations I took, based on research, when developing the re-design for my creative component. It discusses ideation and different means of developing characters. There is a discussion on Indian representation to highlight the different examples and create awareness around how some designs need improvements and why. Alongside the discussion of character design and analysis, it is further broken down into more detail regarding video game

characters and theory analysis. This focuses on reflecting on my creative component, highlighting and framing how I have analyzed and reflected on my self-drawn presented designs. Finally, I have a section on feminist theory, which says that my approach to this dissertation was not by having antisexualism in mind but by promoting meaningful design, where a character's form and function mutually coexist. This was an important aspect to explore based on teachings from Hall (1997) and Said (1978) on fetishism and stereotypes. Moreover, how these scholars express that "the other" was often reduced to their bodies as a means of representation (Hall, 1997, pg 249).

Representation, Fetishism And Stereotypes

Stuart Hall's papers, *The Work of Representation. Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (1997) and *Encoding, Decoding* (1980) present a great deal of valuable information around topics of race, gender, stereotypes, sexualization and other sub-topics stemming from these broader ones. He has a strong approach to these topics, not only explaining the harmful images and messages that are conveyed about people of minorities but also explaining where and how these beliefs came to be (Hall, 1997, pg 257)—a section in *The Work of Representation. Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* titled *The Spectacle of "the other"* (Hall, 1997), Hall breaks down stereotyping in a sense where the perspectives of both sides are explained. He speaks about the possible reasons that Western cultures perpetuated certain stereotypes onto people and how they had probably remained so strong and prevalent in creative media. He also speaks from the perspective of the "other", which refers to an individual the group perceives as not belonging or being different in some fundamental way (Hall, 1997, pg 225). These create perpetrated stereotypes, and Hall (1997) explains how it makes the "other" feel misrepresented and oppressed. He develops other terminology that I believe is useful in explaining the reasoning behind the visual design of the three champions I mention.

I have found that the way champions that are "different" are constantly presented bare negative stereotypes and tropes that become normalised and accepted. At times, these aspects detract from their representation; it can be disappointing to learn that specific motifs make a champion's race

and identity distinguishable because they perpetuate these negative stereotypes. Hall's teachings (1997) on the portrayal of the "other", use of motifs and symbolism that induce stereotypes, allowed me to further understand what representation is and how stereotypes are produced through the gaze of Western cultures. Hall (1997) further outlines a core element of visual representation: "difference". Hall (1997) states that difference comes in both negative and positive ways and is employed in both these ways; this is purely based on the representation of an individual and how it is absorbed by those who engage with it. This links back to Hall's (1980) teachings on *polysemy,* which is explored later on in this chapter. When looking at the three aforementioned *League of Legends* champions, *Nidalee, Karma* and *Nilah*, it can be seen how they all share positive and negative qualities within their visual design. For example, *Nidalee* deeply cares for nature and has a protective attitude towards it (Riot Games, 2009). However, her appearance stems from a fantasised idea of what an "exotic" and "different" champion like this might look like (Hall, 1997, pg 257). *Karma* is heavily tied to spirituality, but her colours and clothing do not signify its elements. Urmila Mohan, a scholar in religious studies and art, expresses that the cloth worn by gurus is the medium through which divine power can be transmitted (2018, pg 3). Attire such as harem pants, kurta shirts, ash markings, and draped fabric are usually signifying elements of an Indian spirit guide (Mohan, 2018, pg 49). Ramratan Guru, Ushma Saini and Jyoti Rani explain this specific type of clothing to be of Vedic descent (2023, pg 959). The Vedic period is one of the oldest documented and is known as the era of ritualistic and spiritual teaching, which is why Vedic clothing is still used today by gurus (Guru et al, 2023, pg 955). Lastly, *Nilah* encapsulates the empowering elements of an Indian woman but is also highly simplified (Riot Games, 2009). *Nilah* has a fair amount of detail in her visual design, but after reading her champion description, she could have been more equipped to take on the foes she faces. More armour, greater detail in fabric design and even greater detail in her attire would have elevated her design further. *Nilah*'s design does not convey any problematic elements or inaccuracies, but some additional detailing would have elevated her design further especially considering the importance of textiles in expressing Indian practices (Guru et al, 2023, pg 953). The simplicity and misinformation of aspects of the champion's design hinder their uniqueness and representation. Subtle details and textures can enhance designs in meaningful ways, but this requires researchers to thoroughly search for the information to bring these aspects to life. The designs lack this, and the most likely reason due that the teams consist of white male designers (Thompson & Martins, 2021, pg 2). Hall (1997) made

it easier for me to understand the designer's perspective and the design's message, as his teachings on the Western Gaze and its influence of imagery within media allowed me to frame how I approached the visual design of the champions. It is also important to note that this was not solely a problem in *League of Legends*; it was a prevalent issue in other games. Examples of this would include *Symmetra* from *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment & Iron Galaxy, 2016) and *Farah* from *Prince of Persia* (Ubisoft, 2008). Both of these characters share similar traits with the above-mentioned *League of Legends* champions. *Symmetra* has a similar appearance to *Karma.* She is the stereotypical, highly intelligent Indian character that plays on the fantasy of a sexualized techie. *Farah* resembles *Nidalee* as she is barely clothed and expected to fight and be protected in minimal clothing. These characters further argue towards the influence of the Western Gaze influence of imagery and media production. An image of these characters can be seen below in Figure 19.



Figure 19. Character designs of *Farah* (Ubisoft, 2008) and *Symmetra* (Blizzard Entertainment & Iron Galaxy, 2016).

As previously mentioned, a common reason for the problematic depictions of female Indian characters is the "The Western Gaze". Dibyesh Anand (2007, pg 23), a professor of Humanities studies, explains, "The Western imagination of the Other involves a recognition at two levels—the practices of essentializing and stereotyping that provide the backbone as well as various strategies (such as infantilization, eroticization, debasement, idealization, and self-affirmation) that put flesh to the imagined Other". He further expresses that these strategies are historically fixed by Westerners where they develop an agreed upon code on how the "other" should be presented (Anand, 2007, pg 23). Anand (2007, pg 24) expresses that this strategy was used to create a way for the "other" to be known, no matter the problematic depictions it carried. I found this problematic because these notions are still being carried through into the visual designs of video game characters, where they are developed using notions riddled with inaccuracies and harmful stereotypes. Anand (2007, pg 26) further expresses that the West acknowledged that Indian people had their rites and traditions. However, instead of using their uniqueness to highlight their depictions, it was used as a method of reduction to further depict stereotypes of incapability, savagery and tribal-ness (Anand, 2007, pg 26). He explains this to be the practice of essentialism, which he defines as, "we find essentialism in the reduction of the indigenous people to an "essential" idea of what it means to be "native"." (Anand, 2007, pg 26). Similarly to Hall's teachings on primitive reduction of the "other" (1997, pg 266), Anand shares the same belief. This is the belief that people considered to be the "other" were no more than just aggressive and underdeveloped (Hall, 1997, pg 266). Anand expresses that the image of the "other" often comes with depictions of simpleness and primitiveness in the context of Indian representation (2007, pg 31). An aspect that Anand (2007, pg 28) discussed that tied in well with the topic of this dissertation was that of the "sexually promiscuous primitives". This ties in well because this is how *Nidalee* is depicted. She is depicted as a "promiscuous primitive", and her visual design heavily reflects that shown in Chapter Three. Similarly to Hall (1997, pg 266), Anand (2007, pg 35) expresses the depictions of the "other" as the " uncovering of the naked, available, desirable and primitive female body". This aligned well with Hall's explanation of the case of *Saartjie Baartman* (1997, pg 268), which is explained later in this chapter.

The teachings and arguments on the stereotyping, sexualization and fetishization of the "other" made by Anand (2007) align and support Hall's (1997) theories and express the same notion of the reduction of the "other" to its simplest and sexualized form through the Western gaze. The Western gaze is most evident in the design of *Nidalee*, but it still exists within the designs of others. A common trope for women considered to be the "other" was the reduction of them to their physical appearance (Hall, 1997, pg 263). *Nidalee's* design is heavily reduced down to her body. Her minimal clothing and emphasis on parts of the body deemed sexual attests to that. Furthermore, Hall (1997, pg 251) speaks to how Western cultures often tend to project primal and savage-like tendencies onto people who reside within marginalized groups. From *Nidalee's* lore and visual design, she also bears those characteristics. This stereotype was formulated amongst older Western cultures, the stereotype that anyone who was not white was most likely unintelligent, unpredictable and unevolved (Hall, 1997, pg 258). It is important to note that this was formulated to justify colonialism and not Western cultures. These findings applied to my research as there was a strong use of these tropes in the champion's designs, which will be further discussed in Chapter Three. Imagery showcasing marginalized women and renditions of them in games often make use of these stereotypes to the point where they become identifiers of racial groups. Hall (1997, pg 268) explains that when something is new, exciting or unknown, aspects that make that group unique contribute to how they are represented in media. When reflecting on the thought of different races being stereotyped as unintelligent and primitive, we are just left to a body because we assume there is nothing more to engage with beyond that than a spectacle to be observed (Hall, 1997, pg 265). Moreover, when left with that, to make the idea of a group of people more exciting, we emphasize aspects and exaggerate their appearances to draw in appeal, leaving us with characters that are overly sexualized, and their body acts as the signifier (Hall, 1997, pg 265). This is a stereotype that is often cast onto women who are not of Western descent. These discursive formations (Hall, 1997, pg 234) made by Western cultures have led to a long line of stereotypical depictions in many forms of media to date. Hall (1997, pg 234) explains discursive formations as the manner in which knowledge regarding a particular topic is constructed and organized through language and social practices. Alongside this, there are many dimensions of difference, including race, gender, sexuality, and class (Hall, 1997, pg 234). However, I found it important to discuss how these aspects lead to the fetishization of specific groups of people. The examples used by Hall (1997, pg 264) primarily focus on the sexualization and fetishization of the

feminine African body. This was where he spoke about the case of Saartjie Baartman, an African woman brought to Europe by a Boer farmer (Hall, 1997, pg 265). However, when he discusses why this happened, we can see and understand how it may apply to many different races of women. Hall (1997, pg 265) explains that the physical form of non-European women led them to be known as the "other".

Hall (1997, pg 225) refers to the "other" as an individual the group perceives as not belonging or being different in some fundamental way. In this case, the differences in Indian descent and skin tone have influenced the champion's design. An important fact to note about *Nidalee* is that she has bestial superpowers that allow her to transform into a cougar of free will. This has its own implications, mainly because it emphasizes the primordial nature that Hall (1997, pg 243) discusses and explains was used as a baseline to represent anything non-white. The use of the cougar, a predatory feline, also draws back the notion of the woman acting as sexual prowesses. Furthermore, the fact that their choice was a cougar rather than a native cat species such as a Bengal Tiger, Asiatic Lion or Indian Leopard. However, *Riot Games* (2009) plays an interesting depiction here. With the majority of their players being young males, they create the appeal of the hypersexualized champion also being a cougar, literally and perhaps figuratively, commonly understood as an older woman who preys on young men. Catherine Tipler, a human and gender studies scholar (2013, pg 1), further states that women often face two different types of dehumanization. This is where the woman might assume that of the "predator", where they need to be tamed and act wildly or that of the "prey", where they are deemed weak and fragile, needing extra care and attention (Tipler, 2013, pg 1). When applying this theory to *Nidalee*, we can immediately see could fall into either side as her design is ambiguous in this regard. She could potentially fall into the side of the prey; she appears wild and free but still maintains the appeal in her presentation of being lustrous (Tipler, 2013, pg 1). Or how she falls into the side of the predator whereby she can be expected to be blunt, aggressive and forceful (Tipler, 2013, pg 1). Tipler (2013, pg 4) expresses that this can lead to stereotypes of women being "seen as irrational, amoral, lacking culture, and motivated largely by instinct". This eliminates the possibility of women being seen as complex human beings capable of thought, logic and feeling. Because of reasons like this, women are often subjected to dehumanization and then given animalistic attributes to cater for their lack of general human behaviour (Tipler, 2013, pg 4).

Instead of finding the meaning and power behind the representation of animals in character designs, it instead showcases this as a strategy used to dehumanize women and fetishize them, especially in the case of the Indian women characters in *League of Legends*. This is reminiscent of the 1988 Bollywood film *Jungal Ki Beti* directed by Roshan Thakur. The movie follows the story of a beautiful Indian woman, *Jungle Girl*, who was raised in the jungle and her purpose was to protect diamonds. *Jungle Girl* looks quite similar to *Nidalee.* She is dressed up in very skimpy animal skins with minimal protection. She even has the same white markings on her body like *Nidalee*. Additionally, a Bollywood film called *Tarzan Ki Beti* portrays its woman similarly (Singh, 2002). This movie was released later, and the depiction of Indian women within it is arguably worse. The poster for *Tarzan Ki Beti* has a woman dressed only in leaves while snakes slither across her body. Her facial expression looks sultry and almost as if she is modelling. She is incredibly sexualized and her representation appears very similarly to that of *Nidalee.* These films contribute to the argument and representation of Indian women in media as it can be seen that these negative stereotypes are carried across various types of it, depicting the same problematic imagery. This can be observed in the images below.



Figure 20. Side by side of *Jungle Girl* (Thakur, 1988) and *Nidalee* (Riot Games, 2009).

Meenakshi Durham, a scholar in Journalism and Mass communication studies, expresses that Indian women are subjected to objectification because of their "otherness" (2001, pg 201). She further explains that the depictions of Indian women glamourized their uniqueness to entice the West (Durham, 2001, pg 204). This was done by using elements of cultural adornments such as forehead Bindi and markings present on their bodies while they demonstrated sexually dominant displays (Durham, 2001, pg 205). This aligns well with Tipler's teachings on how the woman is depicted as either predator or prey, whereby the predator displays dominance (2013, pg 1). These depictions were documented to play on the fantasies of the West and offer them depictions of Indian women who were both sexually dominant but subordinate. Durham's (2001) teachings furthermore align with Hall's (1997) through the expression of sexualizing and fetishizing the "other". Using their cultural and racial symbols to create fantasies of sexualized images that the West can consume. Similarly to Durham (2001), Hall (1997, pg 264) expresses that fantasy can be understood as the term that gives way for the West to dream the unthinkable towards the "other". And the reduction and expression of key aspects of the "other", highlighting specific fantasy related traits is known as fetishism. I felt as though this also describes *Nidalee*. The use of cultural Indian elements such as the markings and forehead Bindi are present in her illustration but contribute to the sexualized fantasy of the champion. It is also important to know that *Nidalee* is considered a *Vastayan* (Riot Games, 2009). A *Vastayan* refers to champions that bare animalistic qualities, and are considered to be a different species (Riot Games, 2009). Furthermore, *Vastayan* heritage is rooted in *Ionia* which is the place that represents Asian culture, further indicating that the champion is Indian because of her *Ionian* heritage and descent, which explains why elements of her design, such as the Bindi, represent Indian culture (Riot Games, 2009).

These factors led the Indian female champions to become fetishized because of their differences. The bare minimum known about the specific groups of people is then used as a means of reference, once again developing and perpetuating stereotypes in a way that makes it seem these qualities embody those groups. These are the main components I have addressed during my analysis to explain further how the designs of the two first champions fall flat and are stereotyped and fetishized. This was important to consider for the analysis of the champions. Knowing this allows

us to better understand their visual design and the possible thought processes of those who created them.

Production And Interpretation

Stuart Hall (1980, pg 52) discusses that content is created with a fixed meaning, which is then provided to the receiver. However, Hall disagrees with this; he believes this process lacks chaos. Furthermore, Hall (1980, pg 54) explains that this process exists within distortion where the message or meaning the creator intended for the content to have is somehow lost in translation, or the receiver may not be up to perceiving in the intended manner. This creates room for interpretation or not, depending on the individuals consuming the media. Hall (1980, pg 54) calls this process encoding and decoding. Encoding is the aforementioned process by which a developer creates messages using conventions and specific codes. Decoding refers to the process by which the receivers interpret and consume the messages, whether they are closely aligned with the intended message or not (Hall, 1980, pg 54). This can be subjective, as different individuals perceive things differently, which can cause misunderstandings. Hall (1980) went on to develop a model of encoding and decoding. Similarly, French literary theorist Roland Barthes (1991, pg 148), expresses that text and writing regarding a singular topic may arise from various different cultures, but the merge of this information is where meaning is contested. It is at this contestation that meanings arise from the readers and the author's intentions are put to the side (1968, pg 148). He also explains how the idea of the author as a singular authoritative figure is a product of Western culture and not applicable to others. As for meaning to arise and become multi-faceted, the death of the author is needed to give rise to the birth of the readers (Barthes, 1968, pg 148). This aligns well with Hall's (1980) explanation on encoding and decoding, where meaning from the creator might come with a specific intention, but will be perceived differently due to the multiple cultures that may find different meaning within a creation. Hall (1980) describes the process as the degree of symmetry and asymmetry, or the levels of understanding and misunderstanding, whereby these aforementioned distortions create a lack of equivalence between the two communicative parties (Hall, 1980, pg 54). Barthes (1968, pg 148) furthermore expresses that people have allowed

themselves to be fooled by the notion that meaning is fixed, which has contributed to the destruction of interpretation.

Despite this relating more to film, it is important to discuss and understand many different types of media, especially video games. It allows creators to understand how their audiences perceive their work and why. Especially if the meanings developed and interpretations are entirely different. Understanding how or what types of meaning your work can convey is valuable. This allows creators to situate their content better and make improvements or adjustments to get their product closer to what they desire. These multiple interpretations are "Polysemy" (Hall, 1980, pg 57). Hall (1980, pg 57) describes "Polysemy" as the possibility of media having multiple meanings. These multiple different meanings arise based on the different viewers' understanding and frameworks of knowledge. Different types of people would interpret and give meaning to the same entity, but the meaning may differ depending on the person. This term encapsulates the previous teachings from Hall (1980) and Barthes (1968) on how media can be interpreted differently and should be allowed to be interpreted differently based on the culture and background of those consuming it. Polysemy and teachings form Barthes (1968) on the way media can be interpreted ties back to *Nidalee*. The champion has a visual ambiguity to her, but because of the information provided by *Riot Games* such as her lineage as well her direct link to the Indian Pakka tribe, she can be interpreted as Indian or other races based on individual interpretation. But the key is that this relies on individuals and their varying perspectives and analysis on something. However, Hall emphasizes (1980, pg 57) that this should not be confused with "Pluralism". (Hall, 1980, pg 57) pluralism is a condition or system that enables various elements of media to coexist. This varies from groups of people, sources, and other things unrelated to analytic product interpretations. The main difference is that *polysemy* revolves around the meaning media produces based on knowledge frameworks and *pluralism* revolves around the coexistence of media and the meaning derived through demographical knowledge.

Drawing back to the three champions I have presented for this paper, I believed there was value in looking at them in a way that encoded and decoded their visual design. This meant analyzing the champions as represented and understanding how their visual design entices players to interact with them. This was achieved by deconstructing their visual designs to understand better how they

may be perceived. Upon doing this, I better understood what the designers may have been trying to achieve, but how the meaning got lost in translation. By deconstructing the champions' visual designs, I have understood them more. However, it is important to add that this process was made easier by using *Riot Games'* (2009) official website to view the champions' stories and descriptions. By doing this and having their form, champion illustration, and their function being their lore, put side by side, it became easier to understand them and align story to picture.

It is also here where it was important to consider the connotation and denotation of the champions. Hall (1997, pg 38) defines these terms as follows, "Denotation is the simple, basic, descriptive level, where consensus is wide and most people would agree on the meaning ('dress', 'jeans'). At the second level-connotation - these signifiers, which we have been able to 'decode' at a simple level by using our conventional conceptual classifications of dress to read their meaning, enter a more expansive, second kind of code - 'the language of fashion' - which connects them to broader themes and meanings, linking them with what, we may call the wider semantic fields of our culture: ideas of 'elegance', 'formality', 'casualness' and 'romance'." Although this approach is somewhat subjective at times, it is important to do this to understand how and why people may interpret visual design. In relation to video game characters, denotation allows us to decode their visual appearances in order to identify them. We can identify the components of their visual designs and then make the connections based on knowledge we already have. This process was applied to my analysis of the characters. As a female Indian, my perception of these champions may be harsher and more critical than someone within a different context. This is most likely also due to my desire to feel represented within games as I am passionate about them. However, it is through the unpacking of the visual design that we understand how the visuals work against or with the designer's intentions, which, in this case, remains somewhat unclear.

Through this unpacking, it can be seen that meaning can be associative and dependent on the intervention of different types of contexts that viewers fall within (Hall, 1997, pg 38). The acknowledgement and usage of these two terms are important when considering visual designs because they allow creators to understand better the possible implications behind the works they create and determine whether or not its perception is as the designer wanted it to be (Hall, 1997, pg 37). However, it is explained that this tool can be used for analytic purposes, and Hall (1997,

pg 38) suggests that it should. The connotative values of interpretations are never equal. There are different factors to consider when analyzing something, such as social, cultural, racial and political factors that contribute to how an individual perceives something (Hall, 1997, pg 57). With this in mind, and speaking from my context as an Indian woman, I believe that, to some degree, my interpretation of the champions may have a far more informed perception of their visual design. This may not factor in the other differences, such as social and political issues, other than my own experiences growing up. However, I can speak to the cultural representation and acknowledge how the designs may look based on what I have researched and already know about these specific champions because of the research I had done and how it substantiated my claims. This was of great value when deconstructing and analyzing the visual designs of *Nilah, Nidalee,* and *Karma* later in chapter three. This allowed me to speak to their literal visual design and my perception of them based on their representation based on my preexisting knowledge and knowledge gained through this research.

However, with this in mind, Hall makes mention of "subjective capacity". "Subjective capacity" is a term that Hall (1997, pg 58) uses when interpretations become too individualized or heavily based on private matter by the viewer. Throughout this dissertation, this thought was consistently on my mind. This project was fueled by a passion, but needed to be rationalized and analyzed thoroughly as I needed to avoid the pitfall that is *subjective capacity*. In order to do this, I made alignments in my research to showcase objective elements within each design that made them problematic, sexualized and fetishized. Using the research I had collected allowed me to ensure I had not made claims regarding the champions visual designs without proper theoretical reinforcements, despite the understanding that I am an Indian woman. This aimed to ensure I was not creating an individualized interpretation of the champion but rather bringing issues of their design to light with consideration towards their roles within their game and the cultural inaccuracies they carry implications. This served as a reminder not to allow passion to be the only driving force in this dissertation and that proper research and knowledge are needed to ensure that my points were well substantiated. Furthermore, this also indicates that the points I made cannot be accurate or false if they are based on bias, and they need to be reinforced by theory to prove their legitimacy.

This relates to my research question, as everything is left up to interpretation with most art forms. My arguments with how *League of Legends* may come from a personal bias, but are supported and substantiated with research. Hall's (1997) and Barthes's (1968) teachings on interpretation and representation serve as a means to indicate how and why some interpretations hold more value than others, and why they do. Furthermore, it highlights the reasons behind problematic depictions' existence and continuous production. Using Hall's (1997) teaching, I was equipped to understand the possible mindsets of those who designed these champions and the reason why the audiences enjoy consuming them. When considering that the producers and audiences of the games around the early 2000s consisted of mainly white, straight males (Ratan et al., 2015, pg 440), I was able to piece together Hall's (1997) teachings on the fetishization and sexualization of the "other", this allowed me to understand why these types of champions in *League of Legends* came to be. With the producers and audiences both conforming to the same demographic, the enjoyment of the same subject matter was based on their enjoyment. This influenced the approach I took when redesigning *Nidalee.* By sharing the same demographic and being more knowledgeable about Indian culture, I was able to use my knowledge of how to approach visual design. The theory formalized the beliefs I had and proved their value in allowing me to avoid *subjective capacity*. I knew my personal understandings would leave me susceptible to critique without solid research to substantiate myself, but Hall (1980) and Barthes (1968) framed my thought process. Rather than using techniques that stem from problematic behaviours, I explored and experimented with what I believed would enable me to create something that was both accurately portrayed and in alignment with the story of the champion.

Orientalism

Much like Hall's (1997) explanations, Edward Said (1978), a literature professor, provided a theoretical framework explaining "Orientalism". Said explains it as the depiction of Asian people as dictated by Europeans (1978, pg 21). His theoretical framework allowed me to situate the Western gaze into perspective from a much more racially appropriate stance, as he does include

Indian people in his framework. By this, I mean he is looking at representation with Asian individuals in mind specifically. However, Said (1978) does express that Orientalism is less preferred as it is seen as too vague and general (1978, pg 2). I found this remark interesting as there is a common trend within *League of Legends*. Different forms of Western representation have different regions designated for specific champions, such as T*argon, Demacia* and *Noxus* (Riot Games, 2009), and all the Asian presenting champions have been condensed into *Ionia* (Riot Games, 2009). Although contextually different, it reminded me somewhat of the visual designs of the champions and how they were also vague, inaccurate and minimally representative of Indian culture. This is concerning as the company itself is Chinese owned and often celebrates Chinese holidays through the game using cosmetics and rewards (Riot Games, 2009). *Riot Games* (2009), was bought over by Chinese technology company *Tencent* in 2011 (Riot Games, 2009). This change of ownership may have contributed towards more progressive designs of the female Indian champions, as my analysis explains how their visual designs became less problematic. But even so, there are still issues that prevail through this move over. A key reason for this was the company's newly appointed CEO Dylan Jadeja. He had worked for the company since 2011, but had managed it so terribly, he had to lay off nearly 500 employees (Kahlert, 2025). He was previously the company's CFO, until appointed to CEO and had carried the mentality of money over with his switch of position. Rather than valuing the inclusivity and accessibility to the games rewards, he made decisions that led to them becoming almost unobtainable. Due to his poor management and the neglect, the company started producing cosmetics that cost $500 (Kahlert, 2025) to somehow make money back. They started to also produce fan-service based skins to generate revenue, which places the representation of champions in highly inappropriate attire, such as bath towels and bikinis. The approach taken by the company once again, was no more than a marketing strategy. By valuing sales over inclusivity, the same ideals on representation are perpetuated. With the buy-over to an Asian company, and the CEO being of Asian descent, one could have expected to see more influence on the creativity of the game and the way in which the character's are represented. However, this was not at all the case. There was no desire to bring in culturally unique and well-represented characters, only money.

There are some similarities between the two observations Hall (1997) and Said (1978) made. This includes that of the Western gaze perpetuating lasting stereotypes of certain races and having them

carried through as being the “other” through difference. As expressed before, Said (1978, pg 11) explains Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. I found this explanation extremely powerful, especially when relating it to the female Indian champions of the *League of Legends*. Riot Games has complete control and power over what they create and represent, thus allowing their players to interact with inaccurately and disrespectfully represented champions. This creates a chain of stereotypes carried by their audience, who may not consider the implications of these champions. Players would instead engage with them because they find them appealing purely based on their visual design in an inappropriate manner. This power and domination over how these champions are presented and the inability to correct and explain how the representations are harmful carries through inaccuracies about certain groups of people (Said, 1978, pg 12). They have power of choice in what they represent, and the lack of knowledge on their part has led to large groups of people consuming media that sends the wrong message about feminine Indian characters. This also touches on a point that Said (1978, pg11) expresses when he explains the Western gaze has further depicted that the Orient is incapable of thought and action. The Orient only exist as a means to be observed and experienced. I feel this can be taken in many different ways - mainly in the sense that the Orient is just a vessel or object that exists to be dictated by the West. They have no purpose other than what is given to them by other people who deem them lesser based on differences. Said (1978, pg 15) explains that there was a notion that occidentals were superior to orientals. This is something I believe is also a common practice in the visual design of characters, given the trend and depiction of non-white characters as barbaric or tribal. It showcases that they cannot be as sophisticated or intelligent as their occidental leaders. Relating to the previously mentioned case of Saartjie Baartman, the Khoikhoi woman who was taken by Europeans and exhibited in a freak show as a sex attraction due to her unique physiology (Hall, 1997, pg 265). This furthermore highlights the appeal of difference and the “other”. This is an indication of racial superiority, just within a different context. Applying this to my argument further reinforces the point of the white male designer having superiority over these designs as he owns them and delivers them to audiences. Said (1978, pg 19) that there is nothing natural or mysterious about authority. It is a medium that is instrumental and persuasive. It has status and is indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true (Said, 1978, pg 20). This ties back to the representation of the female Indian champions I have analyzed. They are made-up characters owned and created by a specific group

of people. Those in charge of creating these champions have authority over the designers and require them to produce such visual designs, even if their representations are far from accurate or true. My creative practice aims to showcase how design without authority but cultural understanding and knowledge can produce designs that visually uphold the cultural accuracy from which the champion was inspired.

Another key aspect that is discussed by Said (1978, pg 190) is where he describes the Orient as being the escapism of sexual fantasy. It is something that the occident can use to escape normal fantasies and be more adventurous. Games are a medium for players to be expressive, immersed and explore. Most games have a character with which you perform these acts. Moreover, by using the representation of the Orient in a highly sexualized manner, you allow your audience to indulge in potential fantasies they may have about her. Said also expresses that the representation of the Orient could be depicted in many forms, such as princesses, enslaved people, veils, dancing girls and harems (1978, pg 190). *League of Legends* has also presented a female Arabic champion to the game, *Samira* released in 2020. She was one of the champions I had wanted to use in my analysis, but upon further inspection, I discovered she was Middle Eastern, specifically Arabic. She was born in *Shurima* and raised in *Noxus* where she became a key fighter in the various battles they underwent (Riot Games, 2009). She is known for her fierce, daredevilishness and is never afraid to turn down a fight. She was initially supposed to be a part of my analysis, however, upon further inspecting her visual design, her tattoos gave away that she was Middle Eastern and not Indian. Because of this, I removed her from this dissertation but expressed my findings in my proposal. *Samira* can be seen in Figure 21 below.



Figure 21. A screenshot of *Samira's* champion illustration (Riot Games, 2009).

The visual design of *Samira* was supposed to fall just after *Karma* as she was a sign of progression within visual design. However, there are elements that are left to scrutiny. The women of the Middle East are known for the modesty and desire to elegantly conceal parts of their body as expressed by American Anthropologist, Richard Antoun (1968, pg 672). This was practiced to ensure that their bodies would not be open to the gaze of prying men (Antoun, 1968, pg 673). This is however not practiced at all within *Samira*'s visual illustration. Her lower abdomen and thigh can be seen peaking through her clothing, highlighted with draping jewelry that guides the viewers eyes to those areas. This was at all not appropriate in general, but contextually even more so given her Middle Eastern inspiration. The Middle Eastern inspiration can be seen in the tattoos she has on her arms. Upon closer inspection, it can be seen that the tattoos resemble that of Arabic writing. It follows the flow and calligraphic patterns of the written language. However, despite the later release of this champion, her design could have been more modestly done to account for the possible Arabic and Middle Eastern woman that would have appreciated feeling represented by a

powerful and modest champion. This would not take away from her design, but that highlights the inspiration for it. But instead, she is exposed in certain areas that could have been covered with interesting and contextually relevant materials -nce again, Riot Games fetishizing the unknown.

Moreover, these exotic depictions have led to the fetishization of them. These obsessions could be deduced from the carryover and reproduction of problematic images, creating a stereotype that is sought after. It creates an unobtainable experience to the occident, further driving the desire for it (Said, 1978, pg 190). Furthermore, as Hall (1997) stated, the reduction of the "other" leaves her only with her body, which is done to the Orient. Moreover, even though Said speaks mainly to those of Arab descent, it is an important link to Indian descent as they are both Orient. Said expresses that if the Orient is not to offer anything social or intellectual, they instead offer traits that are biological and sexual (1978, pg 311).

Said further states that the Orient is an entity that can be used for sexual incitement (1978, pg 313). When drawing this statement back to my research, I could argue that the same was done for the two champions released earlier in the game. Once again, considering their release dates and the audience, the champions could have served as a means to evoke excitement from their players, not based on what they could do but rather the way they looked. Making them an example of the way the Orient can act as a means to evoke sexual incitement. This would be achieved through their difference and otherness. When these champions are given to players, it creates a world for the player to experiment. By giving them something considered exotic, the players could be encouraged to interact with them. For example, *Nidalee* is a unique champion representing an attractive Indian woman prowling around the jungle in a pelt bikini. She can turn into a cougar, which no ordinary woman can do, and it can be something that excites a player. It play on a fantasy or fetish, encouraging them to try the champion out, not because her in-game abilities interest them, but rather her appearance and uniqueness.

Using Said's (1978) teachings, I better understood how Indian females were specifically portrayed and understood by the Occident (Said, 1978). Said (1978, pg 5) defines the Occident as the counterpart of the Orient, meaning it represents the West. Said (1978) frames representation so we

can understand it from various viewpoints and different types of Oriental people. Said discusses varying elements that affected the perception of the Oriental people, such as social, political, geographical, physical and intellectual elements. However, an observation from these elements was that the Occident remained superior to each one. A key aspect that I find important here is that of power and authority (Durham, 2001, pg 204). By coming from a place of power and status, the spread of produced content is shared with many people. There is potential to do good, rewrite stories and reconstruct what oriental people are recognized for. This power is needed to improve and change inaccuracies and bring justice to undignified and false representations. The designers at Riot Games wield this power, and we have seen how they can use it to make changes, grow and develop champions that need it. By recognizing the potential of carrying over inaccurate representations, past stereotypes and inaccuracies, I was equipped with a newfound appreciation and invigoration to ensure I did justice to these champions.

Character Design And Analysis

An important aspect of this dissertation was its exploration of visual design in promoting and creating meaningful representations of female Indian game characters. Therefore, theoretical frameworks regarding character design and analysis were vital research points. A resource I found, but was instead a set of instructions provided in an online course, was from a MasterClass. Judy Blume's MasterClass, created in 2021, provides a set of techniques that consider various aspects in developing a character, such as considering the character's backstory, motivation and elements that drive the character to have empathy, if there are any. These elements were used to create the character in theory, and this theory was aimed at enabling the character designer to create them visually. However, because the champions I analyzed have these aspects pre-designed, I did not use these guidelines as much as I initially thought I would have needed to. These components work to unravel elements between the different champions to understand if their visual design encapsulates their backstory and determine if the champion's visual representation aligns with their function within the game. Although this set of techniques tackles a few important aspects of character design, it is still not specific enough; the aspects are vast and generalized. It also does

not tackle anything about designing an Indian character at all. Most pre-existing techniques encourage designers to "find an aesthetic that fits" (Sheldon, 2023, pg 88), but that can be tricky. Much exploration, research, and knowledge needed to be gained in order to understand better what aesthetic would work best. I needed to know and understand the characters as well as I understood myself, even if they may be otherworldly in many different ways. Considerations like geography, biology, culture and class were all needed when I developed and created a champion to understand the champion, their story and their circumstances. Again, there does not necessarily need to be complete realism in design, but there does need to be believability. When shown a visual design like *Nidalee's* and understanding that she has to face the harshness of the jungle daily, a woman running around in an animal pelt bikini and appearing completely unscathed is hard to believe. I would expect to see a woman who has scraped together anything she could find to protect herself. Based on her champion description, I imagined her wearing pieces of armour from any dangerous trespassers she may have ambushed. There would still be elements of fur and pelt in her design to hint towards her ability to shapeshift into a cougar, but maybe rather a tiger for cultural cohesion. There would also be an array of mismatched fabrics draped from her armour to emphasize Indian representation further. If time was taken to reconsider her visual design and her circumstances carefully, her visual design could emphasize the strength and resilience she wields to remain in such a harsh environment while still staying true to her backstory (Riot Games, 2009).

Riot Games has power, and by using it to develop pre-existing champions further, players will begin to see more examples of meaningful and empowering forms of representation. Especially when seeing the comparison of the before and after of the illustrations. Generalized techniques for champion creation do not work. They sometimes seem like a means to develop uninteresting champions that lack depth. There is a strong need for specific character development techniques to ensure creators know what they are producing. Moreover, my struggles in finding materials that are reliable enough can attest to that. More reliable techniques are necessary for ensuring that specific groups of people do not fall into trends of harmful interchangeability[1], where aspects of cultures are generalized and seen as similar when, in reality, they are worlds apart.

[1] Harmful interchangeability is a term I use to refer to generalizing and encapsulating different cultures and religions into one. For example, assuming that all Asian cultures are the same, or all types of African are the same.

MasterClass may not have a heavily detailed framework from which video game characters can be designed. However, it does outline key factors such as knowing the audience, world-building, shape language, character personality, colour experimentation and keeping designs simple before expanding on them (Blume, 2021). It is important to note that *League of Legends'* target audience is still a group of toxic gamers. They most likely have no regard or care for meaningful representation but rather care for sexualized representation. This allows *Riot Games* some freedom when designing champions because they are aware they would not receive a great deal of backlash, given that the majority of their players are males who would enjoy seeing and playing the game as a sexualized champion.

Lee Sheldon, an American academic writer and game theory developer, mentions that breaking the rules in character development is key to creating unique and interesting designs, which can be taken in many ways, both positively and negatively (2023, pg 1). However, he explains that there needs to be a valid reason for every rule break. For some, it may just be for the sake of it, but for others who want characters that have depth and rich design, there will always be a reason behind the designer's visual choices. Sheldon (2023, pg 9) explains that a character's appeal starts at the beginning, with their story and how that manages to captivate people. It gets people excited to begin something. Moreover, after looking back at the pipeline of a *League of Legends* champion, the players come to know their story before they know what they look like. When reading *Nidalee's* story, which has been adapted twice since her release, a reader can gather much to formulate an image of the champion, but this is up to individual perception similarly to how Hall (1980) and Barthes (1968) explain perception. Regardless of what I might deem as the best design for her, it is unrealistic given the number of people who play the game, read the stories, and have their imaginative thoughts. But based on what the story explains and as I explained earlier, I would expect a scruffy, calloused and battle-worn young woman who has braved the wilderness for her entire life. She would look well-armed and protected with whatever she could find because, by this time, she would understand all there is to know about the jungle. Her gained knowledge could be presented in the form of scars and old wounds, which I have used in my visual design. My redesign of *Nidalee* features her with a blind eye, indicating she may have encountered something dangerous in the jungle but survived. What did not come to mind was a very skimpily dressed woman in a fur bikini trotting along the jungle with a spear. This is not to promote antisexual

characters but rather practical ones that look like their visual appearances carry over their stories. It has also been emphasized that being respectful when developing and creating a character is important. This depends on their role, but as a designer, working towards a character that is captivating rather than a problematic character is more rewarding (Sheldon, 2023, pg 52). Another important statement by Sheldon (2023, pg 38) expresses that a stereotyped character is not respected. Signs and symbols should be used with care as there is a difference between visual elements being used to make the character recognizable and using elements to stereotype them (Sheldon, 2023, pg 54). This links back to the champions I have discussed, as their visual designs embody stereotypes within them. These champions exist because the work is already done for us, as stereotypes serve as premade characters (Sheldon, 2023, pg 58). The teachings from Sheldon broadened my understanding of developing champions and the different levels at which they are made. This assisted my argument in expressing how designers should be careful about what they make, and should it require improvement, the improvements should be made.

Theo van Leeuwen, an art school professor, and Carey Jewitt, an education school professor (2011), provided visual analysis methods to aid me in this process. Leeuwen and Jewitt are scholars who wrote The Handbook of Visual Analysis (2011), a book that offers a wide range of methods and means for visual analysis. They describe and explain different methods and provide examples of how they can be used, applied or analyzed. This handbook further emphasized and exemplified the importance of visual data and analysis within research, which was fundamental to my dissertation. My creative practice, despite knowing the representation of female Indians, still required me to find visual inspiration and do further research on visual depictions. Having the knowledge I had was not enough, and additional research was required to expand my creative component, especially in my reflection on the creative component. Furthermore, reflecting on the creative component required an analysis of the visual design I produced to indicate my successes and areas of improvement.

Multiple aspects can be discussed when visually analysing this dissertation's character. It explained the different methods for visual analysis and the different ways in which characters can be deconstructed. I paid close attention to this when breaking down the design of *Nilah*, *Nidalee* and *Karma* in chapter three. This dissertation discussed the use of images as a means of interesting

analysis. It described them as vehicles or triggers for information that may not be necessarily represented or present within the images themselves (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 3). This relates to Hall's (1997, pg 38) framework of connotation and denotation, where he explained that an image has two parts: its literal state and its interpreted one. The information was not actively within the image but within the person consuming and interpreting it. van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011) further explain how images can keep visual records. When considering this dissertation, the images I used effectively replicate that. They are records of older publications and designs; however, newer ones work towards visual development. This also builds towards understanding the progression of the design through these visual records, as the different champions' designs have improved with time. With this in mind, my method of analysis was the "Direct analysis" approach (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 6). During the process of my analysis, I handled the images as data, with the subject recorded being the champions (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 6)."Direct Analysis" (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 6) can be used to extract information from images and champions to understand the perspective of their makers better. I understood that to know more about the design process, I needed to know more about the designers. Using this method, I could better understand the process by compiling the images of the champion illustrations and their cosmetics comparatively. Overall, this method primarily focuses on data collection and analysis.

League of Legends provides various cosmetics for each champion, providing me with precise data from which to work and derive information. This method is divided into four stages, which worked well with my analysis of the champions. This is referred to as *The Basic Model of Analysis* (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, pg 7), and the stages are as follows: the first stage is where data is observed as a whole. Data is looked at through its overtones and subtle aspects to derive meaning and seek patterns. van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011, pg 7) explain that within this stage, one should trust one's feelings and note them, as how the viewer responds to an image can provide an important direction for further analysis. This is described as a "trigger", which I did find myself experiencing when looking at and analysing the pictures I used. Amal Ziv, an academic and researcher, and Shaul Bar-Haim, a senior sociology professor, explain, "The term "trigger" designates a sensory reminiscence of the traumatic event that has the potential to revive the event in the survivor's

memory and thus activate a set of symptoms" (Ziv & Bar-Haim, 2024, pg 437). Upon looking at the champions, apart from *Nilah*, I noticed that they acted as a trigger. When I looked at their visual designs, I saw the inaccuracy and sexualization of woman who had no purpose baring such harmful stereotypes within their visual designs.

The second stage involved creating a gallery or log of all my images. This stage also allowed me to create the inventory with goals for my research in mind (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 7). These images reflected how I described the data I had analysed. This slightly contrasts with what Hall (1997, pg 58) explains about subjective capacity, but this stage was important in the denotative analysis of the champions and their designs. The second stage required me to inventory the images I had. If I used the essential splash art for the champions, I would only have three images. However, as mentioned before, the champions have cosmetics that players can buy for them; in this stage, I brought in a few of those splash arts to deepen my analysis. These additional splash arts[2] further contributed to the visual analysis of the champions, as some of them played on stereotypes of Indian women or were just overly sexualized. For example, *Nidalee* has a French Maid cosmetic (Riot Games, 2009). This plays on the stereotype of racial inferiority as well as the fact that the illustration itself is highly sexualized (Hall, 1997, pg 243). French Maid *Nidalee* was an illustration I discussed and analysed in Chapter Three. It was also using this material that allowed me to document and explain the progression of the champions and indicate design changes that make them less visually problematic.

The third stage involved structuring my analysis. This was where evidence was looked at with specific questions. The important aspect I took from here was the comparative one. It is explained that statistics should be looked at and plotted in graphs. However, my research is focused on the representation and analysis of the champion, not quantitative data (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 7). I used this stage's comparative elements to gather information about my research question and other questions for my analysis. I then used my collected findings to deepen my argument. However, suppose I were to complete this stage as explained. In that case, I believe there would have been information I could have recorded regarding the development of Champion Cosmetics

[2] Splash arts refer to cover art that advertises a cosmetic for the champions. Every champion will have multiple splash arts depending on the cosmetics that were made for them and what the theme of them was (Riot Games, 2009).

alongside their base visual design. I could have searched for records of the specific cosmetics buy rates to see what the players engaged with most. I used that information alongside the product's appearance to deduce why certain cosmetics are more popular. However, this information is difficult to track as *League of Legends* has its cosmetics readily available, making tracking and documenting the different cosmetic purchases nearly impossible. Other aspects that make this information difficult to retrieve include their discounted sales shop, battle pass rewards and player-curated shops. Even when players purchase loot in the game, there is a maximum log count of thirty, so when this is exceeded, the older items slowly start to filter out. Although this would further contribute to my argument and understanding, how champions are designed to make an income has too many factors at play when retrieving concrete statistics.

The fourth stage required me to search for significant meaning in the gallery I had created and offer my conclusions based on observing the champions together (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 7). At this stage, I observed the champions, produced a small comparative analysis, highlighted any issues I had found, and commended any well-thought-out designs. Whilst I mainly looked at the designs of the champions individually, I saw the need to look at them as a collective to understand them and their implications better. This was important in explaining the progression of the champions and understanding the different ways their design had been improved. This stage primarily focused on drawing conclusions based on my final observations when observing the data as a collective.

These stages worked well with my argument as I compared the champions to one another. Each had a section where their visual design was broken down into negative and positive aspects. This furthermore worked with my analysis, as there was a pre-existing gallery of cosmetics for me to justify the progression of their designs. This analysis method also allowed me to have my own bias towards the design. However, it required explanation and research as to why I found them distressing, which I provided in the analysis. van Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2011) techniques offered various types of analysis for character designs. After researching them, I found that this model worked and aligned well with my analysis of female Indian representation within *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009). Especially the method of working with a collection of images to assess their designs and determine a means for their improvement.

Although these stages covered a large portion of how I conducted my visual analysis, I did find that the "Open Viewing" technique that van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011, pg 7) have proposed tied in well with what I was trying to achieve with my analysis. This method explains how the images speak to the viewer and the possible cultural circumstances they may represent. This was important when looking into the champions I had selected, as, at face value, there may be viewers who do not see any issues with the design. As the analyst, this allowed me to become further immersed in deconstructing the champion's visual design. Furthermore, it allowed me to situate my interpretations and understanding regarding the representation and stereotypes of Indian women in video games. This analysis method also facilitated comparisons, similarities, and contrasts, which worked well with my argument, as I had discussed this in my analysis of the champions. This stage can be understood as one of the most productive stages of analysis. It allowed me to understand possible patterns in the designs through recurrent and contrastive elements used within their visual designs. This is tied well to the "Direct Analysis" method (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 6). This method can be understood as seeking information on the subjects seen in the images or extracting understanding regarding the making and functions of the images, as well as the perspectives of their makers (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 6). This is linked directly to what I addressed when I researched the demographic of designers around the time of the *League of Legends* release. It reinforced the idea that the white male designer depicted these images to play on their fantasies. As my research was focused on visual design, an important factor to explore was the designer's consideration, and this model considered that. Tying this into my "Open Viewing" (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 7) method showcased my understanding of the designers and my understanding of the designs, bringing the two elements together in a way that justified my cultural ideas on what female Indian champions should look like, whilst knowing the designers would not be of the same mindset. Understanding and identifying patterns here further aided me in understanding the possible ways that I, as the designer, may think it is optimal to create champions belonging to particular demographics, namely the female Indian demographic. Specifically looking at *Nidalee* and her link to the Indian Pakka Tribe, I had some materials to work with, which I included in the moodboard. Apart from my cultural understandings, the Pakka Tribe provided materials that could be used and implemented into her design, such as weapons,

traps, clothing and physical features. Most of the fabric swatches were drawn as inspiration from the Pakka women to create a deeper sense of representation and highlight their Indian inspiration.

Understanding Indian Representation Within Games

Indian representation has not been holistically achieved since I was a child until I encountered *Nilah* in 2022 (Riot Games, 2009). I started playing video games and understanding the concept of video game characters at the age of eight. I remember always being excited to play games to find a character that had a similar appearance, wore similar clothes or showed visual elements of cultural practices, like me. Unfortunately, it took me fifteen years to find a female Indian video game character who encompassed the visual concept I had created in my head growing up. There is a distinct lack of Indian representations, let alone meaningful Indian female representation, in games. Other examples of this would be *Apex Legend*'s *Rampart* (Respawn Entertainment, 2009), *Overwatch's Symmetra* (Blizzard and Iron Galaxy, 2016), and *Borderlands 3's Amara* (Gearbox Software, 2019). *Rampart* has a visually strong representation but plays on the stereotype of the rude Indian person. *Symmetra* plays on the stereotype of the hypersexualised techie, and has a similar visual appearance to *Karma,* where the sexualization has no part in their visual designs. And then there is *Amara,* who was the most uplifting female Indian representation I had found until *Nilah* was released. She is a strong, independent and fierce woman. She also takes on the class of a *Siren* within the game, which means she has divine power (Gearbox Software). What highlights her visual design so much is the way her *Siren* powers represent her. They take the form of multiple hands that stay behind her back, forming different signals with her fingers, just like the Hindu Goddess *Lakshmi. Amara* was everything I had hoped and dreamed for in a video game character, and seeing her was when I knew there was hope for the representation of Indian women in games.

I understand that race is not explicitly defined by physical features such as body type, skin tone, facial structure and hair texture. However, this feature still forms a large part of what race is

derived from. So, I found it important to break down the various classes of Indians, showcasing the varying features such as skin tones, hair texture, facial features and body types. This is shown in Table 1.2 in the appendix, accompanied by an image that explores and expresses the different types of Indian representation and their various phenotypes. Katti and Arun, two neuroscience scholars, explore the physical traits of Northern and South Indian depictions (2019, pg 1). These images contributed to the facial designs of *Nidalee's* redesign. The images used in the figure were in no way meant to generalise the people within these specific Indian groupings, but rather showcase how different and unique they look comparatively. Many factors are still in play when considering the different phenotypes. Regardless of where people come from, we cannot assume they share the same facial features, body shape, skin tones, or hair texture. Everyone has different genetics, resulting in different appearances, but it is also important to note that certain physical features are also environmentally dependent (Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1973, pg 618). Luigi Cavalli-Sforza, a geneticist and Marcus Feldman, a biologist, explained that genetic aspects are inherited from parents (1973, pg 619). With this in mind, the table has categorised and showcased the various types of Indian people that exist and how, with enough research and dedication, there are various avenues to approach the design of a female Indian champion. The absence of imagery in certain sections of the table was due to the lack of documentation on some of these Indian people. Much like other cultures, it could be that they no longer exist or were not prevalent enough to be thoroughly documented. I find this a saddening notion, as I believe many older cultures are dying out without leaving behind anything representational. This is caused by various reasons, and I believe the main ones are due to a lack of and inaccuracy in representation, practice and maintenance. The thought of this motivates me to redesign *Nidalee* as a means to leave behind something representative of female Indians, even if it is just within a game.

These images and statistics have provided material towards a better understanding of the physical differences between different types of Indian people, yet designers still fall into tropes and misrepresent them. Naithan Lagace (2018), an academic at the University of Manitoba, expresses how the misrepresentation of Indian characters has been carried through many generations and different media forms such as movies, video games, and other pop culture formats such as comics (Lagace, 2018, pg 5). He expresses that this could be due to the complexities, including disconnection issues, struggles to maintain culture and the temptation to oversimplify and reduce

them to stereotypes (Lagace, 2018, pg 5). This ties back to when Hall (1997) expressed the notion that when the occident does not understand something, they reduce it to its simplest form. This was expressed in his analysis of Saartjie Baartman, where he explained, “Saartje Baartman did not exist as a person. She had been disassembled into her relevant parts. She was ‘fetishized’ — turned into an object” (Hall, 1997, pg 266). Moreover, in the case of this dissertation, the champions have been reduced to stereotypes, oversexualized designs and savagery, similar to how Hall (1997, pg 266) explains the case of Saartjie Baartman. This same notion is also shared by Lagace (2018, pg 6), who describes the representation of the Indians as primitive in comparison to their European counterpart. He speaks mainly through the framing of the Indigenous American Indians, but how he frames his research is something I found to apply to my own. This is because Native Americans share the aspects of classes, subclasses and tribes, like that of the Asian Indian, but are not Indian or Asian at all.

Further deepening my argument were teachings from Souvik Mukherjee (2018), an English professor and video game researcher, who provided similar teachings using video game characters he found. The one he described was from Street Fighter (Capcom, 1991). Street Fighter is a two-player fighting game where each player is set on opposite sides of the screen. Players must use combinations of keys on their controller to enable their character to fight. Using these combinations from the input onto the controller, the player must hit the enemy and deplete their health points to win. Different characters are available to the player, called “fighters” (Capcom, 1991). The fighter that Mukherjee addressed was Dhalsim (2001). Dhalsim uses a yogic fighting style and posture (Mukherjee, 2018, pg 15). This is interesting as yoga is an exercise form that is supposed to unite the body and mind; therefore, using it to fight somewhat contradicts its primary objective. Upon further investigation, the problems within Dhalsim’s design started to arise. Dhalsim was reduced to wearing torn and tattered saffron pants, a skull necklace, and can spew fireballs and enjoys curry. This is depicted in his character description in the Street Fighter Alpha 3 game (Capcom, 1998). Again, the tropes are reduced to the most essential aspects, such as savagery. Furthermore, the stereotype of the Indian’s favourite food being curry is that race and having a favourite food are not exclusive of one another (Mukherjee, 2018, pg 13). Additionally, Dhalsim’s wife’s name is Sari, and it is a traditional outfit worn by Indian women (Mukherjee, 2018, pg 13). This further indicated the lack of research and effort put into the creation and

development of Indian characters and their story. The Street Fighter designers could not even give the character's wife a more meaningful Indian name when an array of names have beautiful meanings. This reinforced my argument that the representation of Indians is flawed and reliant on stereotypes in order to develop and create characters (Mukherjee, 2018, pg 13). The champions I analyzed have fallen into these stereotypes, and these teachings reinforce that. I could apply these findings to my analysis of the champions in Chapter Three. The fact that this type of stereotyping can be found across different video games is problematic. This further motivated me to use the mistakes of these designers as a lesson. These lessons guided me when analysing the champions to situate my analysis further. Through knowledge, I made more informed visual design choices for representing the female Indian champion, *Nidalee*.

Video Game Characters And Theory Analysis

Felix Schroter, PhD candidate in game development (2014), has an interesting paper on video game character theory and analysis. In Chapter Three, he raises various points I have applied when discussing and analysing the champions. Schroter develops a method for analysing video game characters based on a theoretical understanding of their medium-specific representation and the mental processes involved in their intersubjective construction by video game players (Schroter, 2014, pg 40). This is interesting in that he looks at the theoretical and design perspectives. This framed my design process during my creative component, as it keeps the creator and the audience in mind. When redesigning my *Nidalee* to make her represent a female Indian champion in a more meaningful way, my audience is a driving force. This creative component was a piece to fulfil the desire of seeing a video game character that meaningfully represented Indian culture and Indian women. It was for me, and all young Indian women, who enjoy games and want to find themselves within a character and relate to her. It was for my satisfaction as well as for all of those who shared the disappointment of inaccurate and harmfully designed female Indian characters.

Schroter (2014) has three interesting perspectives I engaged with upon completing my analysis. The first is what he proposed to call 'narrative experience' (Schroter, 2014, pg 24). Schroter

explained this: “The player perceives game characters as identifiable fictional beings with an inner life. Players construct mental character models that represent, for example, a fictional entity’s bodily, mental, and social properties and connect these with situation models related to diegetic events and existents” (Schroter, 2014, pg 49). I understood this as the player perceives game characters as an embodiment of themself within a virtual space. This is where players can connect with their character on a different level and live through fantastical events through the character. Players construct mental character models that represent the character and connect it with situation models related to diegetic events and existents (Schroter, 2014, p. 1111. Diegetic events can be understood as events in the game’s world experienced by the character and the player; existents are framed as the character’s existence and how we perceive them. I found that this tied in well to my dissertation as it uses the concept of developing a mental character model, which I had been doing since I was young. I was constantly creating mental models of different female Indian characters because I did not feel represented by any. Schroter’s teachings allowed me to develop mental models of *Nidalee* and, from this, draft designs for her in Chapter Four.

Secondly, Schroter discussed what is known as the ‘ludic experience’ (Schroter, 2014, pg 49). Schroter explained this: “The player’s attention is focused on characters as elements of the game mechanics, as game pieces that are defined by game-related properties such as ‘health points’, ‘speed’, ‘special abilities’ and so on. In this mode, the player-controlled character is perceived as a tool, which extends the player’s agency into the game world” (Schroter, 2014, pg 49). I understood this to be when the player’s attention is focused on characters as elements of the game mechanics, as game pieces that are defined by the game world and its features. This relates exceptionally well to *League of Legends* and the champions players use as the player-controlled character is perceived as a tool, which extends the player’s agency into the game world. Using the way *League of Legends* functions as a game, the player uses a champion as the model of their character and enacts what the role of that champion is meant to achieve using game-related features, champion abilities, character-related goals and rules (Schroter, 2014, pg 12). Schroter’s (2014) framework expresses character design by considering what the character looks like and what the character is trying to achieve. I believe he is trying to express that there should be a semblance between these two aspects, which I agree with. A video game character and their

backstory or goals should represent their visual design. This influenced my analysis regarding the player wanting to engage with the champions based on their appearance. The players being able to use the champions as a tool to extend their agency could be evoked by the overly sexualized appearances of the champions and the fantasies they may play into. Again, this notion draws back to the focus of my dissertation: the champions exist and have goals to achieve in the game, depending on their role in the game. As mentioned before, players who can control the champion can play into fantasies (Lim & Reeves, 2009, pg 348). The sexualization and fetishisation of a champion should not be the reason players interact with them; it should instead be the champion's goals and in-game goals that invite a player to want to interact with them. Furthermore, the mental model and story or goals of the champion should align. It should be noted that *Nidalee* received a minor rework in 2015; however, this rework did not at all alter her appearance (Riot Games, 2009). This rework adjusted her abilities to make them feed off each other more effectively, but her overall visual design was not tweaked to account for the fact that the initial design was hypersexualised, fetishised and did not align well with her backstory. *Nidalee* and *Karma*'s visual design do not achieve this, further emphasizing the need for the visual redesign I provided in Chapter Four.

The third element is the 'social experience' (Schroter, 2014, pg 50). Schroter explained, "Characters are perceived as avatars, as representations of other players in a multiplayer setting. In this case, players not only form mental models of a fictional being or game piece but also of the player 'behind' the avatar, resulting in a connected or mixed representation which includes features of both." (Schoter, 2014, pg 50). Furthermore, "This mode, which directs attention to the real-life context of the game and the forms of communication and interactions that it affords, certainly challenges structuralist-semiotic conceptualisations of character which predominantly rely on textual structures" (Schroter, 2014, pg 50). This is also highly applicable because *League of Legends* is a multiplayer-based game where players hide behind their avatars and can communicate through the game's text chat. Text is also provided to the players to explain the backstory and abilities of the champions. This creates an interesting idea around the design of certain characters to ensure the likelihood they would be played, just from a slightly different perspective. Champion descriptions advertise the champion, so how the champion is textually framed could encourage or discourage players from interacting with them. Although fetishism may still play here, this is a

similar point made within Schroter's aforementioned ludic experience element (Schroter, 2014, pg 49) as the *League of Legends* designers have provided an avenue for players to interact with a type of champion that may be different or intriguing to them for the wrong reasons. Again, this draws back to player engagement due to a sexualized appearance and not a holistic interest.

Schroter (2014) also discussed using characters on specific levels, which is an important factor when considering the design and development of their visuals. This was important when considering the champion's importance itself. Usually, the main characters are highly detailed and developed in games. As the level of importance declines, so does the character's overall design. Depending on importance, non-playable characters often showcase minimal design and development elements, as the player may not interact with them. Schroter discussed and described the visual design of video game characters using existing video games, which allowed me to understand and frame other characters similarly. Firstly, he discussed characters as Troubled Fictional Beings (Schroter, 2014, pg 53); this is where players use the character as a vessel and make choices for them that have effects on the overall gameplay experience. These characters usually evoke sympathy from their players, allowing players to be more thoughtful while the avatar is in their hands. He then describes characters as Configurable Game Pieces (Schroter, 2014, pg 58). When he discussed this, he focused on the narrative of the game. Schroter (2014, pg 58) described it as using a nonlinear narrative structure that allows the player to let the player-controlled character travel (more or less) anywhere in the game world at any time and ignore the main storyline completely, should they choose to do so. A *League of Legends* game has no narrative at all. There are champion stories and lore that explain how the champion came to be and where they are from, but this information has no direct impact on how the game plays out. This was rather to inform the players of the abilities they could expect from the champion. For example, the Freljord region is an icy land. Therefore, champions from Freljord have ice-themed abilities (Riot Games, 2009). Despite the lack of narrative drive, *League of Legends* champions conform more to the notion of being configurable game pieces (Schroter, 2014, pg 58). Players can control the champions, make them move to different places on the map and cast abilities. The players are directly using the champion as a piece, controlling it and making it enact the players' desired actions. Using this notion with that of Lim and Reeves (2009, pg 348), it can be understood that there is a certain satisfaction to playing certain champions based on their appearance. When

creating my redesign for *Nidalee* in Chapter Four, I wanted to maintain the satisfaction of seeing a champion and wanting to play it based on its appearance. However, I wanted to redirect this satisfaction. Rather than the player basing their interaction with the champion based on attraction, I wanted to create a design that looked heroic and epic. So that when players looked at the champion, they would be intrigued for a more meaningful reason. In this case, I wanted to direct their attention to an accurately represented female Indian video game character.

He then described characters as Fictionalized Player Representations (Schroter, 2014, pg 63). This was described as the use of characters in a manner that allowed them to represent the player in an online environment. This is usually seen in massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs and other online-based games where the characters are used as vessels to fuel the player's intentions and interactions. This was the classification I found to be most applicable to *League of Legends* because of its online nature. Although the game is not an MMORPG but a MOBA, its champions could still be considered Fictionalized Player Representations. They represent the player in the state of the game and are a medium through which their players can funnel actions.

Overall, these two larger sections allowed me to situate the champions and analyse them more precisely based on the theory provided here about video game characters. They also allowed me to frame the champions better by giving me an understanding of what types of characters they are based on my findings.

Feminism, The Anti-sexual Approach And Connotation

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, the focus is not on gender studies. I acknowledge the importance of gender studies and their role in my research topic. However, the focus was on the sexualization of female Indian champions within *League of Legends*. The resources I provided allowed me to frame aspects of my research regarding the representation of women. However, my

research has been sectioned to have frameworks addressing the racial and gender aspects of this dissertation individually. This section focused on the representation of female video game characters, while "*Understanding Indian Representation with Games"* addressed the racial depiction of characters. These two frameworks were combined and considered throughout Chapters Three and Four, as well as during the development of my creative component.

It is important to emphasise that my approach to my work was not in the sense of belittling characters with a heavily sexual visual design. It was instead to showcase and highlight how the use of sex appeal to characters that are the "other" generates attention to them. In doing this, the character designers tend to lose the essence of the character as they become promotional and less of an entity for players to engage with on a deeper level beyond that of their appearance. Characters that form part of specific demographics are often depicted sexually to make them approachable (Lynch, Tompkins & Fritz, 2016, pg 565). Lynch et al. (2016, pg 565) explained that due to the primarily male-dominated environment of games, in order to cater to the audience, developers need to appease them. This inherently resulted in overly sexualized and objectified representations of female characters in games (Lynch et al., 2016, pg 567). Lynch et al. (2016, pg 568) further explained that female characters are met with rich backstories or accompanied cinematics, but their visual representation is still met with sexualized underpinnings. Themes such as benevolent sexism, which confines women into stereotypes of being fragile and delicate, and hostile sexism, which frames them as seeking control through sex and sex appeal, are large contributors to how these characters are developed. This even occurs when characters are given traits that contribute to strength and leadership, whilst still maintaining the visual design of a stereotypical, sexualized female character. Jansz and Martis (2007) called this pattern the "Lara Phenomenon" after the iconic *Tomb Raider* (Lynch et al., 2016, pg 568). *Lara Croft* was an example used earlier in this dissertation to express that regardless of the character's intelligence, wit and strength, those traits will be accompanied by an overly sexualized and exaggerated visual design (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009, pg 810). This showcased that female characters are constantly being objectified regardless of the game or its makers, as explained by Tabares (2023, pg 3). Tabares expresses that the male gaze is a perspective that sexualises and fetishises women for the male view. This problem was both produced by the developers of the games and the audience themself, which fueled the carry-over of these harmful stereotypes (Tabares, 2023, pg 4). This is a tactic that is used to

generate income for the game itself, where the representation and meaning the character holds are put behind sales. According to Tabares (2023, pg 4), the neglect and disregard for the representation of women can be found within almost any form of media. This observation is terrifying and, given that Tabares's research is relatively new, showcases that the issue of female representation within media and games remains unresolved.

Similar to Tabares (2023), Lynch et al. (2016, pg 567) explained that using stereotypes greatly aided in promoting or selling games to consumers. This is directly applicable when looking at the champions I have selected, as they bear over-sexualisation elements that were most likely a tactic needed to sell the champion to the players further. However, it is argued that this trend started to become overly used, and players were not responding well to the designs of overly sexualized characters, creating a need for designers to dig deeper and create something more interesting and embody the characters they aimed to cosmetize. This is where my idea of form follows function and starts to feel truer. By giving players characters that embody a meaningful story while still having appeal to their visual design, we can create or strengthen the engagement of the players with these specific types of characters. For example, Lynch et al. (2016, pg 566) express that many female players were less reluctant to play female characters with an overly sexualized appearance but preferred playing female characters in general. With the rise of female players in the online gaming scene, to make even sales, there is a new target market that should also be catered for, requiring cosmetics and characters that are visually designed for them to find appealing. But female players do not appreciate that the design of female video game characters can almost always be accompanied by overtly sexualized variables such as extremely revealing clothing, nudity, breast size and unrealistic body proportions (Tabares, 2023, pg 3). The fact that these elements can be expected provides designers with a baseline to work against. Based on these findings, it would make sense for *League of Legends* to adopt a similar approach as female players become more prominent and even have their tournaments available (Riot Games, 2009).

When specific depictions of characters become less overused, they develop more iconic symbols within the context of their design. This contributes to them becoming recognisable and distinguishable because of it. These do not just need to be symbols, but even colour, markings,

silhouettes and other aspects contribute to this. Similarly to what Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009, pg 811) explained, the constant use of specific imagery creates a societal expectation that can engrain the notion of an image into a player's mind. A popular example of this would be superheroes. When we see the stark graphics "s" with a ripped shirt surrounding it, we think of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Superman* (Siegel & Shoester, 1938). This trend is not exclusive to superheroes but also to many other characters in different media types. However, without knowing or having context about a character, understanding these symbols is not easy for the audience, viewers or players interacting with them.

This emphasises that characters should be designed with their story, goals, and objectives in mind. Those aspects can resonate through their visual design while still maintaining the appeal. Therefore, if the desired character is intended to be sexy or sexual in any way, that may translate into the way she or he is designed. However, there are ways to make it tasteful without outright falling into the stereotypes of creating reasonless, objectively sexualized characters. An example is *League of Legends* champion *Evelynn* (Riot Games, 2009). *Evelynn* was released in 2009, and she is a succubus. Her champion description reads as follows:

> "Within the dark seams of Runeterra, the demon Evelynn searches for her next victim. She lures in prey with the voluptuous façade of a human female, but once a person succumbs to her charms, Evelynn's true form is unleashed. She then subjects her victim to unspeakable torment, gratifying herself with their pain. To the demon, these liaisons are innocent flings. To the rest of Runeterra, they are ghoulish tales of lust gone awry and horrific reminders of the cost of wanton desire." (Riot Games, 2009.)

An image of *Evelynn* can be seen below in Figure 22.



Figure 22. A screenshot of the champion, *Evelynn* from *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009)

*Evelynn'*s visual design and story are well aligned. The champion is sexualized, and this can be observed from how she is sitting on top of the man, piercing her tendrils into his body while she seductively places her finger on her lips.

Lynch et al. (2016, pg 581) stated, "Normalizing female characters toward competent and non-objectified depictions may mitigate hostility toward women in gaming". This gave me the sense that this affects the perception of characters within the game and the way female audiences would engage with them. Instead of creating characters where female players find the need to alter themselves to suit the idea of the ideal type of woman, they can instead resonate and enjoy an experience with a character that they feel represents them and makes them feel comfortable. By normalising visual design in terms of developing characters without stereotypes in mind, designers can contribute to a safer space where women feel represented and not sexualized. Overall, this research guided me, as a game and character designer, in understanding that the approach towards

my visual design was not solely based on an emotional approach to feeling underrepresented but an actual issue whereby female characters take the brunt of marketing where the primary audience is predominantly males (Lynch, Tompkins & Fritz, 2016, pg 565). In actuality, the characters should be enjoyed for the meaning they carry, the goals they achieve within the game, and for maintaining an appearance best suited to carry out their objectives. This directly links to my argument as I aimed to promote and develop visual design where the champions are as holistic and well-represented as they can be, not just for the character but for those who interact and play as them as well. I tried to encompass elements of Indian representation into my creative component so that female Indians would feel represented and empowered by it. This further allowed me to situate my approach for my creative component and understand why and for whom I was designing this. I designed it for Indian women and me who want to feel represented in video games. That was my driving force: to develop ways and showcase that Indian women can be represented in ways that are not sexualized, objectified and fetishised.

Chapter Three

Champion Analysis:
Who wore it better?

This chapter focused on analysing the different champions. Each champion was discussed individually based on specific criteria. I gave context to the champions before deconstructing their design. Each of these champions was denotatively analysed, meaning they were analysed at a simple and descriptive level (Hall, 1997, pg 28), based on the criteria I had found to be important when creating a video game character. Elements such as skin tone, clothing, focal points, usage of colour and overall representation of the champions were used to express their sexualized designs based on Hall's theories teaching that the "other" always tends to be represented as inferior, unintelligent, primitive and sexualized due to reduction of the entity (Hall, 1997, pg 265). The analysis was conducted mainly using van Leeuwen's and Jewitt's approach to their *Basic Model of Analysis* (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2011, pg 7). The first stage involved analysing the champions and responding to what I saw. The second stage involved creating a gallery of their cosmetics and showcasing their progression over the years. The third stage involved drafting questions around the gallery created in stage two. This was used to analyze the three champions to better understand *Riot Games'* progression in the representation of female Indian champions within the game. The fourth stage involved finding meaning in the visual designs, expressing the factors that were successes and expressing the ways that those elements could have enhanced the designs. This model is applied throughout the analysis of the champions, where they are generally discussed and descriptively analysed, and their shortcomings and successes are reflected.

The denotation was summarised in Table 1.1 beneath the rest of the analysis for an easier comparison of the champions. The criteria I will analyse will be the use of colour in the design, the characters' pose, the scenery present in the splash art, the characters' physical features and the focal points within their splash art. This chapter discussed the design successes and shortcomings

of each champion. These are more focused on comparing the designs themselves to what a player might expect an Indian character in a video game to look like based on their stories and purpose within the game.

Nidalee, The Bestial Huntress

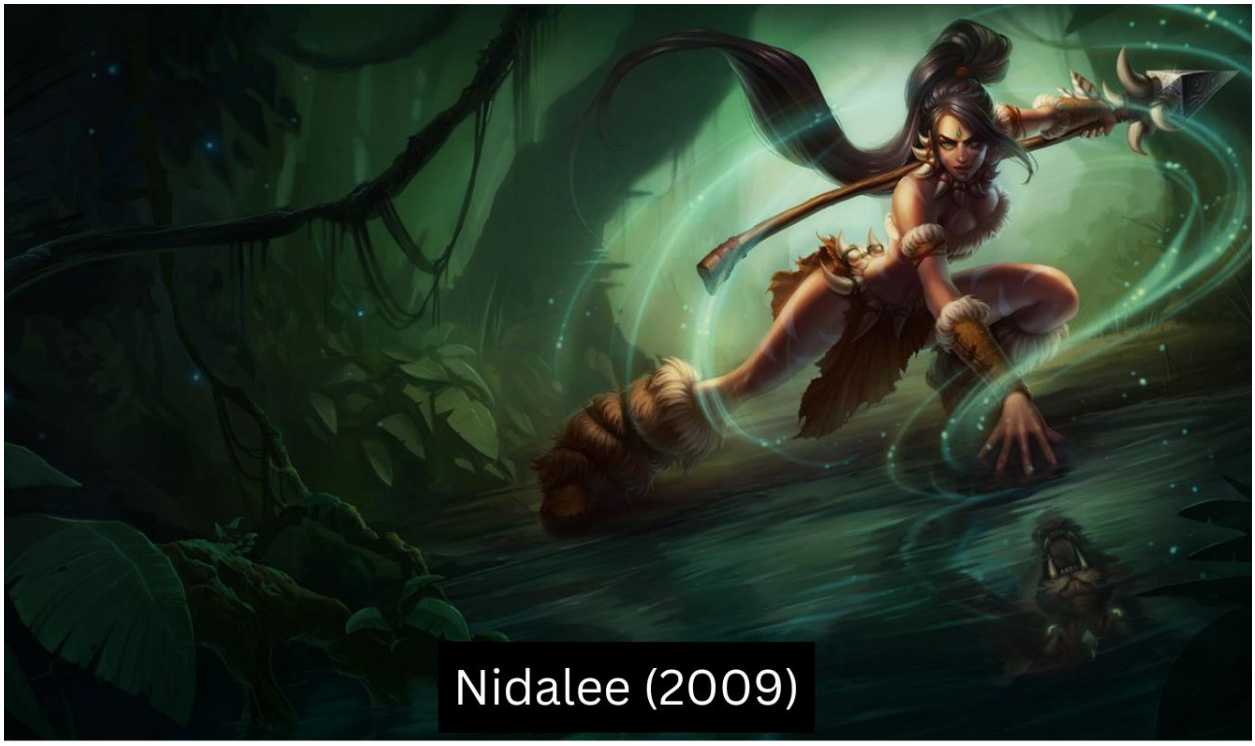


Figure 23. A screenshot of *Nidalee's* champion illustration (Riot Games, 2009).

Nidalee, shown above in Figure 23, was the first Indian champion present in the game. She was lost in the jungle as a child and raised by the creatures of the forest to become the bestial huntress she is now (Riot Games, 2009). As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, her current champion description reads as follows:

> "Raised in the deepest jungle, *Nidalee* is a master tracker who can shapeshift into a ferocious cougar at will. Neither wholly woman nor beast, she viciously defends her territory from any and all trespassers, with carefully placed traps and deft spear throws. She cripples her quarry before pouncing on them in feline form—the lucky few who survive tell tales of a wild woman with razor-sharp instincts, and even sharper claws..." (Riot Games, 2009).

However, her story was changed multiple times, which indicates poor character development and creation, especially since the champion's story was told. However, as mentioned earlier in this dissertation, *League of Legends* designers can change aspects of the champions to adapt them as they need. This could have been the case with *Nidalee*; her story could have been changed to fix errors from prior ones. It ended up with her story being changed to better suit her visual design instead of the other way around. I find that this may have been one of the reasons her design was not well-informed, as there was no firm foundation to start with, other than the lost jungle woman who has primitive qualities. However, through the *Riot Games* card game, *Legends of Runeterra* (Riot Games, 2009), I was able to gather the additional knowledge that indicated she was part of the Pakka tribe. Apart from her voice lines making note of this within the game, *Legends of Runeterra* is where it can be found within her story (Riot Games, 2009). It also provides a clearer understanding of where she is from and who she is.

Denotative Analysis:

Using Hall's first level of analysis, I used denotation to deconstruct *Nidalee* to her simple, basic and descriptive level (1997, pg 38). This allowed me to develop a broad consensus of what the champion looked like at a level where most people would agree. I also used the *Direct analysis* approach of the character design framework provided by van Leeuwen & Jewitt (2011, pg 6) to analyse *Nidalee* denotatively. *Nidalee's* splash art is quite dark and gloomy overall, contrasted by

the striking brown colour of her skin, thus making her the clear focal point within the artwork. Her pose allows her to stretch across the artwork, showing off her legs and the side of her body. The pose itself accentuates her body, but the stance is firm. The strong use of greens and browns creates a natural atmosphere, alluding to the jungle-like environment and surrounding trees (Dauksta, 2011, pg 135). Dainis Dauksta, a scholar who observes the depiction of nature within images, suggests that the pairing of browns, maroon and greens can create a forest and jungle-like environment (2011, pg 135). Therefore, this relates to the champion's current location, the *Shuriman* jungle (Riot Games, 2009). The use of the colour green within Indian culture and many other cultures represents harvest, healing, nature, and fertility (Vladimirovna & Olalere, 2022, pg 13). Harvesting is an important aspect of Indian culture as farming is one of the main activities throughout the country and the Asian continent (Sridevi & Prabhavati, 2024, pg 5). This was so important that a traditional Hindu festival called *Makar Sankranti* celebrates the harvest (Sridevi & Prabhavati, 2024, pg 4). Although the colour green does not entirely represent the theme of this champion, there is a relation to nature. More powerful colours could have been used, especially since the champion is warrior-like and a huntress. However, more powerful colours could deter away from the champion's actual function within her story, which is to be a stealthy hunter. The colours used are also quite dull and muddy. So, some clarity would make the splash art appear more visually readable to ensure all important aspects are visible.

There is also very minimal scenery present within the splash art. There is an inclination, and it is a jungle based on the very few leaves and trees, but there could have been more vegetation and flora in the splash art. An element that could have been used to elevate this would have been the use of lotus flowers in the pool beneath her. This is because the lotus flower is important in Indian culture and is even the country’s national flower (Kintaert, 2010, pg 481). Furthermore, the lotus flower is always seen in depictions of the Indian Deity, *Lakshmi*. *Lakshmi* is the Indian goddess of fertility, abundance, richness and royalty (Aamir & Malik, 2017, pg 203). She is often depicted seated on a giant lotus or with her feet touching a group of lotuses, preventing her from making contact with the ground. The lotus is also a symbol of bringing thoughts and courage into reality, which I believe may fit well into the context of *Nidalee*. *Nidalee* relies on knowledge and courage to protect herself, ensuring the lotus's use fits well in the design. Additional vegetation and flora could have also been used to better frame the champion by even having her somewhat hidden in

foliage. In contrast, the lotus flowers framed the cougar aspect of her by contrasting pink flowers to draw the viewer's eyes to the water. When looking at her features, I discovered this champion does not bear physical features that most Indian people would. This is a bit of a tricky aspect to define, as I do not want to generalise Indian people and their physical features. Walter Elliot, a British Civil Servant of Colonial India, expressed that aspects such as more prominent noses, deeper skin tones and thicker hair ranging from head to brows are more common for Indian appearances (Elliot, 1869, pg 124). *Nidalee's* features seem quite white-washed, as seen through her button nose, large, round eyes, and very angular face shape. *Nidalee* also has a fairer complexion, which although is not a key factor given that various races have various complexions, but in this case it also appears to be whitewashing her. This is especially so, as with her earlier cosmetics, her skin was lighter, and in newer cosmetics, her complexion is darker, making it easy to discern she is not a white champion. Meredith Reitman, a social and cultural geographical scholar, expresses that whitewashing was a trend used to create racial invisibility and to promote repressive multiculturalism (2006, pg 268). Rebecca Peters (2021), a Bollywood film analyst expresses how Bollywood standards consider the more fair complexioned Indians to be more appealing and women with darker skin to be lower caste. This could have been a consideration used towards her design, ensuring her skin is still tanned, but not dark enough to be explicitly racially expressive. Furthermore, her skin is also very polished, with no scars, dirt marks, or calluses. Given that she is a huntress, I would have thought she would look more scruffy or battle-worn. Given the champion's story and her living in the jungle, life may be difficult. She would have to defend herself from all types of harm, so I did not imagine her looking as pristine and unscathed as she does in her splash art. Her bear scars, dirt, mud and grime would make her design more believable. This splash art's framing makes the viewers look up *to Nidalee,* acting as its focal point. This is done through the use of lighting, highlights and colours. There are spiralling wisps of colour that weave through the splash art, leading the viewer's eyes up to the champion's body or even down into the pool of water in front of her, showcasing the bestial aspect of the champion, being the cougar. However, even that pool is quite dark, so the viewers may even miss the cougar staring back at her.

Connotation:

Using Hall's teachings on the second level of analysis, I have provided a connotative analysis where the meaning starts to derive from the denotative elements (1997, pg 38). These observations are problematic as I do not want to make it seem like I am confining different races to specific physical features. Instead, I highlighted ways the champion could be more accurately represented based on pre-existing information. *Nidalee* was a champion who was new and different from those who encountered her during the time of her release and popularity. She can be considered as the "other", and there is a common trend of reducing such demographics to their bodies (Hall, 1997, pg 265); this may be due to a lack of research or knowledge into these specific demographics (Lynch et al., 2016, pg 565). That would correlate with her oversexualized design and not for any particular reason relating to the champion's abilities and story. She was the first female Indian, and Indian overall, that *League of Legends* developed, so the use of green and the idea of her being new and fresh to the community relates to the use of colours. Colours such as red, yellow and orange could have made the champion more striking (Chaudhary, Dutt, & Gupta, 2021, pg 1546). Colour theorists Ankita Dutta and Juri Baruah express that warm colours such as red and orange grasp attention and draw in viewers (2018, pg 210).

Furthermore, yellow represents the *Manipura Chakra*, which represents willpower and determination. It is also used to turn instinct into complex emotions, which this champion may rely on, as most of what she can accomplish would be based on her instincts. This ties into the Indian practice of *Chakras*, where yellow represents these elements (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). However, keeping in mind the champion's role and story, such bright colours would not be as prominent; they should instead have been used in a more subtle and meaningful way to indicate the strength and determination of the champion. The use of the greens still works well in representing her as it represents love, compassion and kindness, which translates to the champion as she has love and care for the creatures within the jungle (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5).

The lack of scenery and pure focus on the champion is an elevating and detracting technique in this splash art. It is enhanced in a way that viewers can see and focus on her. She is the most

important aspect of the splash art, and the minimal scenery works well to frame her. However, it is detracting based on how the champion is represented and her focal points. *Nidalee's* physical features essentially whitewash her. Instead of using more racially accurate features, they have instead chosen European features, which further ostracise the depiction of Indian representation (Payumo, 2023, pg 6). This could have been done to create a more approachable appeal to this "new" type of champion. Some of the features are still soft enough and recognisable that players are not deterred from her. This, however, would take away from her design, as it could have been more effectively designed to encapsulate one of the many possible ways a female Indian character could have been represented. However, she then loses the sex appeal that is aimed at the target audience, which is young white males (Ratan et al., pg 455). The focal points remain the same, but the lighting based on the wisps and spirals leads the viewer's eyes around *Nidalee's* body. *Nidalee's* body has been heavily sexualized, and the lighting contributes to where viewers may focus, such as around the breasts, thighs, hips and waist. I found it frustrating that one of the most important parts of the champion, her ability to shapeshift into a cougar, gets lost because of these aspects.

When considering the connotations of her design, knowing what the champion is capable of and seeing what she looks like, I found that her visual design disregards aspects of the strong Indian woman. The further whitewashing of the character dilutes her visual design as her lighter complexion maintains a sense of appeal, where a darker skin tone, given her time of release, may have been off-putting (Peters, 2021). She could be represented as strongly as she should, but her visuals are highly misinformed and problematic. This is further explained in the section to follow, where the failures of the champion's visual design are highlighted and explained.

Nidalee's Visual Design Shortcomings

Nidalee's overall visual design is oversexualized. Her design at that time was to cater to the larger population of the game, which was young, white males (Ratan et al., 2015, pg 445). As *League of Legends* is a multiplayer-based team game, each team consists of five players, each with a

respective role. *Nidalee* was designed to be a "jungle" (Riot Games, 2009). Junglers do not have a lane, meaning they are not playing within the three main pathways within the game, but play in their own "lane" called the jungle, where they focus on killing monsters that grant the player money and buffs that are received by the rest of the team. (Riot Games, 2009). Most of the "jungle" champions in the game look like they are equipped to fight off monsters and assist teammates. However, *Nidalee* is one of the few who does not wear anything that makes her look equipped to fight off any monsters. Her spear and her ability to turn into her cougar form would surely offer some form of protection, but regardless, she would still need protection in her human form to ensure that if she is unable to use her cougar form, her human one can withstand battle. Even a large male like *Garen* wears armour to protect himself, emphasising that *Nidalee* would need some armour to protect herself. Instead, her visual design depicts an attractive woman in an animal pelt bikini running through the jungle and slaying monsters unscathed. Her physical appearance does not align with her function within the game. In her design, the functionality of the champion seems like an afterthought, and player engagement, at any cost, is a forethought.

Furthermore, when a player uses a champion, the champion refers to them as a summoner—almost breaking the game's fourth wall, recognising that the player controls them. Each *League of Legends* champion has personalised voice lines triggered when prompted by something in the game. *Nidalee's* voice lines outwardly flirt with the summoner. For example, she makes statements such as, "You are lost. Let me show you where you belong…" and "Love takes as many shapes as you do!" and "Did I mention it is mating season?" in a highly flirtatious tone (Riot Games, 2009). She is one of the only champions who makes flirtatious statements to the player, other than a succubus champion discussed earlier, *Evelynn* (Riot Games, 2009), who was developed to be sexual due to her story and lore. Similarly, this occurs with her emotes in the game. A player can press a combination of keys, and the character does something in response, such as laugh, make a joke or dance. When using *Nidalee's* emotes, they are also exceptionally sexual for no reason. Instead of having a dance that could represent Indian culture in an important or empowering way, she pierces her spear into the ground and begins pole dancing on it. Compared to other champions, this is one of the most sexual emotes in the game, second to that of the succubus. An image of this emote can be seen below in Figure 24.



Figure 24. A screenshot of *Nidalee'*s dance emote where she is pole dancing on her spear (Riot Games, 2009)

Using van Leeuwen and Jewitt's second and third stages of visual analysis (2011, pg 7), by which I have created a gallery of the skins and addressed their visual designs, I found that the stereotypes and sexualization of the champion do not stop at her base visual design. If players want their champions' appearances and abilities to stand out, they can purchase cosmetics for the character. *Nidalee's* initial cosmetics were quite problematic in the sexualized and fetishised nature they may have been created. Below are some of her in-game cosmetics that perpetuate stereotypes and other issues regarding colonialism, classism and slavery.

Upon observing Figure 24, it can be seen that the image of *Nidalee* is not her base design, but she appears to be wearing a maid outfit. This is one of her first cosmetics, *French Maid Nidalee* (Riot Games, 2009). *League of Legends* develops interesting and engaging themes for cosmetics, but this one is somewhat troublesome because of its implications. These implications include the slavery of Indian people and their need to work as maids and farmers, amongst other types of low-

class jobs. N. Ram, a social scientist, expressed that most jobs available to Indians during colonial times were in-house servants or maids, agricultural enslaved people, and merchant servants (1972, pg 56). In using depictions like this for a modern-day game, harmful stereotypes are carried over generationally when they no longer exist in the modern day.

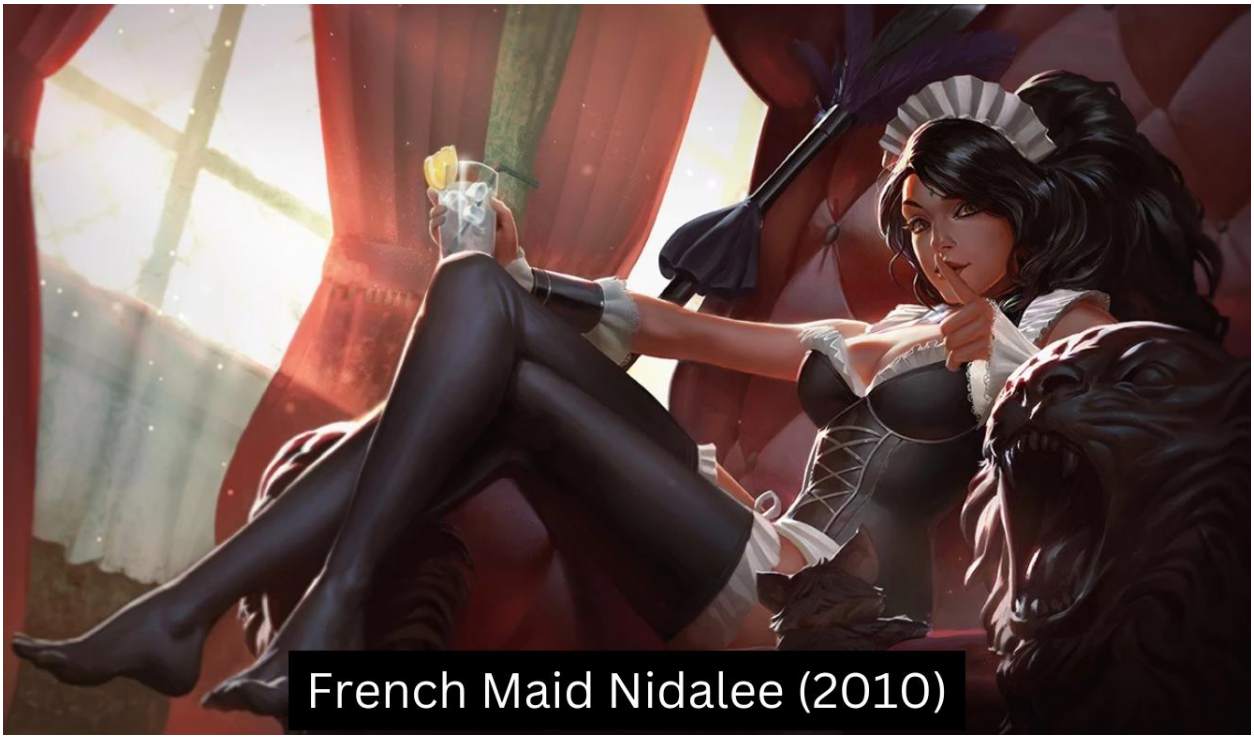


Figure 25. A screenshot of the French Maid *Nidalee* cosmetic (Riot Games, 2009).

This is where the second stage of the approach, van Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2011, pg 6) approach, is used in my analysis to create a gallery of cosmetics I address. Other cosmetics were developed, such as *Pharaoh, Leopard* and *Snow Bunny Nidalee* (Riot Games, 2009). These were released sometime after her first cosmetic. *Pharaoh Nidalee* is problematic because it promotes *harmful interchangeability*. There is an assumption that it is appropriate to take existing champions with racial backgrounds and interchange them due to phenotypic aspects such as skin tone, hair colour or even body type. When looking at *Snow Bunny* and *Leopard Nidalee, Nidalee's* skin tone has become lighter and lighter, further white-washing her (Payumo, 2023, pg 5). Additionally, *French*

Maid Nidalee carries stereotypes of non-white individuals being cast into lower cast jobs, as well as feeds itno stereotypes of colonial jobs for non-white people. These skins could have been made to portray Indian representation more by reframing the approach to the skins. For example, *Pharaoh Nidalee* could have been *Deity Nidalee* or *Trapper Chieftess Nidalee,* inspired by Hindu goddesses or the female leaders within the Pakka Tribe. *Leopard Nidalee* could have been reframed to tiger or panther *Nidalee*, using native Indian wild cats that could be located in the regions the Pakka Tribe inhabit. Large wild cats are sacred and worshipped beasts in Indian culture (Chakraborty, 2023, pg 237). They represent divine energy, protection and spiritual power in many Asian cultures. Her ability to transform into one at will is an aspect that is very empowering to her design from a general and religious perspective. This is a significant and representative feature of her design. However, the choice of having it be a cougar for the final design is questionable because of the implications of what a cougar is apart from the actual animal. A cougar, more informally, refers to an older woman who seeks sexual relationships with younger men (Thorne, 2014). Adding to this, the cougar as an animal does not represent an Indian wildcat. This influenced my creative component as I offered designs of large wild cats that were more relevant to Indian culture and geography. These cosmetics can be observed below in Figure 23.

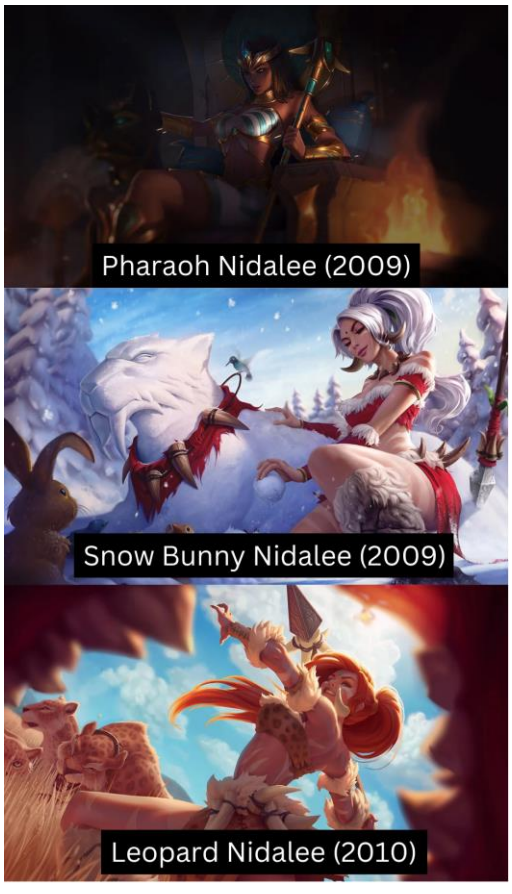


Figure 26. A collection of screenshots showcasing *Nidalee*'s early cosmetics (Riot Games, 2009).

Apart from *Nidalee's* visual design, her narrative plays an important part in understanding the champion. Based on what is known about her, she has minimal contact with other humans, or at least not enough to have learned how to speak or communicate. *Nidalee's* visual design depicts stereotypes of an underdeveloped and primitive Indian woman; based on aspects such as her voice lines, she seems to know about topics that would be out of her reach, based on her narrative. She is knowledgeable in flirtation and seduction, which seems unrealistic considering that she is a hunter who has rarely interacted with other humans in that manner. It is also frustrating that her narrative has been adapted twice to explain her better when, in essence, I found that it did not. Furthermore, I found that her visual design is overall inaccurate and misrepresentative. This is because the champion should visually showcase the representation of a female Indian who is a strong, fearsome hunter. This is what my creative component aimed to achieve. It aimed to represent the powerful Indian woman *Nidalee* visually and was truly meant to encapsulate. Using documented materials on the South Indian Pakka tribe, which translates directly to *Nidalee* and her abilities, I was able to further draw meaningful inspiration. The creative component offered a different concept for *Nidalee*, showcasing how I had experimented with skin tone, hair texture, facial features, clothing and her cougar form. It aimed to showcase that she could be better represented with accurate elements of Indian representation.

Nidalee's Visual Design Successes

As much as I have acknowledged the flaws in her design, some aspects of her visuals work well and can be further developed to improve them. Although skimpily dressed, *Nidalee* is not portrayed as weak or frail. She presents herself as a strong, stealthy and agile woman through her animations, voice lines and in-game abilities. She can create and set traps, transform into a cougar at will and wield other magical powers to heal herself and her allies (Riot Games, 2009). She

showcases her talents as an advanced and skilful hunter, which is appreciated in many different cultures, especially in those from heavily oppressed backgrounds where hunting is necessary to feed those around you. Additionally, an empowering aspect of her design is the use of the Bindi (gem-like dot) on the centre of her forehead. Incorporating the Bindi represents Indian culture and emphasises that the champion is spiritually in tune. Indian people wear a Bindi to represent the third eye, and having a dot in that area of the forehead protects the person's spirit from evil (Hamid, 2015, pg 104). *Nidalee* is wearing a green Bindi; the colour is a significant part of Indian culture, a green one representing the closeness to nature and harvests (Vladimirovna & Olalere, 2022, pg 13). Usually, this is worn in certain seasons to yield healthy crops. They must also choose the colour green because it aligns with the champion, her narrative and her aesthetic. Furthermore, when reapplying van Leeuwen and Jewitt's second and third stages of visual analysis (2011, pg 7) to her successful designs, it showcased that *Nidalee's* design in terms of cosmetics has improved over the years; some of her more recent cosmetics can be seen below in Figure 27.

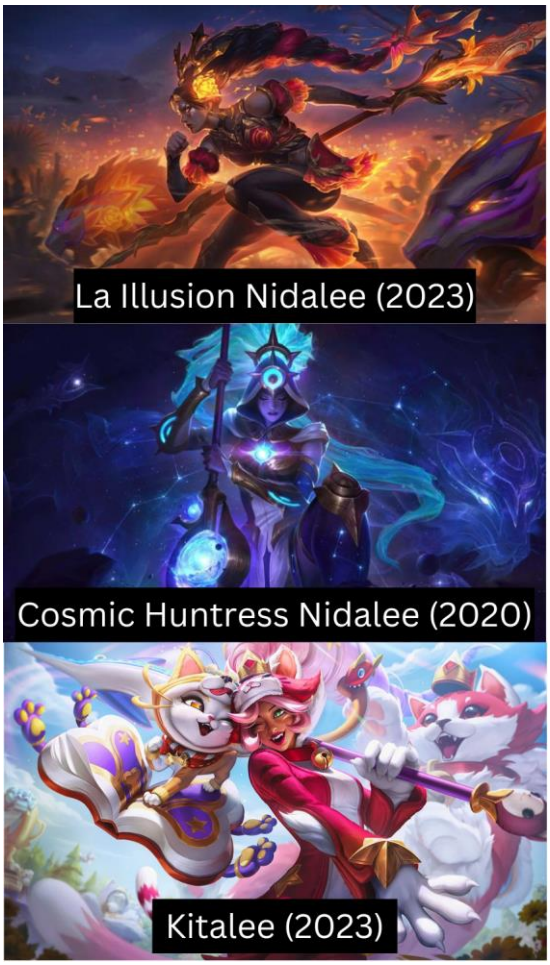


Figure 27. A collection of screenshots of *Nidalee*'s more recent cosmetics showcasing the visual progression (Riot Games, 2009).

Karma, The Enlightened One



Figure 28. A screenshot of *Karma's* champion illustration (Riot Games, 2009).

As seen above in Figure 28, *Karma* was the second Indian champion to be presented to *League of Legends* players. She was released in 2011, and in just two years, she demonstrated a stronger design foundation than *Nidalee's*. Her story has remained the same since her first inception, solidifying the champion more in situating her and understanding her background. As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, *Karma*'s champion description reads as follows:

> "No mortal exemplifies the spiritual traditions of *Ionia* more than *Karma*. She is the living embodiment of an ancient soul reincarnated countless times, carrying all her accumulated memories into each new life, and blessed with power that few can comprehend. She has done her best to guide her people in recent times of crisis, though she knows that peace and

harmony may come only at a considerable cost—both to her and to the land she holds most dear." (Riot Games, 2009).

I found her visual design to be less sexualized and stereotypical than *Nidalee's*, as well as more representative of Indian representation based on her physical features, attire and overall appearance.

Denotatively, *Karma* bears the appearance of what I believe to be a spirit guide, more commonly known as a *Guru* in Indian culture. According to Joel Mlecko, a scholar in Hindu and Indian traditions, a *Guru* can be understood as a spiritual teacher or guide who offers the meaning of life and inspires those they interact with (1982, pg 33). These elements were indicated in her aforementioned champion description, expressing that she partakes in spiritual traditions and has guided people as best as possible (Riot Games, 2009). She is not fully exposed, but she had an interesting set of attire chosen for her, considering what *Gurus* tend to look like in India. These *Gurus* wear the white and red ashes on their forehead, wear orange clothing and have prayer beads strung from their necks. They are not heavily decorated but relatively simple and eye-catching. Examples of a *Guru* from India can be seen in Figures 29 and 30 below.



Figures 29 & 30. Images of Indian *Gurus*', a male to the left and a female to right.

In terms of connotative interpretations, my initial interpretation of this champion was well-received as I thought she had elements of Indian representation within her design. Furthermore, I found her design to be empowering. This was because of how unmoving she seems in her champion illustration. Upon further investigation, I found that this champion bears qualities and traits irrelevant to anything within the context of her being a spirit guide or *Guru*.

Denotative Analysis:

Using Hall's first level of analysis, I used denotation to deconstruct *Karma* to her simple, basic and descriptive level (1997, pg 38). This allowed me to develop a broad consensus of what the champion looked like at a level where most people would agree. I also used the *Direct analysis* approach of the character design framework provided by van Leeuwen & Jewitt (2011, pg 6) to analyse *Karma* denotatively. *Karma's* splash art uses intense lighting and colours that highlight her well. Using colours green and purple creates balance within the piece as they are complementary colours. As mentioned in the analysis of *Nidalee,* green represents nature, fertility and harvest (Vladimirovna & Olalere, 2022, pg 13). Using these colours does not relay much of what *Karma* does, so using green in *Karma*'s design may not have been the best. I had imagined the illustration as it was, using bright yellows and oranges instead of green, and I believe it would have suited the champion better. Growing up, I learned that purple, within Indian cultures, represents soundness of mind, virtue and peace (Vladimirovna & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). I believe this embodies the champion well, as she is an enlightened being with a strong spiritual bond. The use of purples and oranges would also work well together as they are complementary colours on the colour wheel. An interesting aspect of using colour in her splash art is that purple or violet is associated with the crown *chakra*. The crown *chakra*, or head *chakra*, is known to most Indian people as the *Sahasrara*, where the most vigorous formation of one's self is formed (Johari, 2000, pg 8). This is what Indian people consider to be the most important *chakra* of all, as it is where all

others emanate from (Vladimirovna & Olalere, 2022, pg 5).

The pose of the champion shows her hovering upright with her hands extended and glowing lights flowing around them. Her closed eyes and soft facial expression allude to peacefulness and ease. Her thighs are exposed in the stance, as the wind has blown away the fabric, revealing them, which does feel like a more subtle attempt at giving this champion an element that creates sex appeal. The depiction almost teases the viewer, giving them a snippet of her body without revealing it all. The scenery within the splash art works well to capture the space around *Karma*. Large temple-like structures are present in the artwork's foreground and background, which contribute to her spirituality. She is also surrounded by nature in her splash art. Although minimal, the way the mountains, valley, architecture, and overall landscape are used emphasises the size of the space around her, and the largeness of the temple works well to create a sense of depth and focus around the champion.

Although *Karma* does not have a powerful resemblance to the typical Indian features I am used to, I could see that this champion is Indian based on her skin tone, facial features and hair. This is still a difficult distinction to try and make, but even so, I have looked at this champion and discerned that she is Indian based on her physical features and that she is from *Ionia* (Riot Games, 2009). She has a more angular face and prominent jawline, but elements such as her nose, hair, large brown eyes and lips contribute to viewers identifying her as an Indian champion (Katti & Arun, 2019, pg 2). The subtle ash markings on her legs are similar to those seen in Figures 26 and 27. This element could have been implemented to showcase the representation of Indian elements within her design, but the placement is strange. As seen in Figures 26 and 27, an Indian spirit guide or *Guru* will have the markings present on their foreheads. The attempt at representation may have been there, but it did not translate accurately. Within this splash art, the focal point of this champion is her upper body. This is framed and highlighted by the green pools of energy circulating in her palms, drawing the viewer’s eyes to that area of her body. The light and shadows are cast well, contributing to where a viewer’s eyes will be drawn. The colour of the energy matching that of her crown also creates a fluid eye movement to her face, which viewers would be drawn to.

Connotative Analysis:

Using Hall's teachings on the second level of analysis, I have provided a connotative analysis where the meaning starts to derive from the denotative elements (1997, pg 38). Similarly to *Nidalee,* the use of green in *Karma*'s design could represent love, compassion and kindness, which translates to the champion as she cares for others and tries to guide and help them as best as she can (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). The use of green in the context of Indian *Chakras* is also symbolic of the *Lord Ishvara*, who is the deity of personal belief and guidance (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). This translates well to *Karma* being a *Guru* as she does not offer subjective guidance but personal guidance to those seeking her help, much like a *Guru* does (Riot Games, 2009). Although this was a few years after the creation of *Nidalee,* the game's audience remained the same. Therefore, this champion was a form of uncharted territory for some of its players. This is interesting, considering a more generalised meaning behind the colour purple on her dress is that of royalty, luxury, and, at times, mystery, which this champion could have very much been to her players, provided she was represented as accurately as she could be.

Her pose provides some exposure to her thighs, which are well-highlighted due to the lighting in the splash art. It emphasises her thighs, which sexualizes *Karma* in the splash art. A *Guru* would not typically wear such revealing clothing, but in the case of having to make the champion appealing, this has been done to make her design enticing. Although the sexualization is far less than *Nidalee's*, it is still used to encourage players to interact with her. A *Guru* would not have their limbs exposed in such a manner. This contributes to exploring the unknown and giving players a taste of something they may not have seen before. A more tasteful way to do this, if it was completely necessary, could have been to have *Karma* wear baggy Indian pants known as

harem pants or *Patiala,* as sometimes there are windows on the sides where very minimal skin is exposed. These are even worn inside temples, as it is a common piece of Indian attire. These *Patiala* pants can be seen in Figure 31 in the *Order of the Karma Lotus* cosmetic.



Figure 31. A screenshot of the *Order of the Lotus Karma* splash art (Riot Games, 2009)

Like *Nidalee*, the scenery could have been used to better frame the champion in a way that highlighted her stance and power in the space. This choice of spatial mapping makes her seem small compared to everything else. It can be seen that the champion is small compared to her surroundings, so the scenery could have been better planned to make her seem more powerful, other than just existing within it. Conversely, she stands amongst these towering temples in complete peace because she has nothing to fear and understands her surroundings.

Upon observing the visual cues to direct viewers to focal points, I could see that the green glow directs the eye to the upper region of her body. The focal points then became her face and breasts as the lights cast shadows that drew the eyes towards that region. This is most likely another technique used to excite the players about this champion, although not making her outright

sexualized, but guiding the eyes to the parts that are. A focal point could also be her leg, leading up to the thigh and then up to the face. This would then be working like a line-of-action or line-of-flow. Martin Guay, Marie-Paule Cani and Remi Ronfard, a group of scholars from Inria, express, "The line of action is a conceptual tool often used by cartoonists and illustrators to help make their figures more consistent and more dramatic. We often see the expression of characters—may it be a superhero's dynamism or a fashion model's elegance— well captured and amplified by a single aesthetic line" (2013, pg 2). This tool allows designers to position and frame their characters in a way that directs a viewer's eyes across a character's fluid movement. Overall, *Karma* embodies the essence of spirituality and tranquillity. However, her visual design does not fully represent these qualities in an Indian way. I had mentally redesigned *The Order of the Lotus Karma* using oranges and yellows in her outfit and abilities; changing these colours would have elevated her design and showcased a champion that accurately represented an Indian *Guru.*

Karma's Visual Design Shortcomings

At first glance, *Karma* is slightly sexualized, considering her context. If her goals and backstory aligned more with her being presented sexually, then it would make sense, but presently, these aspects do not align at all. There are more elegant ways to design a spirit guide character visually, and so much inspiration can be drawn from it, but this may not have been a priority to the design, given that her design is simple. Her design is not highly detailed, which can be observed from her simple outfit, decorations and physical features. There were no accurate colour usages regarding representing her as an Indian spirit guide, and colour is an important aspect of Indian culture. It can elevate representational elements within the visual design of champions. An important set of elements to Indian spirit guides is the *Chakras*[3] (Schneider & Cooper, 2019, pg 25). *Chakras* are colour-representative (Gupta, 2021, pg 1070), and with *Karma* focusing on meditation and

[3] Chakras are focal points on the body that are usually used to channel energy through meditation and prayers. In larger prayers, these are visually represented through what are called *Idols*. *Idols* are small pieces of metal with related Chakra body parts indented into them.

spiritual awakening, colours could have played a massive part in her visual design. They could have even informed the way that the champion's abilities work. *Karma* is a support champion; she functions by keeping herself and her allies alive in a way that allows her to play offensively and defensively (Riot Games, 2009). Using chakras to inform the functionality of her abilities could have been a powerful way to represent Indian culture within her visual and mechanical design.

Another shortfall is within her motifs, which refers to the representation of animal symbols to showcase the role of animals in Indian culture (Chakraborty, 2023, pg 236). Despite her being Indian, she has strong motifs relating to Dragons. Dragons are a large part of Asian cultures and are used in many traditions, tales, festivals and other celebrations, but not in Indian cultures. This is *harmful interchangeability*[4] of Asian cultures. *Harmful interchangeability* is a term I have developed and used to describe the combination of more significant cultures into one due to a lack of understanding and consideration. Essentially, it is the process by which outsiders condense cultures of larger racial groups without considering their differences. The condensation of culture shows a lack of understanding and research into the design. If the designers were to make it more accurate, animals such as elephants, tigers and some lions would have worked more effectively to tie the design together. Alongside this, the voice lines she presents to the player in the game are comprised of multiple Asian languages, which does not necessarily make sense because she is chanting mantras when she does this. Mantras can be rhythmic chanting during rituals or ceremonies to send messages to spirits (Bolle, 1992, pg 148). Indian mantras use existing Vedic languages and phrases set up by priests and other spirit guides. Instead, they have drawn from other Asian languages, which the character most likely would not use to chant and further progress the use of *harmful interchangeability*.

Karma's design has so much potential to impact someone at first glance. This is also notable in the cinematics where she is present. This champion has the most potent mental resolve compared

[4] This is a term I use to describe the combination of larger cultures into one due to lack of understanding and considering. Essentially the process by which outsiders condense cultures of larger racial groups without considering their differences.

to every other champion in the game (Riot Games, 2009). However, in these cinematics, she can be corrupted despite her advertised unwavering spirit. It seemed it was not an important part of the champion design to carry through consistently. A few of her in-game cosmetics devalue the representation of Indian elements within her design. These include *the Sun Goddess* and *Sakura Karma*. These images can be seen below in Figure 32.

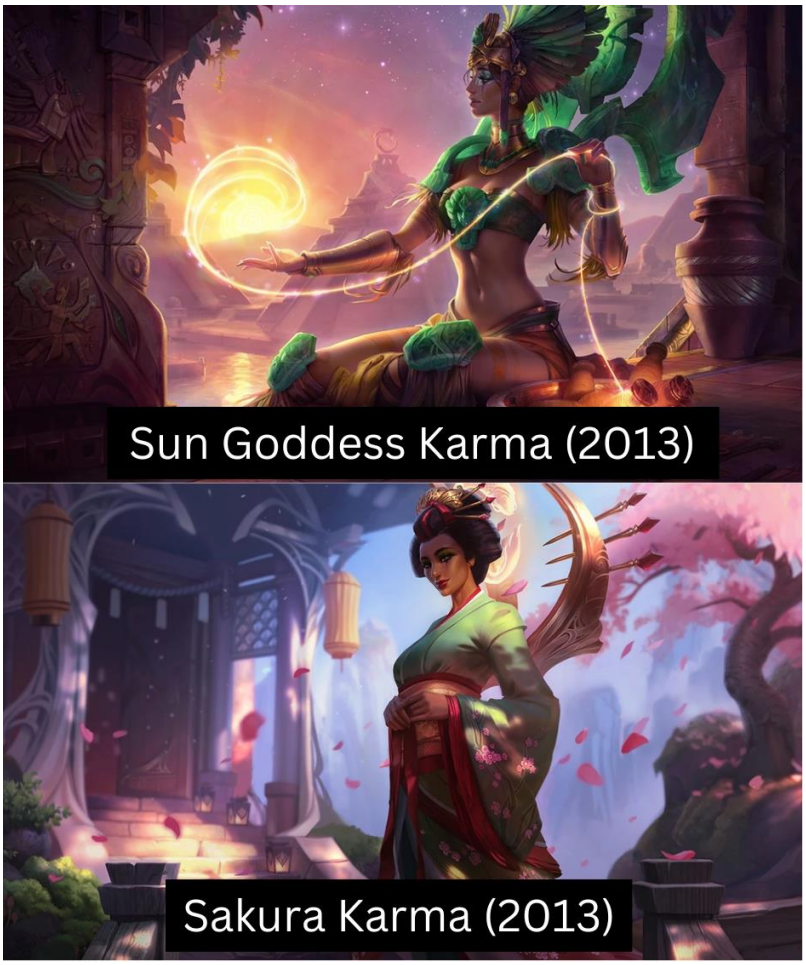


Figure 32. A collection of screenshots of *Sun Goddess* and *Sakura Karma* (Riot Games, 2009)

Using van Leeuwen and Jewitt's second and third stages of visual analysis (2011, pg 7), by which I have created a gallery of the skins and addressed their visual designs, I found them quite upsetting because of the *harmful interchangeability* they demonstrate. The *Sun Goddess* variant showcases elements of Mayan and Aztec culture within it. The sun is an important aspect of both Mayan (Watanabe, 1983, pg 171) and Indian (Malville, 1985, pg 431) culture. However, rather than

making it racially appropriate for the champion, *Riot Games* had just inserted it into a context that did not suit her. This brings about the notion of cultural appropriation, deeming it acceptable to have any brown person wear clothing designed and made entirely for a different culture (Lenard & Balint, 2019, pg 1). Indian people worship the sun (Chacko, 2024, pg 31), making it an easy tie to correlate the visual design to her instead of choosing a completely different culture to do so. This is unjust to both cultures and the champion. The same thing can be observed in *Sakura Karma*. However, in the context of representing an Indian champion using Japanese elements of design. The sakura is a sacred flower in Japan, one of its main attractions and cultural flowers (Atushi, 2007, pg 41). This could be done using lotus flowers or marigolds to make it more representative. Marigolds are bright red, orange, or yellow flowers that are common worldwide but are used to celebrate all types of auspicious events in India. Khayum, Siddiqua, Sarvade, Tanuja and Babasaheb, a group of marigold cultivars, explain that the marigold has a wide range of uses, such as for skincare cosmetics, food, perfumes, textiles and even medicines. However, it will always be seen at any Indian celebratory event (2023, pg 21). Furthermore, it is used in India for many religious events, ceremonies and rituals; therefore, the use of the flower as opposed to the sakura could be used to make the cosmetic more appropriate for the champion and more in tune with Indian representation (Mir, 2019, pg 324).

Despite these listed issues, it can be observed that this section of this dissertation, where *Karma* is analysed, is much shorter than *Nidalee's*. This is because of the progression of designs representing female Indian champions within *League of Legends*. Even though she appears undeveloped in some areas of design, such as with clothing and colours, there are areas of her visual design that were successes, which should be acknowledged and appreciated.

Karma's Visual Design Successes

The use of paints and ashes around her body is something that many Hindu spirit guides use, as seen in the images provided in Figures 24 and 25. It serves as a means to the belief that we turn back into ashes at the end of our lives (Singh, 2015, pg 127). Doing this brings them closer in tune with spirits who have passed on from the physical world into the astral one. There are specific ways that this is supposed to be done. *Karma* may not be accurately represented, but it was interesting to see this incorporation into her design, as it conforms to some Indian traditions.

Similarly, *Karma* (Johari, 2000, pg 45) is a belief amongst many Indian people despite being adopted by various groups. *Karma* in Hinduism is the six acts of purification of the mind, body and soul to bring about inner peace and harmony (Johari, 2000, pg 45). *Karma*, the champion, is the prospect of harmony; she has listened and been guided by the spirits to mend her broken world and bring peace to it once again. The link between the practice and the champion's name is meaningful and contributes well to representing her as an Indian character. This can be further observed through her voice lines and story (Riot Games, 2009). Some of her voice lines include, "An ideal is nothing... until you fight for it," and "Peace, no matter the cost." (Riot Games, 2009). These voice lines further emphasise how the champion believes in bringing peace and having moral grounding to fight for what is right. Although the term "*Karma*" is commonly understood as the idea of what goes around comes back around, it does not always need to be translated violently, which is what she represents. Her design is peaceful and serene, but lacks the sense of power it should have to embody the purpose this champion has accurately. I also wanted to showcase her cosmetics collection and its improvement over the years. This can be observed below in Figure 33.

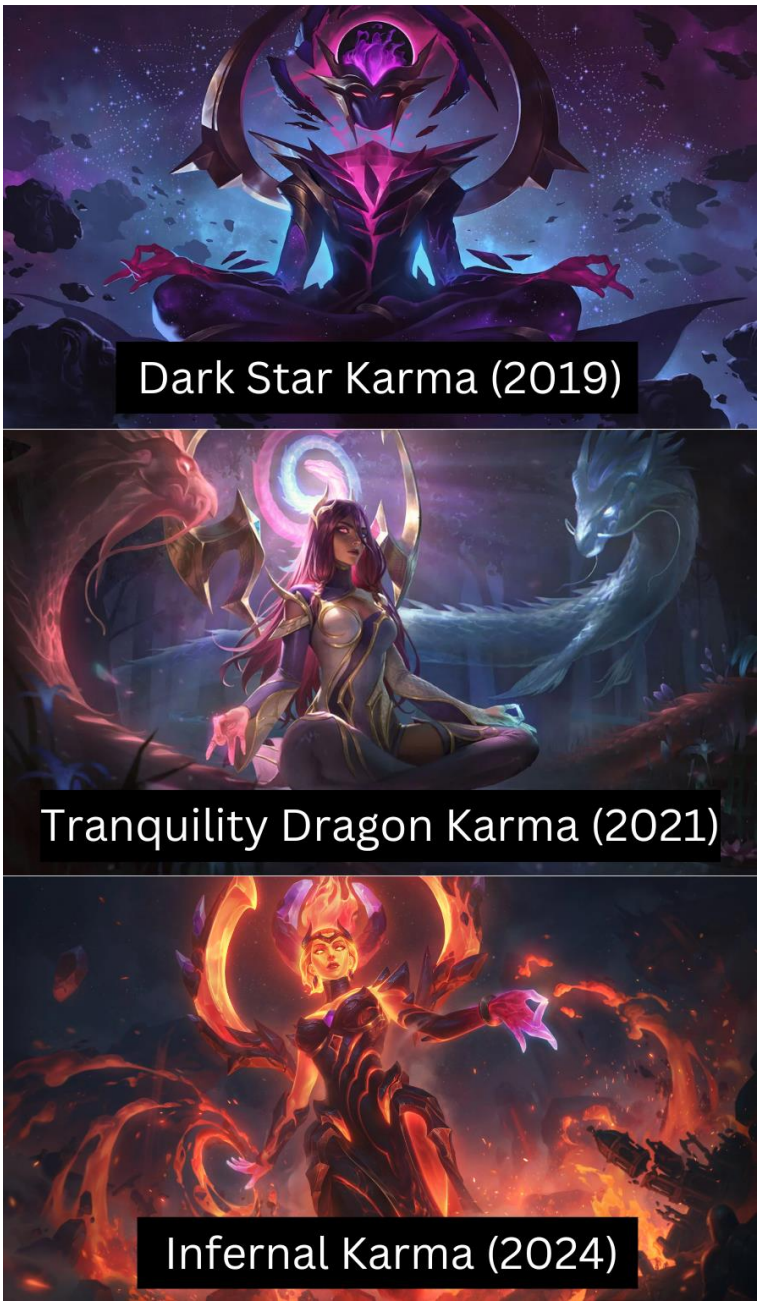


Figure 33. A collection of screenshots of *Karma's Dark Star, Tranquility Dragon* and *Infernal* cosmetics (Riot Games, 2009).

When reapplying van Leeuwen and Jewitt's second and third stages of visual analysis (2011, pg 7) to her successful designs, I found these cosmetics to work well with the representation of *Karma* as a female Indian champion and a spirit guide. The first two cosmetics have her sitting in a meditative pose while emphasising how monumentally large she is. The Dark Star *Karma* is more

significant than a planet; this can be seen in how the splash art has her sitting amongst asteroids. Upon further inspection, I also noticed that the stars behind formed a mandala constellation. Mandala is the wheel of chakras, represented as mesmerising flowers, swirls and patterns (Shakya, 2001, pg 81). The *Tranquillity Dragon Karma* also has her sitting meditatively, hovering above a body of water. Although I did not like the idea of Indian animal motifs being absent in her design, this cosmetic theme was draconic. Riot Games titled this cosmetics theme as Dragonmancer skins (Riot Games, 2009). I feel this could have been applied more so to the Chinese and Japanese champions to further emphasise elements of their representation, instead of using it on champions it did not make sense for. However, the design is still aesthetically pleasing. The way her clothing and decorations are styled adds a significant amount of detail to her design. Moreover, the dragons work to frame her well in the splash, making her the focal point. The *Infernal Karma* is slightly simplified compared to the other two cosmetics, but how she is represented makes her look monumental. Buildings are falling over at her feet, and the worm's eye perspective foreshortens her to emphasise how large she is. Furthermore, the hand gestures are similar to meditative ones, giving a subtle hint of Indian representative elements.

Overall, compared *to Nidalee, Karma* is more well put together and has a stronger foundation to build. Her design is slightly more informed, aligns with her function in some way, and is not completely problematic. This champion was given more detail, consistency in her mannerisms, and some hints of Indian representation within her design. With more attention, I believe she could have truly encapsulated the vision I have always had for what a female Indian video game character would look like.

Nilah, The Joy Unbound



Figure 34. A screenshot of *Nilah'*s champion illustration
(Riot Games, 2009)

Nilah was the latest female Indian champion to be released to *League of Legends* in 2022. She can be seen in Figure 34. There was not much information available about her other than her story presented by *League of Legends*. *Nilah*'s champion description reads as follows:

> "*Nilah* is an ascetic warrior from a distant land, seeking the world's deadliest, most titanic opponents so that she might challenge and destroy them. Having won her power through an encounter with the long-imprisoned demon of joy, she has no emotions other than unceasing jubilation—a small price to pay for the vast strength she now possesses.

> Channelling the demon's liquid form into a blade of unparalleled might, she stands defiant against ancient threats long forgotten." (Riot Games, 2009)

When Riot Games announced that they were releasing a new champion, I was initially not excited or too interested. That was until they advertised her in a highlight video. Highlight or champion spotlights are short animation clips showcasing new and upcoming champions. They give some lore to the champion and minimally showcase their in-game abilities (Riot Games, 2009). I was emotional upon seeing her because, after years, it finally felt like a video game character was representing me. I found her visual design extraordinarily well-informed and was taken aback after seeing it. It used so many elements of Indian culture in an elegant way that was stereotypical but rather elevating. The Indian elements of her design shone through in a meaningful, subtle, but noticeable way. There were many aspects within her design that not everyone could understand. However, I am sure many Indian people would appreciate what this champion embodies in terms of her visual design.

Denotatively, she is a joyful, fearless Indian girl who glides across the ocean's surface with a large aquatic monster falling in the background. She has a strong Indian representation, which can be seen through various visual design elements. Connotatively, it would be similar, a bright young woman fearlessly fighting sea monsters. However, she must have some form of supernatural qualities if she can achieve such superhuman feats — I address this in more detail in the following sections.

Denotative Analysis:

Using Hall's first level of analysis, I used denotation to deconstruct *Nilah* to her simple, basic and descriptive level (1997, pg 38). This allowed me to develop a broad consensus of what the

champion looked like at a level where most people would agree. I also used the Direct analysis approach of the character design framework provided by van Leeuwen & Jewitt (2011, pg 6) to analyse *Nilah* denotatively. *Nilah*'s splash art captures the essence of her champion and her incredible feats within a single art frame. Using colours combining yellows, purples, and blues works well to create a balanced look of bright and dark colours within her visual design. As previously discussed, purple represents luxury, virtue, and peace when considering the colour representation of chakras (Johari, 2000, pg 8). Virtue reigns strong with this champion as her story reveals that she had given up the ability to feel all emotions except for happiness to fight for what she believes in and become a protector of her world (Riot Games, 2009). Within Indian culture, blue represents power and life, which translates to the champion's strength (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). She can defeat monumental monsters because of her immeasurable strength. The colour translates cohesively to her aquatic theme as well. Yellow represents willpower and victory within Indian culture (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). The use of yellow generally also ties in nicely with this champion as scholars Damiano, Gayen, Rezanejad, Banerjee, Banik, Patnaik, Wagemans, and Walther, who specialize in psychology and brain cognition, express that yellow often represents joy (2023, pg 2), which directly links to *Nilah*'s title, "The Joy Unbound". When relating yellow to its Indian representation and its symbolism of victory, it is something *Nilah* often mentions within the game through her various voice lines. She remains victorious in all the battles she has encountered throughout her lifetime (Riot Games, 2009), making the use of yellow translate well.

Her pose in the splash art is epic and heroic. She is kneeling on one of her knees, staring back at a monster in the distance. Her stance indicates she has landed from completing some move in battle, and the monster that challenged her is falling away behind her. The scenery ties nicely into this as the battle occurs over the ocean. The perspective makes it difficult to discern the splash art orientation, but she has landed on the water's surface, and the monster behind her has destroyed a ship in its fall. The spatial mapping of the different components within the scene highlights the magnitude of the fight *Nilah* has taken on, and it all works well to frame her and the situation in which she has found herself.

Her physical features are pretty representative of the general majority of Indian people in a way that is not harmful or stereotypical. Her complexion is darker than the other two champions, and her features are more pronounced. She has a mesorrhine nose, which is more pronounced than other noses. A mesorrhine nose is a moderately sized nose with a pronounced nasal bridge (Mehta & Srivastava, 2017, pg 5). This type of nose is quite common among Indians due to geographical ancestry conditions. She has long, thick black hair tied behind her that is held together with fabric. This is also common for Indians to do with their hair, not really with this technique, but the aspect of fabric intertwined within hair held back. Within this artwork, the focal point is made clear through her weapon. The slick water whip guides the viewer's eyes from *Nilah* to the monster and back again. It creates a smooth line of flow, where everything important is framed within the splinters of the glowing blue whip.

Connotative Analysis:

Using Hall's teachings on the second level of analysis, I have provided a connotative analysis where the meaning starts to derive from the denotative elements (1997, pg 38). The use of colour in her design, although relating strongly to meaning within Indian culture, could have made sense and relayed aspects of the champion well. Because colour is an important part of Indian culture and closely linked to the belief in chakra, almost all standard colours can be assigned a positive meaning. However, I believe Riot Games had taken more time and research into ensuring *Nilah* was accurate to Indian representation. Yellow is commonly used to illustrate happiness and joy, which translates to the champion, as it is all she feels. So, I felt it may have been a generalised notion of the colour that made sense to use instead of directly researching colours that convey certain emotions about the representation of colour in India. I felt the same for using blue, as the champion is familiar with the ocean, and her ability to control a water demon in the form of her

weapon within the game works cohesively (Riot Games, 2009). Blue works well to illustrate the water theme; however, it is more commonly used to illustrate sadness (Damiano et al., 2023, pg 2). So, it seems like there may be a clash in the usage of colour or that it was used cleverly to express that it is saddening that the champion can only experience happiness, which is ironic. I enjoy using the two colours in opposition, with the yellow reflecting her happiness while the blue contrasts it with the sad reality that the only emotion she can feel is joy.

I found that the pose expressed the champion's power well. She does not seem fatigued by the encounter; instead, she seems like she has a rush from it. Her eyes are wide and bright, and she has a smile. The pose gives the viewers an inclination that she is ready to get back into battle. Furthermore, the pose leads viewers to see the heroics of her battle, and I found that this is also framed well by the scenery.

In terms of the physical features of the champion, more thought was put into *Nilah*. Her complexion is darker, and her features are more recognisable than an Indian's. Especially in her body shape, as it is common for Indian women to have a slimmer body type and shape. However, with that being said, it is not a generalisation at all. It was primarily due to India's harsh social environment that Indian people, especially women, were expected to have slender figures. This is expressed by Jaita Talukdar, a sociologist, who explains that the Indian media perpetuates the idea that all Indian women need to be slender (2012, pg 101). She expresses that a majority of Indian women have slender figures naturally due to geographical circumstances (Talukdar, 2012, pg 113). Despite this, the effort was put into ensuring the champion quickly resonated. I also found that because her design is not sexualized, the focal point leads the viewers to and from what is key to the champion and her story, not her physical appearance.

Nilah's Visual Design Shortcomings

A shortfall was that her design was overly simple. She is on the ocean's surface, fighting titan-like monsters without a piece of armour. Something to contribute to her battle-fueled story would be appreciated and would coincide well with her visual design. Apart from this, her story pushes her into the stereotype of sacrificing or bidding to receive power and strength. This is a common trope that damsels experience in creative media. As expressed by Margaret Stacey and Marion Price, two scholars in feminist studies, it is common for women characters in new media, like film and video games, to bid or sacrifice parts of themselves, both internal and external, to gain power (1980, pg 35). Unlike a lot of the male champions who are just simply made powerful, *Nilah* had to sacrifice her ability to feel any emotions other than happiness and joy to be able to have the powers that she does (Riot Games, 2009). This stereotype is upsetting and takes away from her design as a champion. I believe there could have been more interesting ways to showcase her slayer nature without the confines of sacrifice influencing them. I believe that female characters should be able to be assertive without having to give up aspects of themselves. Another example of this stereotype would be *The Witcher's* (CD Projekt RED, 2015), Yennefer of Vengerberg. Yennefer is a fictional character in *The Witcher* series of games, books and a TV series (Sapkowski, 1992). She is one of the most powerful sorceresses in the world, but to fully gain her power, she had to give up her ability to have children. This character later regrets the decisions she made for power and hopes there are ways she can regain her fertility, but once the trade is made, it cannot be undone (Sapowski, 1992). This is a stereotype that takes away from the empowerment of female characters. I believe that they should sometimes just be allowed to be robust and not have to sacrifice anything for it. I found that this heavily underplays *Nilah*'s power because, without her sacrifice, she would not have been the same champion.

Nilah's Visual Design Successes

Her visual design encapsulates various elements of Indian culture. The use of colour and accessories works so well in her design. From her long black hair to her nose piercing connecting to her ear, there is a strong, empowering Indian representation within her visuals, and we can see it. Bright yellow represents victory and triumph in Indian culture (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). This ties in well with the champion, as she claims to have never lost a battle and will continue to triumph. Some of her voice lines express, “The bigger they are, the better the fight”, and “Raging demigods, dragons, the age of the world... *scoffs* Not enough. Who is next?” (Riot Games, 2009). These voice lines further deepened the notion of her readiness for battle and familiarity with it. Her deep red pants symbolise strength, bravery, and qualities this champion possesses (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). The integration of colour and champion intention is well implemented and well-informed. Therefore, the choice of colour, the meaning, and the champion’s intentions all align. Alongside this, she does Bharatanatyam dancing in one of her emotes, which is very specific to South India. This deepens her design further. Other players may not easily detect it, but it is very empowering to those who know and understand it. As she was a newer champion, only two cosmetics were available. These cosmetics can be seen below in Figure 35.

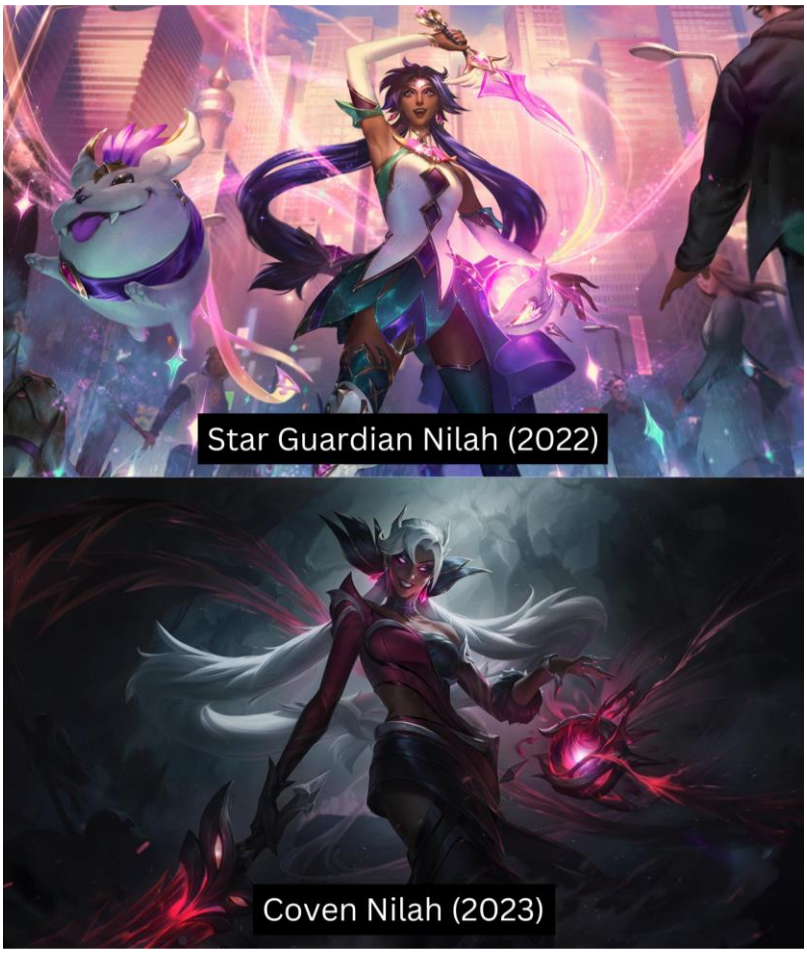


Figure 35. A collection of screenshots showcasing *Star Guardian* and *Coven Nilah* cosmetics (Riot Games, 2009).

When using van Leeuwen and Jewitt's second and third stages of visual analysis (2011, pg 7) and creating a gallery of *Nilah*'s cosmetics, I addressed their visual designs; I found the Coven cosmetics to be well-designed and represented her quite well using the different themes it conformed to. I do think the Star Guardian cosmetic could have been more refined to produce more traditional Indian elements within it. Furthermore, the skirt she is wearing is extremely short and would not make sense for the theme of this cosmetic line. The theme of this cosmetic puts the champions in a setting where they are all High School students and chosen by the first Star Guardian to become protectors of their city (Riot Games, 2009). A high-up skirt for a High School student is entirely inappropriate; furthermore, if she is to fight battles and protect the city, it does not seem like it would protect her. She could have still been wearing pants or armour to protect herself. For these reasons, I find that *Nilah*'s Star Guardian cosmetic lacks. Coven *Nilah* still carries through visual elements of traditional Indian representation, which I found reinforced the elements while remaining true to the champion, as the theme of the cosmetic line frames its champions in a witch and wizard setting. I appreciate the consistency of the carryover from the original *Nilah* to the Coven variation and how it has maintained elements of Indian representation.

Overall, *Nilah* was an empowering champion to see and play as. From her skin tone to her accent, apart from her Star Guardian cosmetic, she was not whitewashed. She had been well thought out, and it is evident through her visual design. This is the type of champion that can be used to inspire future representations of female Indian video game characters.

Akshan, The Rogue Sentinel

Although my focus is solely on the representation of the female Indian champions within *League of Legends*, I believe it is important to acknowledge the only male Indian champion in the game. This is the only form of representation that Indian men have within the game. Moreover, he plays on harmful stereotypes of being extremely flamboyant and extravagant (Dill & Burgess, 2011). There is a common stereotype of Indian men being portrayed this way, and this design falls into that. From the extended shirtless body to the sly grin on his face, this champion embodies those

stereotypes. He is meant to be a sneaky, rogue-like champion, but is dressed flashy with excessive, gaudy style and bright colours. Not only does his visual design not align with his purpose, but he is excessively flamboyant and flashy for no reason. This is a trend of Bollywood men where they are known for their unnecessary and distracting flashiness. This trope often has men completing the simplest tasks in the most extravagant that it makes them appear strange. Other champions might be visually flamboyant, but this champion is outwardly so, as well as cocky. Some of his voicelines can attest to this, for example, “Who am I to decide who lives and dies? Huh. Just a guy.” and “I taunt with my grappling hook. See how it taunts you? Taunt, taunt, taunt...”. This is a stereotype that some may find offensive, and seeing as this is the only opportunity for an Indian male to relate to the game, it may be unsettling because it is all they have (Bopp et al., 2019, pg 314). With the female champions, there is still an opportunity to decide between the hunter, the divine and the hero. Askhan is the only very flashy and flamboyant option available. An image of Akshan can be seen below in Figure 36.

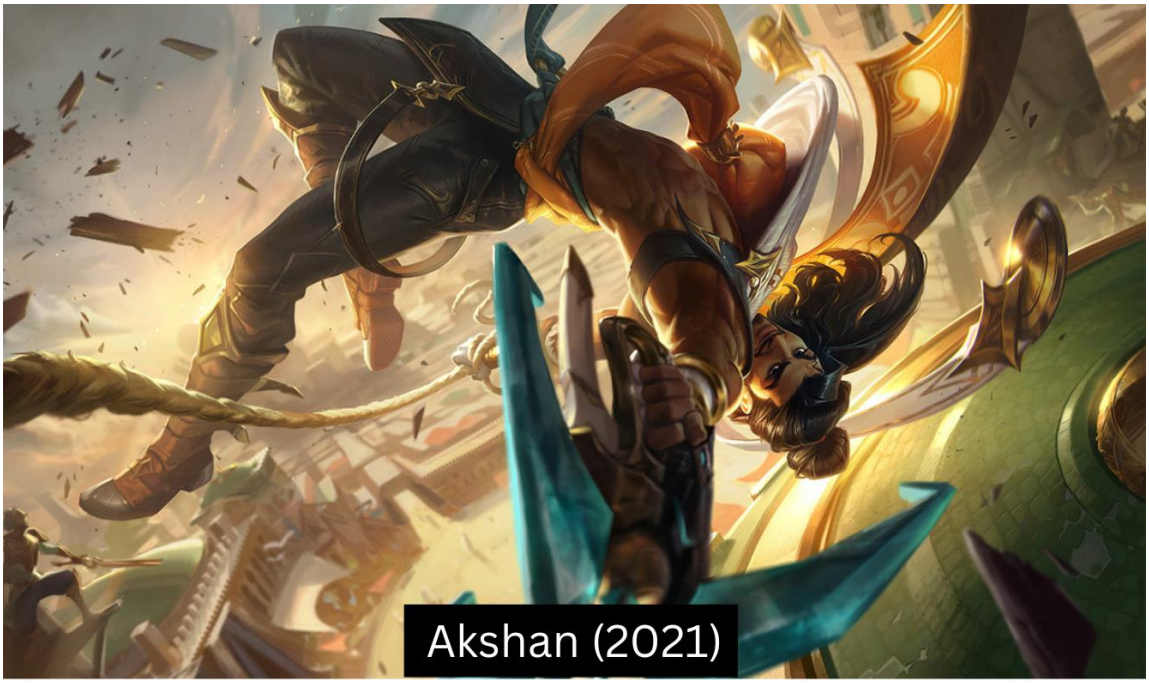


Figure 36. A screenshot of *Akshan’s* champion illustration (Riot Games, 2009).

Denotative Diary

For the denotative process, using Hall's teachings on denotation, I have analysed the champions on a descriptive and basic level (1997, pg 98). Using my findings, I have formulated a table comprising aspects that should be considered when looking at these different champions. I combined Hall's teachings on denotation alongside the teachings from van Leeuwen and Jewitt to produce categories using the stages of their Basic Model of Analysis and Open Viewing Method (2011, pg 5). These two frameworks allowed me to summarise my analysis better to inform my redesign of *Nidalee* in my creative component. Furthermore, this table provides a guideline of what elements of Indian representation should be included to deepen *Nidalee's* design of Indian representative elements. By having a category that addresses the visual progression of the designs, I could incorporate elements such as colour, hair design, skin tone and body structure into my visual redesign of *Nidalee*. Table 1.1 below is a comparative descriptive data collection of information drawn from the champion's visual designs. I have discussed the four stages as proposed by van Leeuwen and Jewitt to summarise and showcase what this section has covered.

Table 1.1 - Denotative Diary: A summary of visual design elements tabulated using teachings from Hall (1997) and van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011).

Champion	Stage one - First Impression	Stage two - Representational Accuracy	Stage three - Visual Design Progression	Stage four - Concluding thoughts	*Open Viewing*
Nidalee (2009)	I had heavily questioned her design. I found aspects of it frustrating due to its extremely sexual nature and inaccurate depictions.	This champion presents minimal elements of representation. But it is not completely absent from them. Elements such as her hair, Bindi and skin	Her overall design and early cosmetics showcase no visual progression. However, the progression of her designs through other	*Riot Games* has highlighted the potential this champion has but has not enacted it. They have used cosmetics to offer more representational	She perpetuates negative stereotypes regarding the representation of an Indian woman. She is seen as primitive on baseless

		tone contribute to accuracy.	cosmetics has drastically increased the progression of her visual design.	forms of her, but that does not erase what lies beneath the cosmetics.	grounds when she is intelligent enough to create and set traps. She contradicts herself almost.
Karma (2011)	I found her design to be an improvement over *Nidalee's*. But I still find it lacking and needing further depth. There was a great amount of lost potential in the manner *Riot Games* chose to depict this champion.	This champion presents more elements of Indian representation than *Nidalee*. The choice of colours related to chakras emphasises Indian representational elements.	Her overall design of early cosmetics was too heavily inspired by Asian cultures; she was not a part of them. This showed a lack of research into her own, but the exploration of others. Later designs were more well-informed and showcased more elements of Indian representation.	This champion has so much potential in her visual and mechanical design. A deeper incorporation of Indian elements would have truly elevated her design to be as good as *Nilah'*s. Later designs are also more informative of Indian representation and could be used to redesign certain elements of her design.	She is less stereotyped, but is still sexualized. She has a great amount of potential, but she is very simple. She starts to break away from the pattern of the sexualized foreign representation and has a stronger foundation of design.
Nilah (2022)	*Nilah* had caught my attention from the moment I had looked at her. Her design radiates with representational accuracy. She upholds Indian representation in a meaningful and positive way.	*Nilah* is the strongest form of Indian representation within *League of Legends*. The champion encapsulates elements of Indian representation in a meaningful and empowering way.	There are minimal materials available to justify any form of progression. But with what was available, her design remains well-informed, where elements of Indian representation	Her design could have been a bit more detailed to emphasise the fact that this champion fights monumental beasts. She needs to appear better equipped than she does. It is also saddening that she plays on sacrificial stereotypes to	*Nilah* does not perpetuate problematic stereotypes. She showcases meaningful and accurate Indian representation. Her biggest letdown in falling into the trope of having to give up something to become

			remain prevalent and meaningful.	gain power.	powerful. I also wish her visual design contained more detail.

Chapter Four

Reflection on Creative Practice:

Grit and Grace: The difficult process of making sure you are not being problematic when solving a problem

Explanation

PLEASE NOTE: THIS CHAPTER IS TO BE READ WITH THE ACCOMPANIED ART BOOK FOR A CLEAR VIEWING OF MY DIGITALLY DRAWN ILLUSTRATIONS.

The creative practice of this dissertation offered a visual redesign of *Nidalee*. This was done to offer a visual design of the champion containing accurate Indian representation elements. I did not want to change the way the champion worked; I instead wanted to change her appearance and make the elements within her design more accurate using what she already had. I first started by creating three rough concepts for the various design elements. In this process, I offered three variations of a facial design, taking into consideration the anatomical theories of Katti and Arun (2019) and Talukdar (2012) on Indian physical features. Furthermore, the teachings of representation from Hall (1997) and methods of analysis from van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011), summarised in Table 1.1, guided me on the physical features I needed to consider. This was done to showcase various skin tones, eye shapes, hair textures and face decorations. I offered three variations of outfits, which considered the available materials at *Nidalee's* disposal, alongside colour theories relating to Indian Chakras from Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais and Olalere (2022, pg 5). I also experimented with different colours, patterns, and textures, using small squares to mix and match different ones. This was done to use colour to represent the Chakras and their symbolism

within her design. Furthermore, I offered three weapon variations for *Nidalee* using Indian-inspired weapons for the champion's spear within the game. Indian Gods and Goddesses inspired these weapons to further the elements of Indian representation within the visual design. Lastly, using Sunquist and Sunquist's (2002, pg 377) explanations on native Indian wild cats, I offered three variations of large wild cats for her cougar form using native Indian wild cats to ensure that it aligned with Indian representation. After I had drafted these concepts, I worked towards producing a final piece of art that showcased what I would have done to redesign *Nidalee's* visuals. This combined elements from each design for each visual element, such as her face, outfit, weapon and cougar form.

The creative component of this project was an extensive process where I encountered many difficulties as an artist and a young Indian woman. I found it difficult not being able to apply my knowledge of Indian representation without the need for constantly having to find references to prove what I already know. It felt impossible to make the right choices because it felt like I would be wrong about something, knowing I would not be. But even so, the importance of researching made my thoughts clearer, and even showed me greater detail within the understandings I do have. It taught me the true and accurate ways in which different elements function within the culture, which I was able to apply throughout this dissertation. Without this research, I would not have been able to rewrite and understand the inaccuracies I had believed myself. Through intention, I found the solace I needed to undergo this creative component. I experienced difficulties, but tried to think carefully when I started my illustration process. I had concerns regarding being stereotypical and problematic myself when I had no intention of doing so. Creating pieces of work that are based on pre-existing racial and cultural ideals felt difficult because I did not want to create something problematic in trying to derive a solution. This was especially so with body types and features. I decided to take a different approach by drawing inspiration from fashion designers, which allowed me to generate a model to draw my designs and adjust them as needed.

Furthermore, the anatomical teachings of Talukdar (2012, pg 110) gave me a better idea of how to approach the bodies using the theories she provided. She explains that the depiction of thin and slender bodies should not be used to glorify an unattainable body shape but to recognise those who naturally have it without shaming others who do not (2012, pg 110). These teachings allowed me to begin my process by drawing simple and rough sketches on paper. This allowed me to label and understand the different materials and textures I wanted to approach the designs. However, I still found this too limiting regarding the body type I was trying to recreate. I wanted *Nidalee* to look slender and healthy, so I drew inspiration from *Nilah* alongside the teachings of Talukdar (2012, pg 110). I used a body shape similar to *Nilah*'s while maintaining *Nidalee's* feminine flair and agile appearance.

My process followed researching different types of Indian female warriors online and creating an artboard from them. Platforms such as Pinterest (Pinterest Inc., 2009) and Google Images (Google, 2001) provided me with some images that guided some of the design elements. Furthermore, elements from my analysis in Chapter Three guided me on the visual design. This worked to draw inspiration in conjunction with the aspects I wanted the design to incorporate. The artboard can be seen in the appendix. After creating the artboard, I created paper prototypes where rough sketches were drawn. This was done to plan out the different aspects of the designs while considering what would be accessible to *Nidalee* in the jungle. Although her interaction with other humans was limited, it was not absent, and there were often opportunities for her to interact with them or look for salvageable materials they left behind (Riot Games, 2009). In a more foreboding sense, she would have also been able to acquire materials from the corpses of those unable to make it through the jungle. Keeping this in mind, some of the materials I decided to use were old or abandoned attire in armour, fabric, leather and jewellery.

One of the key factors of the champion is her ability to transform into a feline form of free will. With this in mind, drawing a feline that was more cohesive with her was important to do. As

discovered in Chapter Three, the choice of the cat *Nidalee* can transform into does not represent any elements of Indian culture or symbolic motifs. Chakraborty (2023, pg 240) explains that using certain animals relies on cultural and religious beliefs. In the context of India, animals such as tigers, elephants and monkeys are animals that are often depicted in Indian artworks for the various symbolic meanings they have (Chakraborty, 2023, pg 240). This made the choice of cat important, as I wanted to ensure it accurately represented Indian culture. After exploring this in Chapter Three during *Nidalee's* analysis, I brainstormed ideas and researched different large cats that could be found in India. I wanted to experiment with colour, fur texture and pattern and from there, I decided what worked best with the overall champion design. I initially did not incorporate the feline aspect of her design into my creative component. However, after some reflection and reviewing my analysis in Chapter Three to guide my designs in this chapter, I realised that it would be essential to this process. This is because of the potential it had in strengthening her design. It was an aspect that could uphold the Indian representation and further emphasise it, especially when considering the symbolism of animal motifs in Indian culture (Chakraborty, 2023, pg 237).

Overall, my process started with research into the different visual appearances of Indian (Katti & Arun, 2019, pg 2) people, which can be observed in Table 1.2 in the appendix. From there, I started brainstorming faces. This allowed me to experiment with hair types, skin tones and facial features. Once this was completed, I created the outfits for her. As stated above, she used various materials, ranging from what she could harvest in the forest and salvage from elsewhere. This was done similarly with her feline form; a final one was presented with extra aspects of *Nidalee's* human form reflecting on it. I offered three designs while still trying to maintain some aspects of her original design. Once this was completed, I presented the final outfit and face.

Reimagining The Canvas

The process of redesigning *Nidalee*

Concept 1

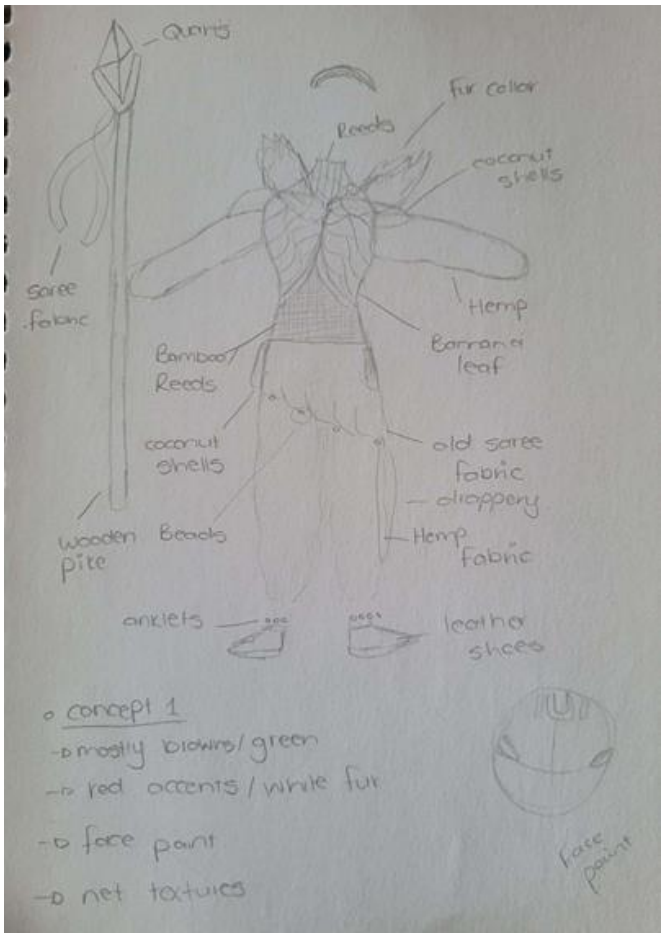


Figure 37. My hand-drawn paper prototype of concept one.

The hand-drawn images served as my mental models for the designs, acting as a model to be developed upon (Schroter, 2014). My first concept for an outfit design can be seen on page 10 of my art book and above in Figure 37. The paper prototype was the first concept for developing *Nidalee's* visual design. They listed my various materials and thoughts when I drew them. The focus was to ensure that *Nidalee* had enough coverage to protect her from the elements and battles

she may be involved in. I still wanted to remain faithful to the elements that existed in the original design of the champion, so elements such as fur and pelt were included. Within her context, it makes sense for these elements to be present in the design, as fur and pelt would be materials she could quickly harvest and gather around the jungle. I wanted to include ash markings on her face in each design to incorporate elements of Indian culture into her design. This was also done with gold accents, as she may have found some treasures around the jungle, she could use to reinforce herself. I also added some form of scaring or indication of battle to further add realism to the fact that *Nidalee* is from the jungle and would have scars, even if it were just from moving around.

Alongside this, I had brainstormed a face to go with it. Figure 35 below is my rough digital concept of face design. For this face, I wanted to experiment with a lighter skin tone because, despite the typical skin tone more commonly used for Indian characters, there are lighter skin variations. I wanted to ensure I was still being inclusive without whitewashing (Payumo, 2023, pg 5). *Nidalee,* like the other splash arts I mentioned in Chapter Three but still keeping it deep enough so she does not appear whitewashed. However, the skin tone may not be the best option for the design, as I wanted something more intense in tone to create a striking look. However, I found the eyes from this design to be the most appealing. This is due to one eye being blind. The likelihood of *Nidalee* sustaining a serious injury in the jungle would be high, especially since she has been there since childhood (Riot Games, 2009). By incorporating an aspect that people may generally find off-putting, I show that the champion can still look appealing and heroic despite it. I used Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais and Olalere's (2022, pg 5) teachings on colour symbolism and chakra. I wanted to use the red face marking to symbolise strength, determination and willpower, while the green symbolised compassion and kindness. This also underscores that she is a protector and has a deep association with the jungle (Isbister, 2006, pg 10). Furthermore, I found the hair lacking volume and the nose not to be as pronounced as I would prefer. However, I chose to use the eyes present in this concept for the final design of the face. A more detailed version is presented on page 3 of the art book.



Figure 38. My digitally drawn concept one facial.

The chosen spear has been depicted in many older paintings of Indian history that represent battles and wars. The spear's tip is similar to that of a partisan, but in ancient Indian times, it was referred to as a "Sang" (Royal Trust Collection, N/A). A Sang is an Indian knife with a sharp triangular shape, shown in Figure 36 below. There is little information on this knife besides its recurring depiction in old Indian artworks and naturalistic elements where it is supposed to resemble a leaf (Royal Trust Collection, N/A). I hoped to bring it back to life by incorporating it into a design. However, I was concerned that it was not apparent that this was a South Indian weapon. The rough version of this weapon can be seen on page 26 of my art book and in Figure 40 below.



Figure 39. Image showcasing Indian Sang.

On pages 11 and 12 of my art book, as seen in Figure 37, are my rough and refined digital sketches and colour drafts for concept one. This was used to illustrate my idea and get familiar with the design. It worked as a rough draft to plan out how I wanted the outfit to look and the colours I wanted to use. I chose to keep the green to relay the meaning of nature and harvest regarding the traditional Hindu festival of harvest called Makar Sankranti (Sridevi & Prabhavati, 2024, pg 4). I used red, orange and yellow to symbolise willpower, strength and determination based on the representation of colours from chakras (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). Below is the more refined version of the outfit alongside the rough. This version also includes the spear I planned to use with this design.

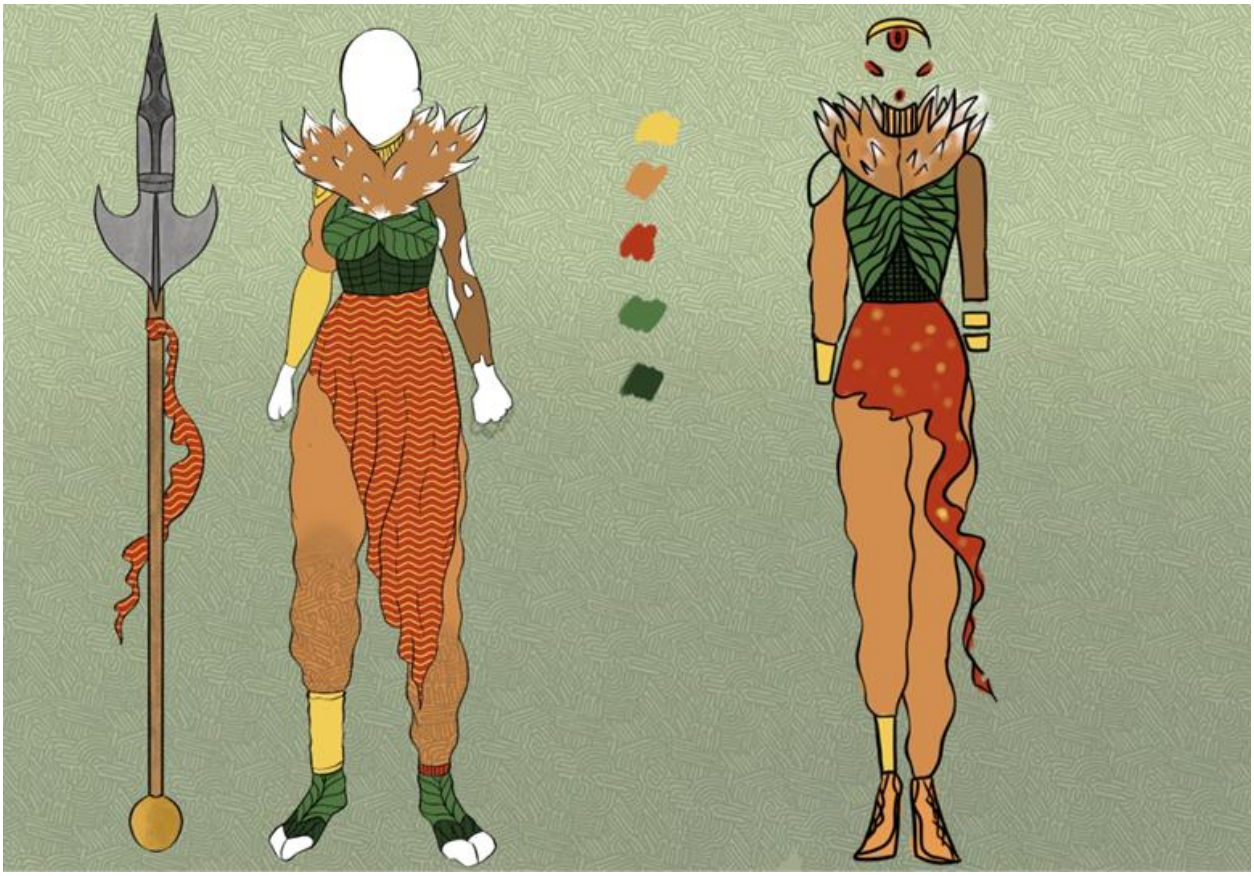


Figure 40. My digitally drawn rough and refined armor for concept one.

Concept 2

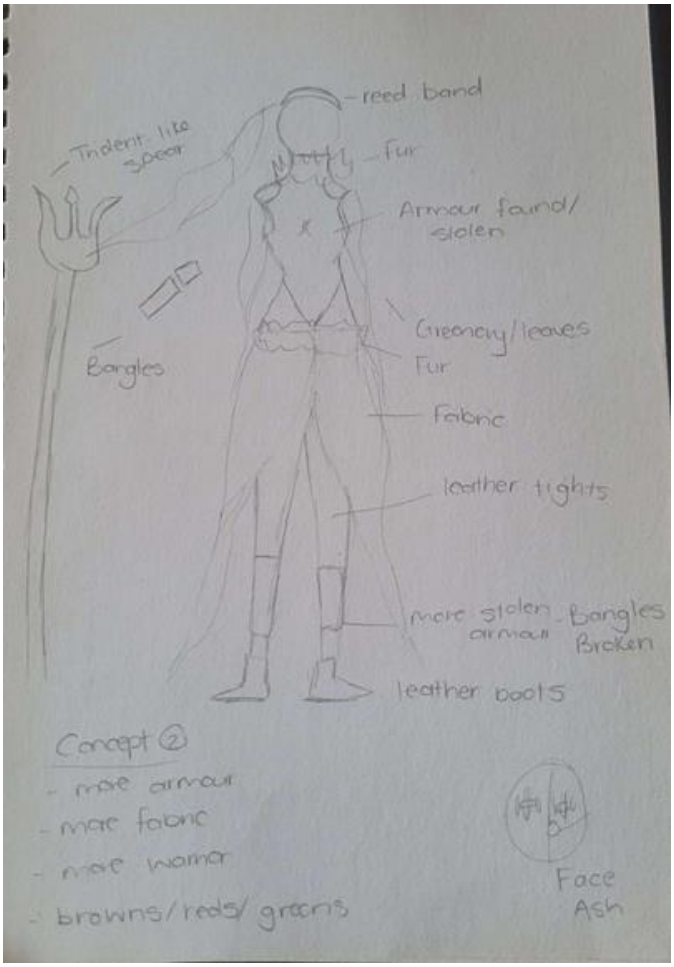


Figure 41. My rough hand-drawn paper prototype of concept two.

Figure 41 above, on page 12 of my art book, showcases the second rough design. This design was developed with the inspiration of a stealth-like appearance to the outfit. I wanted it to be more fitted but not overly tight, and have the flair of fabrics to the sides. This was also more focused on armor, which I thought was missing from *Nidalee's* original design. The armor could have also been found in the jungle by lost soldiers or warriors who often travelled through it. For this, I looked at the appearance of armor used within the in-game region of *Ixtal.*

By doing this, I was also able to find more Indian-oriented armour. I wanted to merge the Indian and *Ixtal* elements in a way that still represented *Nidalee* in a meaningful way. I also wanted to include pieces made of reeds and banana leaves, commonly used in many ways in Indian culture, mainly in creating disposable but sturdy materials with varying uses. They are used to make baskets, and when dried and tied together, they can form a robust mesh (Kora, 2019, pg 2). This would be an efficient way to protect and shield herself from any incoming damage. This correlates well with her in-game abilities, where she can heal herself, and when she does an animation, triggers and leaves fall around her (Riot Games, 2009). This linked well to the Indian representation of the banana leaves and her in-game healing ability. They have also been used to make braces, which I tried to implement in this design. Moreover, as it is a shared resource, she can permanently repair and fix them (Kora, 2019, pg 2).

For the facial design, I wanted the design to be more rugged. I untied the hair in this design and made it longer, darker and wavier. I wanted to give her a less tame look because of how flat I found the hair in the first concept. It would also make sense if she were in the jungle and did not have access to resources to groom herself properly. Within this concept, I also made the markings on her face more intense and visible. I used only one colour in this design: yellow for the symbolism of determination and willpower, symbolised by the Manipura Chakra (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). I implemented a darker tone on the skin to complement the yellow and drew inspiration from *Karma*'s skin tone. However, after some reflection, I decided a skin tone similar to *Nilah*'s would be more effective, given she was the most accurate representation of the three champions (Katti & Arun, 2019, pg 2). I also found that the features felt too European, which made me unhappy. The overall look of this concept did not seem like it encapsulated *Nidalee* as much as I wanted it to. Although I find the concept still strong, I did not find it fitting for *Nidalee* based on how she looked. It was a good stepping stone to the final face I created in concept three, shown in Figure 43. This concept can be seen below in Figure 42 and on page 4 of the art book.



Figure 42. My digitally drawn concept two facial design.

The spear in this design is also a trident that the God Shiva wields. Shiva is the god who protects, mends and rebuilds the universe (Johari, 2000, pg 106). He is the divine symbol of creation and wields this trident, more commonly known amongst Indian people as the Trishula. Not only is this wielded by Shiva, but also by Durga. Durga is the Goddess of war and destruction. However, this is not in the context of seeking violence but in the sense of protecting those who fall victim to war (Rao, 1914, pg 7). This weapon was one I found important to incorporate in some way, as this is Shiva's favourite weapon (Rao, 1914, pg 7). Figure 43 showcases what a Trishula or Shula typically looks like (Rao, 1914, pg 7). It is a three-pronged trident mounted to a wooden shaft with beaded strings, fabric and jewelled embellishments all to decorate the weapon to make it fit for the God (Rao, 1914, pg 8). This weapon has strong ties to Indian representation and culture and was the weapon I used in my final concept of *Nidalee*. The rough sketch of this weapon can be seen in Figure 41 below and on page 26 of my art book.



Figure 43. A screenshot of a Trishula weapon wielded by Shiva.

Figure 44 showcases my rough and refined digital sketches and colour for concept two. As mentioned before, for this concept, I worked on combining traditional Indian elements as well as *Ixtal* elements. This was because *Nidalee* is from *Ixtal,* and it made sense that if she acquired any armor, it would be from the locals who were travelling through the jungle. However, the armor should still have elements of Indian representation.

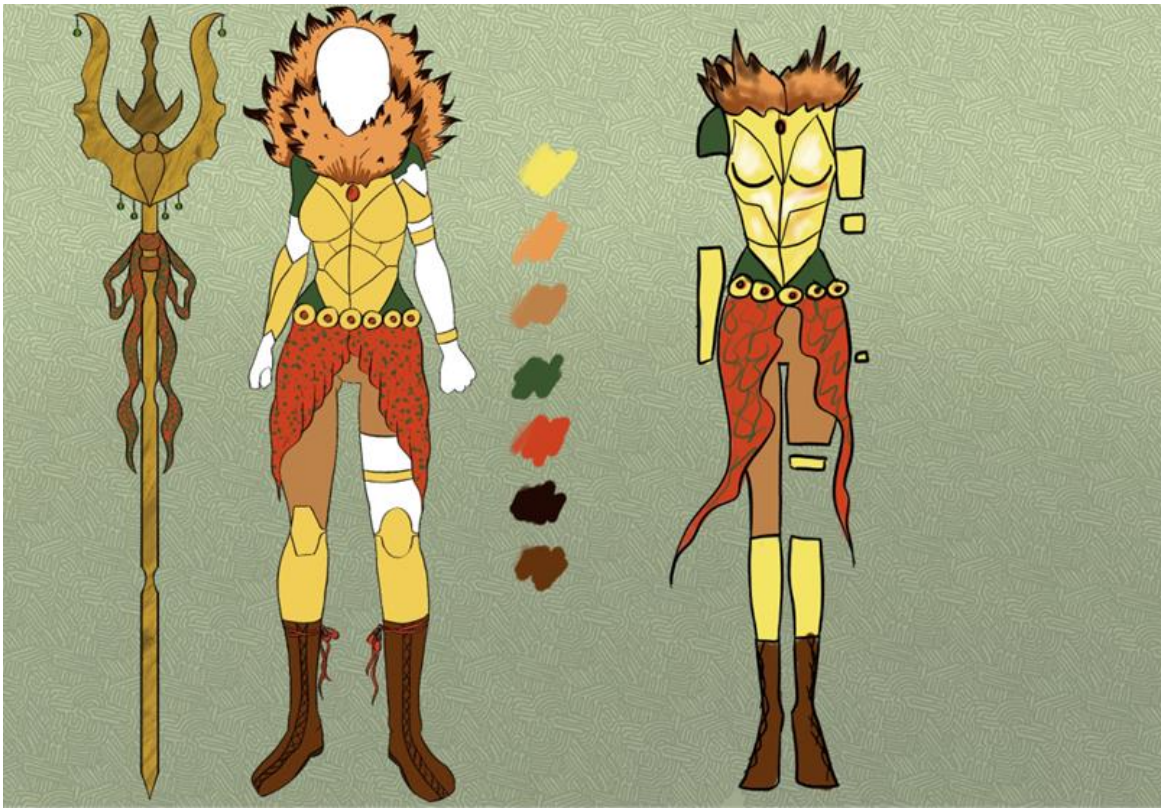


Figure 44. My digitally drawn rough and refined armour for concept two.

The colours for this design are very similar to those of the first one, but this design starts to use more intense fur and armor plating. I immensely enjoyed the appearance of this outfit, but it may have been too unrealistic for her to have a breastplate perfectly intact and well-kept. Given that *Nidalee* is a hunter or would have found the armor while foraging, it would be unlikely that the armor would be pristine. The wearers of armor could have also encountered beasts within the jungle that damaged armor during combat, so it would need to be entirely damaged. It would have made more sense if it had been tarnished, broken, and mismatched, which is a consideration I considered in the final concept of *Nidalee.* In this concept, the yellow shown is supposed to indicate gold armour, which translates to the *Sahasrara Chakra* that represents a pure consciousness and is the highest center of oneself; it is from here that all *Chakras* emanate (Vladimirovna Kudrya-

Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). I also incorporated the red for determination and the green for compassion and kindness (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). I did not want the colours to be redundant and showcase a lack of experimentation. Therefore, in the last concept, I moved away from this palette and experimented with other colours and variations. I liked the idea of asymmetry in the design, as the likelihood of finding two of the same items in perfect condition would be unlikely. Therefore, I wanted to keep that consistent in the design, the sense of asymmetry but balance in the outfit. Figure 44 can be observed on pages 15 and 16 of the art books. I found that this concept had the most visually appealing weapon I could produce, and this is the weapon I used in my final design.

Concept 3

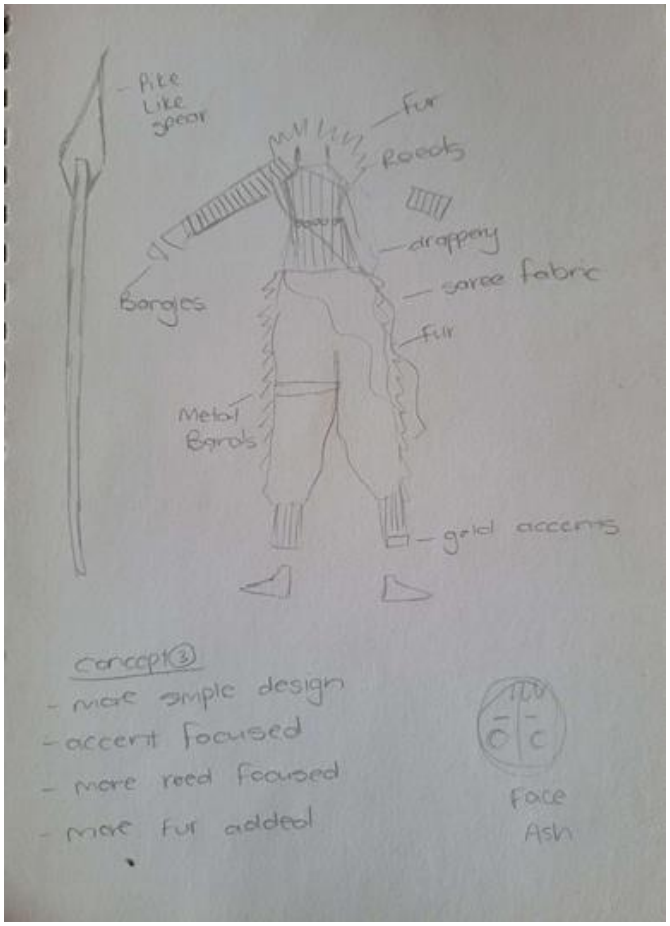


Figure 45. My rough hand-drawn paper prototype for concept three.

Figure 45 and page 18 of my art book showcase my third concept. I wanted it to be the simplest of the three but still appear appealing. This design method used natural materials such as bamboo, reeds and leaves to create the armor. I wanted to use bangles and jewelry to accent this design to give it more South Indian flair, as jewelry is deeply woven into Indian cultures (Fernandez & Veer, 2004, pg 55). Indian culture values jewelry, and this can be seen in the extravagance of an Indian bride's attire (Fernandez & Veer, 2004, pg 55). The value of gold runs more profoundly than its physical cost; rather, it symbolises the rituals of exchange at weddings, birth ceremonies, and even funerals. This ensures that the people involved in the ceremonies have something to give to their loved ones when needed (Fernandez & Veer, 2004, pg 55). I used the bangles on her arms to protect them, but also made it seem like she had broken them and reused them to create armor for different body areas. This design has also used more fur surrounding the upper body and accenting her pants. It can be seen within her designs that there were some holes and scratch marks on the clothing to emphasise that *Nidalee* is a hunter and has faced its harshness at times. I also used drapery over the armor further to emphasise the South Indian flair of the design. This was done using scraps of material she could have found lying around the jungle from any travelers that may have come through it from their helms or war posts. My inspiration behind this was using saree fabrics to emphasise the Indian elements of the design.

For this facial design, I wanted to capture some of the elements that the other designs lacked into one design. This led me to develop this final concept, as shown below in Figure 46 and on page 5 of the art book. This facial design used the darker skin tone from *Nilah* and had a rougher appearance to the hair. The use of greens was more prominent in the design, trying to keep the eye's colour from the original *Nidalee* visual design while using its symbolism of the Anahata Chakra, which represents kindness and compassion. This design furthermore showcases some scarring and ruggedness. I also included *Navagraha* beads, which are symbolic of the nine planets by which Indian people pray for fortune. Shyam and Aithal, two astrologists, explain that Indian people have each planet representing aspects of life that people may pray for; these aspects are

linked to planets called Grahas (2023, pg 49). I wanted to deepen the Indian representation within her design, so I included the Grahas as a necklace.



Figure 46. My digitally drawn concept three facial design.

The skin tone was more intensely toned. It was more striking than the other two, which contrasted nicely with the facial markings and the accents of jewelry that she had on. The skin worked well to complement the markings, while the markings did the same for the skin. *Nidalee's* facial features, such as her nose, jawline and forehead, were more pronounced in this design and were not as European presenting. However, the hair in my design, as shown in Figure 46, looked quite grey and not black, which I did not like. The darker black, like from concept two, worked better here and intensified the look more similar to *Nilah*'s dark hair. The markings around her eyes looked like overdone eyeshadow attempts, so I removed those in the final version of the face. This was, overall, my favorite facial design. This was because it encompassed the features I believed should be emphasised, and the design itself is still appealing while still representing the Indian elements.

The spear in this design had a snaking appearance similar to the South Indian “kris” blade, as shown in Figure 44 below. Agun, a social and cultural studies scholar, explains that the Kris blade is inspired by a snake and is used in many Asian cultures (2021, pg 398). It is very similar to the Chinese Serpent Spear. Snakes are a big part of South Indian culture (Manna, 2023, pg 237). Temples and other religious buildings usually have carvings to represent snakes or nagas, as referred to by Indian people (Allocco, 2013). Figure 48 and page 26 of my art book show my rough sketch of this.



Figure 47. An image of a snaking blade that I used to create the weapon concept for concept three.

Figure 45, as seen in my art book on pages 19 and 20, is my rough digital sketch and colour for concept 3.



Figure 48. My digitally drawn rough and refined armour for concept three.

This design was my favorite of the three. It used interesting colours and patterns and was the most asymmetrical of the three. The use of green, gold, purple and red was symbols of the *Manipura, Anahata* and *Sahasrara Chakras*, meaning willpower, strength, kindness, compassion and self-security (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). It used various materials, including saree cuts, broken armour plates, cane stems, and leather fabrics. The colours were different and did not match perfectly, but I did not find them unappealing. This sense of mismatched-ness made the outfit appear as if *Nidalee* had put it together based on what she could find and use. It made the outfit seem more realistic. There were minor changes from the original sketch to the more refined version, but the changes just made the design more balanced. These images can be found on pages 19 and 20 of the art book.

Cougar Form Concepts

Within the game, *Nidalee* can transform into a cougar (Riot Games, 2009), which has implications, knowing what a "cougar" typically reflects about a woman who is called one. Instead of removing this aspect of her overall design, I believe it should be embraced in a way that represents her better than it does now. Because, as much as it holds negative implications, it can genuinely make the champion more special. There was a large variety when researching the large wild cats that inhabit India. However, I narrowed it down to three to experiment with different textures, patterns and features. Each variation of the feline had a visual link to the three proposed facial designs I had created. From this, the final decision led me to draft designs for a Royal Bengali tiger, a black panther, and a snow leopard. I decided on these three wild cats based on their locations being of

Indian origin (Sunquist and Sunquist, 2002) and the variety they offered to my designs. I had a solid and slick feline, one that was bigger, built and had stripes, while the other was spotted and had an overall furrier appearance. These variations offered an interesting perspective on how this champion could pick up a new look whilst still staying true to what she was meant to be. Large cats have high symbolism in Indian culture and are often depicted in images alongside a god or goddess. They symbolise craftsmanship, protection, and peace (Chakraborty, 2023, pg 238). I want to recognise that the development of these cat forms may contradict Tipler's (2013) findings on the depiction of women being attributed to felines. In Indian culture, these are potent motifs. Therefore, I have chosen to challenge Tipler's (2013) teachings and showcase that the symbolism of cats can be empowering when it does not attribute stereotypes to women. Below are the concepts for *Nidalee's* cat form.

Concept one - Royal Bengali Tiger

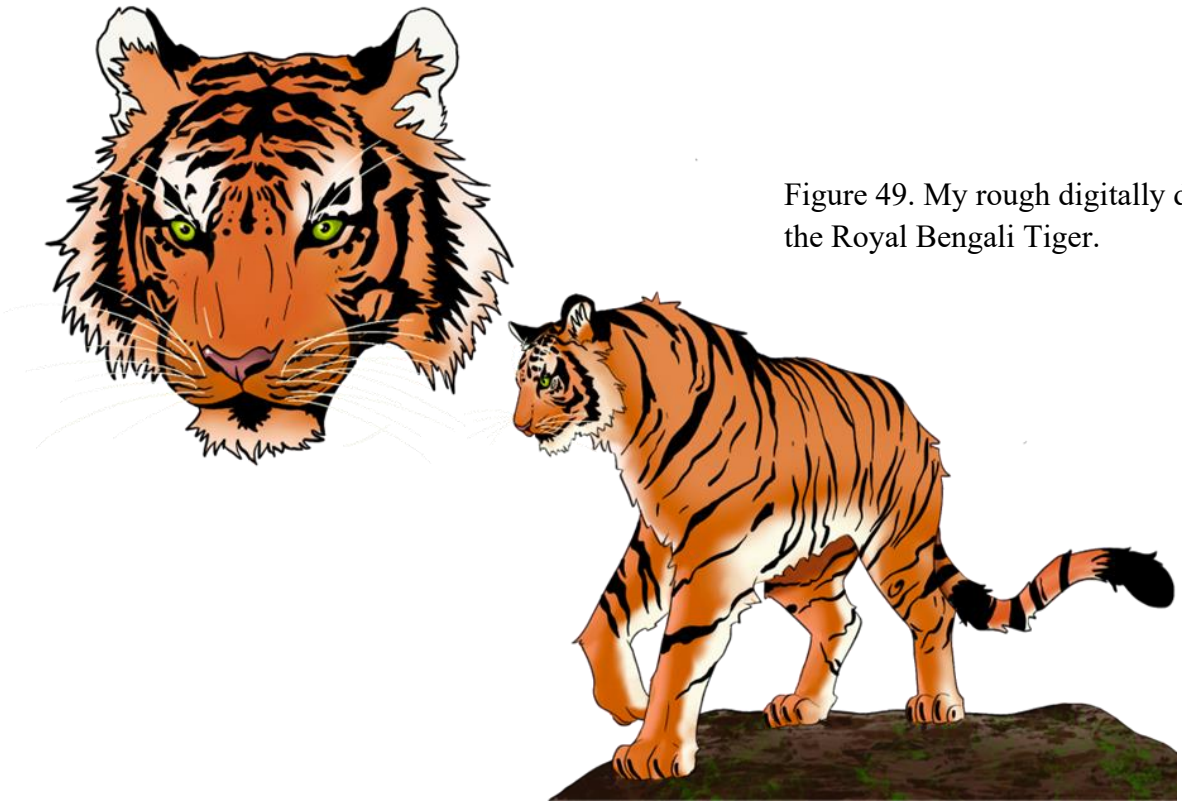


Figure 49. My rough digitally drawn concept of the Royal Bengali Tiger.

Figure 49 above and shown on page 30 of my art book, is the concept for the Royal Bengali Tiger. I aimed to capture its magnificence and bold stripes. The Bengal tiger is the largest of the tiger family (Sunquist and Sunquist, 2002, pg 343). Moreover, it was my first choice when it came to creating *Nidalee's* cat form because of tigers' importance in Indian cultures and religions. It is also a native feline to India, so it worked realistically regarding Indian representation (Ghosh, 2013, pg 13). Tigers in Indian culture represent power, beauty and ferocity. Tigers are always accompanied by the Goddess *Durga*, the female embodiment of power and divine victory (Amazzone, 2010, pg 22). For this reason, this association made it feel necessary to include a tiger in the concept process. Having an animal accompanied by a strong, powerful female representation makes the design come together and reinforces creating a strong visual representation of *Nidalee* that is powerful, empowering and accurate. This image can be seen on page 30 of the art book.

When looking at the design, I was too harsh with the saturation of the colours. It made it look off-putting and felt harsher on the eyes. There was a lack of differentiation between fur types, which was a problem. A key visual aspect of a tiger is how the white and orange tones melt together whilst the black stripes strike through them. The appearance had an excellent look, but it was not as natural and soft a look. My choice of colours in other areas was also not well done, once again contributing to the overly saturated appearance of the tiger. The tiger's muzzle, chin and short mane were bright orange, but in reality, tigers do not have that much orange on their facial region; they have a white and black melting into the orange. The lack of differentiation contributed to the solid appearance, making the tiger appear less realistic. I have mostly illustrated reptiles and aquatic animals before. I did not have much experience in illustrating mammals, but I produced decent illustrations. My main shortfall was trying to illustrate the tiger like I would with the other animals I have drawn, but that was not the correct approach. I learned that a softer hand, lighter lines work and more intense shading get the colours to meld together. With these findings, I was able to produce better variations.

Concept 2 - Black Panther



Figure 50. My rough digitally drawn concept of the Black Panther.

After creating something with stripes and great details in textures and patterns, I wanted to experiment with a feline with a more sleek and streamlined appearance. This led me to choose a Black Panther for my second concept, seen in Figure 50 and page 31 of my art book. This was the weakest design I had produced for the cat form concepts. I felt it looked very flat and struggled to get much detail. Because of the dark colour, I should have used a different colour to create the linework and contouring for the design to ensure that it still had a good level of detail. This observation came in too late when I looked back at it and realised that it caused this great loss of detail. Despite this, having the black panther present for the concept was important because of their representation in Indian culture. They represent dark forces necessary to balance good and evil (Ghosh, 2013, pg 5). Having the panther was also reminiscent of Disney's popular film, *The*

Jungle Book (1967). The protagonist of the story, *Mowgli*, is accompanied by a panther named *Bagheera*. This also relates to *Nidalee's* story, where she was found by jungle animals and raised in the forest; she, however, chose to remain there to protect it, the same way it protected her as a child (Riot Games, 2009). The similarities between *Mowgli* and *Nidalee* were interesting. Furthermore, this movie was the first Disney movie ever created with the representation of India in mind. The black panther is also a native cat to India (Sunquist and Sunquist, 2002, pg 113), which contributes to keeping the representation accurate. Because of these similarities and the accuracy of panthers being with *Mowgli*, given that the story is set in India, I felt inspired to include a panther in the concepts for the cat form.

Concept 3 - Snow Leopard

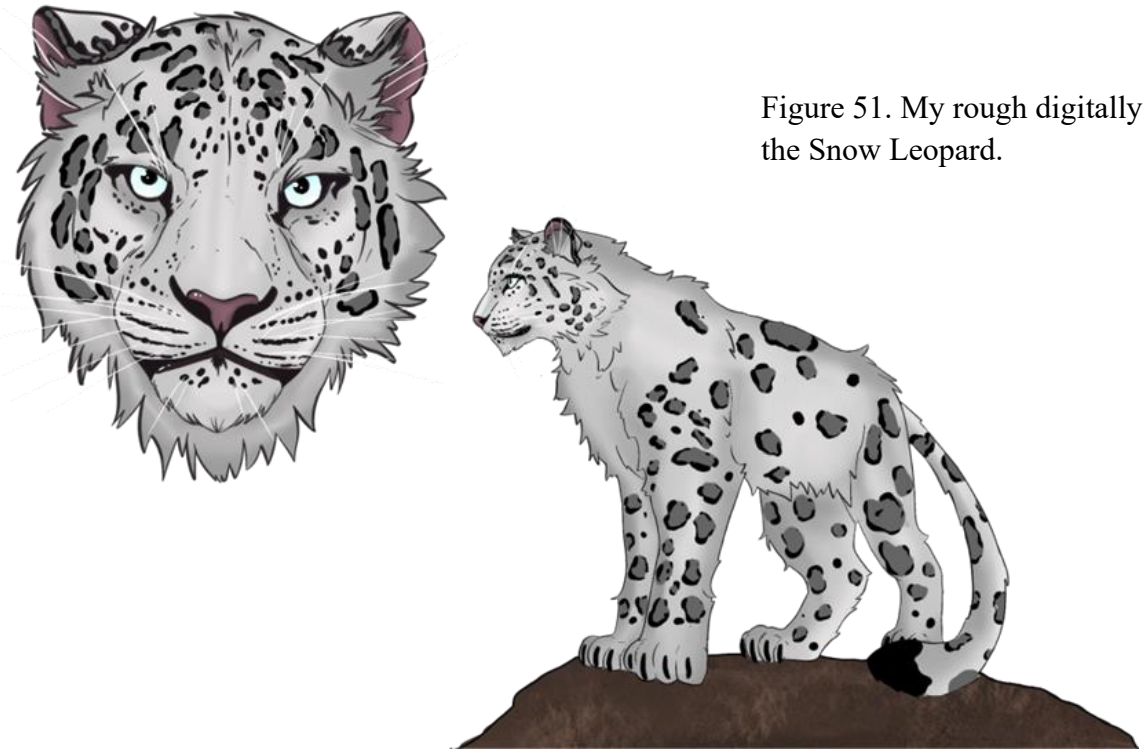


Figure 51. My rough digitally drawn concept of the Snow Leopard.

For the final concept, I decided to illustrate a Snow Leopard, which can be seen in Figure 51 above and on page 32 of my art book. After creating plain designs with stripes, I wanted to design something with a different texture and pattern, which led me to this choice. This concept was the most enjoyable because of its intricacy and variation. However, I still have not provided enough details about this. Snow leopards are incredibly fluffy and have very present spots, whilst some fade out into their fur. I did not encompass this too well in the design, but it is a fair showcase of how I wanted the design to look. The spots are not a solid colour; they have a lighter middle encased with a black border. The body shape has naturally more oversized paw pads and a more enormous tail, which are also accurate to the design. Moreover, the feline is still native to India (Sunquist and Sunquist, 2002, pg 377). The snow leopard represented agility and allusivity (Chakraborty, 2023, pg 237). These symbolic meanings encouraged me to develop this concept, but with further investigation, I thought an animal with this much fur would not fit into the jungle. This made it feel like it lacked a strong reason to be the feline I chose for the final design. It worked based on symbolism and region but lacked realism. I enjoyed creating the Snow Leopard the most, but *Nidalee's* transformation into a Snow Leopard in a jungle was unrealistic. Although I might not seek complete realism for this component, I seek believability. The image for this can be seen on page 32 of the art book.

Overall, this aspect of the creative component was the one I found most challenging. My lack of experience in illustrating mammals made executing some of the designs challenging to approach. Getting the fur and textures correct was tricky, and trying to find a good mixture of realism and animation was even more so, and still, I had not struck a good balance. I have a very graphic-based art style where I use heavy, thick lines and very saturated, bright colours. I am also not proficient in realism, but proficient in animated style art pieces that have fair detail and look semi-realistic and not completely cartoony. I find drawing hair and fur textures difficult due to the intricacies and unlearned techniques needed to master them. Rather than using traditional hatching, cross-hatching and sketching techniques, I had tried to adapt the fur to my art style and drew it the way I usually would, relying on the use of colour, smudging and blending to create the details and

illusion of fur. I used my personal graphic styled technique to create thick bold lines, and used the same technique, experimenting with different brush weights and line thicknesses to create a softer and hairy appearance. I could have practised more mammal illustrations or even created fur to prepare better. I am pleased with the product I ended up with, although it may not be as detailed. I believe I captured the fur-like appearance well. I believe I have still provided accurate pieces of art that reflect Indian culture. There are many design and illustrative areas I can improve on, such as linework, shading, blending and colour choice. Moreover, that was to visually redesign *Nidalee* to make her representative of Indian culture without detracting from the aspects that made her design unique.

Final designs

The Face

After considering the strong and weak aspects of my facial designs, I worked towards creating a final design for the face. I found the overall look of the facial design in concept three, shown in Figure 43 or page 5 in the art book, to be the strongest. The facial design had a striking appearance and was a good balance between rugged, elegant, and recognisable. Similar to that of *Nilah*, more rugged. The messy dark hair framed her face and contributed to her wild nature. I decided to use the blind eye and eye shape from concept one, shown in Figure 35 or on page 3 of my art book, because it made the champions appear more realistic. This was because of the blind eye, indicating *Nidalee* may have experienced the harshness of nature. Furthermore, I wanted her eyes to be of a size similar to *Nilah*'s because they were accurately done. Even though the eye may not look appealing, it does not take away from her general appeal but makes her feel more realistic.

I went overly high-toned and shiny with the golden elements, as they are scraps and should not look so clean and polished; this is something I should have changed more in the final design to make it less clean and more tarnished or worn out, maybe a bit broken as well. The likelihood of *Nidalee* finding pristine jewelry is low and unrealistic. Having these elements appear broken emphasises that they are scraps she has picked up or broken apart to reinforce herself. As a more realistic alternative, plant or thorn-based earrings would have worked a lot better in this case to add the decorations, but they would have still kept to the overall theme of the character. I wanted to incorporate some elements of jewelry still as Durham (2001, pg 205) expressed that a key factor in the representation of Indian women was their adornments. Furthermore, Fernandez and Veer (2004, pg 55) express that jewelry is an important part of Indian culture because of its meaning. I could have fewer elements, but the need for the gold elements worked to reinforce *Nidalee's* Indian representation.

After tweaking the design further, I was far happier with the appearance overall. It was not the most professional style, but that is the art style that I wanted to maintain and use for this dissertation. This creative component was not to showcase or test artistic skill, but more to showcase the way that *Nidalee* could be redesigned to have a design that was more realistic according to her narrative, while showcasing elements of Indian representation with her visual design. Moreover, I achieved this, although there were still elements that could have been different to enhance and improve the design I had created for her face. Aspects such as extra line work, higher contrasted shading, and higher detail could have further contributed to this redesign, but I am pleased overall with how it turned out. The designs are shown below in Figure 52 and on pages 6 and 7 of my art book.

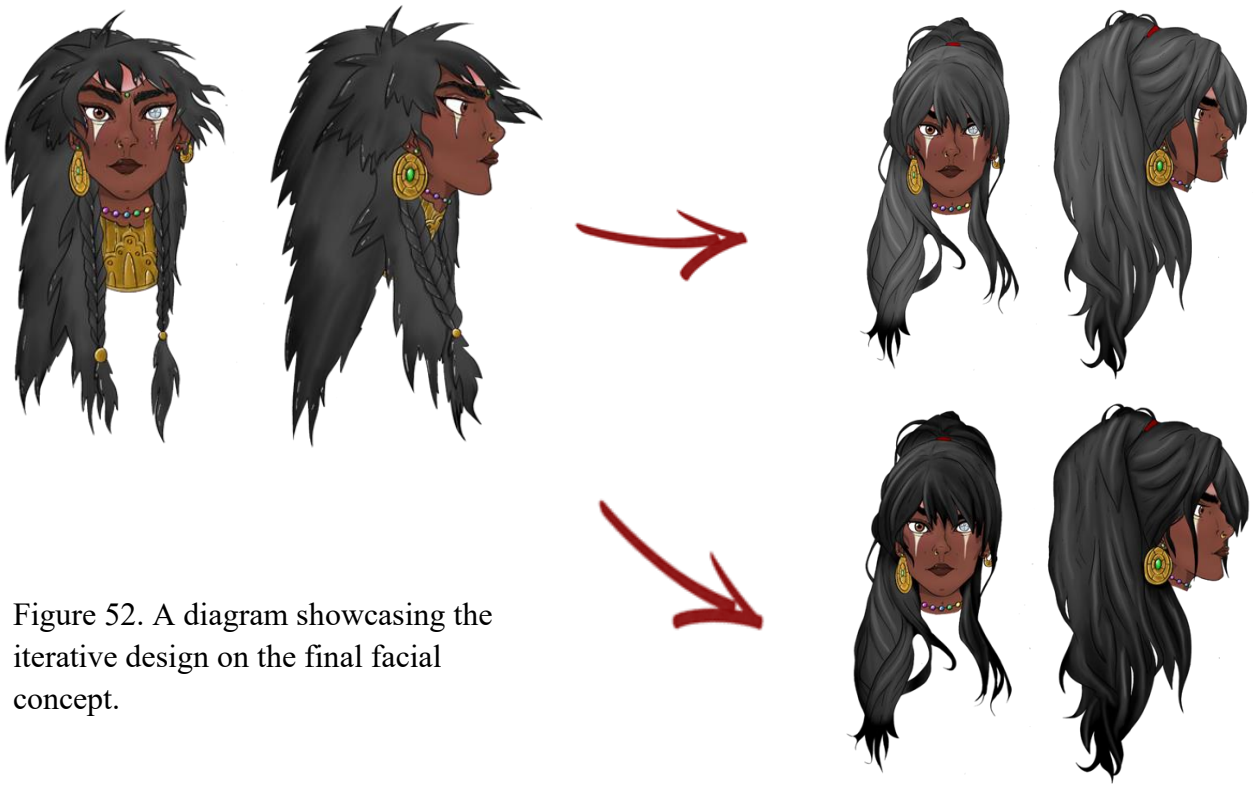


Figure 52. A diagram showcasing the iterative design on the final facial concept.

Outfit and weapon design

Outfit

I found concept two, shown in Figure 44 and on page 16 of the art book, to be the most substantial design for the outfit design. This is because this design has a great sense of asymmetry while maintaining balance. The colour contrast makes the outfit feel like it was put together with scraps. Moreover, the use of colours symbolises the main *Chakras*. I wanted to deepen the Indian representation within the design further. It can be seen in the final design, in Figure 53 and shown on page 21 of my art book, where I experimented and added different colours and materials, but not in an overbearing manner. The armor here is more broken and less held together, which suits the aesthetic better because *Nidalee* would have had to piece different types of scrap together to create armor for herself. However, I still feel it is not as broken and asymmetrical as it should be.

If I wanted it to look more like scrap, there should have been larger chunks missing and more colour variations showcasing how pieces may be gold, silver or bronze rather than just one solid colour. This led to my colour concept for the final outfit. So, with this in mind, I edited the image and implemented changes after further assessment. I also wanted to use the fur the way I did in concept one, shown in Figure 40 or on page 11 of the art book, because of how I framed the facial region. I decided to add more wear to the armor itself. I did not want it to look as pristine as it did in the refined digital concept of concept two, shown in Figure 44 or on page 16 of the art book. Although that was meant to illustrate the overall idea, it should have looked worn out to emphasise further that *Nidalee* would have needed to gather pieces over time, where some may be newer than others, resulting in the pieces being more worn out or pristine.



Figure 53. A diagram showcasing the refinement of the outfit concept.

Colour concepting

I wanted to further this design process by experimenting with colours. In order to do this, I made colour palette drafts. I used colours that are prevalent in many forms of Indian wear, whilst still trying to maintain the essence of scrap fabrics and leathers that were found in the jungle that *Nidalee* inhabits and were pieced together. These fabrics could have been found in war flags, armour covers or even from the helms of the armour she may have picked up. I went too bright on the metals, which are the shiny rhombus shapes. I should have tainted the metal and added dirt or grime to create a scrappy appearance. This would emphasise that they are pieces of scrap pulled together from different jungle areas. However, these squares were how I developed the colour drafts for my final outfit. It is a combination of a few different ones and some newer textures and patterns that I found and implemented as well. These can be seen below in Figure 54 and on page 23 of the art book.



Figure 54. The various fabric and metal trials I made to experiment with colours and shading.

Shown in Figure 55 and on page 24 of my art book is the final design for *Nidalee's* outfit with the implementation of colours and different armor pigments. This is where I took the final design of the outfit and experimented with colours. I had initially used a silver armor base, a bronze, grimy armor base and a gold one. I had initially settled on the gold base being the final concept, but I mixed them all because that did not align with the idea of scrapping mismatched armor. This allowed me to observe the metals in the final design and determine which ones I wanted to use in

which areas of the outfit. The mixture of metals and fabrics was essential in creating the pieced-together look I wanted. Furthermore, the final concept for the outfit uses all Chakra colours and some Navagraha colours, which deepens the Indian elements within it. Based on the colour choices and the symbolism regarding Chakra, this outfit represents awareness, determination, compassion, creativity, spirituality and pure consciousness (Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022, pg 5). I found this tied in well with showcasing elements of Indian culture. There are three variations to showcase colour concepting on the fabrics and armour, alongside my amalgamation of the three. The silver was to represent *Ionia*, the bronze was to represent *Ixtal*, and the gold was to represent Indian culture. This can be observed in Figure 52 below and on page 24 of my art book.

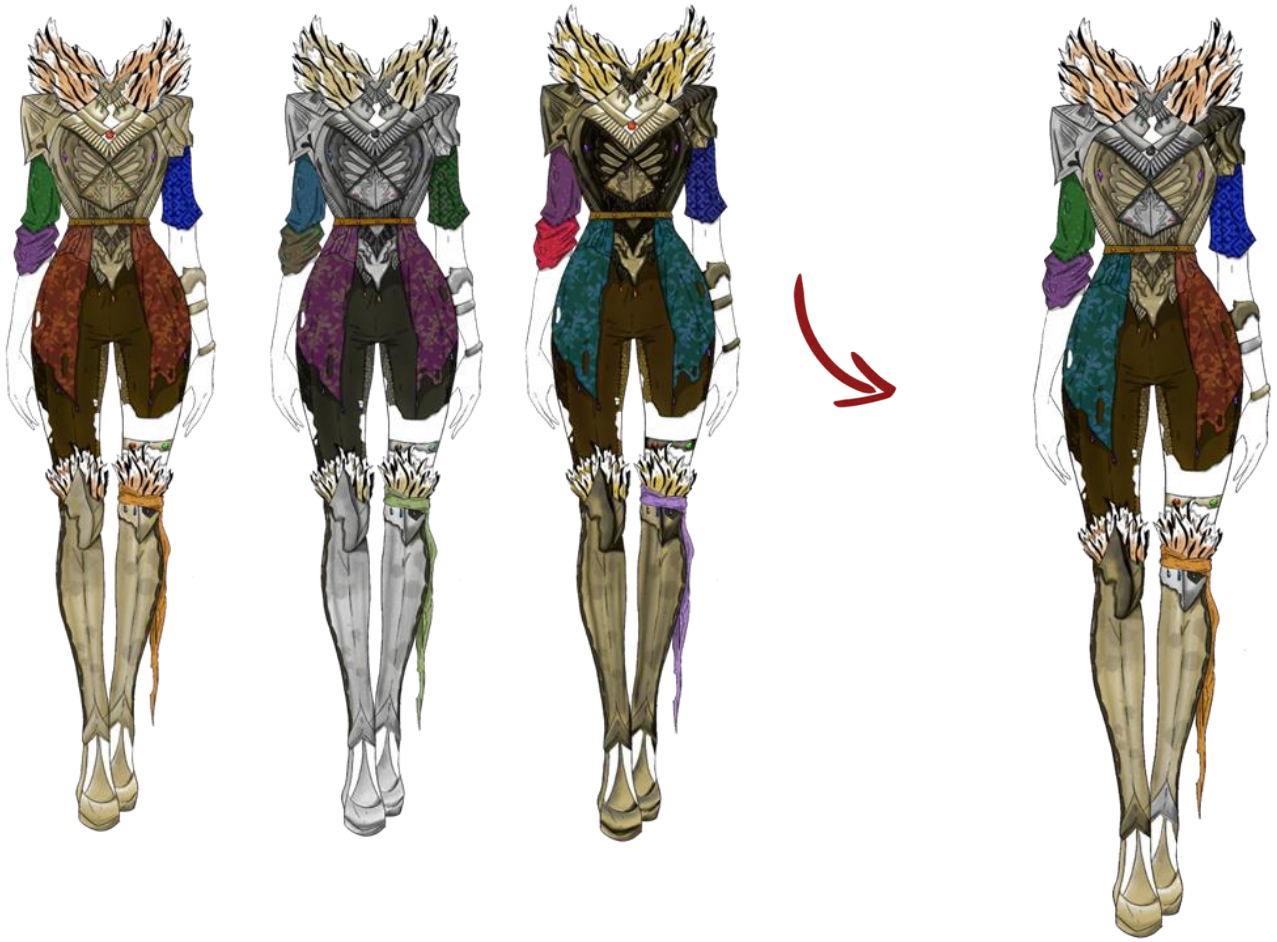


Figure 55. The iterative process of trialing different colours on the final armour concept to achieve a mismatched effect.

The Final Outfit

After experimenting with the different colours and metal types, I decided that combining the different metals could achieve the scrappy and mismatched look I was trying to achieve. The mismatched look of the armor was important because stereotypes of the "other" conformed to a set of ideals through the Western Gaze, which were meant to be depicted as perfect. *Nidalee* was included in this stereotype, as expressed in Chapter Three, where I discussed that she did not have a single scar or blemish on her body. This is done to create sex appeal through the visual designs, as *Nidalee* would be seen as less attractive if she were to have scars, a strange outfit and look rugged. This is because of the glamourization of the "other" with the expectation that they are visually perfect and mentally lacking (Durham, 2001, pg 204). These mixed metals were done to challenge the glamourization and showcase that Indian women can still be appealing with scars, blind eyes and a completely mismatched outfit while still being intelligent. The gold elements contribute to the representation of Indian culture, while the bronze and silver represent other regions such as *Ixtal* and *Ionia*. The combination of these metals reinforces the aspects of *Nidalee's* Indian design and the regions within the world of which she is a part.

I mapped out how I wanted each to be shown using the three metal palettes. This indicates that each piece comes from different armor sets from different regions and must be assembled. The final materials are all prominent colours used in many Indian sarees. Blues, purples, greens, oranges, and reds are the most common colours typically used for traditional Indian clothing (Beck, 1969, 558). Each colour represents something within Indian culture, but these colours can also represent ranking depending on the context (Beck, 1969, 558). The greens represent prosperity and strength, blue represents the gods and goddesses with blue skin, orange and yellow represent the clearing of negative energy, and red represents vitality and fierceness (Beck, 1969, pg 554). These colours are usually very saturated and bright, but I did not want them to be in my design. I wanted the material to have a worn and washed look, which it does in some areas. This challenges

the notion that physical elements should be perfect when depicting the “other” (Durham, 2001, pg 204). There are still areas to be improved on. However, it illustrates for this project how *Nidalee’s* base design could have been interesting and appealing without overly sexualising the champion. The final outfit is shown below in Figure 56 and on page 24 of the art book.



Figure 56. My final concept of the armor with the mismatched armor and fabric colours.

Final Weapon Design

Indian weapons, like most other cultural weapons, come in a variety. However, when deciding what weapon to choose, the *Trishula* was the most accurate Indian representative option. The weapon is wielded by many great and strong Indian gods and goddesses, such as *Durga* and *Lord Shiva* (Ramsey, 2016). Because of its strong link to Indian culture and representation and the fact that it was wielded by gods and goddesses, I felt it would reinforce *Nidalee's* representation the most. The *Trishula* strongly resembles a trident in that it is three-pronged and a very top-heavy weapon in terms of design (Rao, 1914, pg 7). Across cultures, a trident has different meanings and representations. For example, in Greek mythology, it is wielded by gods who control the ocean. In Hindu mythology, it is wielded by gods who represent the three aspects of the wielder: the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer (Ramsey, 2016). The trident itself represents the three Indian *gunas*, *Sattvika* (consciousness), *Rajasika* (activity) and *Tamasika* (stability) (Ramsey, 2016). I incorporated the spear and outfit design from concept two, seen in Figure 44 or shown on pages 16 and 26 of the art book, instead of taking one from the other concepts. This was because I found that the two worked well together; they complemented each other's design elements and were both powerfully symbolic of Indian representation. Although there are groupings in terms of outfit and weapon, I felt they can still be interchanged, as each outfit design and weapon reflects Indian culture.

For the final design, I decided that concept two's weapon would be the best suited. This is because I found that the weapon resonates more with Indian culture and, overall, was the most substantial design because of its depiction in illustrations of Indian gods and goddesses (Ramsey, 2016). I did fear it would look less like a spear and more like a glaive. This fear led me to create two iterations of my final spear. I found that the initial idea was too top-heavy and, from a design perspective, would not make sense for the character to be throwing around. Because of this, I developed a second iteration of the spear, using a more streamlined and slicker three-pronged look. It gives the weapon an overall lighter and less bulky appearance. This slightly took away from the trishula look, which I did not want to move away from, but I wanted to be logical while still representing the Indian flair of the weapon, which I think iteration two did well. It had a trishula appearance,

just slimmer. However, if I were to develop this design further in the future, I would have made the spear's design slicker and more streamlined than it already is. I may have even used one of the other options I drafted to achieve a more aerodynamic appearance. This, again, was to ensure that I was still maintaining believability based on teachings from Zeleniuk, where he expresses that artists should strive to represent better characters and their elements through functional designs (2023, pg 64). This reinforced the minor changes made to the weapon because, although I wanted to make the design representative of Indian culture, the weapon still needed to be functional. Figure 57 shows the illustrations I did for the weapons below. There are rough concepts for the spears and iterations, one and two. These can be seen in the art book on pages 26 to 28.

After experimenting with the different colours and metal types, combining the different metals could achieve that scrappy and mismatched look I was trying to achieve. The mismatched look of the armour was important because stereotypes of the "other" conformed to a set of ideals through the Western Gaze, which were meant to be depicted as perfect. *Nidalee* was included in this stereotype, as expressed in Chapter Three, where I discussed that she did not have a single scar or blemish on her body. This is done to create sex appeal through the visual designs, as *Nidalee* would be seen as less attractive if she were to have scars, a strange outfit and look rugged. This is because of the glamorisation of the "other" with the expectation that they are visually perfect and mentally lacking (Durham, 2001, pg 204). These mixed metals were done to challenge the glamourisation and showcase that Indian women can still be appealing with scars, blind eyes and a completely mismatched outfit while still being intelligent. The gold elements contribute to the representation of Indian culture, while the bronze and silver represent other regions such as *Ixtal* and *Ionia*. The combination of these metals reinforces the aspects of *Nidalee's* Indian design and the regions within the world of which she is a part.

I mapped out how I wanted each to be shown using the three metal palettes. This indicates that each piece comes from different armour sets from different regions and must be assembled. The

final materials are all prominent colours used in many Indian sarees. Blues, purples, greens, oranges, and reds are the most common colours typically used for traditional Indian clothing (Beck, 1969, 558). Each colour represents something within Indian culture, but these colours can also represent ranking depending on the context (Beck, 1969, 558). The greens represent prosperity and strength, blue represents the gods and goddesses with blue skin, orange and yellow represent the clearing of negative energy, and red represents vitality and fierceness (Beck, 1969, pg 554). These colours are usually very saturated and bright, but I did not want them to be in my design. I wanted the material to have a worn and washed look, which it does in some areas. This challenges the notion that physical elements should be perfect when depicting the "other" (Durham, 2001, pg 204). There are still areas to be improved . However, it illustrates for this project how *Nidalee's* base design could have been interesting and appealing without overly sexualizing the champion. The final outfit is shown below in Figure 57 and on page 24 of the art book.



Figure 57. My rough weapon designs informing the iterative process towards a final weapon.

After further assessment, I found the final design too plain at the top, so I implemented more detailing and spacing to deepen the weapon's aerodynamic appearance further. This also reinforces elements of Indian culture as Indian women were known for their adornments (Durham, 2001, pg 204). Even though these changes were minor, they affected the weapon's appearance quite a bit. This is shown below in Figure 58 and on page 28 of my art book.



Figure 58. My final version of my weapon after adding extra detailing.

Final Feline

After more practice, I achieved something I was satisfied with for my final feline design. The colours were less saturated and looked softer. The linework was more defined and clearer, and the stripes looked balanced in distribution and weight. I also executed the white markings better, ensuring they stood out and looked more realistic. I could have added more detail to create a more flocculent look, but I wanted to have it as similar to the final face design as possible. However, I was not done there. I adapted the tiger to match the human face of my final design. In order to do this, I had to take aspects of the human form's facial design and incorporate them into the tiger form's design. This allowed me to replicate the paint markings, bindi and blind eye on the facial design into the design of the tiger. This can be observed below in Figure 59 and on pages 33 and 34 of the art book.



Figure 59. My final concept of the tiger with the implementation of *Nidalee'*s decorative features to its face.



Figure 60. A diagram indicating the application of *Nidalee*'s human features onto the tiger.

These images in Figure 60 and on page 35 of my art book showcase how I made edits to the tiger's face to match the design of *Nidalee's* human face. Elements such as the face markings and the jewellery were carried over to keep consistency. Overall, I was pleased with how this looked. I enjoyed bringing the designs together and making them cohesive. However, I think some elements are gaudy and could have been done without. I think maintaining the physical features would have looked more pleasant than adding the jewels. However, a key component I wanted to maintain was the green gemstone at the centre of the forehead, as this is an important Indian symbol. This represents a Bindi, a round dot worn on the centre of the forehead that symbolises the third eye, used to maintain one's internal energy and protect it (Hamid, 2015, pg 104). In the context of the game, I wanted the Bindi to represent her divine power and ability to turn into a tiger at free will. I envisioned that she would be able to channel her feline powers through the Bindi. And when she did, it would glow brightly, showing power emerging through her crown *Chakra*. I believe that by doing this, I was able to create a meaningful link between her visual appearance and physical capabilities.

I was pleased with the overall designs produced during the creative practice component of this dissertation. Using teachings from van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011), I made my gallery of images to reflect on and decide what would be best for the redesign of *Nidalee*. I could piece together the different concepts by deciding which ideas worked best. The teachings from Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais and Olalere (2022) allowed me to consider the colours I had used for the designs and the representation behind them using the Indian *Chakras*. This allowed me to attribute colours to *Nidalee* based on her backstory and the qualities players might have expected her to have in a symbolic and meaningful way. I do wish I could have incorporated some elements of magic showcasing her healing abilities and relating that back to *Chakras* to deepen the Indian representation further.

Furthermore, teachings from Durham (2001) allowed me to understand the depictions of Indian beauty and its adornments, as well as the dangers of stereotypes it can create. Dangers such as using techniques in an untasteful way that deter, sexualize, fetishise or disparage the character's visual design. This feeds and carries over negative stereotypes of characters into future generations. The expression of Indian female characters as being decorative was also something I paid mind to, as I wanted to maintain the glamour and not reduce the character to jewels that carry the stereotype of beauty before brains. Durham's (2001) explanation and situation of an Indian woman guided this research in maintaining the balance of appearance for me as the designer and the audience. Using her teachings, I could add the elements without portraying *Nidalee* in a sexualized manner while still representing the importance of jewellery within Indian culture, as expressed by Fernandez and Veer (2004). Furthermore, teachings from Hall (1997) and Said (1978) allowed me to frame my practice, understanding the reasons behind the problematic design of *Nidalee* discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Through their teachings, I knew what not to do and how to stay away from Westernised ideals of what an Indian woman should be depicted as. These frameworks allowed me to explore the character design as a young Indian woman, knowing how to challenge stereotypes and produce a character that meaningfully represents Indian culture without having to stereotype her.

Closing Thoughts and Final Design of *Nidalee*

This was the completed final for the project. I had showcased *Nidalee* with her weapon and feline form so that all the elements could be seen together. I also wanted to incorporate a side view of this, but I chose to do the frontal view only, as it showcased all the necessary information we need to see that is not covered by the sections above. Aspects such as her features are shown in the facial design section, so I wanted this final image to be reminiscent of a splash art. A single image that showcases the character.

Presented below and on page 37 of my art book was my final drawing and the form I had chosen to represent *Nidalee*. I had tried to rework her to make her look as close to a figure that represents the essence of an Indian character. From her hair to her weapon and outfit. I had done meticulous research to try and replicate armour inspired by Indian warriors, which can be observed from the artboard within the appendix. There were not many images, but these images were the ones I found to be most accurate in terms of Indian representation and challenging stereotypes. I could have researched further and even referred more to illustrations of Indian Gods and Goddesses to inspire me. Although I have not done that now, it is something I can do to develop this design further. I could have also drawn more inspiration from *Ionian* materials to make the depiction in greater relation to the Asian representation already present within the game. This was drawn from the clothing of other *Ionian* characters. This included fabric, jewellery, colour and detail. Looking at elements from *Karma,* especially, aided me in how I went about designing the fabric to make it align more with what the fabric on her outfit looked like. Furthermore, the analysis done in Chapter Three using van Leeuwen and Jewitt's *Basic Model of Analysis* (2011, pg 7) provided me with a gallery of images from *League of Legends* depicting *Nidalee* with meaningful designs from which I could draw inspiration. I could have used this model to create a more in-depth gallery and even

add more external resources to draw inspiration, as mentioned earlier, by using Indian Gods and Goddesses. However, this consideration will be implemented in future designs. I could have done further research seeking other models that could have contributed to a more in-depth analysis. This could have given me more aspects of visual design to consider and implement into the design to further its accuracy.

The connotative and denotative analysis framework provided by Hall (1997, pg 38) allowed me to deconstruct the champions to their simple elements, which inspired and informed my creative process regarding their facial features, body types and hair. Furthermore, through Hall's (1997, pg 38), I understood the meaning behind specific depictions of Indian women, which allowed me to better inform how I wanted to instil meaning. Using *Chakras* Vladimirovna Kudrya-Marais and Olalere (2022, pg 5) allowed me to further deepen the meaning I wanted to instill using *Chakra* and symbolism. Tipler (2013, pg 1) allowed me to challenge the negativity behind representing women alongside cats and frame it in a way representative of Indian culture. Using the signifiers of racial identity, *Nidalee's* correlation to the Indian Pakka tribe and the obscurity of her race, I was able to deliver an image that explores whether she was to be Indian.

Through these teachings and findings, I tried my best to create something I could feel represented by and represent other people with. I knew the design was not perfect by any means. However, the process showcased that with time, effort and research, characters can be improved and developed to be accurate and appealing. I believed that if a professional artist were to pick up a project like this, they would create something even better than I did and be inspired by an accurate but still intriguing design. Overall, this process was difficult and tedious. However, I learned a great deal from it and showcased even more than I ever thought I could have achieved.

The time and effort were worth it when I revisited the product I had created. I know that the design is imperfect, and additional resources and frameworks could have allowed me to deepen the Indian representation within *Nidalee's* design. However, without much help or guidance, I was proud of what I had achieved alone. However, as I expressed in Chapter One, just because the champion works does not mean it cannot be further improved. I hope to work on this design past this dissertation and keep changing and editing elements within it to deepen *Nidalee's* Indian representation further. For now, I offer the final visual redesign of *Nidalee,* which can be seen below in Figure 61 and on page 37 of my art book.



Figure 61. A diagram indicating the application of *Nidalee*'s human features onto the tiger.

Chapter Five

Conclusion:

The End Of The Beginning

My Question

At the start of this dissertation, I was driven by passion and determined to showcase and bring problematic depictions of Indian women within *League of Legends* to light. Using my findings, I wanted to prove through analysis that the Indian champions could have been further developed to better represent their elements of Indian culture. To further prove that it could be done, I visually redesigned *Nidalee*. I made a creative component redesigning *Nidalee* to prove that the champion could function the same as she did in the game but be better represented and uphold a positive Indian depiction. However, this was all guided by the teachings and frameworks I had found during my dissertation. Using my research question on the representation of Indian women within *League of Legends*, I aimed to prove the aforementioned through theories of representation from Hall (1997), Said (1978) and Durham (2001). I could understand the meaning and problematic nature of the visual depictions of Indian women. This had also equipped me with knowledge to avoid harmful stereotyping and reduction within my creative practice. Using van Leeuwen and Jewitt's model of analysis and Isbister's (2023) psychological approach to character design, by approaching her cosmetics in the form of the gallery and deconstructing their designs, I was theoretically equipped when it came time to analysing and redesigning *Nidalee*. Anand (2007), Durham (2001), and Vladimirovna and Olalere (2022) further equipped me to understand how to approach the Indian elements within the redesign of *Nidalee*. These scholars equipped me with the theoretical teachings to understand how Indian female champions within *League of Legends* can

be analysed to work towards progressive designs. The idea of progressive designs shows that when done with care, what is being represented can showcase powerful and meaningful representation.

This dissertation spoke to analysing female Indian bodies in *League of Legends* to develop techniques towards a purposefully reflective visual design. Moreover, based on my findings, I would argue that it could. Through different techniques and breaking down the visual designs of the champions using denotative and connotative analysis from Hall (1997, pg 38), I pulled together a set of variables and data that I used and worked with to develop the designs for my creative practice. Through my research and my creative practice project, I was able to produce designs based on the data I collected to better and improve a champion who needed to be visually empowered by her difference and not hindered by it. Data in the form of the analysis provided in Chapter Three gave me elements of inspiration that I wanted to incorporate into my visual redesign of *Nidalee*. This analysis used Hall's (1997, pg 38) teachings on representation and van Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2011, pg 7) teachings on character analysis to unpack the designs of the three female Indian champions, *Nidalee, Karma* and *Nilah,* to understand the meaning and reasons behind the way they had been represented. Furthermore, Table 1.1 provided a summary of the design elements that worked well and did not in accordance with the theories of Isbister (2022) and van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011). Chapter Three formed the criteria from which my creative component came to be. It offered me a guideline of what elements to include and redo in my redesign of *Nidalee*. At the same time, other champions' visual successes also contributed to her redesign in the form of hair, skin tone, and body type from *Nilah*, as well as eyes and body type from *Karma*.

The results in the form of concepts I made for *Nidalee's* visual redesign in my creative component allowed me to better understand how much thought and care needs to be put into a visual rework of characters in video games. I knew the process would be theoretically extensive, but the value of learning all of the information and teaching I have received has impacted me as a researcher and video game creator. The theories I have learned have impacted my approach to design in many ways that I will carry forward and apply in future projects. However, through this research, I

learned that a common trend was the whitewashing or *harmful interchange* of Asian cultures, which was something I made sure I was mindful of during my creative component (Payumo, 2023, pg 5). I ensured that the elements represented both *Nidalee* and the elements of representation in a meaningful way. There were moments when *Nidalee's* visual redesign appeared as though its designs were not South Indian but Native American. This was achieved through inspiration from the South Indian Pakka Tribe, from which *Nidalee* is heavily inspired. These different aspects needed careful consideration, time and planning to ensure that I could produce what I needed to and that it expressed Indian culture the way I wanted. The task of redesigning *Nidalee* was challenging, but my theoretical frameworks and findings throughout my research aided this process and provided me with ample guidelines from which to work. Throughout this dissertation, I responded to the problematic representation of female Indian bodies. I proposed a solution and produced pieces of art to substantiate my research and showcase how immense a difference research, care and time can make in visually representing someone or a group of people in video games, in particular, *League of Legends*.

My Research

This dissertation had many different avenues that needed to be researched. Through my research, I found means of understanding representation and what it means to be falsely represented through Stuart Hall's (1997) and Edward Said's (1978) theories on representation and fetish. Both authors explain the Western gaze from different perspectives, where Hall (1997, pg 266) is more indicative of how misrepresentation it created and fetishised; Said (1978) frames it in a way more readily understandable from an Asian standpoint. While Hall (1997) also has a strong focus on feminine representation and fetishism, Said (1978) too makes strong arguments. By combining the teachings of these scholars, I was able to better understand how the visual design of those champions came to light and the possible inspirations behind them. With the information here, I pushed forward with my research by piecing together two similar theories around representation. Hall (1997)

framed representation in a racial, sexualized, and fetishised manner, which I was able to apply to my analysis of the champions in Chapter Three to deconstruct and understand their designs. Furthermore, Said (1978) and Durham (2001) framed representation in a racially relevant way regarding this dissertation. This allowed me to align my analysis using Hall's (1997) teaching with Said's (1978) and Durham's (2001) to produce an analysis that approached the champions from a standpoint that questioned their sexualized, fetishised and racially inaccurate appearances. Barthes further aided in his expression that text and writing regarding a singular topic may arise from various types of people. This helped me understand how and why problematic images come to exist (1968, pg 148). He expresses that once a piece of media is created, it is left up to the viewers to derive and interpret, which was potentially the reason behind the problematic images still having a large prominence in media. Barthes' teachings further made me aware that I would be in the same instance. I had created a piece of media that would be consumed and carried over from person to person, and this was a motivator to ensure that what I had produced had potential for development but did not carry signifiers of any harmful representation.

I found an engaging resource from MasterClass (2020) that provided a set of techniques for creating a video game character with depth. However, that was helpful nothing in comparison to materials such as those from Sheldon (2014), who expresses that some rules need to be bent when designing a to produce something meaningful; van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011) who provided methods to analyze the champions and understand their designs as well as how to work with the data collected from the analysis, while Schroter (2014) encourages the designer to make mental models of characters based on their written identities. These scholars allowed me to piece together what it truly means to analyse and develop a champion. They showcased the different ways I could break the champions down and compare and develop them to produce meaningful and informative designs. There was not a significant amount of focus on gender, race or religion within their teachings, but when connecting their techniques to my learnings from Hall (1997) and Said (1978), I was able to weave these two different topics of research together when completing an analysis of *Nidalee*, *Karma* and *Nilah*. The combination of teachings on character design, development and

character representation from Sheldon (2014), Schroter (2014) and van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011) were applied alongside Hall's (1997) and Said's (1978) teachings on the representational, racial, and sexualized deconstruction of the champions. In having knowledge of character design and representational theories, I had a guideline and set of criteria from which my creative component was created. Furthermore, this allowed me to make informed decisions to create *Nidalee's* visual redesign as best as I could, whilst not falling into any stereotypical traps of visual design, further hindering the champion's visual design. This is because these teachings provided me with the knowledge needed for character design, representation, and stereotypes. I learned that the resources you use need to be intensely and highly focused on important aspects. That should go without saying, but initially, MasterClass (2020) intrigued me, as I thought it was offering a somewhat solid foundation on character design from and internal and external perspective. However, compared to other resources, it offered minimal meaningful design elements in comparison to theories of character design and development from Schroter (2014), van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2011), and Sheldon (2014).

The theories from Lynch et al. (2016, pg 568) allowed me to justify myself in the reasoning behind my redesign of *Nidalee* without seeming like an artist who was opposed to seductive character design approaches. Lynch et al. (2016, pg 568) frame the design of female video game characters in a way that expresses that the designs should be able to exist without catering to the male needs. This encouraged me during my creative component because I was creating *Nidalee's* visual redesign to represent and accurately reflect Indian culture. Moreover, I wanted to ensure that elements showcased and represented Indian culture without the need for sexualized elements to make *Nidalee* appealing. Further theories from Lynch et al. (2016, pg 565) expressed that characters around the time of *League of Legends* were released having sexualized appearances to cater for male-dominated audiences. It showed that champions ranging from different years in the early 2000s were often sexualized to create appeal. This allowed me to frame my reasoning for the design better and emphasised its importance even more. Jansz and Martis (2007) explained that my research is similar to mine and that it is a stereotypical phenomenon. This worked well in

conjunction with Hall's (1997) work on fetishism and the representation of females. Both Hall (1997) and Jansz and Martis (2007) focus on the stereotypes perpetuated on the "other" and their inaccurate representations stemming from the stereotypes. This again aligned as Hall (1997) offers an approach to understanding representation through the Western gaze, while Jansz and Martiz (2007) framed my research in a more relevant way due to the focus being on the representation of Indian female bodies in games and not only general media such as advertisements and posters. The knowledge I gained from these various scholars allowed me to approach this dissertation and its creative component with a well-informed sense of character creation and representation of Indian women. Their findings contributed to my creative component being a solid foundation from which the Indian representation of female video game characters can stem. Using their materials allowed me to redesign *Nidalee*, having the most relevant and informed approach. Their teachings helped redesign *Nidalee* in a way that did not change the way the champion worked but rather in a way that offered meaningful and well-informed elements of Indian representation and culture.

Aspects Of Improvement

Throughout this dissertation, my creative component and my research have argued that the female Indian champions within *League of Legends* need their visual designs to be reworked. Chapters Two and Three express the attention given to champions visually aligned to their backstories, yet prioritised over champions that lacked accurate representation. The creative component proved that the redesign of champions can be done effectively with proper research and theoretical frames to act as a guideline. Chapter Three further proved through its visual deconstruction of *Nidalee*, *Karma* and *Nilah* that there is a need for visual redesigns to make them appear more accurate and representative of Indian culture. However, finding my research and creating something meaningful is long and complex. This is because there is a heavy lack of Asian Indian representatives and cultural materials. Finding it generally was already difficult; combining it with the video game character element made it even more difficult, as fewer materials were available. This is why most

of the research and theory I used combined separate teachings that I pieced together to make relevant towards my research topic. I often found it challenging to find resources and materials that were specific enough for me. I struggled the most to find research on weapons and more ancient Indian cultural elements. The lack of resources regarding weapons directed me towards using Indian Gods and Goddesses, and they often held weapons in illustrations of them. I found that more research was done regarding the illustrations of Indian Gods and Goddesses and the elements within their illustrations. The illustrations and elements allowed me to explain weapon choices and reasoning based on the symbolism they had within the illustrations.

My greatest struggle throughout this dissertation was my dyslexia. My dyslexia made processing information much longer, spelling and using the correct grammar more difficult and reading large bodies of text intimidating. However, I could have made the work lighter for myself by distributing the work more manageable to make it easier to digest. I struggled combing through the theory depending on the time it was released, as some fonts are difficult to read, making my reading process far slower. The mass of pages was intimidating; I was sometimes unsure how to approach them. The most significant difficulty was my spelling and grammatical issues because, at times, I type faster than my mind can keep up, and the words start to become muddled and inconsistent. However, because of my disability, I do not see the errors unless I focus on looking for them. Despite these struggles, I tried to find different versions with different texts and ensure I had the necessary materials for this dissertation.

For my creative practice, I should have taken more time to develop some of the designs. Despite that, I am proud of how the designs turned out, although I wish I had more time to experiment. Even so, I still incorporated traditional Indian cultures and patterns, which was the goal of the art pieces. However, with more time, I could have developed more interesting designs that remained true to the champion while having tasteful representation within her design. Furthermore, it would have been more meaningful to have more rough designs than just three. This showcases how well or poorly I experimented with the different facial features, skin tones, hair textures and other

unique aspects that could have worked well with the designs. I could have used more premade materials as cosmetics for each of the different champions to deepen my analysis further. However, as it stands, my dissertation uses my provided materials to argue my research question and propose solutions towards my creative practice.

Contributions To Work

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that the representation of the three champions, *Nidalee, Karma* and *Nilah*, could be used to produce more meaningful designs. Moreover, I could use the analysis of all three to offer a visual redesign for *Nidalee.* The materials used to reinforce the ideas showcase subverted designs can be redone in order to more accurately represent them. I could have included various other games and the representation of their Indian characters. However, this dissertation aims to showcase how *Riot Games* specifically has the ability and power to rework its champions visually, but it does not have a set of criteria on which it bases its selection of champions. Throughout my research, I found more generalized options focused more on the stereotypical portrayals of characters in media, but not so much in context to the game itself and the stereotypes of Indian people within them. Even though my research and creative practice are solely centered around female Indian bodies, I feel there are two key takeaways. The first is the generational impact on Indian character representation and how it affects the viewers perception of Indian people. And secondly, the ways in which designers have failed female video game characters through problematic depictions through sexualizing, fetishizing and reducing them. These two factors have been heavily stressed and reinforced throughout this dissertation in the hopes of creating awareness and bringing about change.

My dissertation and creative practice are steppingstones in improving existing designs without having to discard them. It proves that you do not have to remove or delete characters from a game to provide better representations of them. The existing characters can be used as a shell, and their

visual design can be developed until they encapsulate what they are meant to. Rather than abandoning old art and its past, a designer can use it to educate and showcase development by sharing the process. This would allow audiences to follow along the process of watching something they may have once disliked grow and metamorphose into something meaningful—similarly shown in Chapter Three, where I have explained the progression of Indian representation of female Indian champions within *League of Legends*. Furthermore, the champion successes in Chapter Three showcased the progression of the cosmetics offered over the years. These cosmetics showcase the improvement and implementation of accurate representation, even though they exist separately from the base design of the champions. I offer an approach that takes these old artworks and shows audiences how they can be improved to represent the character better. Old characters do not exist as entities that are just used to learn from past mistakes. Instead, they can be a learning experience through the active progression and development of the character. Designers can learn more from the progression of design rather than its stagnation. They can learn techniques to improve something and make it better instead of just glancing over it without the desire to improve it. For example, *Riot Games* considered feedback on *Smolder'*s face, as shown in Chapter One. This was to offer insight and perspective on the designs before they are committed to and released without any appreciation. And this is something my research and creative practice offer.

This dissertation has taught me valuable representation, character analysis and character design information. My creative project was driven by a passion for finding a problematic design and offering a more informed one. In doing this, I wanted to create a foundation where designers can look at something, see it for what it is and recognise its potential. Throughout this dissertation, if this is done more often, designers can emphasise and create a field where characters are more tasteful and representative of things, as is the designer's wish. Furthermore, designers can be taught to be more mindful of how they produce content when they may not know the implications of what they're trying to develop. This dissertation argues that creating characters representing and symbolising preexisting cultures and races within real-world games should be researched and developed with great care and knowledge, as the process requires extensive time and theoretical

reinforcements to ensure the representation is not problematic or inaccurate. This is important to ensure that designers do not alter characters' stories to align them with the mistakes they have made.

Many different techniques can be learned and taught through the extensive act of redesigning characters. Regardless of what it's for, it is seen and consumed by the audience. Hence, I believe designers owe it to themselves and to their characters to allow them to be the best they can be and uphold the stories, history, and culture they carry. A quote by Gabrielle Zevin, an author who writes novels about video games, states, "To design a game is to imagine being the one playing it." So, if we assume the same about characters in games, to make a character is to imagine being the one playing as them. It is important to ensure the character's form follows its function. Be it a villain or a hero, a man or a woman, a preexisting race, or a fictional one. The character should always succeed in the roles set out while having an appearance that best represents their purpose and background. This dissertation has contributed to the knowledge and theories surrounding Indian female bodies and their representation within *League of Legends* by exploring topics of representation, character design and symbolism. Using theories of representation and fetishism from Hall (1991), Said (1978), and Durham (2001), this dissertation showcased problematic character designs in *League of Legends* as well how these stereotypes can be carried over and maintain their prevalence through the need for sales and customer satisfaction. Through teachings from Isbister (2023) and van Leeuwen and Jewitt's character design and analysis, this dissertation proved that the inaccuracies of the champion's designs were prevalent but also showcased improvement with time and the redeemability of designers when effort and care are put into the representation of character, rather than just making them sellable artefacts. Vladimirovna and Olalere (2022) guided me, reinforcing elements of Indian representation and culture using accurate symbols and colours which allowed me to ensure that the use of colours was beyond just the physicality, as they carried meanings and were tied to *chakras*. These teachings have worked and proved that with the proper tools, research and care, a character can be made into the best possible version. Using their teachings through the analysis and development of Indian female champions

within *League of Legends*, I have offered a visual redesign of *Nidalee* that emphasises and expresses Indian representation in a meaningful and empowering way.

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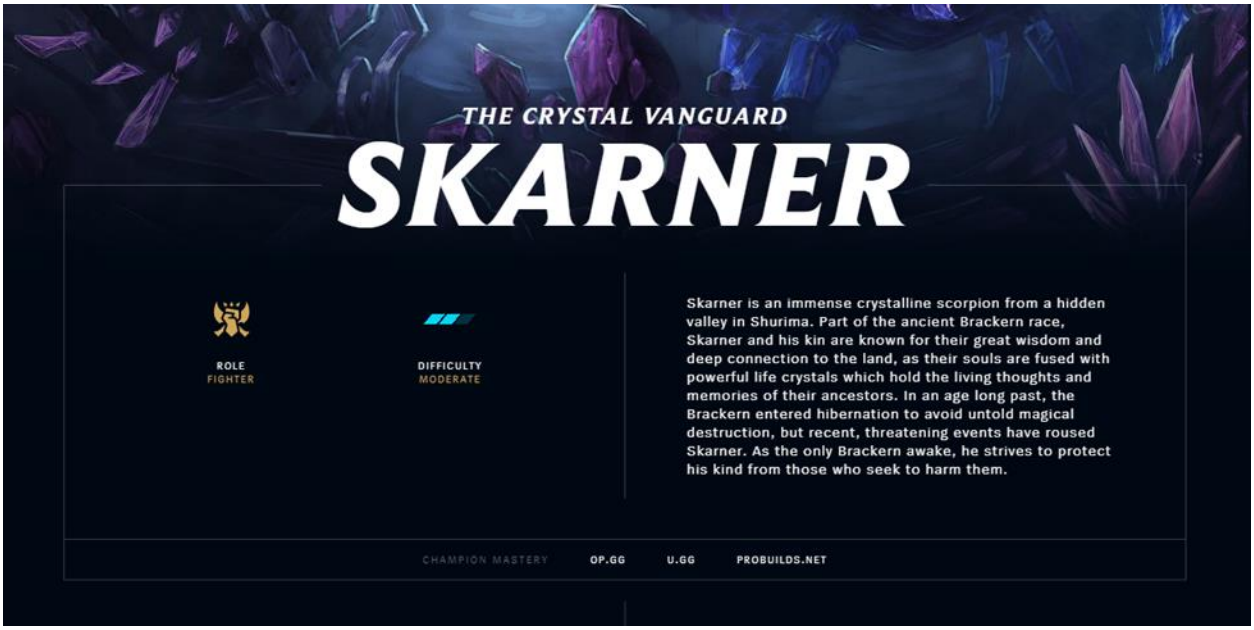
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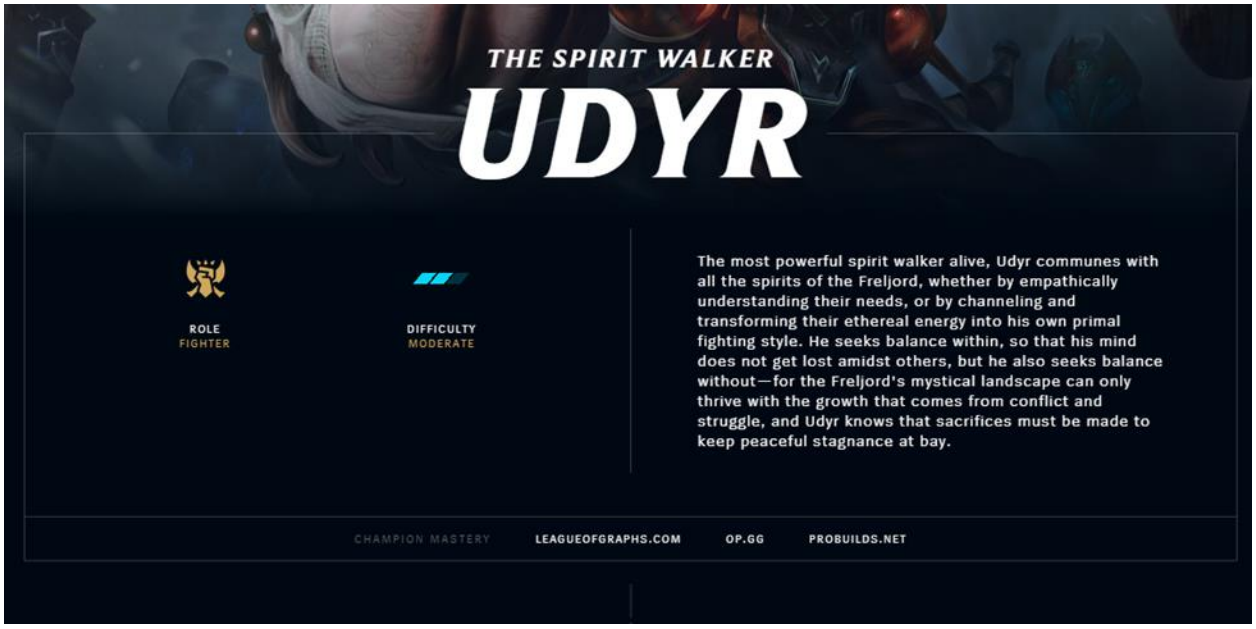
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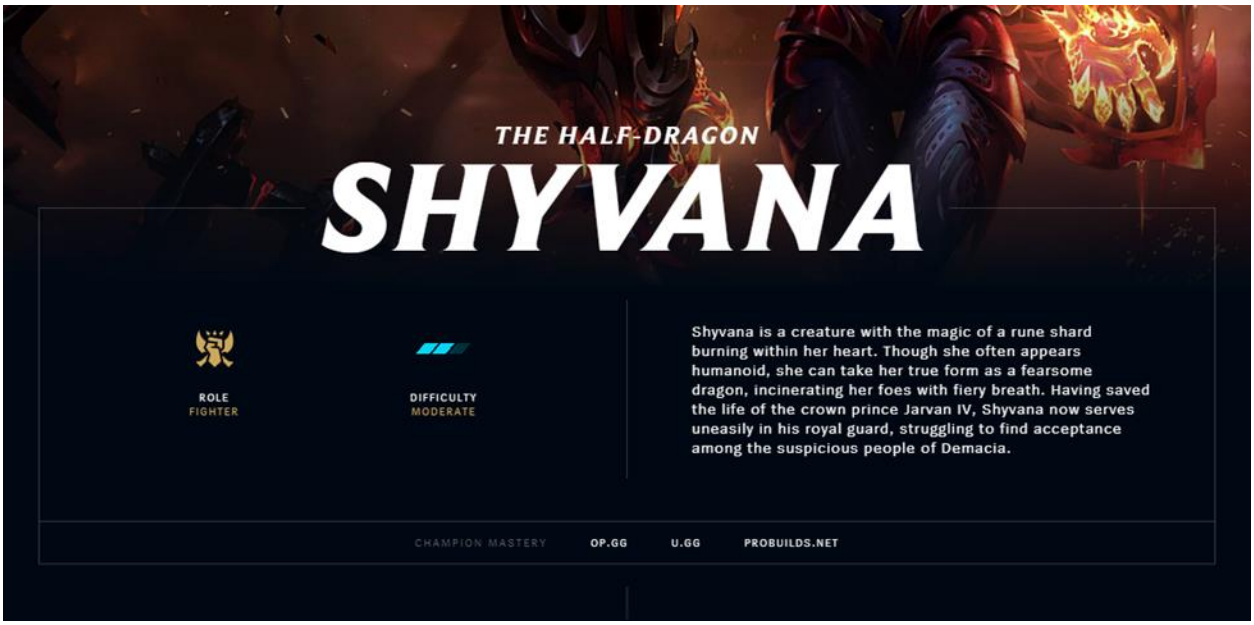
Appendix

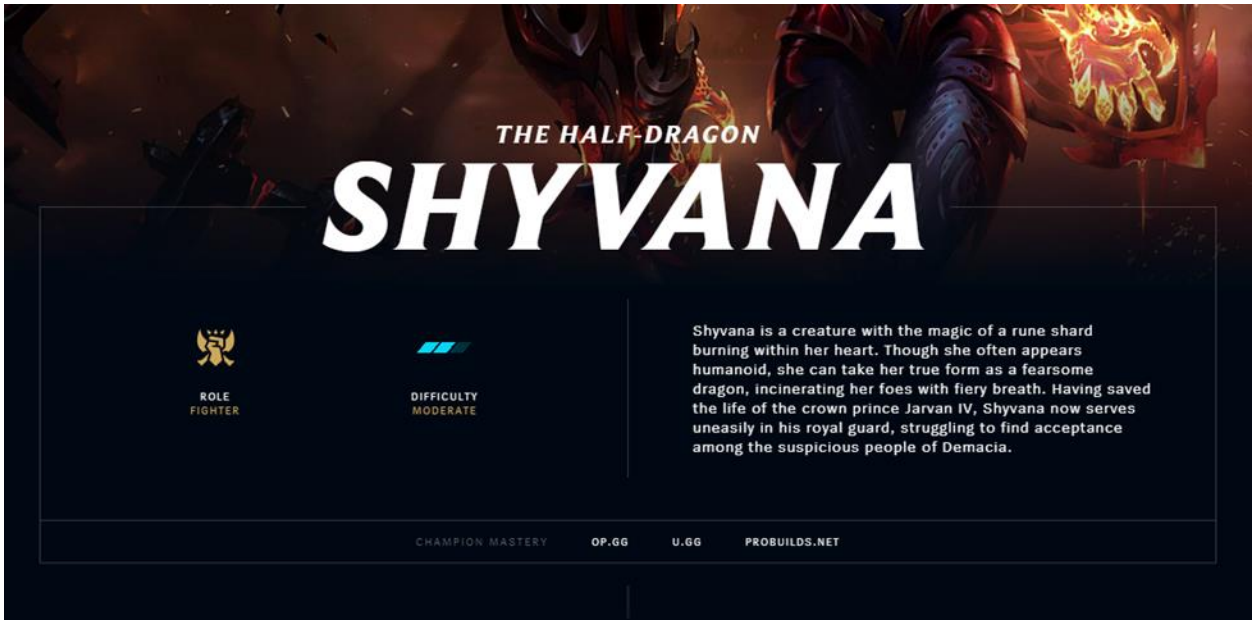
Polled Champion Lore

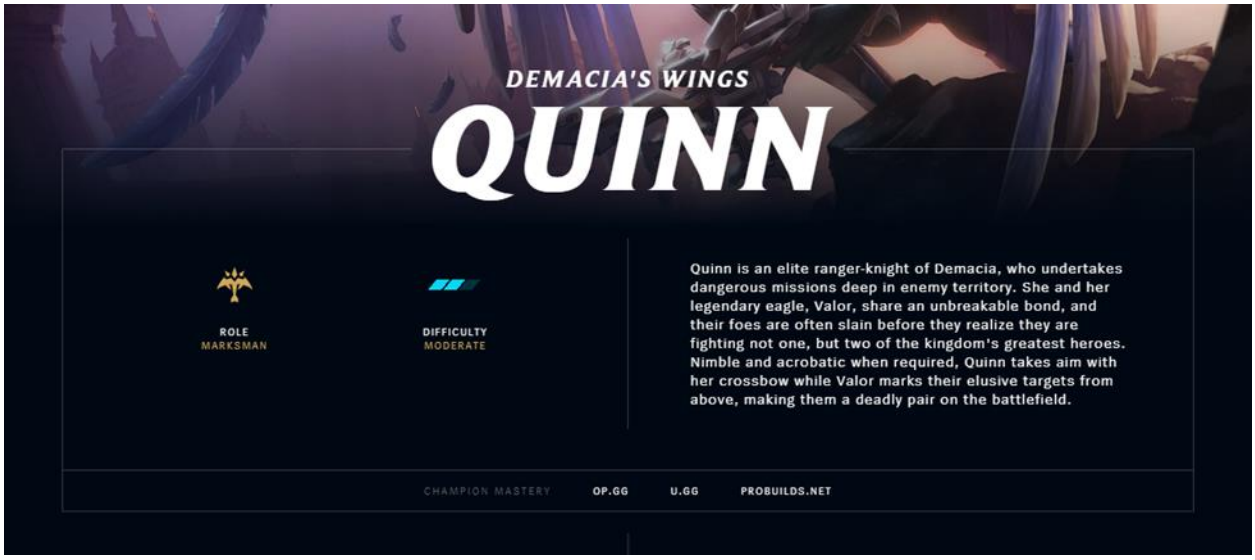
The images below are screenshots of the polled champions backstories presented in Chpater One. These are available from the *League of Legends* website at: https://www.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/champions/






THE HALF-DRAGON
SHYVANA
ROLE
FIGHTER
DIFFICULTY
MODERATE
Shyvana is a creature with the magic of a rune shard burning within her heart. Though she often appears humanoid, she can take her true form as a fearsome dragon, incinerating her foes with fiery breath. Having saved the life of the crown prince Jarvan IV, Shyvana now serves uneasily in his royal guard, struggling to find acceptance among the suspicious people of Demacia.
CHAMPION MASTERY
OP.GG
U.GG
PROBUILDS.NET


THE HALF-DRAGON
SHYVANA
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CHAMPION MASTERY
OP.GG
U.GG
PROBUILDS.NET


DEMACIA'S WINGS
QUINN
ROLE
MARKSMAN
DIFFICULTY
MODERATE
Quinn is an elite ranger-knight of Demacia, who undertakes dangerous missions deep in enemy territory. She and her legendary eagle, Valor, share an unbreakable bond, and their foes are often slain before they realize they are fighting not one, but two of the kingdom's greatest heroes. Nimble and acrobatic when required, Quinn takes aim with her crossbow while Valor marks their elusive targets from above, making them a deadly pair on the battlefield.
CHAMPION MASTERY
OP.GG
U.GG
PROBUILDS.NET

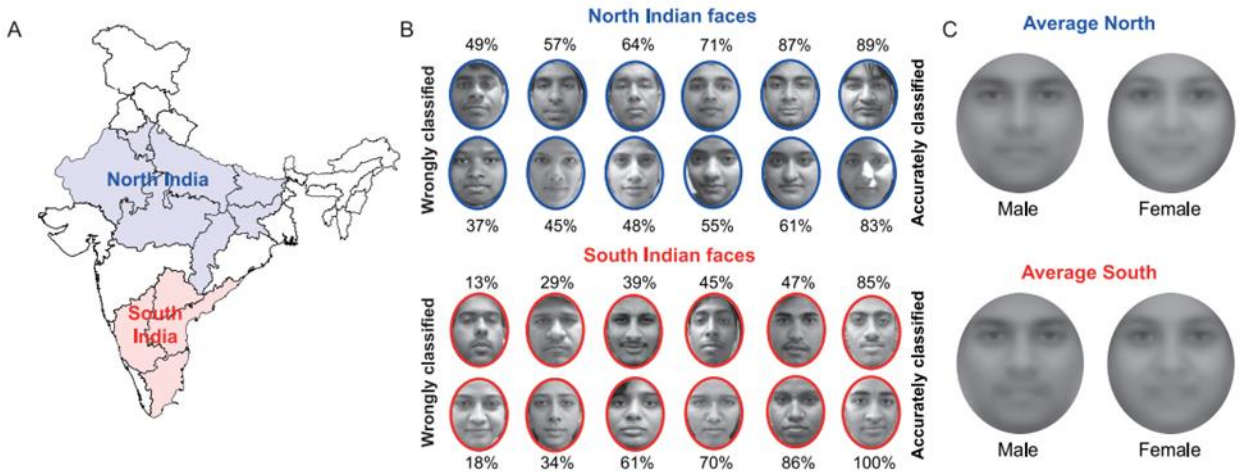
Inspirational Artboard



Table 1.2 - Phenotypes of Indian People

This data was collected by Katti and Arun (2019, pg 2), researchers determining prominent phenotypes of Indian people based on regions.

Facial type	Facial index range	No. of North Indian males	No. of South Indian males	No. of North Indian females	No. of South Indian females
Hypereuryene (very broad face)	< 44.9	0	0	0	1
Euryene (Broad face)	45-49.9	0	0	2	8
Mesene (Round face)	50-54.9	2	1	0	34
Leptene (long face)	55-59.9	33	41	10	6
Hyperleptene (very long face)	>60	15	8	38	1



My Art Book

https://www.canva.com/design/DAGIwfUCiG0/2VtYf4zHW19kETVeSdc6Pw/edit



Facial Design

2

Concept 1:

Rough Digital



3

Concept 2:

Rough Digital



4

Concept 3:

Rough Digital



Concept 3:

Refined V1



6

Final Facial Design

Final Version:



7

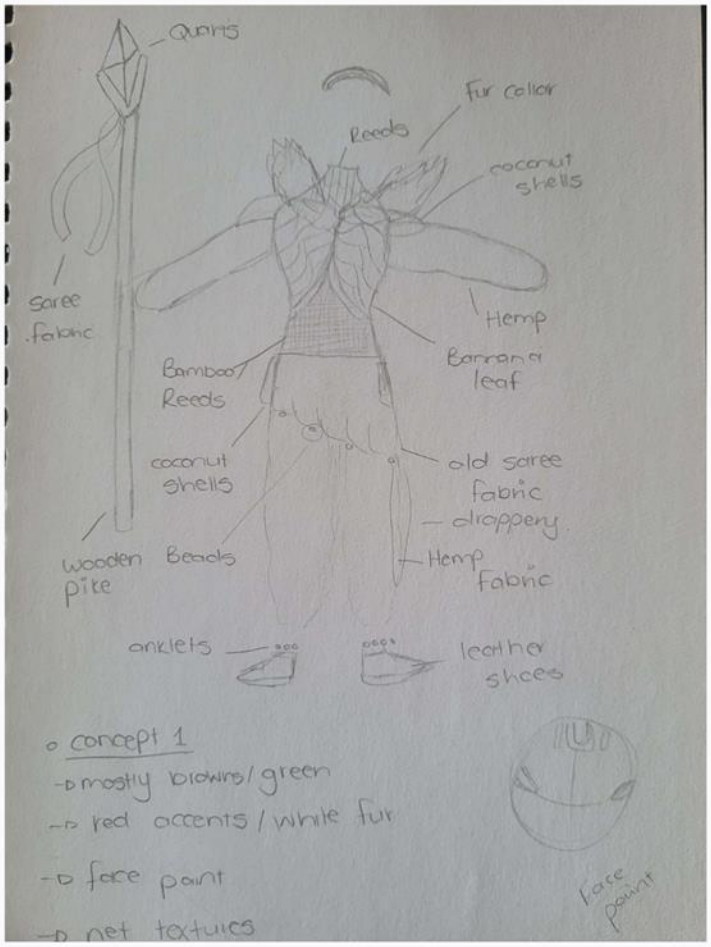
Outfits

8

Concept 1:

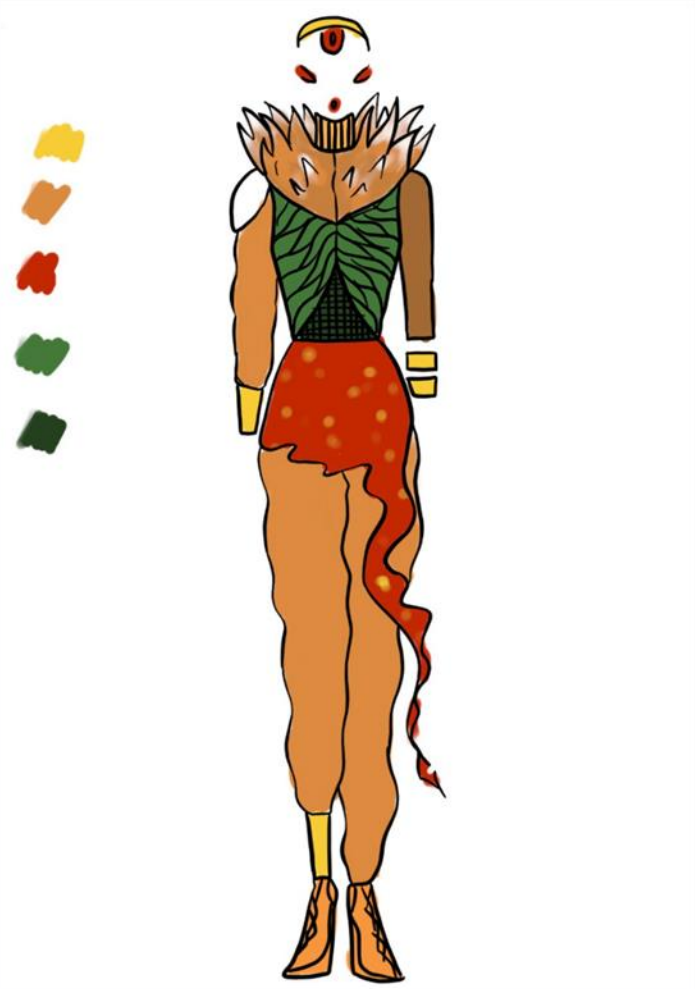
Concept 1:

Rough Sketch



Concept 1:

Rough Digital



11

Concept 1:

Refined Draft

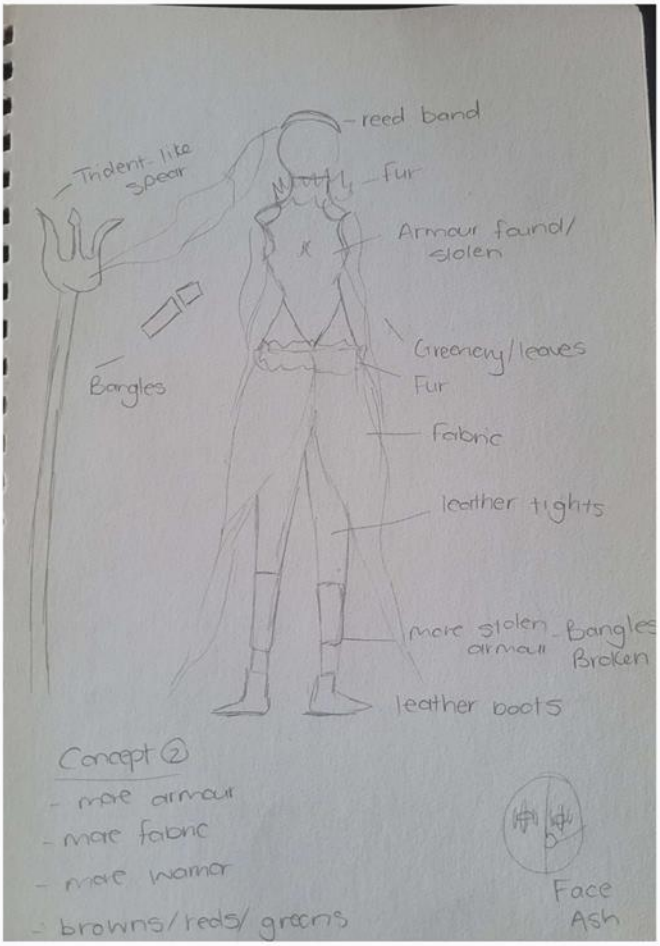


Concept 2:

13

Concept 2:

Rough Sketch



Concept 2:

Rough Digital



15

Concept 2:

Refined Digital

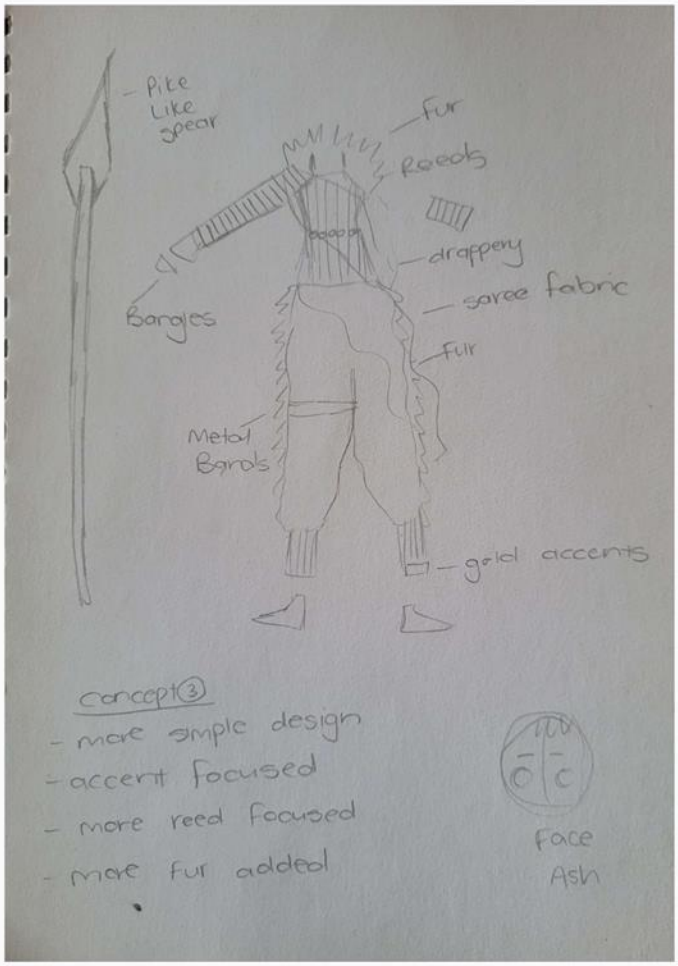


Concept 3:

17

Concept 3:

Rough Sketch



Concept 3:

Rough Digital



Concept 3:

Refined Digital



Final Outfit

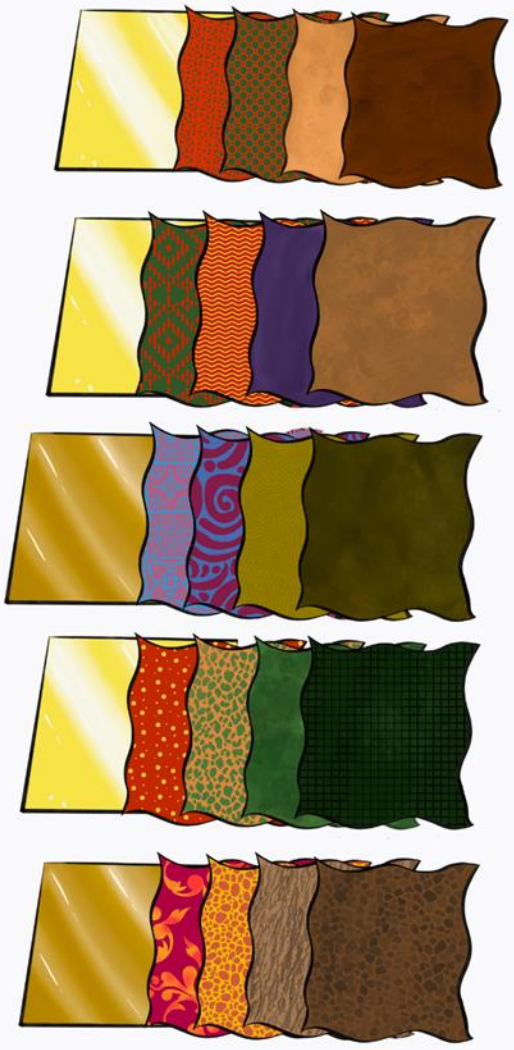


21

Colourization

22

Colour Templates



23

Final outfit with colour editing



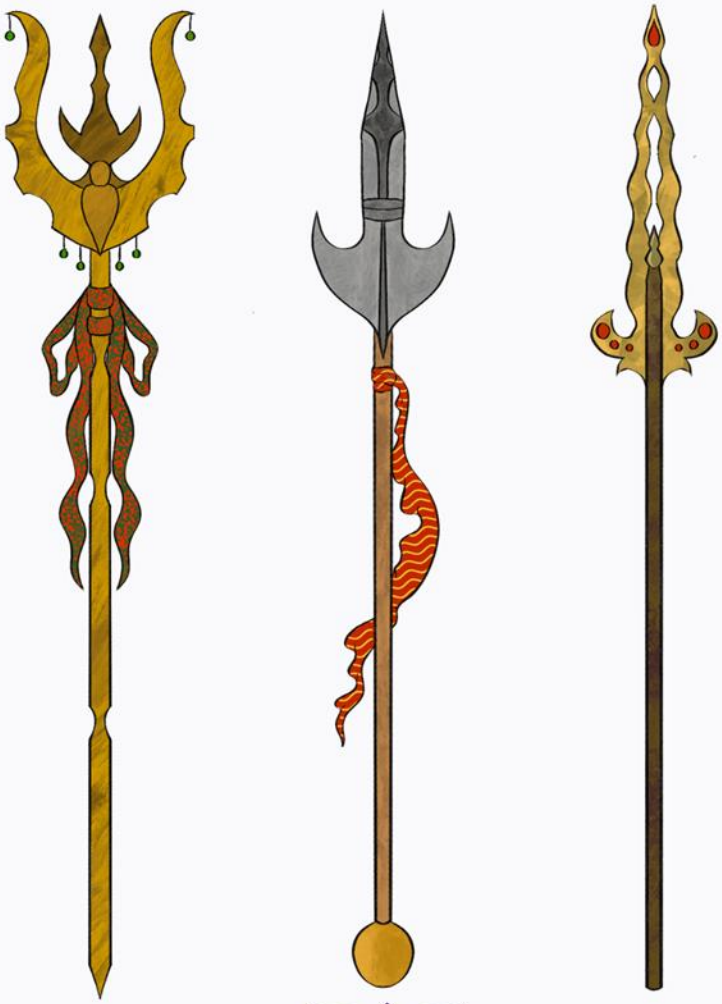
24

Weapons

25

Weapons:

Rough Digital



26

Weapons:

Final Weapon V1:



27

Weapons:

Final Weapon:



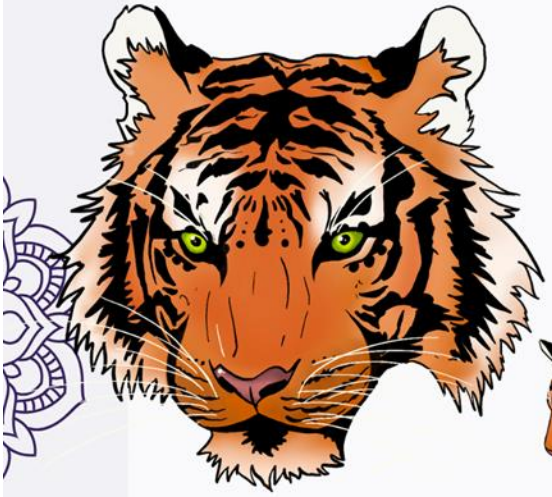
28

Cat Form

29

Cat Form

Rough Tiger



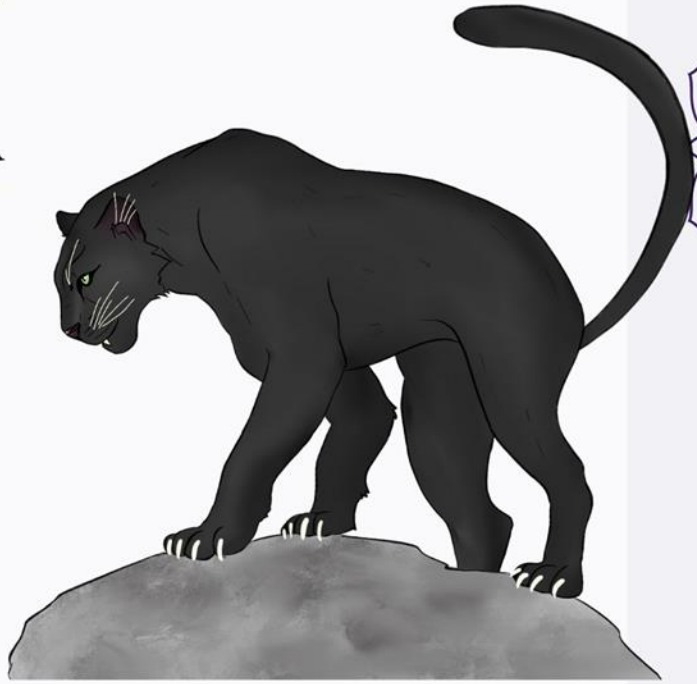


30

Cat Form

Rough Black Panther





31

Cat Form

Snow Leopard



32

Cat Form

Final Tiger





33

Cat Form

Adaptation to character





Cat Form

Comparison to character





35

Final Artwork

Final Artwork



37

The Artist



Hello!

I have not formally introduced myself, but my name is Taliah. I am a 25-year-old South Indian woman who lives in Johannesburg. I am a Tamil Hindu, and my family is from Tamil Nadu, the southernmost part of India. I have been passionate about my culture and religion since I was a child. I have always found it to be colourful, joyous, and giving. I am a lover of video and analogue games, tattoos, animals and art. But probably video games the most. I have always sought to find accurate Indian representation within video games, and it was not up until this dissertation that I realized how difficult it would truly be. This creative component may not be as artistically inclined as others out there. But it came from thorough research and was made with love, passion and care. Thank you for taking the time to look at it and mark it.

Cānti uṇṭākaṭṭum
(Peace be upon you)