



AlterPieces

Amy Williams
Master of Fine Arts Thesis
May 2014

Submitted to the Faculty
of the State University of New York at New Paltz
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts

How To Use This Document

“What the hell is this?”

What you are currently reading is a textual component of Amy Williams’s *AlterPieces*. The ongoing project—the thesis for her Master of Fine Arts in Metal at the State University of New York at New Paltz—is archived most fully at enamelminiatures.com, but also includes the physical artwork, personal exchanges with participants, process documentation, and this writing. Depending on your interests, you can use this document to get to know the participants, learn more about the way the work was made, find out about the critical inquiry that motivated the work, or even just look at the pictures! The choice is yours.

(If you read the introduction, proceed to the next page. If you skip to the core themes of the project, proceed to page 3. If you meet up with Arbitrator Styx, turn to page 19.)

Introduction

“Are we the sum of the choices we make? High road, low road, road less traveled; our circumstances may dictate the options we have, but surely it is the ways we choose to navigate the obstacles before us that distinguishes the kind from the cruel and the brave from the meek.”

I am a logical person. Practical, even. I do my own taxes, drive a fuel-efficient car, and try to eat a balanced diet. This does not stop me from doing completely irrational things, but it does compel me to examine what I’ve done and attempt to make sense of it. So, when I found myself spending hours each week pretending to be an interstellar detective in the distant future, I naturally asked myself, “What the hell is going on?”

The short answer: I partake in the hobby of role-playing games. The best-known example is *Dungeons & Dragons*, though there are many others as well. But “playing a game” hardly described what I was seeing—unique forms of oral storytelling and collective narrative, highly intentional construction of personality, emotional investment on a profound level—and it did not explain the why. Nor were these unusual traits confined specifically to role-playing games; there was clearly some underlying phenomenon the games were tapping. Unable to let the matter drop, I began to investigate. Rotating through the roles of scholar, maker, thinker, writer, participant, and observer, I eventually found my long answer, and I call it *AlterPieces*.

On its most superficial level, *AlterPieces* is a series of enameled jewelry objects depicting the alternate identities enacted by people in specific subcultures, particularly those associated with modern “geekdom.” These groups range from science fiction enthusiasts to historical reenactors, and whose assumption of these aliases may occur as anything from an online chat from the character’s perspective to a fully-costumed staging of a dramatic scene. There is a tremendous variety in motivation as well, as some simply find it an entertaining way to spend an evening with friends, while others feel that their alternate identity is more authentic than their socially-acceptable, workaday persona. However, beyond the dragons and elves and genetically-engineered super-soldiers lies the true heart of the project: an examination of the choice to create communities, establish identities, and take paths otherwise denied in daily life.

Subcultures revolving around intentionally enacted identity—the deliberate “playing a character” as opposed to claiming an identity through simple self-description—are complex sites of inquiry. However, while I have referenced a number of related sociological works, it is not my intent to scientifically examine the topic. Rather, I have opted to create pieces via a sort of experimental pseudo-anthropology, drawing on the embedded narratives to make intimate artifacts for both the alternate identities and the people who wield them. I have taken the role of Fabergé to make-believe tsars.

(To learn more about the themes of the project, move to the next page. To learn about the physical objects, go to page 6.)

Subject Matter

"There's something here, I can feel it..."

During my research and investigation, three subjects emerged as my primary areas of interest: fantasy, identity, and value. However, the locus of *AlterPieces* is where these three things intertwine.

For the sake of clarity, I will define the terms as I am using them.

Fantasy

I am using fantasy to define an extended or alternate version of reality that grants the actors within it some sort of additional vectors of control not found in daily life. This may take the form of a superhero's powers, a religious figure's healing of the lame, a medieval reenactor's temporal displacement, or even a lonely daydreamer's improbable ability to attract romantic attention. While not every character in these settings has extraordinary powers, those peering into the world are aware that possibilities exist which are not normally found in a mundane setting.

When structured as a narrative, the fantasy typically requires internal consistency to be satisfying; disruption of the rules often breaks the suspension of disbelief required to participate. This gives rise to complex systems that formalize fantasy, particularly when multiple people are fantasizing in tandem through formats such as gaming, fandoms, and online communities. These rules may appear in the guise of forum guidelines, the limitations imposed by a video game, the literary conventions for writing on a certain topic, or even a very literal book of rules, as is the case for most role-playing games.





The specifics of any given fantasy are naturally subject to interpretation, both in terms of psychological implications related to the individual and from a critical vantage point taking cultural context into account. However, the specifics of interpretation are of less interest to me than the fact fantasy is happening at all. I would further note that I am focusing less on the innocent fantasies of children—who may not be fully able to distinguish the possible from the impossible—and turning my attention mostly to those who use fantasy in a highly deliberate way. Those who choose to participate in formalized fantasies do so for a multitude of reasons and with many variations, ranging from the escape of an abusive environment to the pursuit of a higher self; allowing participant expression of these variations has driven many of my decisions within this body of work.

But why fantasy, and what meaning does it have in contemporary society?

Fantasy is an echo of myth. Both reorganize reality through narrative, making it comprehensible. Myth is a culture's way of explaining what is outside of empirical knowledge as well as highlighting patterns and declaring them to be fundamentally true. Myths also serve to model expected human behaviors both desirable and undesirable, and often delineate the bounds of good and evil. Fantasy can be seen as diminutive myth, constructed by the individual or small group rather than an entire society and lacking the authority and pedigree of myth. It is an acknowledged construction rather than the distant truth of myth. I am particularly interested in the variations of fantasy that begin to edge towards the collective nature of oral storytelling rather than the single author model of the novel. In either case, participants must opt in to fantasy: you either choose to indulge in it through books, movies, and other narrative media, or you are constructing it yourself through daydreams and imagination. By opting in, however, to these formalized group systems of fantasy and connecting with collective storytelling tradi-

tions, the participants potentially transform from daydreamers to mythmakers. My work is positioned at this point of rupture.

Identity

While there are a whole host of psychological models regarding identity, I am focusing on the tension between identity as the private core of the self and identity as a performance. As Glenn Adamson notes in the “Memory” chapter of *The Invention of Craft*, the quest for identity is ultimately a futile one, because identity is not an object to be obtained but an ongoing process of actions.¹ This plays out in every person, regardless of their interest in fantasy, but those who choose to adopt an alternate persona and carefully tend to it make for particularly clear examples of performance versus self-conception. I credit this to the fact that to assume an alternate identity, those doing so must enact the character traits they ascribe to the character; it is not enough to declare traits like “brave” or “treacherous” as existing, you must actually stand up to a dangerous situation or betray a companion for the traits to apply. This is true even if the actions taken exist only in a fictional setting: Othello’s Iago is not treacherous because he labels himself as such, but because of his actions. By contrast, there are plenty of people in real life who will insist that they are “nice” people but rarely demonstrate kindness of any sort. For them, it is enough to believe that they are nice; they hold their self-description above an actual performance of niceness.

The particular sensitivity to identity’s performativity found among those who actively role-play was an additional strand leading me back to subcultures based around assumed characters as the focus of my investigations. The individuals and their enacted alter egos have become the primary figural elements in my work, appearing as carefully rendered portraits of the characters and the rather more ambiguous silhouettes of their owners. I have also concentrated my efforts on these people for both my underlying interest in the fantastic as well as their personal attachment to their alter egos; part of my exploration is the viability of transferring that emotional bond to physical objects by invoking their existing investment in the character being portrayed. This leads into the third strand of my investigation, that of value.

Value

I define value as personal importance. Economic value is of course an indicator of worth, but not the only measure. The degree of visibility, capacity for transfer, social acceptance, and moral worth of value are highly variable depending on circumstance; that something is so fundamental but contingent is fascinating. Of course, value is a useless term in total abstraction, so I am exploring it through the extremes of fantasy (commonly derided as lowbrow), jewelry (a signifier of value), and identity (the fulcrum for determining personal importance). My choice of highly sentimental subject matter and formatting as a direct route to value is perhaps a bit calculated, and I view the problem of transferring this sentiment to a wider audience as a key challenge in my work. Value is predicated on belief, but the question of belief is the central theme here and one the viewer must ultimately answer.

(To find out how the subject matter influenced the objects made, go to the next page. To find out how participants in *AlterPieces* got involved, turn to page 8. To read Styx’s journal entry about missing her chance to be a hero, turn to page 21)

Materials and Format

“What, really, is the difference between a golden crown and one made of paper?”

The formatting and materials I selected are directly related to my engagement with my subject matter. As alluded to previously, the jewelry format is one of the purest manifestations of value: because adornment is superfluous, its function is almost wholly that of the signifier. As I use it, the term “jewelry” covers a range of personal possessions and adornments, from earrings to badges to belt buckles to key fobs; this inclusivity results in a more nuanced examination of value than something like currency, which, while a potent symbol, speaks only to the economic dimension of value. For the wearer of jewelry, it can indicate wealth, identity, affinity, personal taste, and so forth, while for a giver, it is a token of affection, appreciation, even a marking of territory. In the form of the amulet, jewelry transcends the material and becomes magical, belief embodied.

Placement on the body and the context in which it is worn can communicate volumes beyond the object itself; I designed the pieces to allow for a variety of configurations, permitting both convention and personal preference to play a role in the use of the pieces. By allowing the user as much control as possible over information that manifests through use, their choices dictate what the objects communicate. The user can wear it on the body as jewelry or an accessory, display it on a table, use it as a game token, or even leave it stuck to their refrigerator. I have far more interest in how value builds from investment and interaction than through the commodity value of the material; to draw an analogy, I find wedding rings more interesting than diamond rings. This priority of choice-driven value over material value in my work further questions the viewer’s beliefs about worth.

Formatting the work as a series of portrait miniatures addresses identity in the form of graphic representation, but the intimacy of scale and history as a sentimental token of remembrance touch on identity’s relational aspect. Miniature portraits, and the eye miniature in particular, have close associations with the highly personal and with intense emotional bonds. As Robin Jaffee Frank notes in *Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures*, “Whereas easel portraits present a public self meant to face outward, portrait miniatures reveal a private self meant to face inwards...As such, they invite inquiry into the particular bonds between sitter and beholder.”²² Part of my exploration is to see what sort of meanings accumulate when the sitter and wearer are the same person, but not precisely so.

Each miniature is made for a specific person and depicts a fantasy alter ego they described. Most of the participants had several to choose from, each being generated for



a specific context, but generally had a preference for one character. The vast majority of the characters have no physical model, only a series of text descriptions or statistics describing them, though a few were described as idealized versions of the person in question. Generally, they were explained with emphasis on personality, ability, and motive rather than physical description. However, this proved to be an advantage; my goal with the miniatures is to not simply record the appearance of these personas, but to capture something essential of the personality through a fragmented gesture or expression. To that end, I focused almost exclusively on the eyes of the character. They all meet the eyes of the viewer, giving them a physical presence even for those unfamiliar with the originating subculture and the rest of the character's "life." Many of the pieces are overtly fantastic in nature, depicting mythological creatures, artificial intelligences, and sapient animals. Still, by coming into the physical world, their tangibility becomes an argument for their reality. The characters already exist; they have histories and friends and quirks, but they are normally hidden inside their owners, waiting for the right situations to activate.

Because I want to bring the alter egos into the world rather than simply illustrating them, the work is not purely images. The enamels are designed to exploit their physicality through the play of light through the layers of the painting, and the objects appear overtly lavish. Their design insinuates prestige and power with connotations of Fabergé's Imperial commissions and Napoleonic memorabilia. But this is not a simple matter of setting something in gold and naming it precious. While the baroque frames, rich color, and touches of gilding are clear indicators of status and privilege, the materials themselves are generally quite humble. Alloy 430 stainless steel has the strength and magnetism required for my structural concerns; the connotations are generally those of industry, with the finish of consumer appliances towards the high end of the implied value. Pewter is capable of fine detail in casting, is inexpensive enough to use in quantity, is easily worked, and has a history as a substitute for silver. It also is connected with fantasy gaming, miniatures, hobby craft, tchotchkes, and is a contaminant of more valuable metals. The copper used as a substrate for the portraits is practically synonymous with small coins. And then there is the enamel I use to render the portraits themselves; historically speaking, it evolved as a substitution for valuable gemstones, only later proving a media unto itself and capable of long-lasting, colorfast decoration. While of course it is closely linked to extremely valuable objects like Fabergé's famous eggs, it is also effectively glass, even appearing on common cookware. Its value is determined by the maker's skill and execution, reflecting my motif of personal investment as locus of value. The relative baseness of most of the materials stands in opposition to the skill used in construction, the precious formatting, and the sentimental nature of the work. The viewer is left to be persuaded—or not—that the work has inherent merit, and given the choice of believing in it.

(To read about the characters in the portraits and the people who use them, read the next section. To read about the gallery display, go to page 20.)

Participants

“A stranger approaches you, promising to give you jewels in exchange for information. What do you do?”

My selection criteria for *AlterPieces* was relatively simple. I required the following:

1. Some manner of established alternate identity, preferably one developed enough for the “user” to have invested emotionally in it.
2. A willingness to answer questions and share information with me.
3. An interest in the project that led to them contacting me, rather than me attempting to recruit.

It is my desire that all aspects of the project reflect the underlying themes, so making participation a matter of choice and truly “opting in” has been critical. I attempted to find people whose alter egos originated from a variety of sources, so to that end I reached out to communities of historical reenactors, live-action role-players, tactical war game strategists, writers, storytellers, players of tabletop role-playing games, and furies. I intend to continue this project in the future, and hope to attract participants from groups I may not be aware of or with whom I have no current inroads.

(To read about the participants and what their characters mean to them, continue ahead. To see the questionnaire they filled out, go to Appendix A. To hear what Styx’s boss had to say about hard decisions, turn to page 24.)

Rather than offering a commentary on the volunteers, what follows is their own words, edited only for clarity.

Dylan McManus

A 30 something working artist, lucky husband, father of one, closet nerd, and concerned participant in this thing we call modern civilization.

Commander Dilliad [is a] Space Marine of the Lamenters Chapter, [an army in the tabletop tactical wargame *Warhammer 40,000*]. Dilliad has been the persona I use to insert myself into the narrative of my armies since 1997; he has had differing ranks over the years.

Dilliad gave me strength when I was young; he became an alter ego that allowed me to survive some really harsh realities of the environment I grew up in. He is who I pictured being when I was hiking my first 50 mile hike at 11 years old at 10,000 feet above sea level, when I was so tired I could barely walk. He was the character I became when I was dealing with my first fat lip, when I was getting spit on at school for being a 'hippie', when my parents were separating, etc. He also started to take on and overcome my physical limitations, like the fact that I am legally blind. He essentially became everything I couldn't manifest in the physical world for whatever reason, and the adventures I went on in my imagination were something I have never, until this point, shared openly with anyone. Since I lived in

Wyoming,

I never met other gamers that were my age and so I never had a gaming community that took it as seriously as I did. I had to create my stories on my own and I had differing ways of "solo playing" my adventures. I would sit at my desk, surrounded by miniatures I was working on, and I would stop, pull out my dice and roll through a miniature scenario of my own making. In many ways he was how I dealt with loneliness.



Andrea Frederick

Andrea Frederick is a 25-year-old gamer, artist, and feminist from Wisconsin. She enjoys photography, board games, and blogging.

[Aurelia is a *Dungeons & Dragons* character played for approximately two and a half years. She is a dragon-like humanoid and a warrior/leader.]

Aurelia is a bit on the small side as far as dragonborn go, but that still puts her at a size quite a bit bigger than your average humanoid. Her scales are a deep red and she has yellow-orange eyes. Her size and piercing gaze result in an intimidating figure, though she only takes that approach if her diplomacy skills have failed her. She is quick-witted and hardy on the battlefield. Her back story is a tragic one, however; after a botched attempt to save her family turned into a grave betrayal, she was banished from her clan and traveled alone for months until she found work with a band of adventurers. She became quickly attached to her band of travelers and protects them fiercely in an effort to atone for her failure with her real family.



Chuck Burton

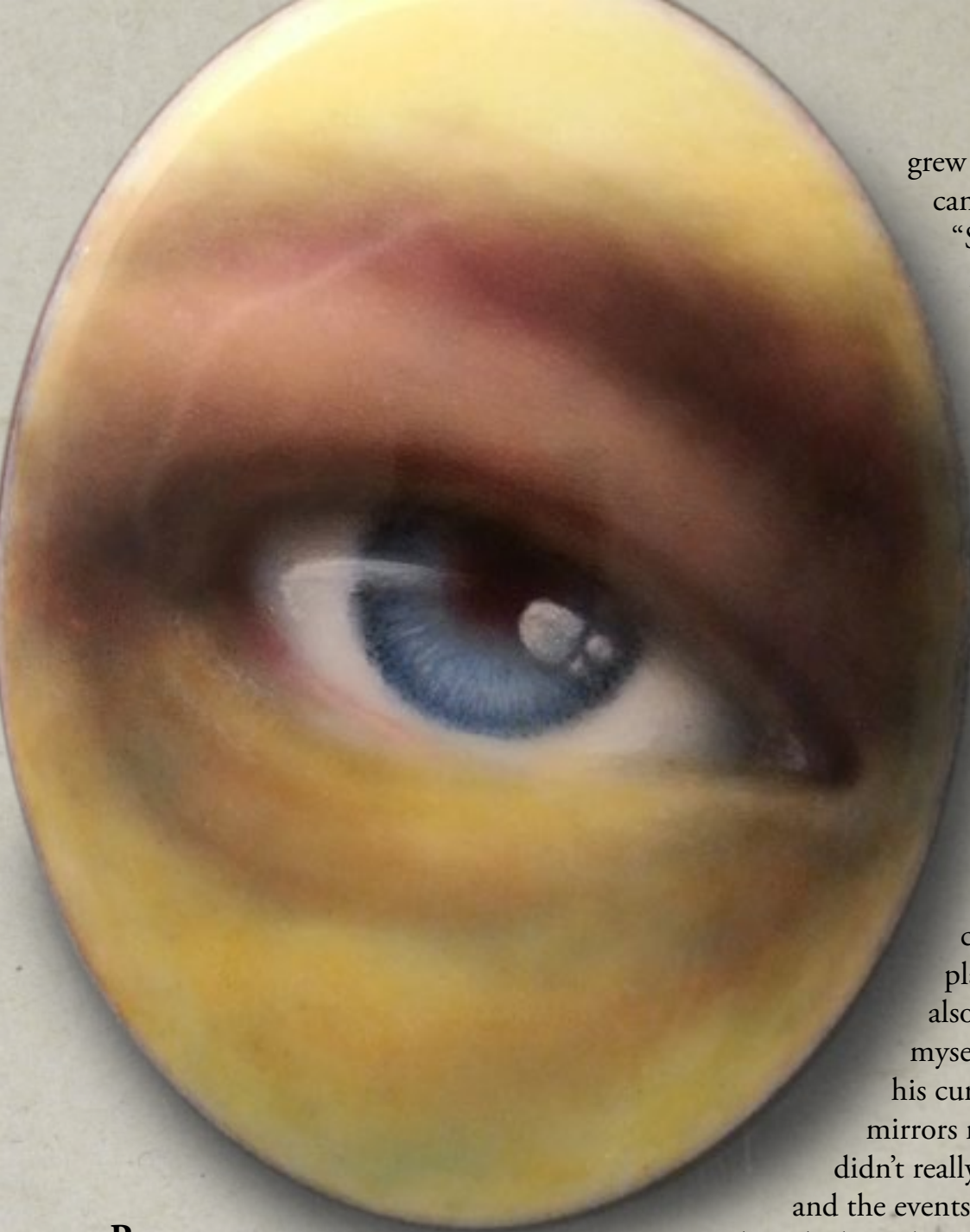
I am a 21st century sorcerer occupied with making the unreal tangible. OK, I'm a middle-aged husband and uncle working as a glass artist, but the other one sounds so much more cool.

Tarik is a 12th century Muslim Seljuk Turkish mamluk (slave soldier) and scribe. Since I began young in the [Society for Creative Anachronism], my persona has had, literally, a lifetime to change and develop.

My relationship with Tarik Aga is sort of like my relationship with alcohol: he is a personality enhancer. There is nothing about him that isn't really me, but he is generally more intense. He is confident, and is not shy about his capabilities. It isn't a negative arrogance—anything he claims he can, he *can* do—and it is certainly not the empty boasting of [...] a pompous ass. Of the 7 Deadly Sins, Pride is his chief fault. He is a bit more fierce [than I am] and will argue his point of view. He has outgrown his warlike behaviors as he no longer enters combat, but there are still echoes of his life as a soldier. He is loyal almost to a

fault and as such he reacts poorly to perceived betrayals. OK, he reacts to betrayal with fury that belongs in the 1001 Arabian Nights—it's one of the personal reasons I went inactive. My wife describes him as well-groomed and fine pedigreed. [...] But I miss 'being' Tarik. He is/was my more confident, more capable, and more influential twin.





**Ryan
Nohr**

I'm a 27 year old independent video game designer with an obvious penchant for fantasy and a phenomenal beard.

Oz is my on-again-off-again *Vampire* [live-action role-playing character] of 11 or so years. [...] As a mortal, he was only slightly above average physically, under average mentally. [...] Personality-wise, he started as a dumb kid, but

grew into a bitter adult. [You can] consider him to have "Seen behind the curtain" of his immortal life, and found the players lacking. Now, the majority of his time is spent hunting down the evils of this world, and passively contradicting the white tower [...] He still follows humanity, but strictly adheres to his own code of honor.

[Oz] was my first character in any role-playing game, and he's been around since I was 16, so I guess he's a bit special to me in that I came into the world of role-playing through him. There's also a huge investment of myself in the character. Much of his current disdain for authority mirrors my own. The two distastes didn't really grow from each other, and the events surrounding these feelings have little to do with each other, but I suppose they inform role-playing choices. It's also been a huge time investment. I haven't always played as consistently as many people, but he's still a pretty old/powerful character now. I'm also at the point in my life now that many of the players were when I first started, so it is interesting observing things from their point of view. Many of the people playing when I started had many years on their characters, and I was the minnow among sharks, but now [Oz is] one of the big characters.

Andrea Burkart

Ixonia LeGrange [is a half-elf *Dungeons & Dragons* character]. She is very impulsive and overconfident in [every way]. She is naturally very untrusting, except for her [half-orc foster] sister whom she trusts and believes unquestioningly. She is, however, very logical and quick thinking, which help her get out of the jams that she gets herself into, but [that] then boosts her confidence and makes her more impulsive. It's a vicious cycle.

I wish I was a daring as she is, and maybe as bold. I love her carefree attitude and her confidence. [...]

I have always been really shy and never really had a lot of friends. I think that is why [my husband] Tom is so great for me; he is so outgoing and wants everybody included, even if I go kicking and screaming. But it has been a great experience to play a character that is so unlike myself, and interact with others who are able to show and express themselves in a comfortable and open setting without judgment of others. I think it has helped build a level of comfort around other people and helps me remember that it really doesn't matter what others think about you.

It is also a great area of support. When I was diagnosed with cancer there wasn't much I could do, but tabletop gaming really only required that I

stay awake. In such a difficult time of my life, [sitting] around friends and play[ing] in a fantasy world was the best medicine. It took my mind off my problems and suddenly I was able to go and do things that, at that time, I was not physically able to. Gaming, to me, is about the connection with other people and being with my friends. It is an amazing experience that we have tried to incorporate into [...] our lives. Having a weekly game night [...] is the best because, though we may not talk to each other all week, we take the time at least once a week to spend with each other. It is something that some families don't even do, and it is this connection and bond that I love most about gaming.





JT

[Uaithne the Wardane, also known simply as Wardane, active 20 years. Origin:] A nightmare / *Dungeons & Dragons*. Warrior Scholar turned Apocalyptic Shadow Deity.

A shape shifter and an illusionist, Wardane possesses the ability to take a great many forms, the most common being a dark-haired man of average height with a shock lock, a thin and ephemeral black dragon, and a towering (by human standards) demonic figure in black biomechanical armor. Regardless of his form, Wardane is always missing his right eye.

Short of stature; big of presence. Gives the very real impression that his physical form is a mask worn by something alien and Omnipotent.

Looks like he knows more than you, not out of arrogance but because it is simple fact.

Uaithne's Eye: Wardane did not lose his eye. He plucked it from his own head and tossed it into the river Lethe. It floated to the end where all the lost memories go. Still connected, Wardane can perceive all the lost memories that gather there.

Myka

19-year-old, gender-fluid, bisexual student, currently majoring in Computer Science at GSU (GA State University). Enjoys sketching, writing, gaming, and similar creative endeavors.

In the furry community, I am represented by a rusty-spotted genet by the name of Fyre, who was created by myself and a friend last April (I had previously been shown as a fox and a gecko).

It's a bit complicated here ~ I'm *Myka*, and my main character (fursona) is *Fyre*; "Myka" is sort of a catchall, used for any time there's a direct mention or discussion of myself, no matter which character I'm presenting myself as at the time. It's what I'm referred to as in the community and the name that goes on any convention or character badges.

Personality-wise, Fyre tends to be very playful, affectionate, and innocent, though rather shy; for example, she tends to bolt for cover when meeting people for the first time, and just sort of keeps a curious eye on them from safety.

Originally, she was just a secondary character of sorts, though she's since become more important, more personal; the most accurate way to put it would be as she's become something of an idealized reflection of myself - what I could be, what I desire, what I dream of - and a reflection of how far I've come.

[....]Fyre's evolved to being a part of me; she acts as something of a focus for what I want to change about myself or how I try to act. In appropriate situations, I think of a lot of things as "What would Fyre do? How would she act?"

She's kind of an idealized personality, and - at least in part - a reflection of how I want to be/ think/act as Myka, and treating her as a focus makes that easier.



Thomas Burkart

As far as a description of me.... Ummm, something along the lines of a 30-year-old psychology student who enjoys gaming of many different varieties?

Alexander McAlister [is a vampire necromancer from the live-action role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade*]. While it is safe to say that most vampires have lost touch with humanity,

Alexander brings this thought to a whole new level. His only concern with humanity is how they die; he often goes to extremes to find new and interesting ways to cause and examine death. This detached personality does tend to make him difficult to work with, even for other vampires.

Playing Alexander was almost a bit liberating. It was a chance to literally play the bad guy. Take all the awful things people could do....and have him do it.



Amber Vergauwen

My name is Amber Vergauwen, and I am a geek. I am also a Medicare professional with a Masters in Business, a musician, an ESL tutor, an aunt, and a massive bookworm. I also have a weakness for caffeine and currently serve as the chief servant to two cats, Lucky and Motor. My geekdom centers around something called 'roleplaying games' (RPGs) in which I and friends develop characters with personalities, ambitions, weaknesses and strengths, and then portray these imaginary individuals in a predetermined world. I have participated in short 1-2 day RPGs with just a few close friends, and played within an international organization of interconnected games that have run continuously for well over a decade. Much like books or movies, there are many genres of RPGs, but at heart they all have one thing in common - the element I enjoy most - all RPGs are about exercising your imagination while socializing with friends.

Eve [is a] computer program that evolved to artificial intelligence to sentience and human morality in a dangerous immoral world. [...She] totally has a livejournal at <http://prototypeeve.livejournal.com/> I played "her"

for about 2 years until (a) she became too overpowered for the game and (b) her main connection to the world of the game died.



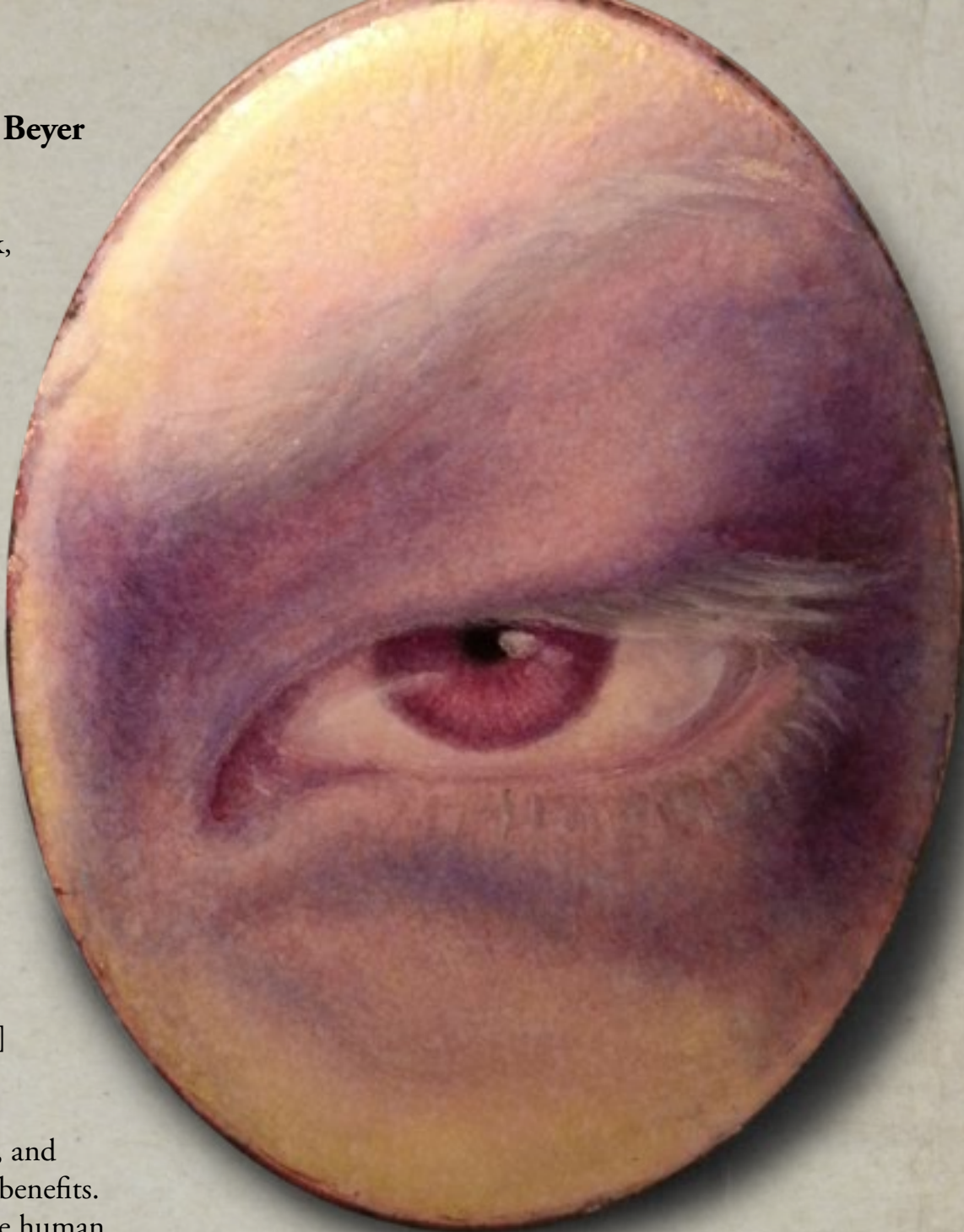
Catherine Noble Beyer

Catherine Beyer is a medievalist, steampunk, and blogger, not necessarily in that order. She writes non-fiction and fictional non-fiction, addressing the history of people and events both real and imagined. She's also a lousy would-be novelist, which is why she lets other people create plots for her own characters to exist within.

Varishka Twice-Born [...] is Varatu, which is a custom race for the [Dungeon Master's] game world. They're vampire-ish [...] Being human is kind of gross, and being Veratu has more benefits. There's no longing to be human.

She is now a dragon warrior, [meaning] she has been melded with the soul of a dragon. This is marked by a purple dragon tattoo on her back. They are ultimately heroes, which might seem a little odd for a Lawful Evil character. However, the only thing her state ultimately forces her to do is fight world-threatening events. She likes her world. Saving the world is totally in her best interests. To the best of my knowledge she's the only evil warrior out of about a dozen of them.

It was my first attempt at Lawful Evil, and she's been a lot of fun. There were a lot of jokes about how she was more ethical than the Lawful Good character. Ultimately she's in it for herself and her city (of Veratu), but that often manifests as being helpful and even generous because the recipients then give more back. She is, however, perfectly ok with getting her hands dirty/bloody (most often literally).



Amy Williams

I am a thinker, writer, and maker. I probably don't have specific interests so much as a tendency to become intrigued by how things work, from people to machines to history. My assorted creative processes are all means of working through and understanding the world around me.

Styx, my current role-playing character in the game *Dark Heresy*, is patterned off of the classic noir detective à la Philip Marlow. She is a tenacious investigator moving through a treacherous world, slowly carving through layers of information in an attempt to find "the truth." Small but tough and resourceful, she persists despite getting her ass kicked over and over again. There is a bit of a recursive relationship between the character and my own artistic endeavors; I bring data from the simulated world of the game into real life and then back again, looking for indicators as to which way to proceed. She is very much a tool for examining questions of choice, consequence, leadership, morality, and redemption.



Display

“Well, well, well. Look what we have here.”

For my thesis exhibition in the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art on the campus of SUNY New Paltz, each enameled portrait miniature of an alter-ego is mounted onto an oval silhouette its owner. Painted the gray of the gallery walls and without an embellishing frame, the richness of the image is concentrated on the fragment of the alter ego, jewel-toned within a baroque pewter setting.

Upon completion of the exhibition, each participant is given their portrait and a set of the settings, which allow them to display the work in their homes or on their persons as they see fit. It is my intent to record some of their uses for archiving on enamelminiatures.com. As the true implications of the work will emerge from their use and context, museum display does not properly encompass the project. The pieces have the potential to bridge the real world and several fantastic worlds as well, but not when confined to a hermetically sealed gallery.

Due to the nature of the work, the website itself is the primary point of access. Once the exhibition is concluded, the pieces go to live with their respective participant, preventing future display as a collection but allowing for the aforementioned use. By creating a centralized hub for the project, the entirety of *AlterPieces* can be seen even when the objects are not available, participants have a place to add their reflections about the experience, the work can be shared across online communities, and viewers can choose to explore more deeply. The expanding nature of an archival website means that it is a better way to record compounding meaning than a single thesis paper or art show, but there is also the matter of access. In the age of mechanical reproduction, the primary experience of a work of art is frequently not through firsthand contact, but through images. It is partially a matter of simple logistics in physical space, but also one of privilege. Not everyone has the time, energy, motivation, money, or inclination to make the trek to a gallery or museum, but internet access is increasingly widespread and profoundly democratizing. Having lived outside of American “cultural centers” and large cities, rarely encountering art jewelry in the wild, it is imperative that the work can be accessed, in at least some form, by those outside of the academic art milieu. If it cannot be found by those for whom it was made, it may as well never have been made. And it was not made for art jewelry collectors, or gallery owners, or publications, or my professors. It was made for people in exchange for their stories, and as a way of learning from each other. At the same time, I do not want the project to be confined to the subcultures from which it has grown; the site has been designed to offer a range of entry points for viewers, from pretty pictures to geek topics to critical theory to technical process information. The choice of how much digging to do is in the hands of the visitor.

(To read the conclusion, turn to the next page. To see the postcards used to promote the thesis show, go to Appendix B on page 26. To read about Styx’s new command role, turn to page 28.)

Conclusion

"What the hell was that?"

This body of work sprang from my inability to enjoy a hobby without examining it closely. And, honestly, "sprang" is much too forceful a word; I had to hunt the damn thing down. As a long-time participant in several of the subcultures discussed here, I could make out fascinating glimpses of largely disused narrative forms, cathexis manifesting, emerging social structures, compressed histories, and the visible construction of personality. Isolating elements and finding the actual points of connection I was most interested in took a great deal of work. The term "investigation" is, quite frankly, overused in the context of art, often suggesting that someone doesn't have a point to make or interesting questions to ask, but I dare say that it is exactly the right term for what I have attempted to do. However, rather than closing the case and ending the inquiry, I turn to you to determine the value of the exercise and what it ultimately means. What do you choose?

(To discuss *AlterPieces* with Amy Williams, email her at rpgportraitminiatures@gmail.com. To see the titles and materials for the work in the show, got to page 22. To give her the damn MFA already, fill out the appropriate paperwork.)

I hesitated. I hesitated, and I lost my only chance to end the encounter with minimal casualties among my team. The plan I'd come up with—attempting to tackle the wounded Space Marine and teleporting him into the clutches of Deathwatch—might have worked, though the massive size and strength difference meant I'd probably get my ass beat in the process. Possibly to death. But it wasn't fear for my safety that had held me back and cost me the advantage, it was a reluctance to make a unilateral decision. Without a formal command structure within our little operations group, decisions are made by mutual agreement and persuasion. What right do I have to just take the lead?

While I was busy second-guessing myself and explaining my strategy, the situation changed and my opening to attack was gone. My companions didn't seem to be bothered by a need for consensus, and opened fire, sparking a fight that ended with our original prey missing, a dangerous ally rendered dead or at least hostile to future cooperation, and my teammates mutated and/or on fire. However, despite my misgivings, their choice to attack an avowed enemy was not incorrect, and our superior considered the mission a success.

Was the price too high? Can't say. Wouldn't matter if it was, as there isn't much to be done about it now. I only know that it was my inaction that haunted me, and vow to be more decisive in the future. If I'm not happy with how we've been running things and too stubborn to just follow orders, I'd better learn to issue them. The other alternative is to just drink until my doubts go away, but I figure the sound of gunfire will only exacerbate a hangover.

Works List

- p. 3 *Solomon Wrax, Night Lord*
Vitreous enamel, 24k gold foil, overglaze painting, underglaze painting, copper. 2013
- p. 4 *The Captain*
Vitreous enamel, grisaille, copper. 2013
- p. 6-7 Bolo Tie Setting
Pewter, steel. 2014
- p. 8 Brooch Setting
Pewter, steel. 2014
- p. 9 *Commander Dilliad*
Vitreous enamel, overglaze painting, dichroic foil, copper. 2014
- p. 10 *Aurelia*
Vitreous enamel, 24k gold foil, overglaze painting, underglaze painting, mica luster, copper. 2014
- p. 11 *Sayf al-Qamar Tarik ibn Abdullah*
Vitreous enamel, 24k gold foil, overglaze painting, copper. 2014
- p. 12 *Oz*
Vitreous enamel, overglaze painting, underglaze painting, copper. 2014
- p. 13 *Ixonia LeGrange*
Vitreous enamel, overglaze painting, underglaze painting, mica luster, copper. 2014
- p. 14 *Wardane*
Vitreous enamel, overglaze painting, underglaze painting, copper. 2014
- p. 15 *Fyre*
Vitreous enamel, 24k gold foil, overglaze painting, underglaze painting, copper. 2014
- p. 16 *Alexander McAlistor*
Vitreous enamel, overglaze painting, underglaze painting, dichroic foil, copper. 2014
- p. 17 *Eve*
Vitreous enamel, 24k gold foil, overglaze painting, underglaze painting, copper. 2014
- p. 18 *Varishka Twice-Born*
Vitreous enamel, 24k gold foil, overglaze painting, mica luster, copper. 2014

p.19 Arbitrator Odessa “Styx” Koshka
Vitreous enamel, 24k gold foil, overglaze painting, copper. 2013

Notes

1. Glenn Adamson. *The Invention of Craft*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013.) p. 187
2. Robin Jaffee Frank. *Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 2000.) p. 1

Isconia LeGrange

Appendix A

(It is dark here. You are likely to be eaten by a grue.)

Information Request sent to participants.

Thank you for volunteering! If you have multiple characters you are interested in, feel free to give me information on each; just note the level of attachment or preference you have for each. Some of the info is purely for me, but I'd really like to create an online archive for the character(s) as part of the project, so please let me know what you are comfortable sharing with a wider audience and if you'd like your mundane identity kept separate (not publicly listed) from the character/persona.

To get started, I'm just looking for some basic information to help me draw up the basic sketches and organize incoming information. Here's what I'd like:

1. Your name, including how you want me to address you in conversation and how you might like to be credited in the project.
2. Character/persona name(s)
3. Length of time active
4. Character origin (e.g., *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Second Life*, SCA, specific forum, etc.)
5. Clan/Class/Race/Rank/Build/Title/other archetype designation.
6. A few words of description, both physical and personality-wise

"How do you do it?" I looked at Rhodes. I'd have to be a fool to think he is as open and mellow as he appears to be, particularly since I've seen him in action, but he seems to know when to use the carrot and when to use the stick. "I mean, how do you know when you've done the right thing?"

"You have to decide for yourself what the right thing is, and then do it," he said. "In most cases, the worst decision is doing nothing." He regarded me without expression, then sighed slightly. "With enough time and resources, maybe we could save everyone, but most of the time we're short on both. So you do what you can."

I'd been hoping for something a little more definitive, some kind of bright line I would know not to cross. No such luck. Still, I pressed him a little further. "How do you keep from second-guessing yourself?"

"You don't have that luxury." Rhodes crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Make the best decisions you can with the information you have. That's all you can do."

I left the meeting without much additional clarity, but strangely reassured.

7. I forgot to put a #7 in earlier versions of this questionnaire, so you can make up a question if you want.
8. Anything you'd like to say about your relationship with the character, like what they mean to you
9. If you are comfortable, a couple photos of your face so that I can take some cues from it for drawing (mostly in terms of subtle expression or eye shape and not to create a likeness).
10. (BONUS) If you have any images you reference when you think about the character, I'd love to see them. Also, if there are any important insignia I might include, I'll need an image.

Once I get that, I can get to work. If you have additional documentation, like backstory, character sheets, doodles, forum logs, photos, and so forth, I would absolutely love to get copies, but that will be more a matter of fleshing things out and creating the aforementioned archive than things I need to directly incorporate into the portrait. I view this as a multimedia project and not just the objects I make, and I'm very interested in the notion of creating portraits of beings who already exist, just not in the most obvious or traditional way.

Incidentally, please let me know if any of the material is the intellectual property of you or someone else. I'm doing all of this in good faith and want to be sure I'm respectful and give people credit for their work, as this is a fundamentally collaborative project.

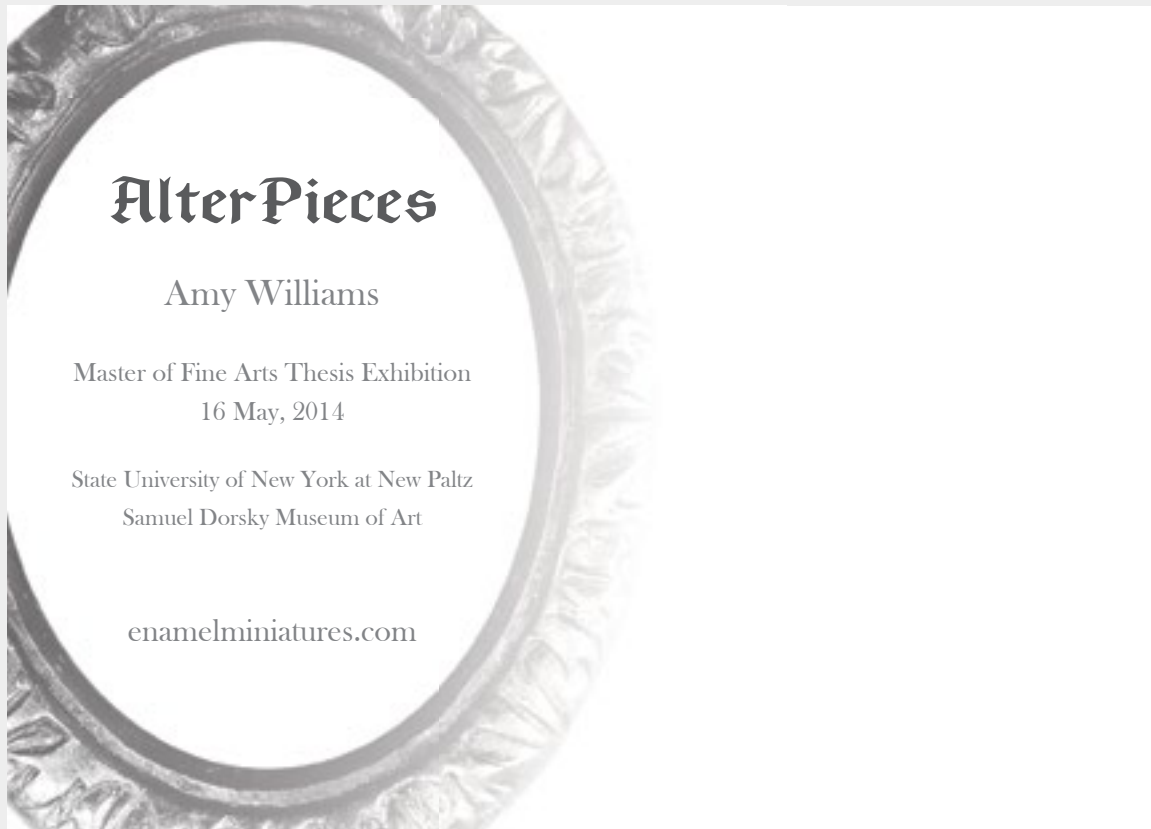
Once the portrait(s) is/are complete, I'll be mailing them out to you. Please take it and use it however you'd like. At this point, I'd like some feedback in the form of photos of the pieces in use and some thoughts (email, skype, phone, whatever) on the piece and process. After the show wraps (and with luck, I'll get my Master's degree for it), I'll post the work back to you and it is yours to keep forever. Any future publication of the objects will include "in the collection of (your name)."

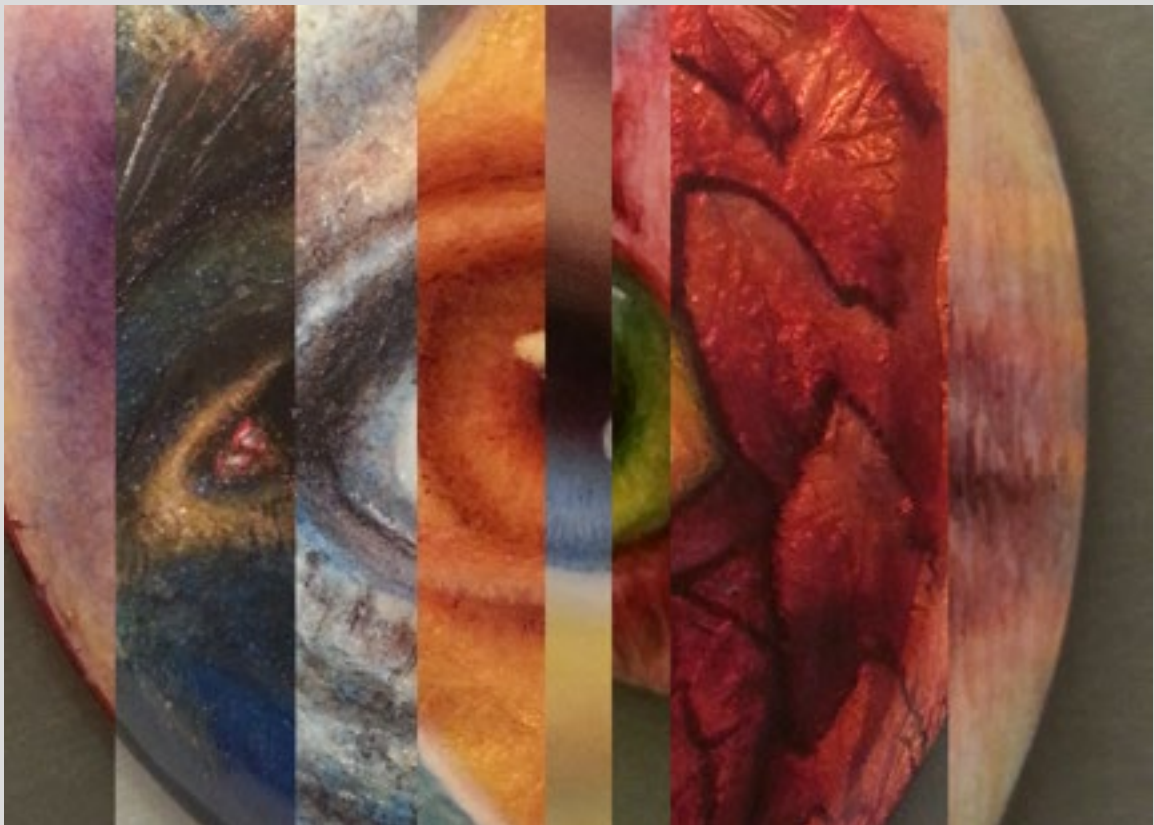
Whew! Ok, I know that is a lot to process, but if you're still interested, I'll happily start work as soon as I get your info. Of course, if you have additional questions, feel free to ask. Thank you for helping out, and welcome aboard!

Cheers,
Amy Williams
rpgportraitminiatures@gmail.com
enamelminiatures.com

Appendix B

Postcards
Series of 4







The pilot was standing in the center of the clearing, pistol drawn, clearly just shy of panic. We knew he'd crashed the ship on purpose and we needed to bring him in to find out why, but he hadn't spotted us; something else was responsible for his terror. Scanning the area, I saw only the island's wildlife fleeing from his position. Then, with growing unease, I turned the scanner earthward.

"RUN!" I commanded, and the pilot swung to face us, wild-eyed. I motioned him towards us and he complied, clutching a clearly broken arm to his side as he bolted through the long grass.

The massive, serpentine, insectoid alien broke out of the ground like a breaching whale, launching itself through the earth where he had stood seconds earlier. The pilot managed to keep his feet and put some extra energy into his sprint as the creature's vast bulk slid back beneath the soil. The team readied weapons and secured the pilot, but I estimated our chances against the behemoth as minimal with us on the ground and only a single device capable of tracking the alien's location. I thumbed my radio and called for air support, tossing the scanner to my jet-pack wearing teammate so that she could keep up with the quick-moving burrower and coordinate the air strike.

We made it back to the crash site with an alien swarm nipping at our heels, retrieving the evidence we needed without taking losses. Not a particularly glorious exit, granted, and we didn't squash the big bug, but I'm satisfied with my decision to, well, make a decision.

That island is going to have to be set on fire, though.

Appendix C

Installation Images



Bibliography

- Adamson, Glenn, ed. *The Craft Reader*. Oxford: Berg, 2010. Print.
- Adamson, Glenn. *The Invention of Craft*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.
- Adamson, Glenn. *Thinking through Craft*. Oxford: Berg, 2007. Print.
- Armstrong, Lilian. *Renaissance Miniature Painters & Classical Imagery: The Master of the Putti and His Venetian Workshop*. London: H. Miller, 1981. Print.
- Bachrach, Lilyan. *Enameling with Professionals*. Worcester, MA.: L. Bachrach, 2002. Print.
- Bagnoli, Martina. *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*. [Cleveland, Ohio]: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2010. Print.
- Barnes, Owen, Kate Flack, and Mike Mason. *Dark Heresy*. Roseville, MN: Fantasy Flight Games, 2008. Print.
- Barratt, Carrie Rebora., and Lori Zabar. *American Portrait Miniatures in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter, Hannah Arendt, and Harry Zohn. *Illuminations*. 2007 Schocken Books Reprint ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968. Print.
- Besten, Liesbeth Den. *On Jewellery: A Compendium of International Contemporary Art Jewellery*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, 2012. Print.
- Beyer, Catherine Noble. "Character portrait." Message to Amy Williams. 14 Oct. 2014-ongoing. Email.
- Boettcher, Graham, Elle Shushan, and Jo Manning. *The Look of Love: Eye Miniatures from the Skier Collection*. Birmingham, Ala.: Birmingham Museum of Art, 2012. Print.
- Bogost, Ian. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006. Print.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*. London: Tate Pub., 2009. Print.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. [Dijon]: Leses Du Réel, 2002. Print.
- Burkart, Andrea. "what up!!" Message to Amy Williams. 26 Mar. 2014-ongoing. Email.
- Burkart, Thomas. "Tom character info." Message to Amy Williams. 14 Oct. 2013-ongoing. Email.
- Burton, Chuck. "Portrait project participation." Message to Amy Williams. 19 Feb. 2014-ongoing. Email.
- Carl, Jason, Jess Heinig, and Peter Woodworth. *Laws Of the Night*. Clarkston, GA: White Wolf, 1999. Print.
- Cook, Monte, Jonathan Tweet, and Skip Williams. *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook: Core Rulebook I V.3.5*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2003. Print.
- Cummins, Genevieve E. *How the Watch Was Worn: A Fashion for 500 Years*. Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2010. Print.
- Danto, Arthur C. *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*. Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2003. Print.
- Darty, Linda. *The Art of Enameling: Techniques, Projects, Inspiration*. New York: Lark, 2004. Print.

- DeLorme, Maureen. *Mourning Art & Jewelry*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Pub., 2004. Print.
- Dillon, Roberto. *On the Way to Fun: An Emotion-based Approach to Successful Game Design*. Natick, MA: K Peters, 2010. Print.
- Foucault, Michel, and Alan Sheridan. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1995. Print.
- Frank, Robin Jaffee. *Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 2000. Print.
- Frederick, Andrea. "Your project!" Message to Amy Williams. 14 Oct 2013-ongoing. Email.
- Gell, Alfred. "Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as 'Traps.'" *Journal of Material Culture* 1.1 (1996): 15-38. Print.
- Gompertz, Will. *What Are You Looking At?: The Surprising, Shocking, and Sometimes Strange Story of 150 Years of Modern Art*. N.p.: Plume, 2013. Print.
- Hickey, Dave. *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty, Revised and Expanded*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012. Print.
- Hill, Gerard, ed. *Fabergé and the Russian Master Goldsmiths*. New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1989. Print.
- Irvine, Gregory, and Ian Thomas. *Japanese Cloisonné: The Seven Treasures*. London: V&A Publications, 2006. Print.
- Johnson, Dale T. *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection*. New York: Metropolitan Museum on Art, 1990. Print.
- JT. "RE: painting you like one of my french girls." Message to Amy Williams. 18 Apr. 2014-ongoing. Email.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. *Under Blue Cup*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011. Print.
- Le, Van Marthe. *500 Enameled Objects: A Celebration of Color on Metal*. New York: Lark, 2009. Print.
- Markowitz, Yvonne J. *Artful Adornments: Jewelry from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*. Boston: MFA Publications, 2011. Print.
- McManus, Dylan. "miniatures project." Message to Amy Williams. 19 Apr. 2014-ongoing. Email.
- Michael, Prince of Greece. *Jewels of the Tsars: The Romanovs & Imperial Russia*. New York: Vendome, 2006. Print.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3.Autumn (1975): 6-18. Print.
- Myka. "Miniatures Project – Furry." Message to Amy Williams. 3 Mar. 2014-ongoing. Email.
- Nehama, Sarah, and Anne E. Bentley. *In Death Lamented: The Tradition of Anglo-American Mourning Jewelry*. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society; Distributed by the University of Virginia, 2012. Print.
- Nohr, Ryan. "Ryan Nohr's Character – Oz." Message to Amy Williams. 15 Oct. 2013-ongoing. Email.
- Patterson, Angus. *Fashion and Armour in Renaissance Europe: Proud Lookes and Brave Attire*. London:

V&A Pub., 2009. Print.

Pech, Arleta. *Radiant Oils: Glazing Techniques for Paintings That Glow*. Cincinnati, OH: North Light, 2010. Print.

Price, Judith. *Lest We Forget: Masterpieces of Patriotic Jewelry and Military Decorations*. Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Pub., 2011. Print.

Reynolds, Graham, and Katharine Baetjer. *European Miniatures in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996. Print.

Reynolds, Graham J. *Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver: An Exhibition to Commemorate of the 400th Anniversary of the Birth of Nicholas Hilliard*. London: Ministry of Education, 1947. Print.

Scarisbrick, Diana, Christophe Vachaud, and Jan Walgrave. *Royal Jewels: From Charlemagne to the Romanovs*. New York: Vendome, 2008. Print.

Scarisbrick, Diana. *Portrait Jewels: Opulence and Intimacy from the Medici to the Romanovs*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011. Print.

Schell, Jesse. *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*. Amsterdam: Elsevier/Morgan Kaufmann, 2008. Print.

Seeler, Margarete. *The Art of Enameling: How to Shape Precious Metal and Decorate It with Cloisonné, Champlevé, Plique-à-jour, Mercury Gilding and Other Fine Techniques*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1969. Print.

Soler, Del Campo, Alvaro. *The Art of Power: Royal Armor and Portraits from Imperial Spain*. [Madrid]: Sociedad Estatal Para La Acción Cultural Exterior, 2009. Print.

Speel, Erika. *Painted Enamels: An Illustrated Survey 1500-1920*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Lund Humphries, 2008. Print.

Stefanutti, Erika Ayala, and Gary Griffin. "Remaking Material." *Metalsmith* Summer 1994: 32-34. Print.

Strong, Roy C., and V. J. Murrell. *Artists of the Tudor Court: The Portrait Miniature Rediscovered : 1520-1620: 9 July-6 November 1983: The Victoria & Albert Museum Exhibition*. London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1983. Print.

Vergauwen, Amber. "RPG character possibilities from Amber." Message to Amy Williams. 14 Oct. 2013-ongoing. Email.

Willies, Joan Cornish. *Miniature Painting: A Complete Guide to Techniques, Mediums, and Surfaces*. New York: Watson-Guipill, 1995. Print.

(You have been eaten by a grue.)

