



Torchsteppe is a concept art book of the story of Princess Mona and the Woman of the Woods, featuring excerpts from the story and behind-the-scenes commentary

The Art of Torchsteppe

Concept Art Book



Artist Statement

Charlie Pugliese is a Portland-based illustrator and designer, specializing in figurative and narrative pieces. He has a painterly and graphic approach to his illustrations, using both traditional and digital mediums.

Charlie manages quick turnaround across a variety of different genres of illustration, including concept art, book covers, album covers, and movie posters.

If you are looking for an artist or have a question, email him at: cpugliese.illustration@gmail.com

Written Proposal

The Kingdom of Torchsteppe has had a tyrannical hold over the entities of Othwa Thür for centuries. Unfortunately, Mona doesn't know that. "Torchsteppe" is a tangled story of grief, revenge, and choice. Using religious and spiritual motifs and folklore from around the world, I will tell this story through a concept art book containing the visual development of Mona; her father Dominic, the King; the Woman of the Woods; and the world they live in.

The land the kingdom resides on, known on ancient maps as Othwa Thür, is inhabited by spirits and entities unheard of to the people of Torchsteppe. The spirits are cast as monsters and creatures to be feared. Their existence haunts the folks within the walls, as they peer through the trees and glide across the dry grass. To Torchsteppe, they are the enemy.

It isn't until one of them makes contact with Mona. Deemed by Mona as "the Woman of the Woods", she is beckoned into the forest and learns the truth about their existence and history. Not as monsters, but as different. It is up to Mona to learn the true history of her people and restore the land to what it once was.

Mona is the 14-year-old daughter of The Smouldering King Dominic, and a firecracker of big questions and bold ideas. She loves her home and is very proud of the kingdom she will one day rule. Her life has been filled with luxuries, but part of her is always unsatisfied.

Stern, arrogant, and definitely hiding something, King Dominic has been in charge of the land since he was a young boy, inheriting the throne from his grandfather after he mysteriously passed. Dominic does have a soft spot for Mona, keeping his love for his daughter between the two of them. While not explicitly a character, Soara is the Goddess that King Dominic

and the people of Torchsteppe worship. She is the source of all their powers, and is the reason for the kingdom's existence. An ancient tome lies in the depths of the castle however, containing the writing of a different but similar goddess. Only the King and his grandfather have ever laid eyes on it, and King Dominic intends to keep it that way.

The Woman of the Woods is a tall, dark, and mysterious figure that calls to Mona and leads her on a journey of a lifetime into the land of Othwa Thür. Inspired by the many folk practices and spirits of the world, she is the embodiment of the natural world and its magic.

The many background characters and spirits that inhabit Othwa Thür, inspired by various mushrooms, the Wildermann of Europe, the Yokai rituals of Japan, and the Zangbeto of Benin, they fill the land with light and life. While they play no major role in the storyline, they add to the atmosphere of the environment.



The story I'm writing, albeit filled with geographical, religious, and cultural references, was not created in response to those issues. These connections were made by me after developing the story, and I have chosen to not use real-world political and cultural discourse in my research. In a broader sense, however, the story is a reflection of how a person grows and changes, and the difficult decisions everyone must make in their lives. Mona's journey is one of self-discovery, growth, and understanding. She is a sheltered young child with no grasp of the world outside of the lies she has been taught.

The use of religious and spiritual folklore and motifs is to better ground the story in reality. The spirits of Othwa Thür are inspired by the Yokai rituals of Japan, the Zangbeto spirit of Benin, the European Wild Men, and the Madremonte of Columbia. Each of these practices consists of dressing as the spirit in question, which entails masking the human form and portraying the spirit as recognizably humanoid but far from human. In the opposite sense, the aesthetics of Torchsteppe are that of the arabesque architecture of the al-Hambra in Spain and the Hagia Sofia in Turkey, as well as the massive spires and sharp accents of German Gothic cathedrals.

My process will include numerous iterations of thumbnail, value, color, and lighting compositions much like the pipeline in the visual development industry. The environments and characters of the two worlds will be visually diametrically opposed, using harsh contrasts of warm vs cool temperatures, high vs low values, and organic vs geometric shape languages. However, throughout both the storyline and concept art book, Mona will become increasingly blended in her appearance, symbolizing her discovery and acceptance of those of Othwa Thür. The layout will serve as a progression of the development process in different stages, or chapters, broken up by characters, environments, assets, and key moments of the story.

The deliverables will be a written story/outline, 5 illustrated key moments of the story, 6 environmental scenes (interior and exterior), 5 character

illustrations, and the ideation process of all pieces. By the end of this semester, I will have the thumbs for each step as well as the rough comps for the characters and 2 of the environments. As of now, I am looking at the final printed book being 10 x 8 inches and printed through Blurb.

My defense will be presented as both a physical book and an online PDF through Issuu. The physical book will be placed on a table decorated with tealights and a table cloth, similar to the altar and tome of the story. Above the table will be the crest of the kingdom as a traditional medieval banner, with four 11 x 17-inch spreads of select pages of the book and two oversized QR codes to access the online version on either side.

My influences stem from existing media and concept art books such as *Rise of the Guardians*, *The Witcher: The Wild Hunt*, *Skyrim*, and *Dark Souls 3*. I chose these specific games (and one film) because of their rich lore and strong storyline. The latter three games are generally open world, and while there is an overarching story and goal for the player, there is no time limit or set path to get there. I have always preferred open-world style stories and games because of the freedom the player has to engage with the world. As I develop this story, I see it existing in its final form as an open-world video game where the player can live as Mona and choose to side with either Othwa Thür or Torchsteppe after the truth is revealed. I am limiting myself to the development of her siding with Othwa Thür for sake of time management, but I do intend to create the visuals for her choosing Torchsteppe in the near future.

My artistic inspirations include Ron Koza, for his graceful figures, balance of realism and stylization, and his layouts of his visual development; Emilyena, for her scratchy approach to painting, dramatic lighting, and stylization of faces; Pablo Hurtado de Mendoza, for his bold colors, surreal compositions, and striking balance of painterly and graphic elements; and Qistina Khalidah, for her elegant figure work, limited palette of black and gold, and her delicate additions of detail and texture. Each of these artists

utilize strong silhouettes, bold colors and contrast, and accents of graphic elements, all of which are things I am working to get more skilled in using in my own work.

This project will fit into my portfolio with both its content and execution. I am slowly building up a visual development portfolio, starting with the character design course I took sophomore year. My past projects have included high fantasy characters and horror environments, and I'm hoping to create a middle ground between the two with this thesis project. I am utilizing the Thesis project as a portfolio and resume builder for future studios I will be applying to after graduation.

"Torchsteppe" is a concept art book project chronicling the development of characters and environments of the lands of Torchsteppe and Othwa Thür. The book will serve as a portfolio of visual development for future employment, but also as an opus of everything I have worked for. It is in an equal sense a career-building project and a personal project as it has been my dream to be a visual development artist.



Creative Brief

Project Vision

Torchsteppe is a 64 page concept art book of the story of Princess Mona and the Woman of the Woods. The book introduces their story, along with a few more characters and the environments of their two worlds.

Audience

Torchsteppe is intended for ages 13 years and up. Although shrouded in fantasy, the journey Mona takes of self-discovery is one many can relate to.

While themes may be mature, the story and visuals wouldn't contain extreme violence making it suitable for a teen audience.

Methods & Materials

The assets created for the Art of Torchsteppe were made using both digital and traditional media. The project was displayed in five copies of zine-style staple-bound books, and six posters of character and environment sheets.

Comparative Media

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, Dark Souls 3, and The Elder Scrolls, all of which feature an open world style of storytelling.

Themes of Torchsteppe are comparable to the High Fantasy aesthetic of The Witcher and TES, as well as a Disney princess-esque arc in the story.

Marketplace Application

This book will be presented as a complete portfolio to submit to future visual development studios for employment. This story is also one of many that I have planned for this universe, creating plenty of projects just like this one in the future for possible spin off games and/or webcomics.

Abstract

The Kingdom of Torchsteppe has had a tyrannical hold over the entities of Othwa Thür for centuries. Unfortunately, Mona doesn't know that. *Torchsteppe* is a tangled story of grief, revenge, and choice. Using religious and spiritual motifs and folklore from around the world, *Torchsteppe* is a 64 page concept art book that introduces the story of Princess Mona and the Woman of the Woods

Oral Defense

Good evening everyone! Thank you all for taking the time to attend my defense. My name is Charlie Pugliese, and I am an illustrator, a graphic designer, and a storyteller.

Since a young age I always seemed to be making some kind of character or creature. Whether it be an imaginary friend as a kid, or madly creating d&d characters, I always loved telling stories. By having these universes and characters at my fingertips I was able to escape reality when I needed to and take some time for myself. Character creation and world building have long been a way for me to express myself and even for a little bit, pretend in something I'm not.

In order to test myself, I decided to combine everything I love into one for my thesis. Character design, environment/layout design, text setting, and book design are all things I have grown to love and do the most of in my professional practice. In this thesis I wanted to make a world that others could escape to as well.

All of that has culminated in what you see here today: The Kingdom of Torchsteppe has had a tyrannical hold over the entities of Othwa Thür for centuries. Unfortunately, Mona doesn't know that. "Torchsteppe" is a story of grief, revenge, and choice. Using religious and spiritual motifs and folklore from around the world, Torchsteppe is a concept art book containing the visual development of Mona; her father Dominic, the King; the Woman of the Woods; Saora, their goddess and the world they live in.

The land the kingdom resides on, known on ancient maps as Othwa Thür, is inhabited by spirits and entities unheard of to the people of Torchsteppe. The spirits are cast as monsters and creatures to be feared. Their existence haunts the folks within the walls, as they peer through the trees and glide across the dry grass. To Torchsteppe, they are the enemy.

It isn't until one of them makes contact with Mona. Deemed by Mona as "the Woman of the Woods", she is beckoned into the forest where she learns they are not monsters, but spirits of centuries past.

The Art of Torchsteppe began my sophomore year during Zack Rau's isometric room project. I wanted to make a castle tower with flame motifs because I thought they were neat, and I named the tower Torchsteppe after Torch for the fire, and Steppe meaning a vast grassland with no trees. In my mind I imagined the tower sitting isolated in a burning field with people somehow immune to the flames roaming the grass defending it.

During crit I was told it looked like the beginning of an RPG and let's just say I am easily influenced. I began thinking about how this concept could function as a game, and soon committed to the idea of Torchsteppe being my thesis.

What started as an isometric room project, soon snowballed into a tale of theocracy, guilt, and a young princess named Mona.

Mona is the 14-year-old daughter of The Smouldering King Dominic, and a firecracker of big questions and bold ideas. She loves her home and is very proud of the kingdom she will one day rule. Her life has been filled with luxuries, but part of her is always unsatisfied.

Stern, arrogant, and definitely hiding something, King Dominic has been in charge of the land since he was a young boy, inheriting the throne from his grandfather after he mysteriously passed. Dominic loves his daughter, but rarely shows his affection when amongst others.

The Woman of the Woods is a tall, dark, and mysterious figure that calls to Mona and leads her on a journey of a lifetime into the land of Othwa Thür. a bordering forest on the outskirts of Torchsteppe. Inspired by the many folk practices and spirits of the world, she is the embodiment of the natural world and its magic.

While not explicitly a character, Soara is the Goddess that King Dominic and the people of Torchsteppe worship. She is the source of all their powers, and is the reason for the kingdom's existence.

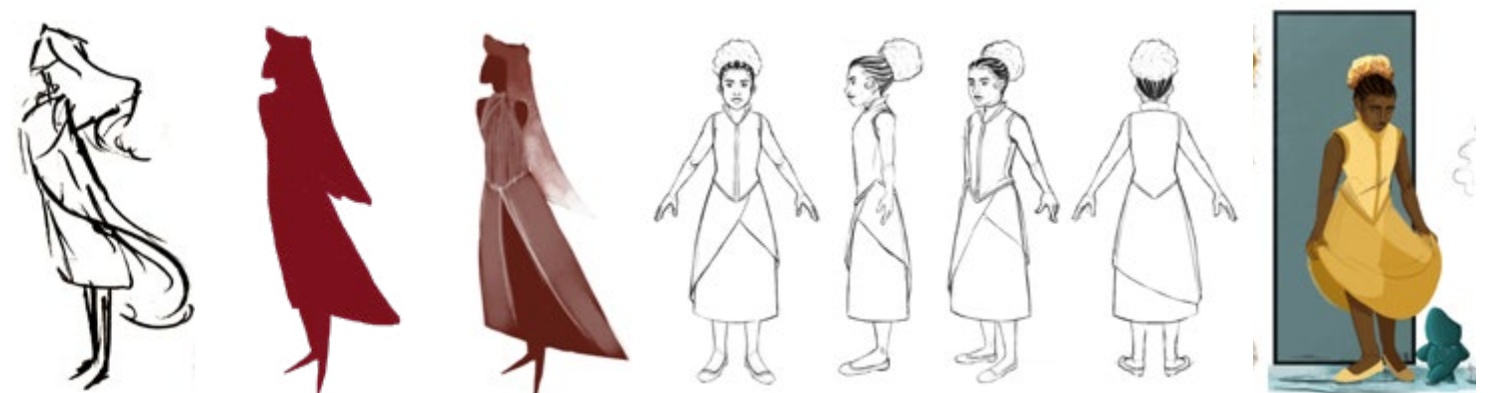
Content and stories an audience can take control for themselves has long been a favorite genre of mine. Choose your own adventure books, openworld video games, and role playing games like D&D, where in many instances you become your character, have fed my interest in storytelling and escapism.

Its for this reason that I wanted to create a world that subverts the audiences expectations. Together you join Princess Mona on her

journey into Othwa Thür and discover the truth with her. What seems like a dark forest of ice and snow turns out to be a burnt wasteland filled with ash and few remains of humanoid structures. The Woman of the Woods tells her of a book burdening her father, and that if she can find it, she can know what happened.

Within its pages I have the ideation and finalized assests of four characters: Princess Mona, King Dominic, Saora, and the Woman of the Woods (as you can also see on these posters) and four finalized environments (two for Torchsteppe and two for Othwa Thür, also on the wall).

My process for creating these characters and environments all began with research and photo gathering. After I got a good amount I began the thumbnailing process but you never really stop researching. I started with thumbnailing, trying to get the basic shape of each character down. I focused entirely on the silhouette, forgoing any details. Once I had a shape I liked for each character, I began cutting away at different values to experiment with layers, clothing, and tone. When I was satisfied with the values, I went straight to work on the turn-arounds, illustrations, and expressions. My process for the environments were similar, instead thumbnailing moreso using contour lines, and then experimenting with different lighting and color compositions.



I also wanna briefly touch on the typography as well, I chose the the cover font (called aviorte) because of its subtle arabesque calligraphy quality, as well as its thicker black letter strokes to resemble the gothic influences of Torchsteppe. I also lucked out because it was free! The interior headers are also written in avirote, as well as the story excerpts in italicized cochin, giving a slightly handwritten look, and avenir (a thinner sans-serif) for the commentary and footnotes.

The cover itself was designed to reflect an older book, with golden accents on the corners and a golden band on the back. I struggled for a bit when it came to the cover illustration, I knew immediately how the text and graphic elements would appear on the page, but it without an illustration it didn't quite match the interior. After a few crits I landed on drawing the tome that Mona finds hidden in the castle.

As I mentioned a bit earlier, there is a lot of spirits and magic in this story, and a lot of my passions lie in mysticism and spirituality which very much influenced the themes of Torchsteppe. Worlds that exist just beside our own have fascinated me from a young age. Stories of spirits and creatures not confirmed but not 100% fake. I wanted to use that part of our world to shape Torchsteppe.

A lot of research went into determining the shapes of the spirits and I used existing spirits to influence their designs. I referenced the Yokai of Japan, the Zangbeto of Benin, the European Wildermenn, and the Madremonte of Columbia. These spirits all are very organic and natural in their shape and behavior. And it was crucial that spirits and the land Othwa Thür was the same.

In the opposite sense, the aesthetics and design of Torchsteppe and its people are that of the arabesque architecture of the al-Hambra in Spain and the Hagia Sofia in Turkey, as well as the design of German Gothic cathedrals. These architectural styles pair both hyperdetailed carvings and flourishes which reflect affluence and beauty as well as sharp and, quite frankly, dangerous looking spires. I need torchsteppe to be equally beautiful and intimidating.

It was really important that Torchsteppe and Othwa Thür were visually opposites. I think for many of us it's easy to avoid and be weary what we don't understand and what's harder to understand than something that is completely 180 to what you're used to. For Mona, this means letting go of everything she knew, to face what is real.

In a more technical sense, My influences for deliverables and book layout stem from existing media and concept art books such as Rise of the Guardians, The Witcher: The Wild Hunt, The Elder Scrolls, Dark Souls 3, and the Skillful Huntsman. These books inspired both what I should be creating and how I should lay them out.

I referenced a lot of artists, namely Ron Koza, for his graceful figures, balance of realism and stylization, and his layouts of his visual development; Emilyena, for her scratchy approach to painting, dramatic lighting, and stylization of faces; Pablo Hurtado de Mendoza, for his bold colors, surreal compositions, and striking balance of painterly and graphic elements; and Qistina Khalidah, for her elegant figure work, limited palette of black and gold, and her delicate additions of detail and texture. Each of these artists utilize strong silhouettes, bold colors and contrast, and accents of graphic design, all of which are approaches that I used to paint this story and implement in other aspects of my portfolio.

Over the course of this semester I found that this project could be applicable in a number of markets outside of a video game/entertainment world as I originally anticipated. As I continued to make this story, I saw it being told through webcomic/graphic novels, picture books, even as a setting for a D&D campaign.

Stepping outside of Torchsteppe and Othwa Thür, there are countries and cultures in this universe that haven't yet had their stories told. And while I will be taking a break from Torchsteppe for a bit, I intend on creating similarly structured series of these other stories to expand the universe and paint a deeper picture of this world sometime in the future.

The Art of Torchsteppe and future books in the series fit into my portfolio as both a visual development artist and a storyteller. My current portfolio is filled with characters and some environments, but this project captures a story and world in its entirety, something I had not yet done. The cover and layouts demonstrate my ability to work in publishing, another avenue of illustration that I've recently considered.

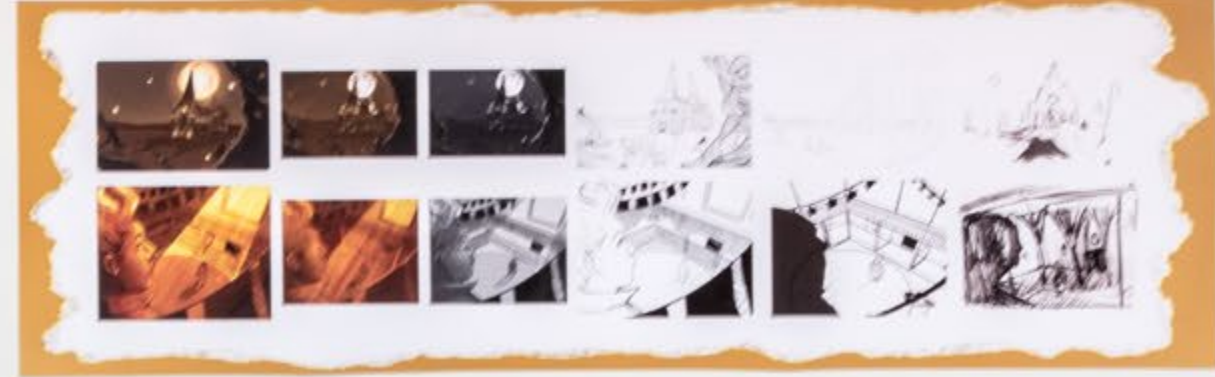
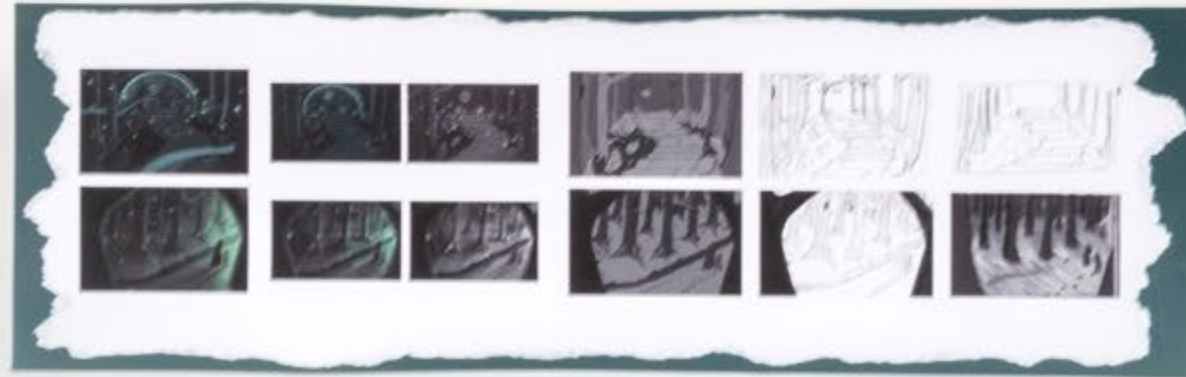
I completed this project not in a way I originally intended. I began with proposing this plus imagery and ideation of two divulging storylines and a written story. Nonetheless, it wasn't until about midterms when I realized a.) that wasn't gonna happen and b.) what I was on track to do was enough. I learned within myself that with this and other projects in non-thesis classes, I get really ambitious when it comes to what I think I can get done. I was told in another class that an app project I wanted to complete in a few weeks would realistically take over a year. I learned that sometimes it's fine to chill out.

"Torchsteppe" is a concept art book chronicling the development of characters and environments of the lands of Torchsteppe and Othwa Thür and introduces the story of Princess Mona and the Woman of the Woods. With all that out of the way, I invite you if you haven't already to come up, look through the pages, and ask any questions you may have!

Thank you very much for listening.

Thesis Defense Documentation





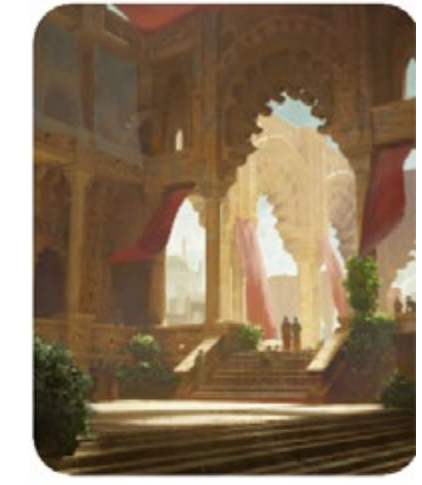
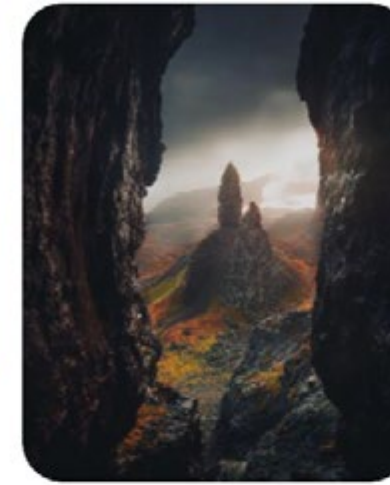


Thesis Journal

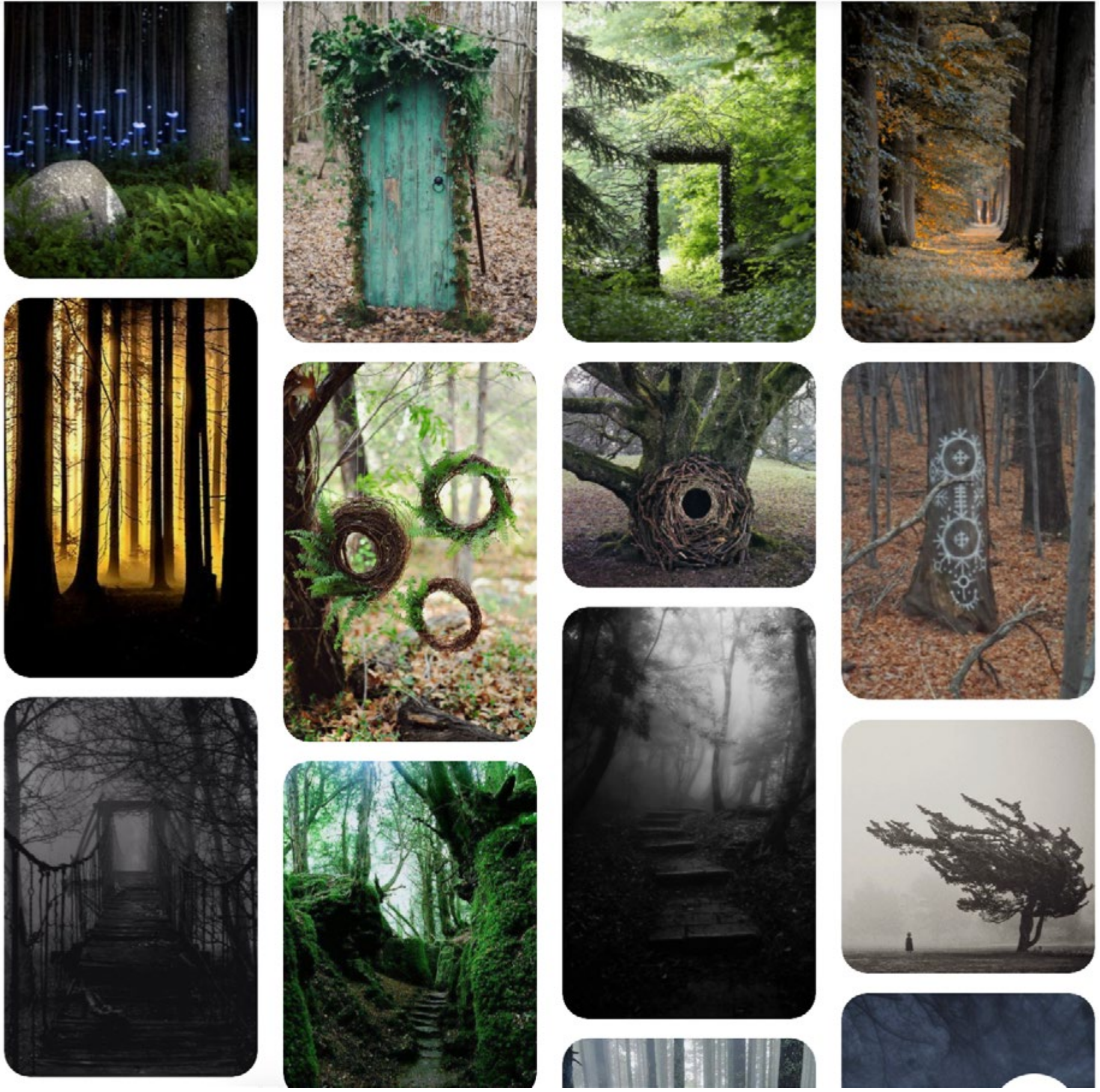


Moodboard





Sample of Torchsteppe Environment References



Sample of Othwa Thür
Environment References



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