Meat Grinder

An artbook by Dominykas Jecius

Characters and art by Dominykas Jecius
Game concept by Ray Whitcher

Project Overview

    The goal of this project was to design characters for a post-apocalyptic sci-fi game. The game world heavily values physical appearance to the point where the world's standard of beauty is warped and twisted beyond comprehension. Because of this, characters in the game receive augmentations, DNA splicing, cosmetic surgeries and the like. Anything and everything is a means to a narcissistic end.

    In the game, there are cosmetic brands that spearhead this sort of narcissistic culture and force their most advanced fighters, Narcissi, to fight in a 3-phase arena-style tournament, named "Meat Grinder".

    The 3 phases of the tournament are as follows:

- Furious Fisticuffs: A battle-royale style melee brawler, where the physicallity and natural strength of fighters takes center-stage. Weapons are banned, but that doesn't stop fighters from smuggling them in, or the crowd simply just throwing weapons into the arena themselves;

- Guns 'n Guns: A free-for-all shooter where Narcissi rack up points via kills, however - respawns are limited by the budget of any specific cosmetic brand. The more expensive a fighter was to produce, the more expensive and limited their respawns will be;

- Demolition Derby: Vehicles are piloted by Narcissi in a fracas of metal, explosions and carnage. This phase of the tournament isn't necessarily about the Narcissi showing off their own strengths, moreso about them striking a balance with their vehicle and performing to the best of their combined abilities;
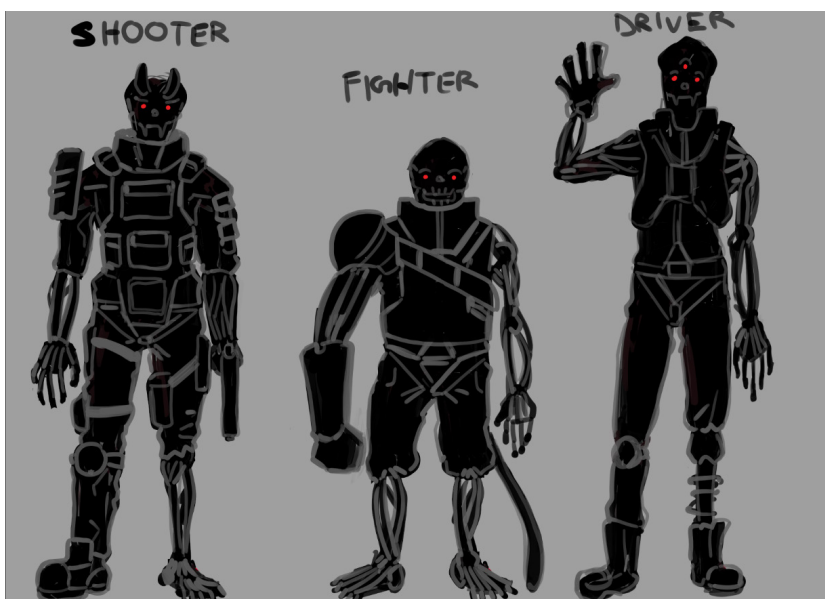
What I've personally set out to do for this project is to design a character for one of these phases, Guns 'n Guns.

    Instead of doing all 3 phases of characters, I've decided to stick with just 1. Because my character is incredibly modular, there's still a lot of extra design work that I can do even for them alone.

Sketches for all 3 different phases. The shooter is definitely my favourite, so he's the one I've chosen to focus on. However later on you'll see that I experimented with some ideas about the Driver as well.

Cosmetic Brand

The brand I've come up with for this project is NecroCorp, a militaristic pharmaceutical company that specializes in reanimation technology. Their main line of work includes salvaging the remains of dead, fallen soldiers, bringing them back to life, augmenting their bodies and forcing them to fight in the Meat Grinder tournament. However, they are incredibly cheap and will tend to take the path of least resistance when it comes to actually manufacturing their Narcissi. Of course, this means their Narcissi are easy to replace, so they've leaned into that design approach rather than stepped away from it.

The first draft for the logo was very simple, mostly just text and a few letters forming skulls. However, I thought this was incredibly cartoony and childish, compared to what the actual company represents.
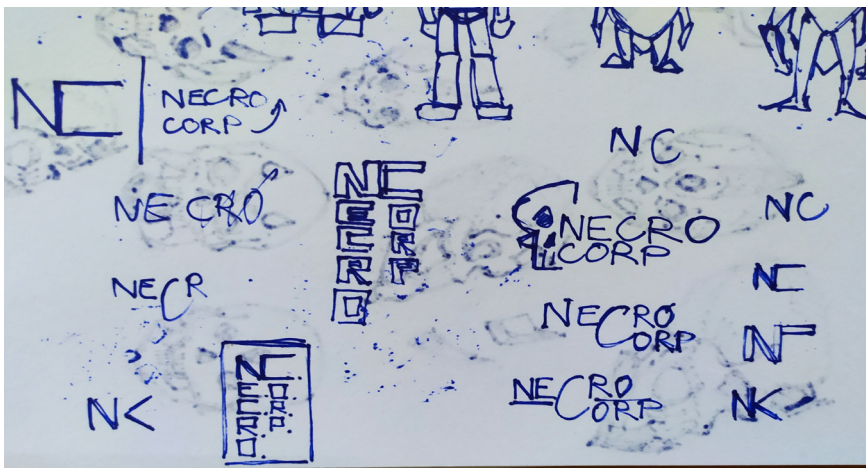
In further sketches I tried stepping away from just simply writing the name of the company and having that be the logo. I experimented with more minimalistic looking logos that you usually see nowadays, especially in tech companies.

"Serve your country one last time. Forever." The slogan for the company was basically set in stone from the very beginning. I'm really quite proud of myself for coming up with something like that so early in the project. Having a clear idea of what I want the company to represent really helped me stay focused in the long run.

Final Logo Design

Final logo without additional slogan at the bottom.

Final logo design, including slogan.

For the final design I decided to go back to the simple idea of just having the name itself be the logo. I needed a font that was somewhat stencil-like, to fit the militaristic theme. However, I stayed away from more grungy looking fonts, because I still needed the logo to look somewhat sci-fi and simplistic, so it wouldn't look out of place in a medical company.

I also reused an idea from my very first draft, of having skulls replace both letter O's.

It was important for me to have the logo look simple, but still imposing and ominous.

Character Design Process

The actual process of designing the character was relatively straightforward. From the very beginning of the project, I felt that I had a pretty strong base to design these characters from. I think the thing I struggled with the most was actually making it believable. What I like the most about sci-fi is when the creators explain how their world works, and it actually makes some amount of sense. Because my character is basically a reanimated skeleton, I needed some extra advice from a teacher to really push the technological aspect of the design.
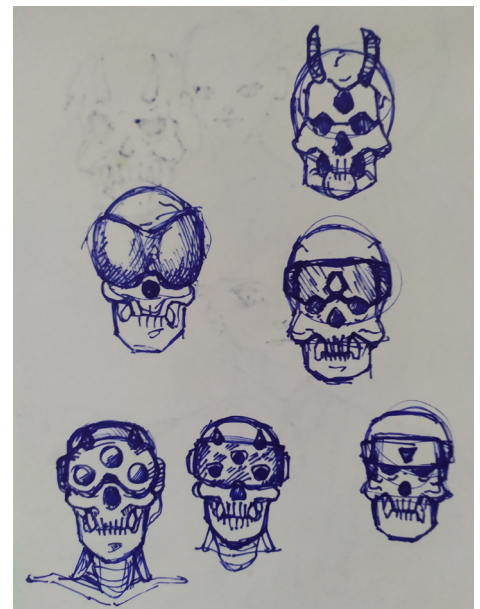

Early head design sketches

Moodboarding and Sketching
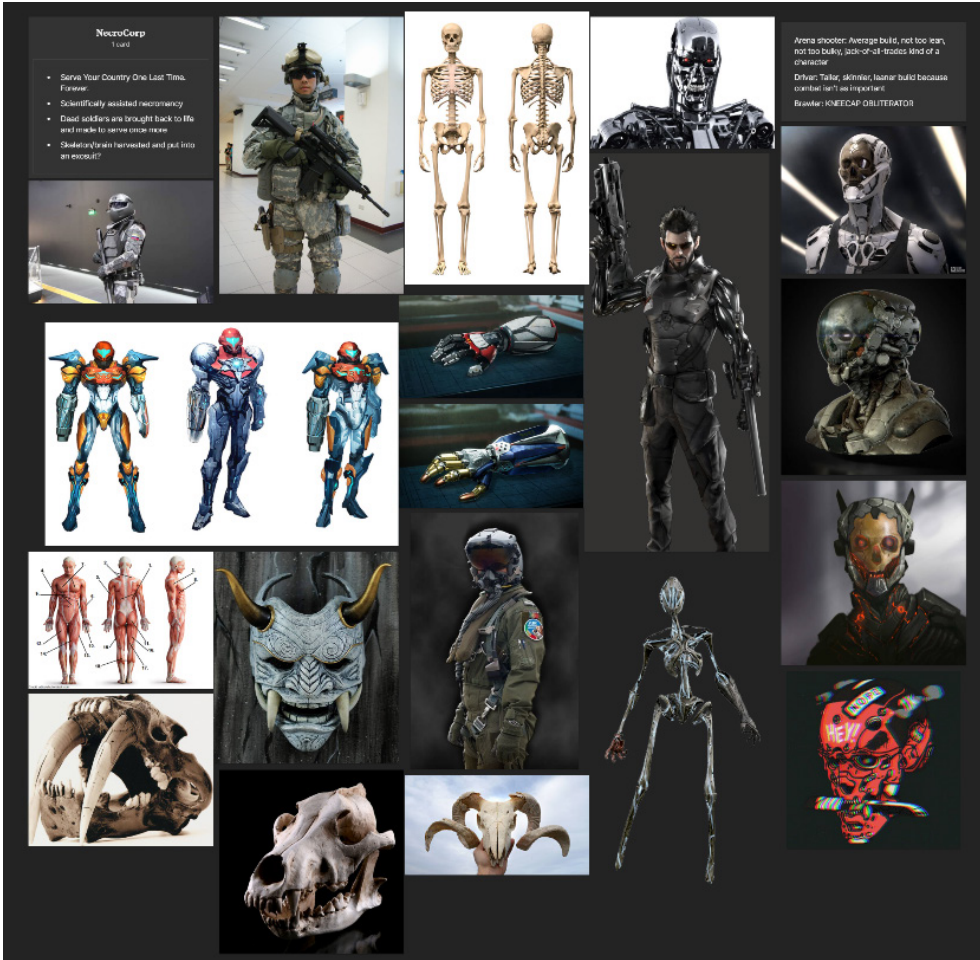
The moodboard I put together at the very start of the project is pretty comprehensive, I think. It includes all of the things that I personally think about when someone mentions sci-fi, plus references for military uniforms and the like.

I also really like skulls and oni masks, so I'm incredibly happy that I managed to incorporate some part of that into the final character design.
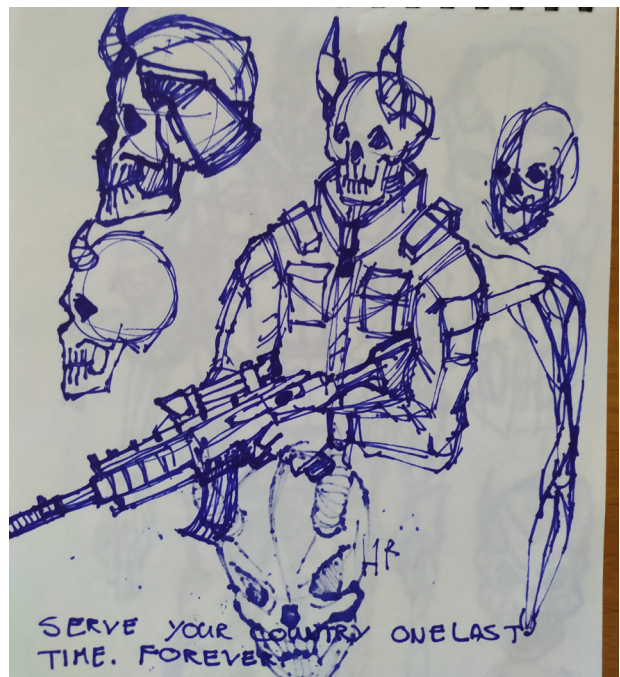
First few rough sketches of ideas for the character, including my first digital iteration.

Skulls, Skulls and more Skulls

Because the character is a skeleton, it was important for me to have their skull look interesting. I tried lots of different designs with different ideas for horns and teeth, however I quickly stepped back a little, because I thought the designs were getting too edgy and horror-esque, rather than sci-fi.

The sketch on the left is quite close to the final design of the character, however you can see that I still had trouble really nailing down a design for the skull itself. I still kept drawing needlessly complex skulls without really considering how they influence the look and feel of the character as a whole.

"Under The Hood"

An important aspect of my character is that it's a skeleton that's being held together by a network of artificial muscle fibers. Their positioning and how they're wrapped together doesn't necessarily mimic the human body, however.


NECROCORP. Muscle fibers and their variations
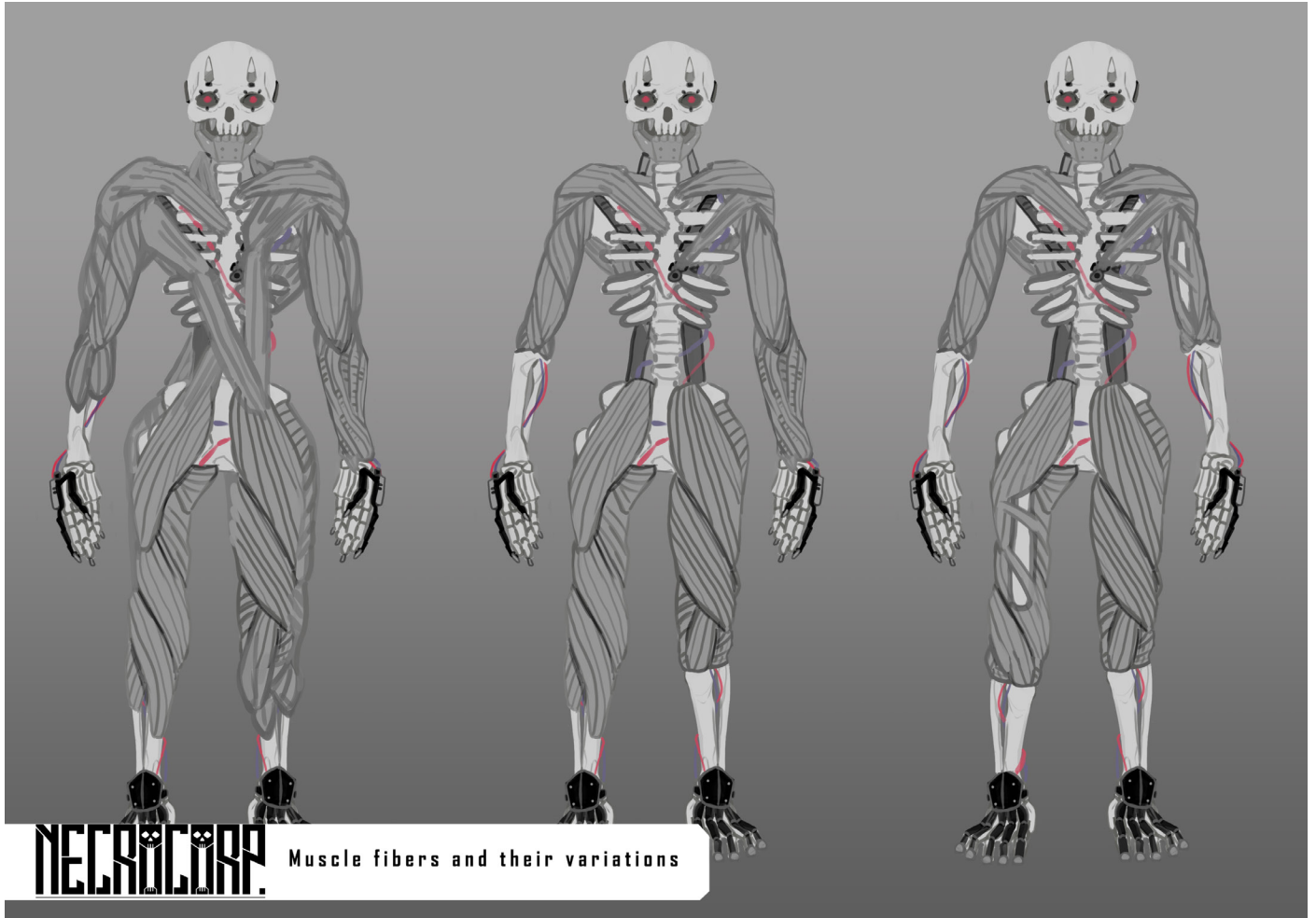
A Narcissi working for NecroCorp is outfitted with an amount of musculature appoopriate for their role. If a Narcissi were to gear up and take on the role of a heavy gunner, they would need stronger muscles to hold up all the extra weight that their armor and weapons would provide. Reversely, a Narcissi specced for an assassin role or a pilot role needs much less musculature, because they aren't going to be fighting on the front-lines.

Another factor that decides how much muscle fibers can be afforded to a Narcissi is, of course, price. Because NecroCorp Narcissi are produced relatively cheaply, in a gamemode where respawns cost money, namely Guns 'n Guns, it's not actually that expensive to give a Narcissi extra musculature. However, this will of course limit how many times they can respawn in total. Basically, it's all about balance. What does the Narcissi prefer, more lives if they were to fail, or a better chance at succeeding outright?

Final Character Design

MAIN TURNAROUND

BATTERY

PAULDRON
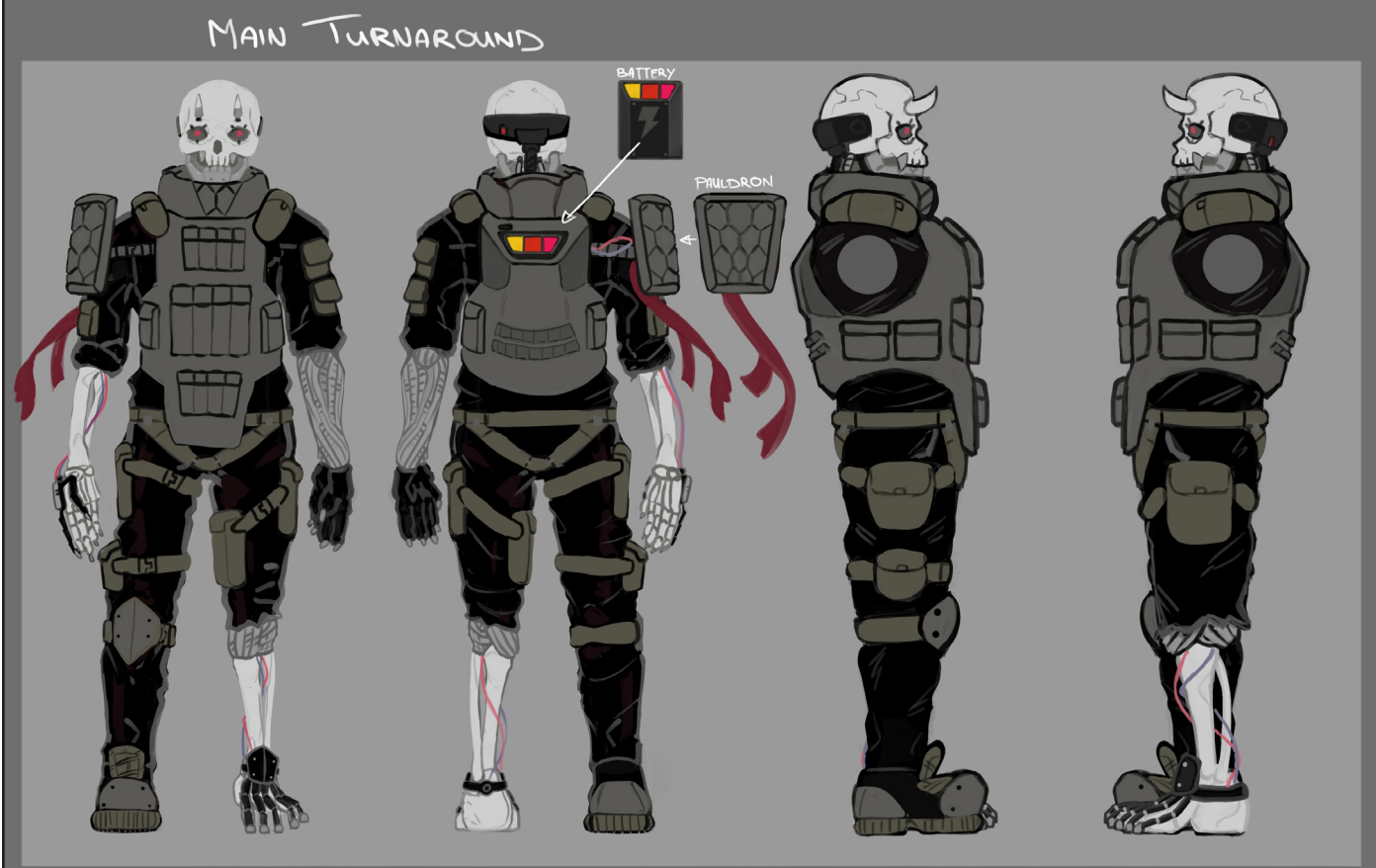
For the final character design I've gone with a more balanced build for the Narcissi. Instead of having either an incredibly large or incredibly small amount of musculature, he sits somewhere in the middle. As previously mentioned, Necro-Corp produces their Narcissi relatively cheaply, therefore even if the Narcissi wear military uniforms, they're actually quite fragile underneath. Adding more or less muscle fibers doesn't necessarily improve their defenses, it moreso allows them to augment their strength, based on the situation.

However, because Narcissi are cheap to produce, a benefit is that during the Guns 'n Guns gamemode, respawns are plentiful. If a Narcissi from a different company has, let's say, 5 respawns, NecroCorp Narcissi can have upwards of 15. NecroCorp's main strategy is overwhelming opponents with numbers rather than upfront destructive power or strength.
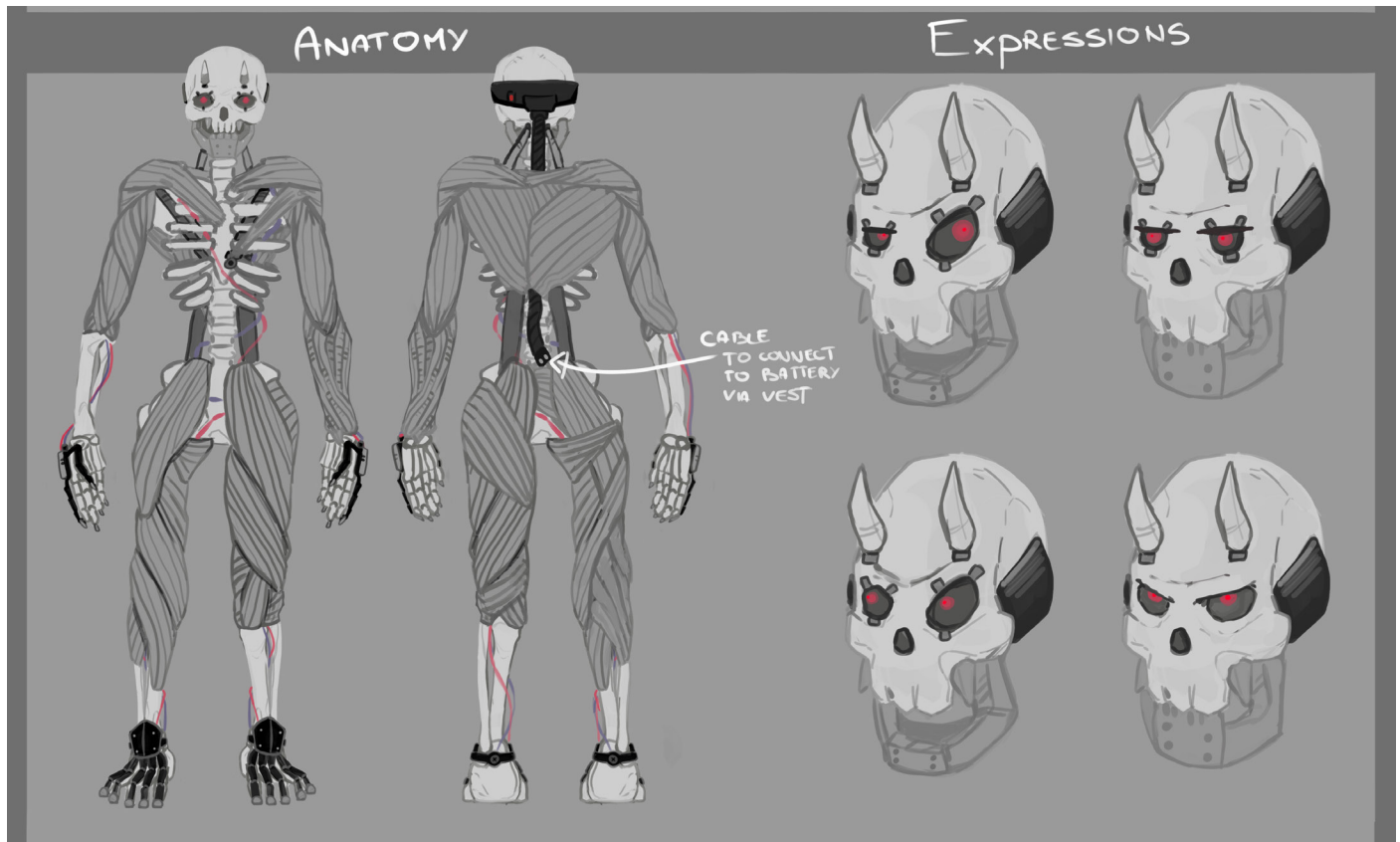
I like the idea of the base Narcissi being relatively plain and simple to understand, with the option of speccing into different classes or builds later down the line.

COLOR INFORMATION

Color palette. It's actually surprising how many shades of red I used, even though most of the character is black.

Anatomy and Expressions

I've already touched upon the idea of the Narcissi having modular musculature, so instead I'd like to focus on the anatomy of the character a bit more broadly. For science fiction characters like this, I think it's very easy to just replace limbs with some sort of machinery and call it a day. I did that exact same thing at first, when I initially began designing this character. However, I think it's a lot more interesting when the technology is incorporated into the character as a whole, rather than individual body parts. In a way, my character is made up of multiple layers, rather than multiple parts. The skeleton itself is a layer, then the bits of machinery and wire holding the skeleton in place and allowing it to move and articulate, then the artificial muscle network tying it all together, then finally the clothes and armor cover up the rest.
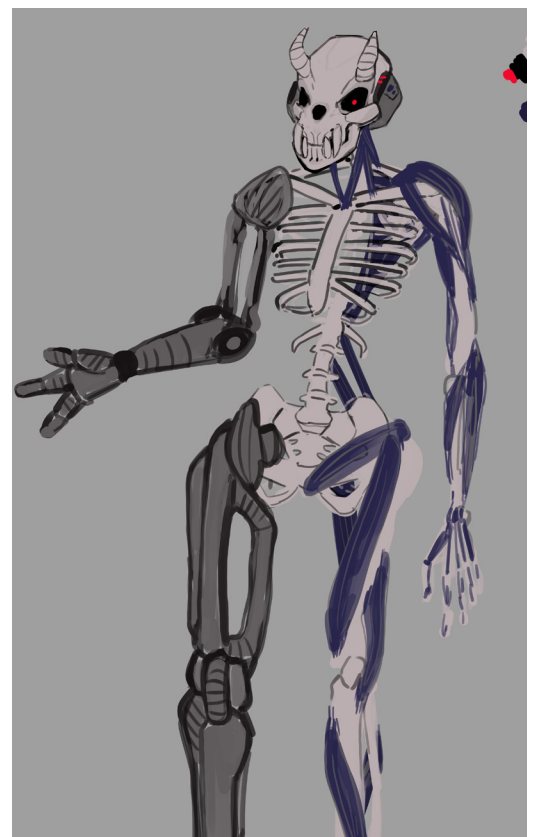
One of the first digital sketches I made for the character, when I came up with the idea of artificial muscles.

Classes, Uniforms, Extras

As previously mentioned, the "final design" of my Narcissi is, at most, only a base. If Meat Grinder were a real game, I'd like the player to be able to spec into different class and gear options based on their preference and playstyle.

NECROCORP. Class and uniform variations
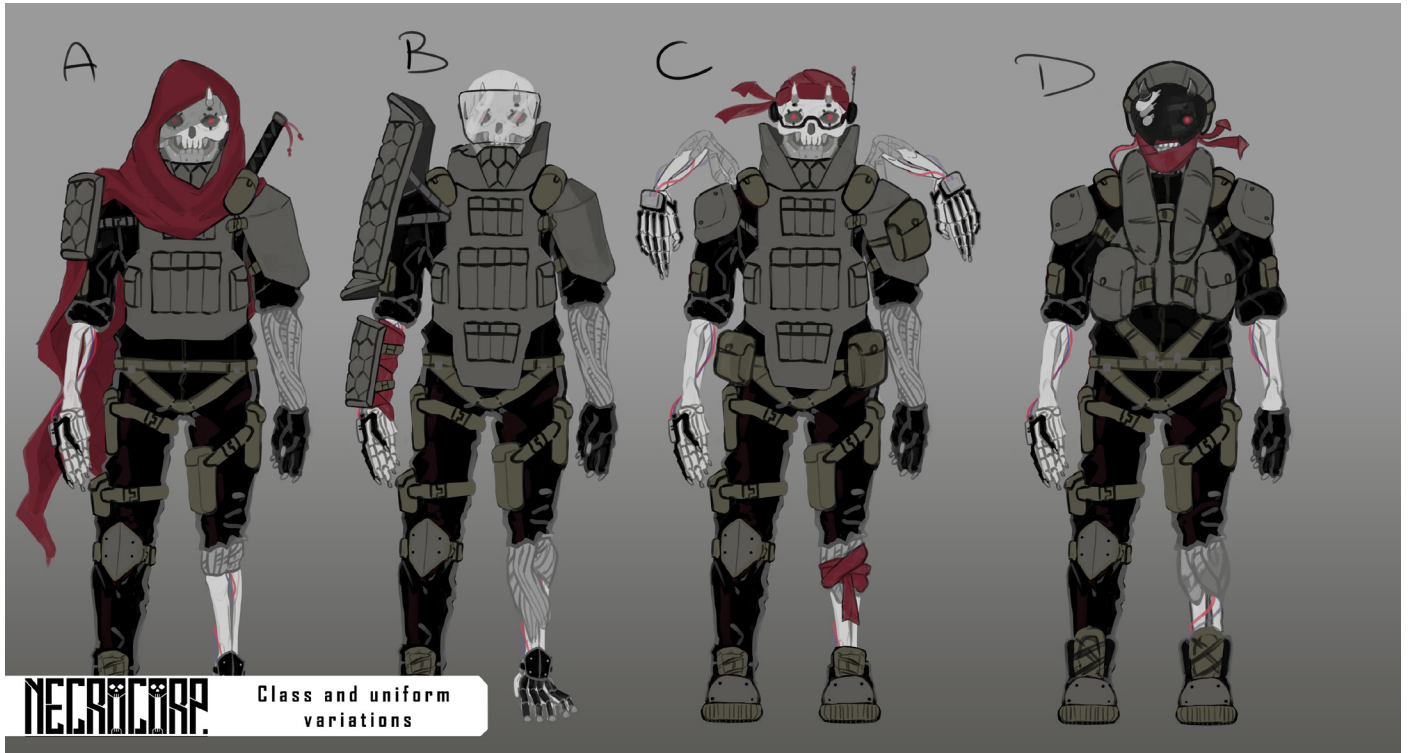
  Option A: The idea behind the design is more of an assassin rather than a soldier. I think this option would be suited better to sniping from long ranges, rather than fighting on the frontlines. Of course, if an opponent were to get too close for comfort, the character also has a melee weapon to use as a last resort.

  Option B: The tank build. Lots of extra armor around the arms and shoulders, with musculature to accompany all the extra weight. This would be for players who want to rush in, do a lot of damage and not have to worry about taking much damage themselves. Of course, this class option would definitely be the most expensive in terms of respawn costs, maybe even going so far as to limit your total respawns to 5 or so.

  Option C: More suited for players who want to support rather than do the main fighting themselves. I envisioned this being more of an engineer class, being able to set up turrets, traps and care packages for other players. The extra arms would allow the player character to hold an extra sidearm to protect themselves, while they're busy helping another player or setting up a mine.

  Option D: Pilot. This is kind of an outlier. It's actually a rough idea for the Demolition Derby phase, using the Guns 'n Guns Narcissi as a base. It wouldn't be available for Guns 'n Guns, of course, however I still like the design, and wanted to include it in the final artbook.

Miscellaneous things, Takeaways

Matte painting/photobashing homework. Ingame I imagine this being an arena for Guns 'n Guns to take place in. I just wish I had spent more time making this look more sci-fi and less post-apocalyptic.

The project in its entirety has definitely been a great learning experience for me. It's not the first time I design a character as an assignment for university work, however it's definitely the first time I've had to be this intentional and thorough with the design process. The whole project is a selection of different things coming together to create something that's greater than the sum of its parts, and while I only really designed a single character, I'm definitely proud of what I've been able to accomplish regardless. Especially considering I consider myself as more of an illustrator than a concept artist, currently.

I can see myself continuing to work on this project in some less-than-official capacity. I like what I've been able to do with my character, and I still have some leftover ideas for other characters that I'd like to explore in the future.

Overall I'm definitely satisfied with the course as a whole and what I've been able to learn throughout its duration.

Drawing in the style of a classmate. I'm not the best when it comes to rendering, but this was great practice for drawing a skull that isn't human.