

Designing Unique Collectible Experiences:

Exploring Designer Toy Strategies to Promote Local Artistry
Through Funko Pop Figurines

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Abstract

In the realm of collectibles, designer toys have emerged as a unique and immersive medium for promoting local artistry and engaging collectors in meaningful experiences. This thesis delves into the intricate world of designer toys, particularly focusing on Funko Pop figurines, to explore strategies that enhance the promotion of local artistry. By utilizing an autoethnographic lens to gather insights, I was able to create a series of figures that promote three Canadian cities and my own art style. Through this design exploration, customization, textural, and interactive elements were explored to generate a unique and personalized experience for a collector. This research contributes to the broader discourse on the creative process of Funko Pops and designer toy production, emphasizing their capacity to push boundaries and foster connections between artists, collectors, and local communities.

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Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of pop culture and consumer trends, the world of collectibles has undergone a remarkable transformation moving beyond its traditional role as mere toys to become iconic symbols of contemporary collecting culture (Geraghty, 2014). Within this landscape, Funko Pop figurines have emerged as a cultural phenomenon, attracting a diverse community of dedicated collectors (Morgan, 2022). These stylized vinyl collectibles have become instantly recognizable due to their distinct design aesthetic, diverse selection of beloved characters from various entertainment franchises, and their appeal to a wide range of interests. This distinct design is known for having exaggerated features including large heads and eyes, while also ensuring that with minimal detail, the character's identity is maintained. The simplicity and stylization of their design makes them universally recognizable and allows fans from different backgrounds to connect with the figures.

The central inquiry driving this study is rooted in the understanding that collectibles, while tangible in nature, often carry profound emotional and personal significance (Belk et al., 1988; Ijams Spaid, 2018). In the case of Funko collectors, the act of acquiring and owning these figures go beyond simple consumerism, manifesting as acts of identity expression, fandom affiliation, and social interaction. Simultaneously, the world of designer toys challenges traditional notions of what constitutes art and design, emphasizing individual creativity, unconventional materials, and limited production runs.

This design investigation seeks to unveil how the concept of designer toys can be tailored to encourage artistic innovation and provide collectors with an enriched and new collecting experience. Through visual analysis and design exploration, this study aspires to offer insights into tailoring designer toys for an enriched and new collector experience. Through this investigation, this thesis aims to answer the following question: How can the strategies of designer toys be effectively integrated into the Funko Pop design process to create a unique collector experience and allow for artistic expression?

1 Personal Experience with Collecting

From a very young age, I have been a collector. From objects like Winnie the Pooh Peek-a-Pooh charms, Silly Bandz, Littlest Pet Shop, and all things Star Wars. The collection that I take pride in the most, and is still on going to this day, is my Funko Pop collection. The first time I ever encountered these figures was at a toy store while on a hunt for comic books. I ended up getting two keychain sized Pops of characters from the show Game of Thrones, and after returning home, I remember the urge to complete that set. From then on, I was hooked and fell in love with the experience of finding my favourite characters and the special editions that remixed how they would normally appear.

Not only do these figures bring me personal joy, but they have a strong social aspect in my life that connects me to friends and family. Many Pops in my collections were given to me as gifts from loved ones, which gives them even more personal significance. The giving and receiving of Funko Pops has made my collecting experience enjoyable because sharing that excitement with others makes it that much more special.

In this thesis, I analyze design elements and aesthetics partially from my collection, in order to produce a series of my own. The three figures created serve as a form of appreciation and love for my communities as well as a form to express myself as an artist and Funko Pop fanatic.

2 Background

2.1 Influence of *Kawaii* Aesthetics

Funko Pop figures draw inspiration from various artistic styles, and the influence of kawaii is evident in their design. Kawaii is a term that refers to a design aesthetic often considered “cute” or “adorable,” and is characterized by its emphasis on simplicity, softness, and a charm. This is commonly portrayed in Japanese culture through forms such as, “Anime (animation), fashion, manga (comics), and everyday objects” (Jones and Lancaster, 2021). The most familiar form is presented to us through popular characters like Pokémon, Sailor Moon, and Hello Kitty (Jones and Lancaster, 2021, & Alt and Yoda, 2007). The proportions of Hello Kitty are considered adorable, with her oversized head, simple facial features, and rounded body, making her the typical embodiment of a kawaii character (Alt and Yoda, 2007). The simplicity in facial features, with large, round eyes and minimal expressions, mirrors the innocence and charm central to kawaii aesthetics.

While kawaii culture brings joy and creativity to many people, it is critical to examine and challenge the stereotypes in order to foster a more inclusive and respectful appreciation of the aesthetics and the cultural significance. The emphasis on childlike innocence and cuteness in kawaii culture has led to the infantilization of women, portraying them as youthful and dependent. This has undermined women's agency and contributes to the objectification and dismissal of their experiences and perspectives (Korusiewicz, 2011).

However, the power of kawaii culture is the platform it creates which provides people with the space and means to express themselves (Jones and Lancaster, 2021). Not only does kawaii symbolize cuteness, but Jones and Lancaster argue that kawaii encourages expression and vulnerability in order to adopt a childlike love and joy for the small things (2021). This does not mean to belittle the female experience, but to enjoy things in an unwavering way. Even though some aspects of kawaii can further gender inequality, it also, “Pushes back against sexist stereotyping” (Dale, 2020). As researcher in Cuteness and Kawaii Studies, Joshua Paul Dale contends, the expansion of new categories in kawaii offer a better understanding of the field as well generating new opportunities. Created by young Japanese women, these combinations of kawaii combine opposing affects such as disgusting (kimokawa), ugly (busukawa), and strong (tsuyokawa). These words and new categories offer a different approach to the idea of cuteness and the concept of kawaii (Dale, 2020). To me, this is where the power of kawaii lies, it can be used as a tool of expression and empowerment.

2.2 Funko Fandom

The Funko company was founded in 1998 in the United States by Mike Becker and initially produced bobbleheads and various vinyl figures. In 2010, the Funko company introduced the Funko Pop line characterized by their distinctive stylization, often described as cute including a head larger than the body with large eyes (seen in Fig. 1). The early Funko Pop releases covered a range of fandoms, including comic books,

movies, TV shows, and video games. Collectors and enthusiasts were drawn to the wide variety of characters available, which catered to their niche interests (Cioletti, 2019). The success of Funko Pops is attributed to the company's strategic collaborations and licensing agreements. By acquiring licences for popular franchises including Star Wars, Marvel, DC comics, and Disney, Funko has created an expansive catalogue of characters, expanding its appeal to wider audiences. The company strives to stay on top of pop culture in order to deliver something for every fandom, which is why they have the most licences than any other company (Morgan, 2022). This approach has fostered a sense of nostalgia and connection for fans who can now collect figures representing their favourite characters from movies, TV shows, video games, and more.



Figure 1. First Pop! figures ever made debuted at San Diego Comic-Con 2010

Today, these vinyl toys are available worldwide in 25,000 retail brands including Hot Topic, Walmart, Amazon, and more (Tait, 2019). The price range of the average Funko Pop is priced from \$8 to \$15 (or \$10- \$20 CAD) which makes them affordable to not only avid collectors, but those starting to collect or those wanting to just buy one or two. However, for those looking for more lucrative Pops, prices can range from \$300 to \$100,000 depending on the rarity, limited production, or exclusive design. Some editions are made with a limited production run, making them highly sought after figures to collectors (Osibote, 2023).

Not only is collecting an individual endeavour, but many collectors join a cooperative experience through clubs and communities. Through these clubs and communities, collectors are able to share their experiences within a safe environment that legitimizes their collecting behaviour (Vergara & Santos, 2023). Through online networks such as Reddit, Facebook, and Instagram, collectors are able to post updates to their collection as well as buying, selling, and trading their Pops. From personal experience, these spaces have become a way for collectors to share their experience and connect with other people who appreciate and take part in the fandom.

2.3 Designer Toys

Contrasting to the premise of Funko Pop figures, art toys or designer toys are figures based on a particular artist or designer's work including their distinct pattern or design (Steinberg, 2010). These collectables blend art, graphic design, and toys, giving rise to unique creations that stem from individual sensibilities rather than being directly linked to merchandise from television or film adaptations, comics, or video games (Phoenix, 2006). Designer toys emphasize originality, artistic expression, and limited production runs, catering to a niche audience that appreciates the uniqueness and creative vision behind each piece (Atilgan, 2014). In this case I would describe the concept of "designer" as a coveted art form. Instead of focusing on the production and commercialization of the product, the focus is on promoting an experience and the artistry behind the process of creating. The object essentially becomes a work of art.

Designer toys began as a product of experimentation between character production and design, and continue to create experiences between merchandising and art. The emergence of these toys began in East Asia, and quickly spread to the UK, North America, and Southeast Asia. These toys first gained prominence in the late nineties with pioneers like Michael Lau paving the way for a movement that elevated mere toys to works of art (Steinberg, 2010). In 1999, Lau expanded his creative endeavours to encompass action figure design, giving rise to his innovative "Gardener" series. This collection ingeniously juxtaposed his beloved G.I. Joe action figures with elements of street culture (Fig. 2). His distinctive artistic style captured international acclaim, affording him the chance to exhibit his creations globally, and continue to innovate the format (Lau, 2024).



Figure 2. Example of figures from 1999 Michael Lau Exhibition III, "Gardener" series

Another globally recognized artist, Brian Donnelly, brings a unique and urban aesthetic to the designer toy scene. This American artist and designer, also known by his artist name KAWS, challenges the traditional boundaries by bridging the gap between fine art

and designer toys. Starting as a graffiti artist in the 90s, Donnelly often merges his own style with pop culture references and characters such as Mickey Mouse and Sesame Street characters (Miller, 2021). Although KAWS gained popularity through his art and graffiti, he is mainly recognized and known for his toy design. With the help of Japanese toymakers, KAWS was able to bring his first 3D version of his now iconic 'Companion' figure to life. These collectibles display KAWS' distinct style with X's for eyes and gloved hands (Stace, 2023). Since developing this character, the Companion figure has taken on a variety of different elements including colours (Fig. 3), sizes, and poses. These figures have grown immensely popular which has led to collaborations with well-known brands including UNIQLO, Nike, and Dior Homme. Majority of the time these collectibles sell out and become a valued commodity sold on secondary sites for more than its original amount. What initially began as a limited edition run of eight-inch toys has evolved into a cornerstone in the art industry and beyond (Estiler, 2021). Donnelly's impact extends past the niche community of toy collectors, reaching into the broader realms of contemporary art, popular culture, and fashion.



Figure 3. KAWS Companion Open Edition Vinyl Figures

3 Current Research

While Funko Pops are globally recognized for their portrayal of characters from various franchises and media, the influence of local artistic traditions, aesthetics, and process of production remains largely unexplored in existing research. Matt Hills, a fan studies researcher, contends that although fan studies has become a vibrant field of scholarly exploration, there exists a noticeable lack of critical examination when it comes to collecting practices and the tangible artifacts that hold significance for fans (Hills in Geraghty, 2014). Fan studies is a discipline that now only serves insights into fan culture, creativity, and community development, but facilitates new emerging fandoms and media sectors, as well as new perspectives to explore (Booth and Williams, 2021). Another researcher in fan studies and popular culture, Lincoln Geraghty (2014) agrees, “that collecting has been overlooked in fan studies,” (p. 2) with its value often diminished due to its association with consumption rather than production. Since collectible merchandise and toys have become a focal point for personal narratives as Geraghty observed, I would also highlight that little work has been done on the collecting fandom in terms of artistic innovation and avenues for new experiences.

Based on the lack of research done on the production and experience of collecting Funko Pops, I argue that the methodologies of designer toys allow for greater insights into that gap. The oversight of local artistic expressions and cultural elements in studies on Funko Pop collectibles is a missed opportunity to explore the intricate intersection between collecting pop culture and local artistic traditions. By delving into this aspect,

this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of not only how these collectibles simultaneously reflect and shape cultural landscapes, but how they become a way for collectors to express their individuality.

3.1 The Need to be Unique

Many collectors seek to stand out from the crowd and express their individuality through their collections. Since collections essentially become an extension of the collectors themselves, they often seek to have their collections as personal and unique as they are (Belk et al., 1988; Ijams Spaid, 2018). Thus, providing the Funko Pop fandom with the ability to customize their collection and experience is paramount. In certain cases of collecting, Geraghty (2014) states that popular culture is made meaningful through personal experience and, “fan culture is not commodified but personalized” (p.4). Funko Pops' design has enabled fans to express their fandom and engage with popular culture in a unique and personal way. However, there are potential approaches that Funko has yet to utilize, such as designer toys methods which emphasize unique artistic expression.

4 Methodology

Designer toy methods often take on the approach of designing characters with the intent to portray a specific artist's style instead of focusing primarily on the commercial and consumer aspect (Steinberg, 2010). Following the basis of this approach, I will be applying an autoethnographic method to connect my lived experience as the artist and designer with the social and cultural aspects stated in the design exploration.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that aims to, "Analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2011). With the researcher as the center to the documentation of experiences and analysis, this method becomes both a process and a product. It facilitates the accessibility to insider knowledge and makes that knowledge not only visible, but understandable to outsiders (Ellis et al., 2011).

This two-phase study will focus on answering, how can the strategies of designer toys be effectively integrated into the Funko Pop design process to create a unique collector experience and allow for artistic expression? In the first phase, I conducted a visual analysis on Funko Pops from my own collection and those that interest me. This analysis was done to determine essential design elements that will be applied in the process of creating my own series of figures. The process of creating these figures will follow the proposed character design process by Joao Ramos da Silva Filho and colleagues. The second phase of the project consists of stage 1 (Identification and Analysis), stage 2 (Conceptual Research), stage 3 (Defining a Character), stage 4

(Imagetic Research), stage 5 (Sketching the Characters), and stage 6 (Rendering the Character) that apply the results to a proposed Funko Pop series.

4.1 Designer Toy Methodology

The designer toy methodology encompasses various aspects of the design, production, and engagement processes, aiming to create a more immersive and meaningful collector experience. Some key elements of designer toy methodology include limited editions, narrative and story, and artistic uniqueness (Atılğan, 2014; Steinberg, 2010). The process in producing designer toys is also derived from character design methodologies that follow techniques and steps in order to create a character (Novica et al., 2020). The character design process proposed by Filho et al (2016), provides the framework of this study and outlines specific steps that define the course of the character's design, refer to the artist's perspective, and allow for flexibility in the creative process. This character design process consists of two different aspects, the background and the foreground (Fig. 4), and is outlined as follows:

Background Processes - Offers the guidelines and constraints for the final designed outcome. (A) Infrastructure: the technology used, (B) Time: the deadline, (C) Audience: who the character is supposed to appeal to, (D) Story: the narrative and backstory of the character, (E) Aesthetics: the visual guideline for creating the character, (F) Media: the final product.

Foreground Processes (Character Design) - (1) Identification and Analysis of the problem: requirements that the design must follow, (2) Conceptual Research: references used to build the character, (3) Defining a Character: the characters personality is constructed, (4) Imagetic Research: visual references: images, patterns, and shapes, (5) Sketching the Characters: sketches that visualize the character and come closer to the solution, (6) Rendering the Character: the best sketches are selected to further render (Filho et al, 2016).

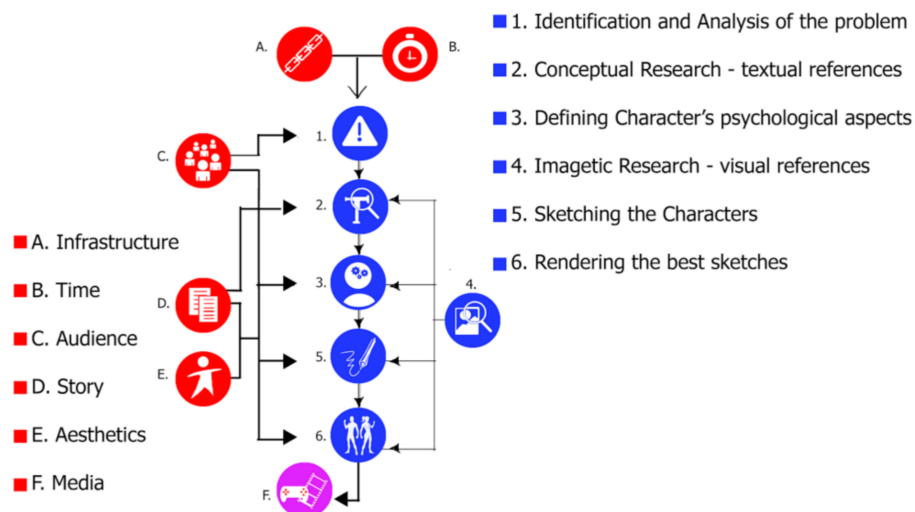


Figure 4. Stages of the character design process

The approach these authors take relates heavily to the concepts of designer toys and is applicable to the outcomes desired in this study. This methodology can be utilized by artists and designers to create a platform for collaboration between Funko Pop figurines and local artists. By adopting this framework, the study aims to facilitate the infusion of local artistic expressions and cultural elements into Funko Pops, fostering a sense of uniqueness.

4.2 Visual Analysis

In order to identify the essential elements to be included in my series and those that can be explored further or altered, I conducted a visual analysis of selected Funko Pops. Based on design elements used for character design and specifically the stages in Filho and colleague's process, I generated a mind map containing the areas in which my analysis would focus on (Fig. 5), including the main two categories of figure and the packaging. Within the two main categories, I was able to further specify areas of the Funko Pop design that are important for the creation and the experience. These categories helped me to gather information on the important design choices and overall visual style.

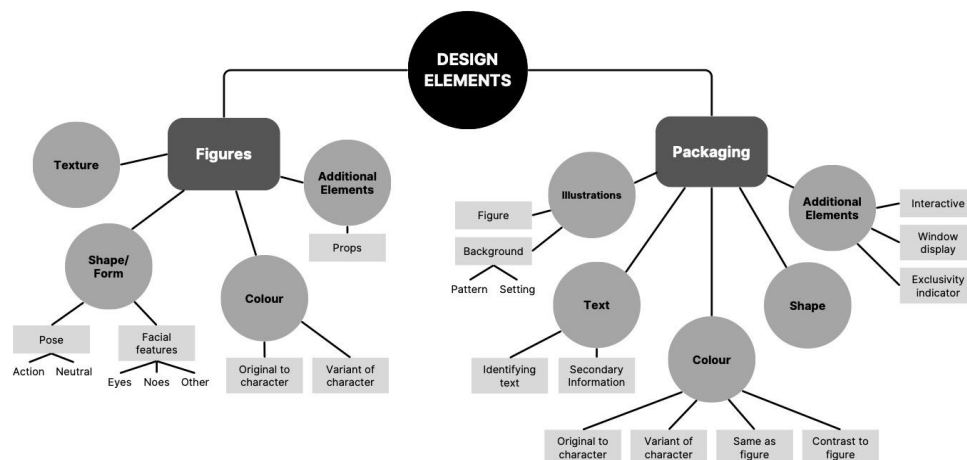


Figure 5. Mind map of figure and packaging design elements

With the figures, the shape and form, colour, texture, and props are the most important choices to be made when designing them, as they are the starting point of engagement for collectors. In terms of additional elements, objects such as supporting characters, handheld items, or any other props are also vital in creating a unique and engaging

experience. The main focus with these figures is the overall visual elements and any additional features that enhance the character or add intrigue. For the packaging, colour and shape were also included, along with illustrations, text, and additional elements. The additional elements included interactive and exclusivity indicators, as well as the window display. These elements not only portray and connect with the character, but they also dictate how collectors interact with the figure itself.

After determining my starting point for the analysis, I examined 15 standard 4" Funko Pops by annotating and charting the following categories: Figure design - shape and form, facial features, colour, texture, and additional elements. Package Design - illustrations, text, colour, and additional elements. The figures analyzed were selected either from my personal collection or based on intriguing design elements. The Funko Pops included human and non-human characters to get an overall understanding of how select design elements are altered depending on the character. The examined Funko Pops were:

- *Winifred Sanderson* (Stone) #1240
- *R2-D2* (Comic) #571
- *Yoda* (Snowman) #568
- *Leonardo Da Vinci* (Artists) #04
- *Black Panther* (Lights and Sound) #1217
- *Jolly Rancher* (Ad Icons) #189
- *Pumpkin King* (Sented) #1357
- *Aang with Momo* #534
- *Rudolph* (Flocked) #1260
- *Chewbacca* (Facet) #657
- *BB-8* (Rainbow) #640

- *Hello Kitty with Basket* #66
- *Groot with Cheese Puffs* (Flocked) #1196
- *Soda Cup* #200
- *Keith Haring* (Artists) #01

The analysis was done by carefully examining the specific categories listed above as well as the overall visual style. This was done to get a holistic understanding of how the design is utilized to produce a personalized experience. The specific elements were examined in order to produce a list of essential elements that the design must include and dependent elements that can be altered depending on the character I design. Each Funko Pop was annotated and included general notes on the overall design and what specific choices made the design unique (see Appendix A for all annotations and notes). The results from the visual analysis provides the aesthetics of the design exploration and as Filho et al states, the guidelines for the creating an intriguing character design (2016).

4.3 Summary of Findings

After annotating each Funko Pop, I organized the data into two separate tables to easily identify elements across all figures and their packages. Across all the Funko Pop figures the most used design elements included similar elements to the kawaii aesthetic such as bigger head proportions, big eyes, small nose, original character colouring, smooth texture, and props. In addition, more than half of the analyzed figures were in a neutral

pose, but the majority of them had an expressive facial expression. Even when the body is stagnated, the face most often expresses some kind of emotion. The less common elements such as head proportion (head is the same size as body or smaller) and big nose are only utilized with non-human characters. The figures that had a variation from the original character colouring were always a special edition or an alternate version of the original character. For example, the BB-8 (Rainbow) #640 Pop is a pride edition, therefore the figure has a rainbow colour palette as opposed to the original white, orange, and black. Similarly, interactive elements and alternative textures were only used with special or limited-edition figures.

Table 1. Design elements used in the Funko Pop figures

Categories	Design Elements	Applicable Funko Pops (out of 15)
Shape and Form	Head Proportion (Bigger than body)	11
	Head Proportion (Same size or smaller)	4
	Action Pose	7
	Neutral Pose	8
Facial Features	Big Eyes	13
	Small/No Nose	11
	Big Nose	4
	Expressive Facial Expression	9
	Neutral Facial Expression	6
Colour	Original to character	10
	Variation from original character	5
Texture	Smooth Texture	12
	Alternative Texture (Flocked/Facet)	3
Additional Elements	Props	10
	Interactive Elements	2
	Supporting Character	1

The following overall observations I made for shape and form, facial features, colour, and interactive elements were compiled based on notes from the annotations:

Shape and Form - The short body emphasizes the oversized head, which is a defining feature for most of the figures. This distinctive form simplifies complex characters into an easily identifiable and stylized design.

Facial Features - Despite the minimalist design, the Funko Pops excel in capturing key facial features. Expressions are simplified but still convey the character's personality. Eyes, eyebrows, and mouths are integral to making each character expressive.

Colour Palette - Often vibrant and eye-catching colours are used to enhance the visual appeal. The choice of colours often mirrors the character's appearance in movies, TV shows, or comics. Colour plays a pivotal role in character recognition and emotional resonance. Although, there are some variations including holiday editions, or pride editions with rainbow colour palettes.

Interactive Elements - Interactive elements are used as variations to encourage intrigue. Lights and sounds, scents, texture are used as unique features with some of the figures.

In table 2, the design elements used in every packaging included figure illustrations, identifying text, cuboid shape, and window display. The identifying text utilized in every

package is the Funko Pop number, the name of character or person, and the name of a franchise or movie. The majority of Funko Pops had a pattern for the background illustration as opposed to a setting or more detailed illustration. Similar to the figures, the majority of the packaging had a colour palette original to the character, however, the special editions had a variation from the original character colouring. Additionally, there was the same colouring between the figure and the packaging in a large portion of the Funko Pops. This means there was no contrast and the colour palette for the packaging and the figure was the same. Opposite to this, some of the Funko Pops had the packaging either different hues or a different colour palette from the character, creating a distinct contrast. Another common design element that was used in all the packaging of special editions was exclusivity indicators. In these cases, stickers are used to identify that the Funko Pop could only be purchased from a specific location.

Table 2. Design elements used in the Funko Pop packaging

Categories	Design Elements	Applicable Funko Pops (out of 15)
Illustrations	Figure Illustrations	15
	Background Illustration (Setting)	4
	Background Illustration (Pattern)	11
Text	Funko Pop Number	15
	Name of Character/Person	15
	Name of Franchise/Movie	15
Colour	Original to character	10
	Variation from original character	5
	Contrast between figure and packaging	6
	Same colouring between figure and packaging	9
Shape	Cuboid shape	15
Additional Elements	Window Display	15
	Exclusivity Indicator	10
	Interactive Indicator	4

The most notable elements that provide a story, crucial information, and visual flow throughout the packaging are the illustrations, text, window display, and exclusivity and interactive indicators. The text not only displays important information, but is presented in an easy to follow hierarchy. These elements have been outlined in the following observations:

Illustrations - The boxes feature illustrations and graphics, often representing the character's world or theme and showing the iconic characters themselves. The packaging essentially serves as a visual extension of the character. Some of the boxes include comic book-style graphics and references to specific time periods or cultural movements. These visual cues evoke feelings of nostalgia by referencing earlier eras of popular culture. Additionally, the back either displays an illustration of the figure or the rest of the series of Funko Pops to collect.

Information Hierarchy - The packaging displays essential information in a hierarchical manner. The most critical details, such as the character name and series, are prominently displayed, while additional information, such as product specifications and legal disclaimers, is placed strategically in less prominent areas. This maintains a clean and uncluttered design.

Window Display - The window on the box allows collectors to see the figure without opening the packaging. It highlights the figure's details and encourages display in the box. The window serves both practical and aesthetic purposes.

Exclusivity and Interactive Indicators - Exclusivity and interactive stickers are placed in front of the figure on the package that visually indicates a unique feature of the specific figure. It tells the collector only certain places carry the figure or if it has additional features.

After this analysis, I was able to come up with elements essential to the design and elements that were not crucial or varied depending on the character (see Table 3). The essential elements are deemed crucial to the design and experience of the Funko Pop character. The elements that were not crucial or varied depending on the character, will be decided based on the series and specific characters I come up with. All of the elements listed below will be set as the requirements that the design must follow, however there is room to experiment with the dependent design elements. These elements include the position and expression of facial features, the pose, props, and any interactive elements. For the packaging, I will also be experimenting with unconventional shapes and unconventional material.

Table 3. List of essential elements and elements depending on the character

	Elements Essential to the Design	Elements Depending on the Character
Figure	• Head proportion (bigger than body) • Big eyes • Original character colouring (since I am creating new characters)	• Pose (action or neutral) • Small noes (dependant if character is human or non-human) • Facial expression (expressive or neutral) • Texture (smooth or variation) • Props relevant to character (enhance setting or feeling) • Interactive Elements
Package	• Figure illustration • Identifying text • Window display • Original character colouring (since I am creating new characters)	• Background illustration (pattern or setting) • Cuboid shape • Exclusivity or interactive indicators

4.4 Background Processes

The background processes are defined to dictate rules that the foreground processes must follow and provide guidelines for the final design (Filho et al, 2016). Here, I outline the constraints on the infrastructure, time, audience, story, aesthetics, and media of the design exploration.

Infrastructure - Sketches and ideations are to be done by hand on paper, while all illustrations will be designed digitally on Adobe software to allow for changes and any additions during the creative process.

Time - The time allotted for this project was established based on the due date of the thesis.

Audience - The audience is young adults and adult collectors, those who are lovers of art and collectibles.

Story - This series explores the identity and artwork based on me as a Canadian artist. This series will be based on the three cities I have lived in, Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary and explore Canadian culture and iconography.

Aesthetics - The series will follow the aesthetics observed in the visual analysis and that of the artist.

Media - Digital files for rendering, and clay, acrylic, and felt for physical models.

5 Design Exploration

After identifying the aesthetics and defining the background processes, the next step is to outline the foreground processes. The foreground processes involve stages 1 to 6, where the character design takes shape. In this chapter, I explore not only specific design elements, but Canadian culture and my personal identity as an artist to create a unique series of Funko Pops. A similar design approach was also applied in the case study done by artist, designer, and educator Aristarchus Pranayama Kuntjara. In his article, Kuntjara used a designer toy as a platform to engage the public with their community and city (2021). I applied this approach while designing each Funko Pop figure based on the three Canadian cities, Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary.

While conducting research and looking at my own experiences for this stage, I came across iconography and concepts that can be considered “stereotypical” of these cities. I acknowledge that these stereotypes are there, however by placing them within the context of my personal experience I aim to remix them as a celebration and expression of my identity, and not a generalization of a community as a whole. Many conceptual and design choices were based on my own experience and what I deemed important. By pushing past the generalizations and giving these elements deeper context, my goal is to provide insider knowledge of what these communities mean to me.

5.1 Foreground Processes: Stages 1 - 4

Stage 1

In the first stage, identification and analysis of the problem is meant to aid the artist in understanding the problem and requirements of a character. The 'problem' is the desired outcome that needs to be fulfilled and the limitations that set the parameters (Filho et al, 2016). In this case, the problem is adapting previously analyzed athletics and designer toy methods to produce a unique series of Funko Pop collectibles. The character and story must be clearly portrayed in order to appeal to Funko collectors. It also must consist of elements that allow the cultural attributes of each city to be identifiable.

Stage 2

The second stage consists of the conceptual research which utilizes textual references to build the character. This involves any text that provides the artist with insights that result in a more cohesive character design (Filho et al, 2016). Here, I gathered details to gain a better understanding of how the character might be designed in terms of visual and conceptual aspects.

Character 1: Ash (Toronto)

- The first proposed Funko Pop is inspired by a self-portrait painting and my personal style. This character represents the city of Toronto and showcases the prominent blend of historical and modern.

This first character will reflect my art style, and due to my Italian heritage, my artwork is often influenced by historical figures and classical designs. The character resembles renaissance marble statues. In addition to these cultural elements, the character will reflect Toronto architecture and iconography. The role of brick has played a huge part in not only Toronto's aesthetic, but the foundation of the city's economy through the Don Valley Brick Works. This material is seen in residential areas as well as some landmarks including the Ontario Legislature and Massey Hall (Fudge, 2023). I chose this aspect to feature in this figure, because it is historically important and reminds me of the houses I grew up in. Another interesting landmark is the Royal Ontario Museum with juxtaposing architecture. This building blends sharp modern angles with historical terracotta coloured brick ("Royal Ontario Museum," 2023). The juxtaposition within these types of buildings has been a fascination of mine for a long time. It becomes a way of preserving the past while also upgrading and renewing it for the present and future. To me it invokes a sense of accomplishment, being able to see what was done, and what is currently being done.

Character 2: Cypress (The Vancouver Bear)

- Named after one of my favourite mountains, Cypress the bear represents the city of Vancouver. This character is inspired from my love of snowboarding and the natural beauty of my home province.

Cypress Mountain, located in West Vancouver, is a part of Cypress Park that sits on the ridges of Mount Strachan and Hollyburn Mountain ("Cypress Park," n.d). The ski resort's name "Cypress Bowl" is derived from the commonly used term for the bowl that sits at

the bottom of Mount Strachan, Black Mountain, and Hollyburn Mountain (“Park History,” n.d). Including this aspect of Vancouver was very crucial to me as it is reminiscent of the family time spent on the mountain during holidays and winter breaks. Not only is Cypress Park known for its winter recreational activities, but it has many natural features including mountain lakes, forests, and breath-taking views. Depending on the elevation, the forest vegetation changes from Douglas fir to mountain hemlock, amabilis fir, and the tree for which the park was named after, yellow cypress (“Cypress Park,” n.d). In addition to the diversity of plant life, a variety of wildlife are habitants to this park including the black bear. The black bear inhabits many parts of Northern America, such as British Columbia. They typically have black fur, with a tan muzzle and a white v shape marking their chest. Other physical characteristics that black bears have are, “a chunky body, small black eyes, a broad head, rounded ears, a short tail, and [fine long fur]” (“Black Bears,” 2001). The black bear was chosen for this character as I would often encounter them when I was a kid. They remind me of going to elementary school in Coquitlam, as I would see these bears frequently.

Character 3: Bow (The Calgary Hare)

- Bow the hare, is named after the Bow River that flows through the city of Calgary. This character is inspired by the warm summers spent in Calgary and the prominent cowboy culture.

The white-tailed jackrabbit is often seen in urban and suburban parks in Western Canada including Alberta (Visscher & Wood, 2022). Often during the summer times an abundance of these hares are spotted all over downtown Calgary. They are a brownish-

grey in the summer with a white tail and are known for having very long ears. They are also described as graceful, with long strides when they gallop (McAdoo & Young, 1980). In addition to the local wildlife, the character will also reflect local traditions. The cowboy culture has been largely embraced since the creation of the Calgary Stampede by American Guy Weadick. It is often described as a celebration of a localized, “romantic past on the open range,” while also, “championing technological progress [and] unfettered entrepreneurship” (González, 2023). It emphasizes the city’s strong sense of community and rich heritage. The artistry of the local boot makers is what drew me to the notion of cowboy culture. The design and attention to detail is what I appreciate the most about these shoes. They not only serve as a practical function, but they also become a space for artists to share their work. One collaboration that embodies this idea of collaboration is The Mountain Spirit by the Alberta Boot company. Made in collaboration with a local artist Lloyd Templeton, First Nations Princess Margaret, and Stoney Nakoda advisor Duane Mark, these boots celebrate the land and community (Alberta Boot, 2024).

Stage 3

The third stage, defining a character, outlines the psychological aspects and role of the character. This involves the construction of the character's personality and tone (Filho et al, 2016). Here I outline each character’s traits and motivations that will influence certain aspects for the final design.

Character 1: Ash (Toronto)

This statue character is a self-portrait that combines the aspects of the past and present. Inspired from Toronto's architecture, this character is a testament to the blending of historical and modern elements. The marble statue represents the artist's Italian heritage and her history. In contrast, she wears modern apparel including her favourite sweater with Toronto iconography. The unmoving presence reflects her stability and unwavering confidence in who she is. Her primary motivation is to serve as a visual reminder of the city's strong artistic and diverse landscape.

Character 2: Cypress (The Vancouver Bear)

Cypress is not a typical black bear. Born and raised in the snowy peaks of Cypress Park, British Columbia, this laid-back bear has a passion for snowboarding and adventure. While most of his friends and family are sleeping during the winter, this bear takes his opportunity to play in the snow and practice his moves. Cypress is the epitome of relaxed attitude and takes life one slope at a time. Despite his calm nature, he has an adventurous side that pushes him to seek new trails. His constant search for fresh powder and drive to try out new tricks, has given him a fearless approach to snowboarding. With his deep connection to the mountains, he is always eager to share his tips and knowledge with others. Cypress' primary motivation is his love for snowboarding and connecting with the great outdoors. He aims to spread positivity and knowledge amongst the local community.

Character 3: Bow (The Calgary Hare)

Bow is a lively and outgoing hare living in the downtown core of Calgary. With her sleek brown fur and bounce in her step, Bow embodies the vibrant spirit of her city. She is always the life of the party and brings endless energy to any gathering. With her outgoing nature and wide circle of friends, Bow enjoys bringing people together. Bow loves to embrace the diversity of her city by attending as many festivals, concerts, and local art scenes as she can. This includes the annual Calgary Stampede. Here she embraces the Western spirit by often sporting a custom pair of cowboy boots. Bow's primary motivation is to foster togetherness and inclusivity within her city. She believes that by bringing people together, she can create a stronger community that celebrates the unique spirit of Calgary.

Stage 4

The fourth stage of imagetic research is conducted using visual references that not only serve the purpose of producing products, but generates creativity in the artist (Filho et al, 2016). In table 4 (see Appendix B), I organized the visual references used to create and inspire the design of each figure. For the first character, the city of Toronto's architecture, skyline, and icons were researched in addition to my own painting. For the second and third character, the cities, landscape, animals, patterns, and props were researched.

5.2 Foreground Processes: Stage 5

Sketches of the character are created during this stage of the foreground process, which summarizes the concept art. The drawings produced by this stage are used to test out certain aspects of the character and how they translate visually (Filho et al, 2016). Initial sketches were created for each character, followed by thumbnail sketches to explore different design elements.

Figure Sketches

For the first character (Ash), I began with the facial expressions, exploring different eyebrow and mouth options. I also played around with the spacing and position of the facial features, spreading elements further apart and closer. This was done in order to achieve a neutral expression. I then looked at different hairstyles, clothing, accessories, and podium options for the character.

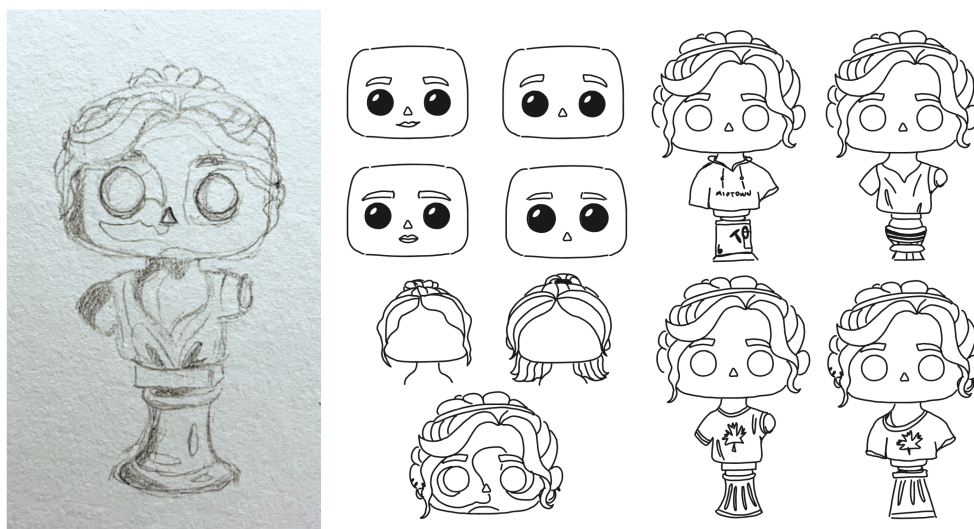


Figure 6. Character 1 (Ash) figure sketches

In the second character (Cypress) sketches, I began looking at the structure of the face. Different sized eyes, nose, and ears were tested out as well as their spacing and position on the face. I then looked at different body proportions with rounder, thicker, and thinner elements as well as poses. Props were introduced to portray this character's defining feature including goggles, a snowboard, and a toque. Another element included in the design is the distinctive mark most black bears have on their chest. Although the mark is a V shape, I also tested out having the mark resemble a mountain peak.

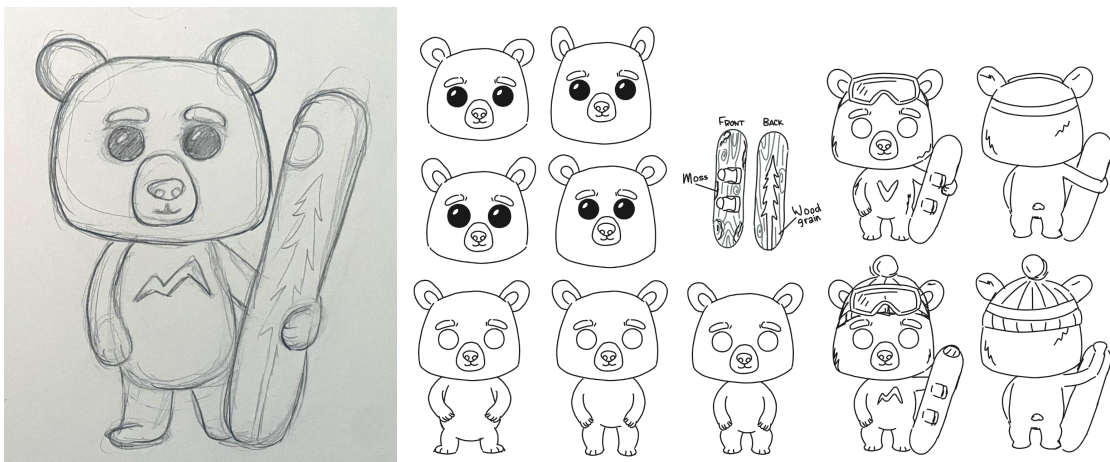


Figure 7. Character 2 (Cypress) figure sketches

Similarly to Cypress, for the third character (Bow) sketches I began looking at different face shapes and features. The eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth were spaced and positioned differently to test out proportions and expressions. Different body proportions, stances, and poses were then explored. Additional props such as cowboy boots, cowboy hat, and a bandana were introduced to explore the cultural aspects of the character. Finally, I incorporated an overall floral pattern on the body that mimics patterns found on traditional boots.

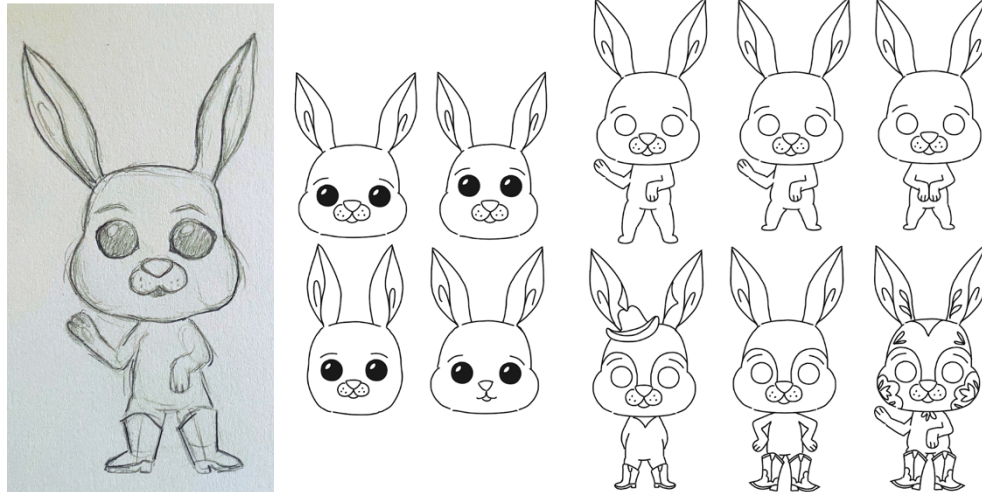


Figure 8. Character 3 (Bow) figure sketches

Package Sketches

In addition to the figure sketches, the initial ideas for the packaging shape and design were thumbnailed. Although the packaging for Funko Pops is always in a cuboid shape, this exploration will utilize different shapes in order to create a new experience.

I began with exploring different possible shapes for the packaging that could still be stacked and displayed together (Fig. 9). With the use of different shapes, the collector would not only have a rare collection, but would have the ability to customize their own display.

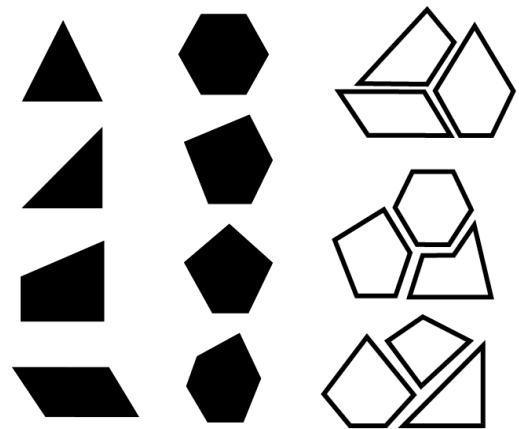


Figure 9. Exploration of packaging shapes

With the packaging sketches the following essential design elements, figure illustration, identifying text, and window display have been included. Figure 10 shows an initial ideation for the packaging design of all three characters. The layout of the packaging

follows the current Funko Pop packaging as observed in the visual analysis, however, it is altered slightly to fit the new shape. The use of these shapes creates a unique composition and adds an element of newness with the way these figures are displayed.

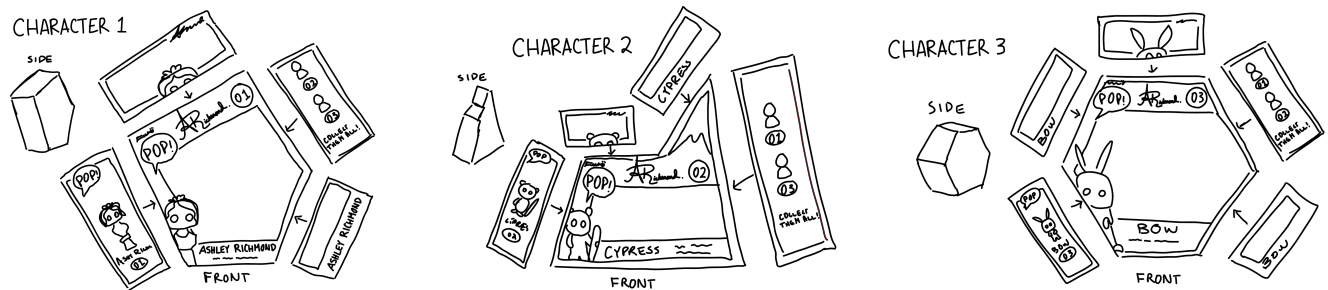


Figure 10. Packaging Sketches

5.3 Foreground Processes: Stage 6

After the sketching stage, the next process is to choose the best sketches to further render. The rendering stage involves adding detail, colour, and presenting a balanced composition (Filho et al, 2016). The character's final design is formed in this stage along with the respective packaging.

Figure Rendering

I first began with colour blocking the thumbnails sketches to get a better understanding of what colours would be utilized for the final design. Each character's colour schemes were chosen based on the reference images and over personality of the character (Fig. 11). Character one reflects the brownish-red tones often seen in brick materials and the

blue hues used in not only the artist's work, but the hockey team in Toronto. The overall cool tones depict the calm nature of the statue. Character two reflects the natural landscape of Vancouver's mountains and relaxed nature of his personality. The third character reflects the liveliness and natural aspects of her city, Calgary. The brown comforting colour depicts stability, while the bold pops of red and pink depict passion and fun. This portrays her fun and outgoing personality.



Figure 11. Colouring process of the characters

Following the colour blocking, the final rendering and colour application were completed on each of the three characters (Fig. 12, Fig. 13, Fig. 14). The design elements of props, patterns and texture were also utilized to fully complete the character's composition and figure design. For the first character (Ash), the addition of orange was added to not only reflect the fall leaves found throughout the city of Toronto, but to add an element of energy.

Props such as earrings would be made out of metal and

dangle in the physical model to create an interactive element. In addition, the figure and its podium would be textured and visually reflect the appearance of brick. The line work and painterly application of the colours will also be applied to the other characters.

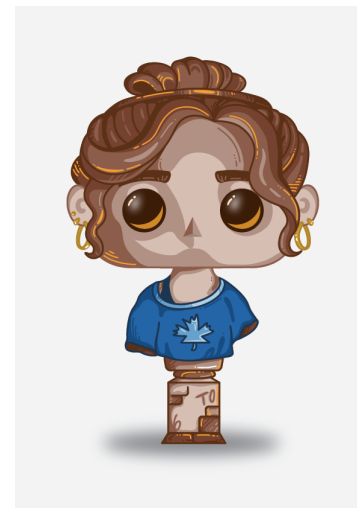


Figure 12. Final rendering of character 1 (Ash)

In the second character (Cypress) the colour purple was added to reflect the independence of the character. Props such as the goggles and snowboard were added

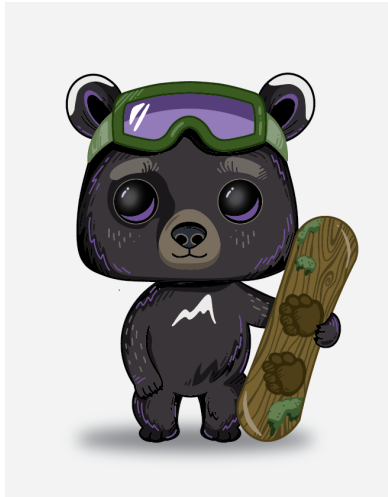


Figure 13. Final rendering of character 2 (Cypress)

to show his main passion. A wood grain and addition of moss texture would be added to the snowboard to produce a connection between the forest and present as if Cypress made the board himself. The marking on his chest derives from the real black bear, but instead shows the tips of a mountain for which he spends most of his time. Similarly, the tips of his ears are white to reflect the look of snowy mountain tops.

Lime green details were added to the third character (Bow) to create a more lively composition. The colour is often associated with confidence and high energy, which perfectly represents the character's personality. The pink in her boots were changed to orange to also reflect her more lively and energetic personality. Her open stance and expressive face was designed to convey openness and give her the appearance of being friendly. I also added a floral pattern and detailing to the character's body and boots. In the final stage of the design exploration, these figures would be made out of clay to allow for flexibility during the creative process.

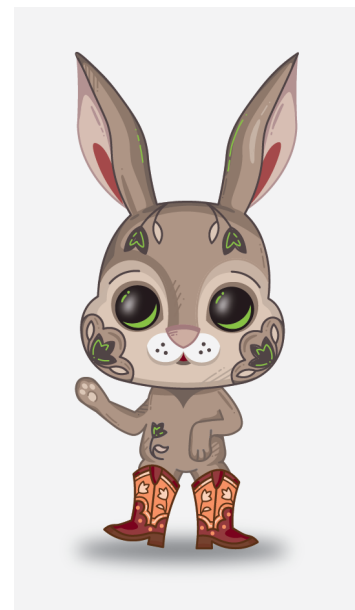


Figure 14. Final rendering of character 3 (Bow)

Package Rendering

After the characters were rendered, the packaging was developed to reflect the character and their respective cities. Two packaging ideas were explored in this section, the first being unconventional shapes, and the second being unconventional materials. The first packaging of unconventional shapes was created based on the previous sketches and idea that they could be stacked in a unique way. These designs use the traditional layout Funko Pop has for their packaging, with slight alterations to fit the new shapes. As shown in Figure 15, the three packages could be stacked in multiple configurations, giving the collector the ability to dictate how their collection is displayed.

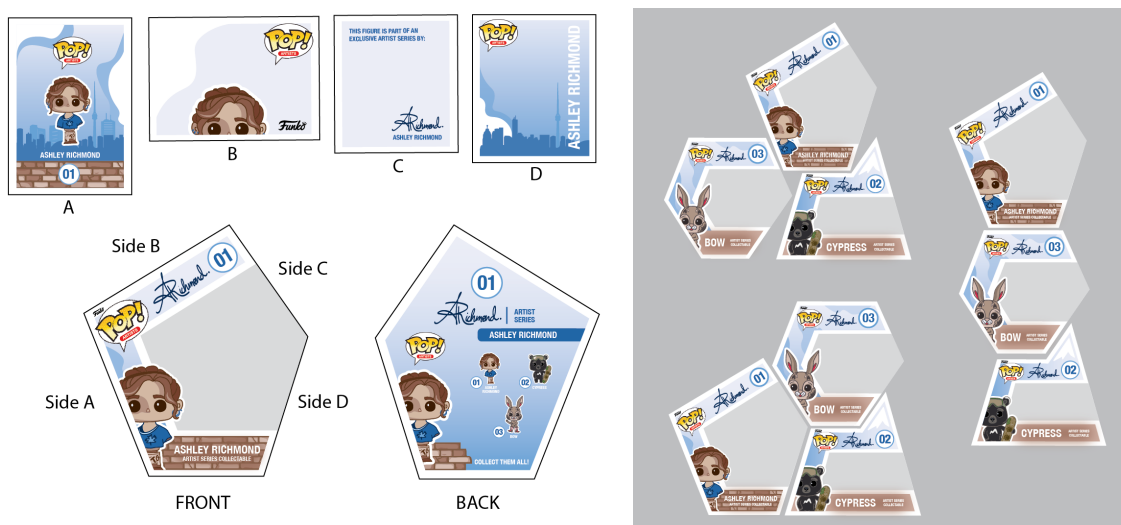


Figure 15. Package rendering with unconventional shapes

The second packaging exploration has an alternate and more simplistic composition in order to direct the focus onto the unconventional material. In these designs, the shape is traditional, but the window display is altered to create more movement and flow within the composition (Fig. 16). Patterns are used for the background illustrations, as

opposed to the settings used in the other packaging. These patterns would be made into patches that can be interchangeable and customizable by the collector on the blank side of the box. These boxes would be made from felt material to add texture and allow for easy removal and application of patches via velcro. The packaging would come with the elements inside, to allow for interaction and personalization between the collector and box. The materials I used for the final models (see Appendix E) were chosen to not only allow for flexibility in the creation process, but to represent my crafty art style. I wanted this series to emulate the feeling of being home, while also having a level of familiarity and comfort with the texture. Although these were crafted in a manner that expresses artistry and exclusivity, I wanted an element of play to produce a different mode of interaction with these collectibles.



Figure 16. Package rendering with unconventional materials

6 Implications

By analyzing the design of Funko Pops and the personal experience of a collector and artist through an autoethnographic lens, this study has led to a better understanding of the influence of local artistic traditions and aesthetics on the production process. In combination with the steps outlined by Filho and his colleagues, this study offers a framework and guideline for artists wanting to design their own Funko Pops. It lends to a better understanding of the process behind the creation of the collectibles we love and the process of designing and tailoring the collectibles as a form of fan art. The increased popularity of fan art could prompt the diversification of these toys beyond the traditional figures. This could include figures featuring fan and community created artwork or collaborations with artists on limited-edition releases. Funko Pop fandoms create opportunities for artists and designers to monetize their talents through commissions, custom designs, or collaborations. Through an autoethnographic lens, Funko Pop fandom and art becomes more than just a consumer trend or cultural phenomenon. They become deeply personal and situated within the lived experiences and cultural contexts of individual collectors. This approach allows for a richer understanding of the diverse ways in which people engage with and understand popular culture. The designer toy approach to creating generates new ways to engage collectors from not only commercial aspects, but from a community and inclusive aspect.

Conclusion

This study underscores the potential of designer toys strategies, specifically within the context of Funko Pop figurines, to act as catalysts for promoting local artists, their work, and their communities. The qualitative data collected through the visual analysis enabled me to ascertain essential elements to the Funko Pop design, and elements that were altered and explored in the design exploration. By utilizing these design elements and the proposed character design process by Filho et al as the starting structure of the design, I was able to focus on translating Canadian culture and my own artistic style. Using the approach of designer toys, where the emphasis centers around original characters and creative expression during the production process, led to the creation of a unique and personalized experience. It presents a new experience for Funko Pop collectors, as they would get to discover a new character and way to interact with the box itself.

Following the strategy often seen with designer toys, having a limited edition series of figures and unconventional materials generates a sense of exclusivity and value similar to collecting a piece of art. With the integration of local artistry into Funko Pops, it presents a new prospect, contributing to the potential evolution of these figures and their role in celebrating diverse cultural expressions. This study also adds to the limited research on the production process of collectible toys such as Funko Pops and the artistic aspect of designer toys. As this toy industry continues to evolve, integrating designer toy strategies is promising in terms of sustaining its appeal and engagement.

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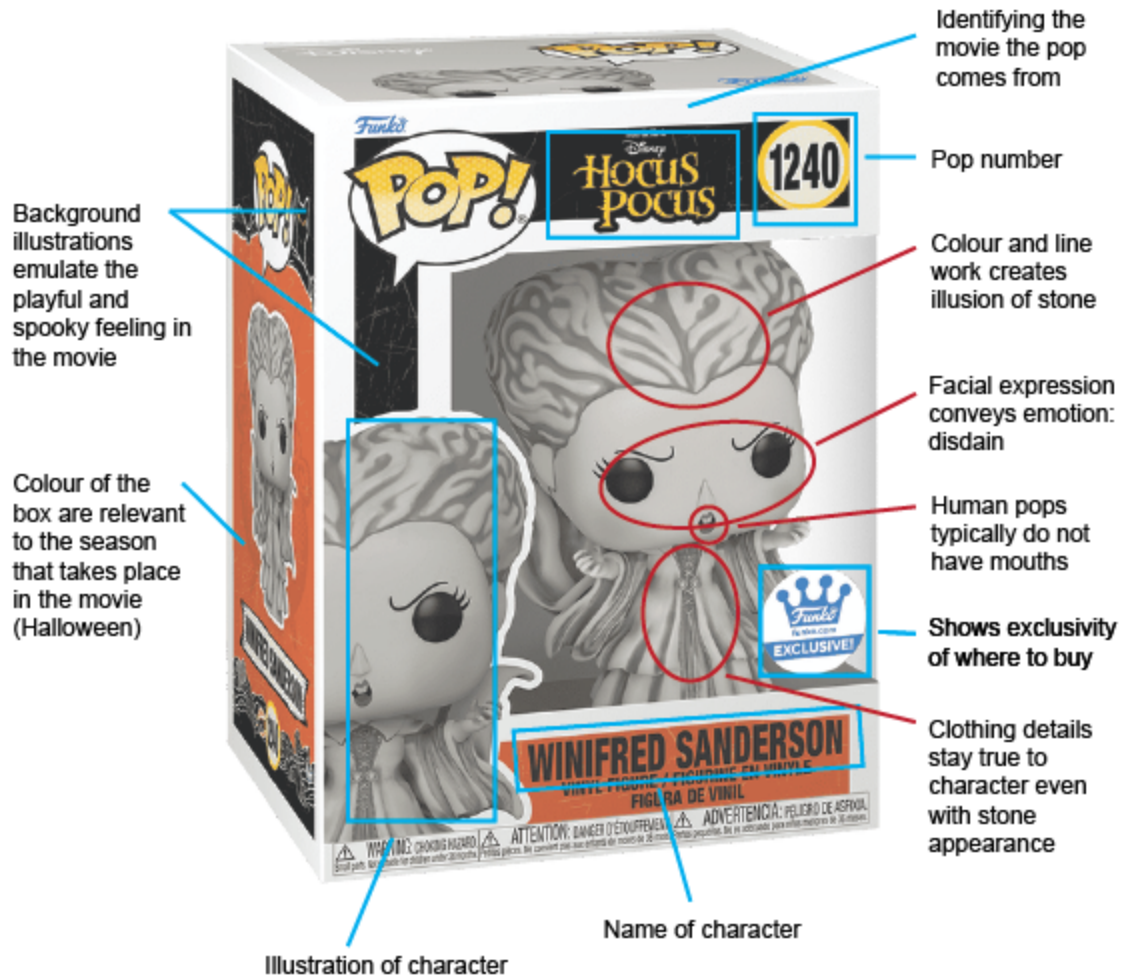
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Appendix A

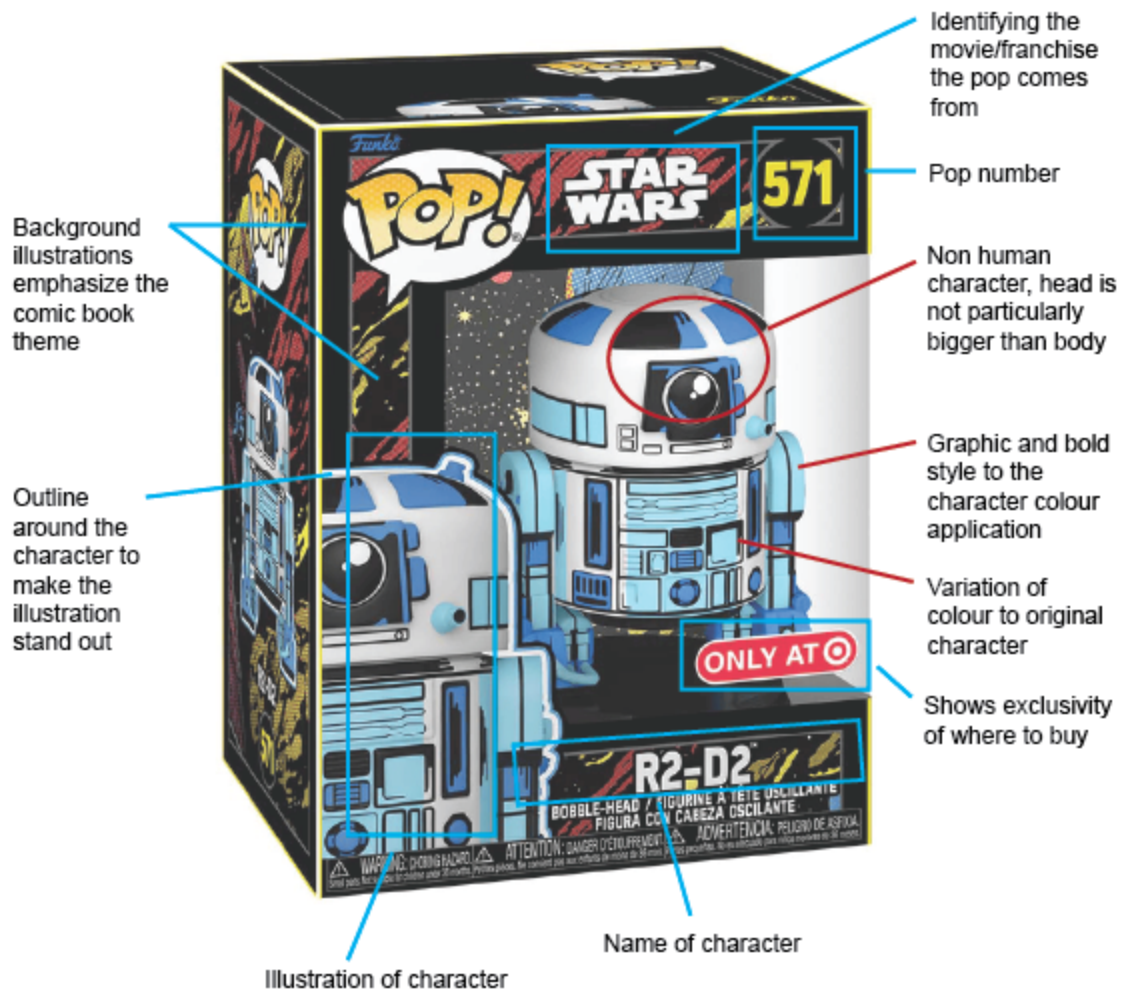
The raw data collected through annotations of each Funko Pop figure and analyzed in the visual analysis.

- *Winifred Sanderson* (Stone) #1240
- *R2-D2* (Comic) #571
- *Yoda* (Snowman) #568
- *Leonardo Da Vinci* (Artists) #04
- *Black Panther* (Lights and Sound) #1217
- *Jolly Rancher* (Ad Icons) #189
- *Pumpkin King* (Sented) #1357
- *Aang with Momo* #534
- *Rudolph* (Flocked) #1260
- *Chewbacca* (Facet) #657
- *BB-8* (Rainbow) #640
- *Hello Kitty with Basket* #66
- *Groot with Cheese Puffs* (Flocked) #1196
- *Soda Cup* #200
- *Keith Haring* (Artists) #01

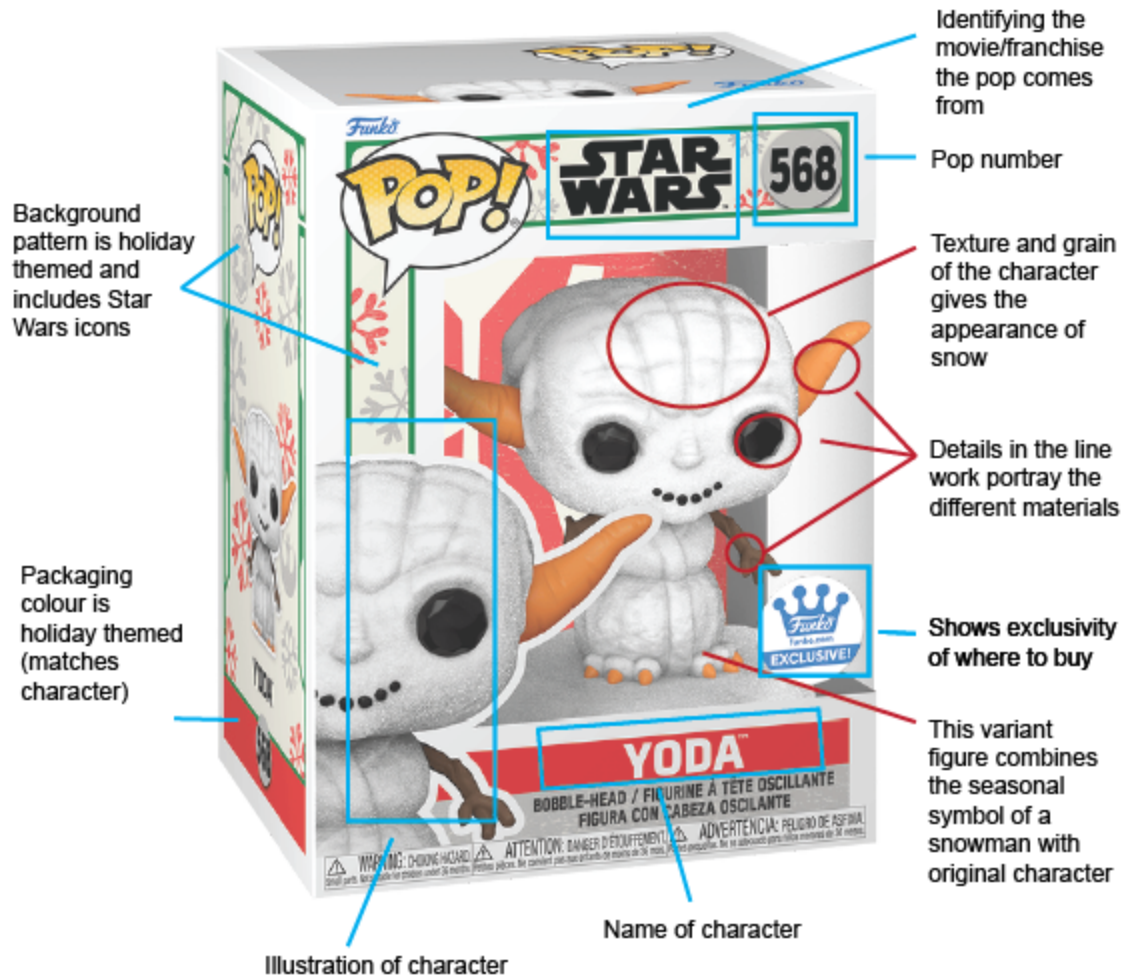
Winifred Sanderson (Stone) #1240



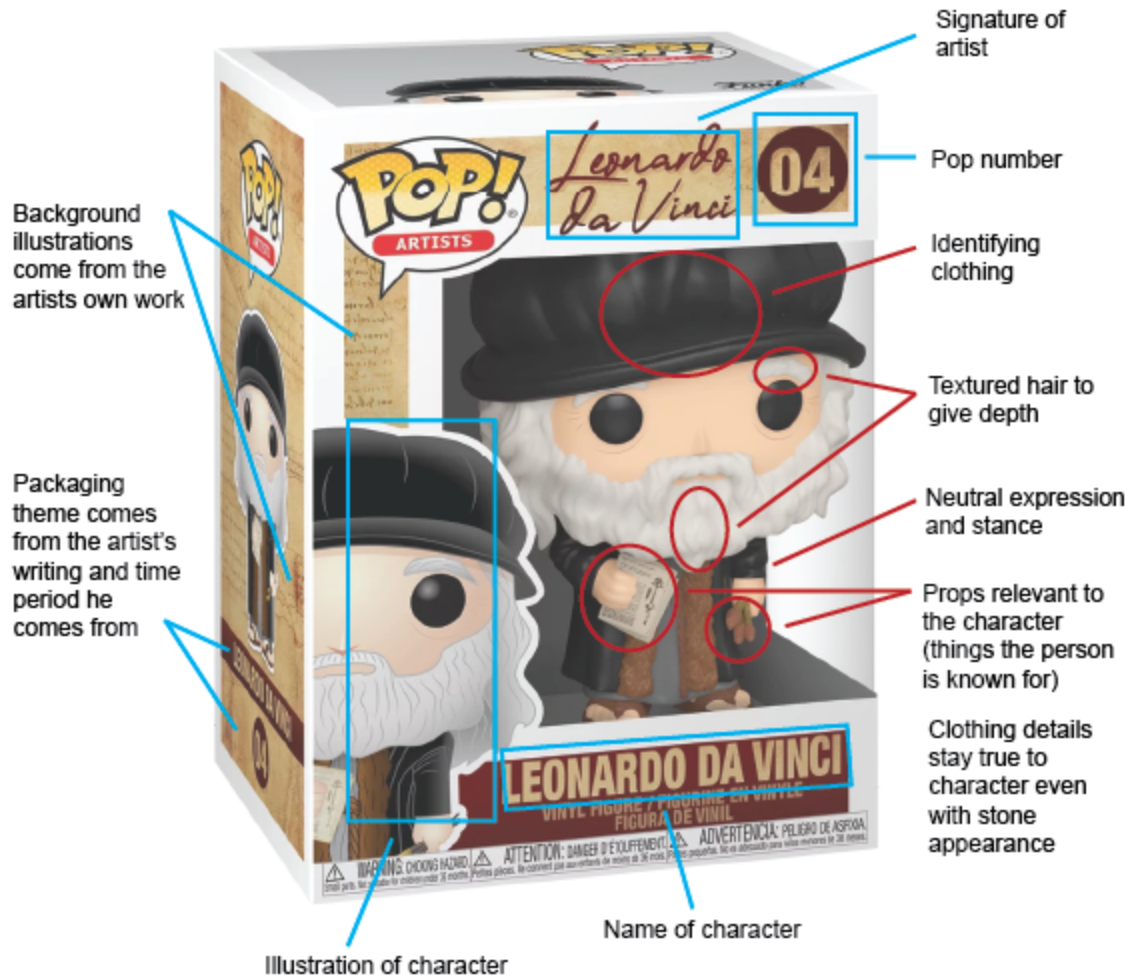
R2-D2 (Comic) #571



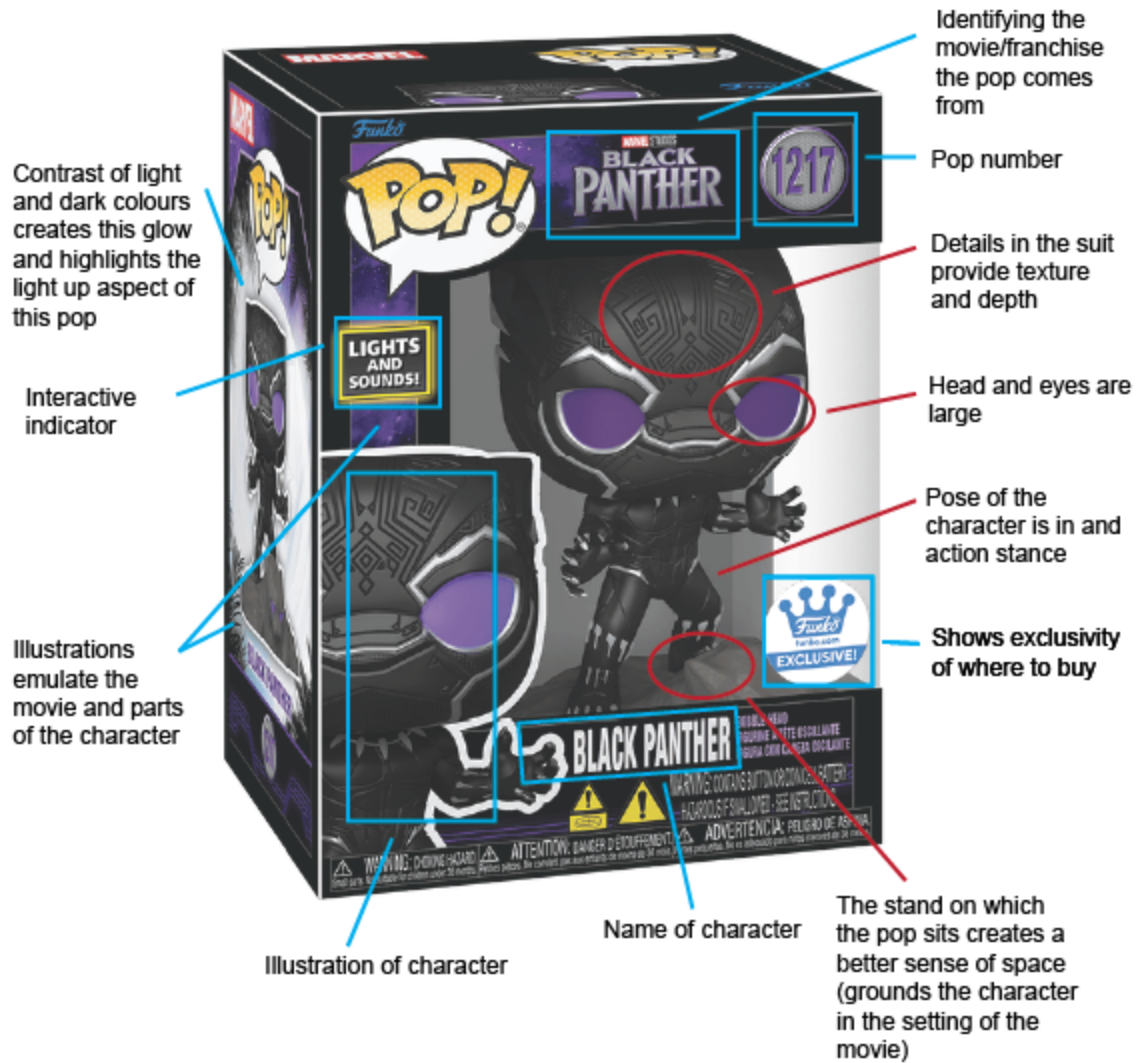
Yoda (Snowman) #568



Leonardo Da Vinci (Artists) #04



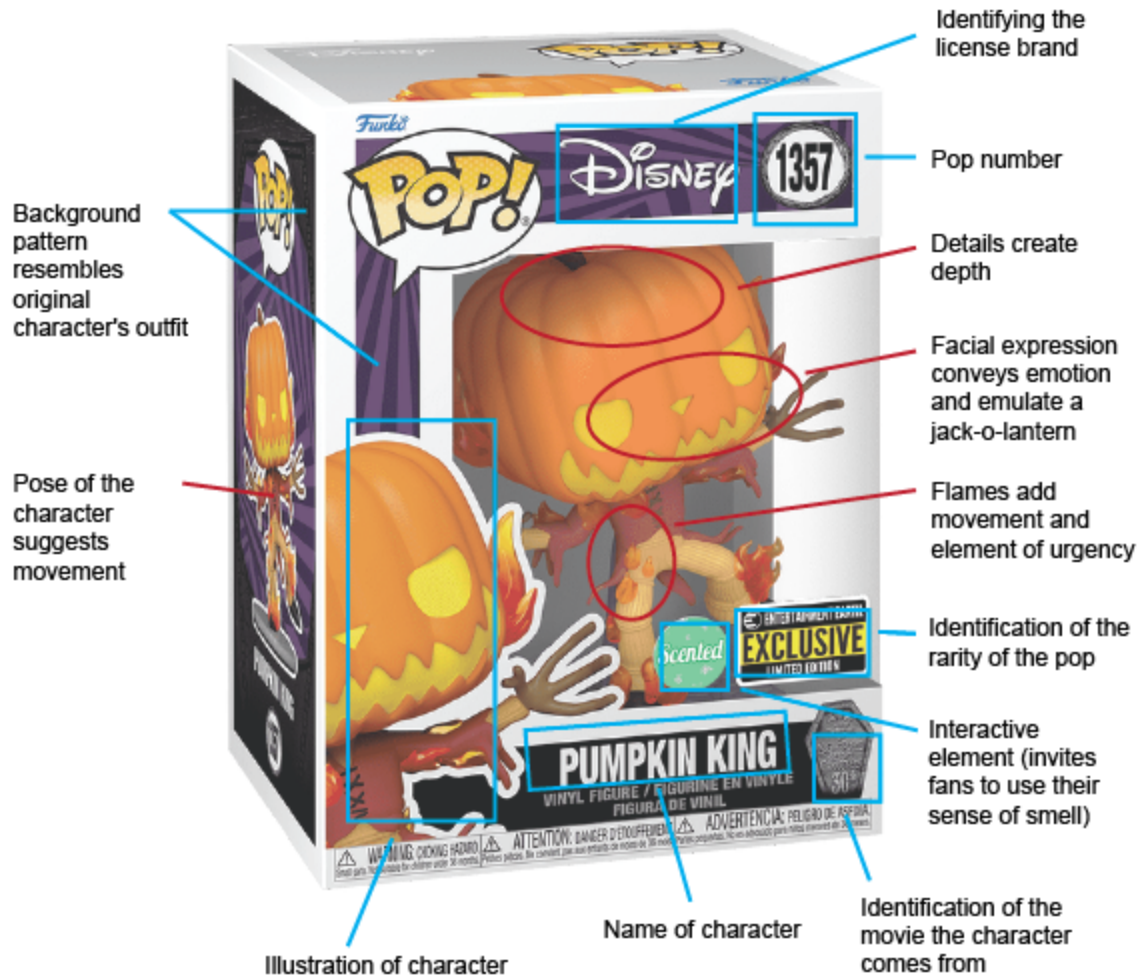
Black Panther (Lights and Sound) #1217



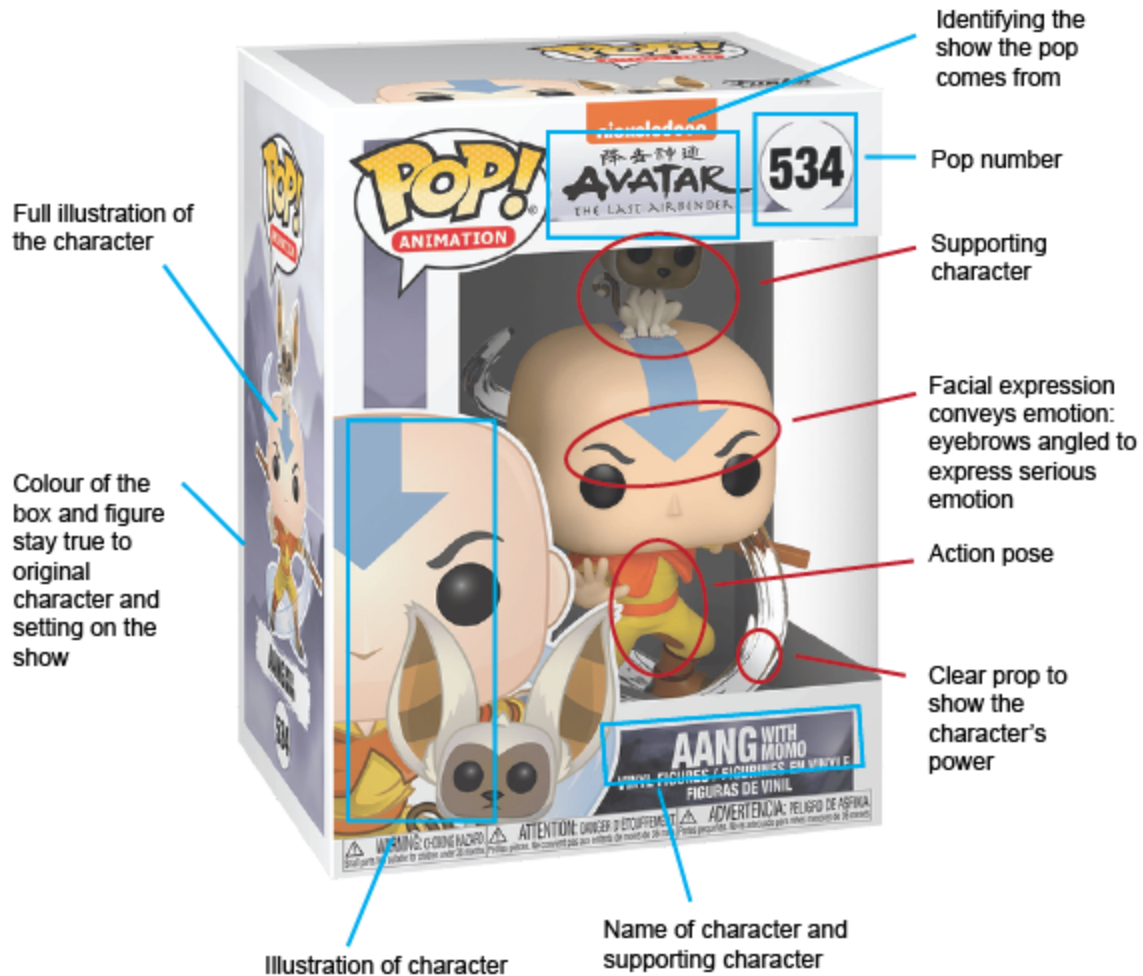
Jolly Rancher (Ad Icons) #189



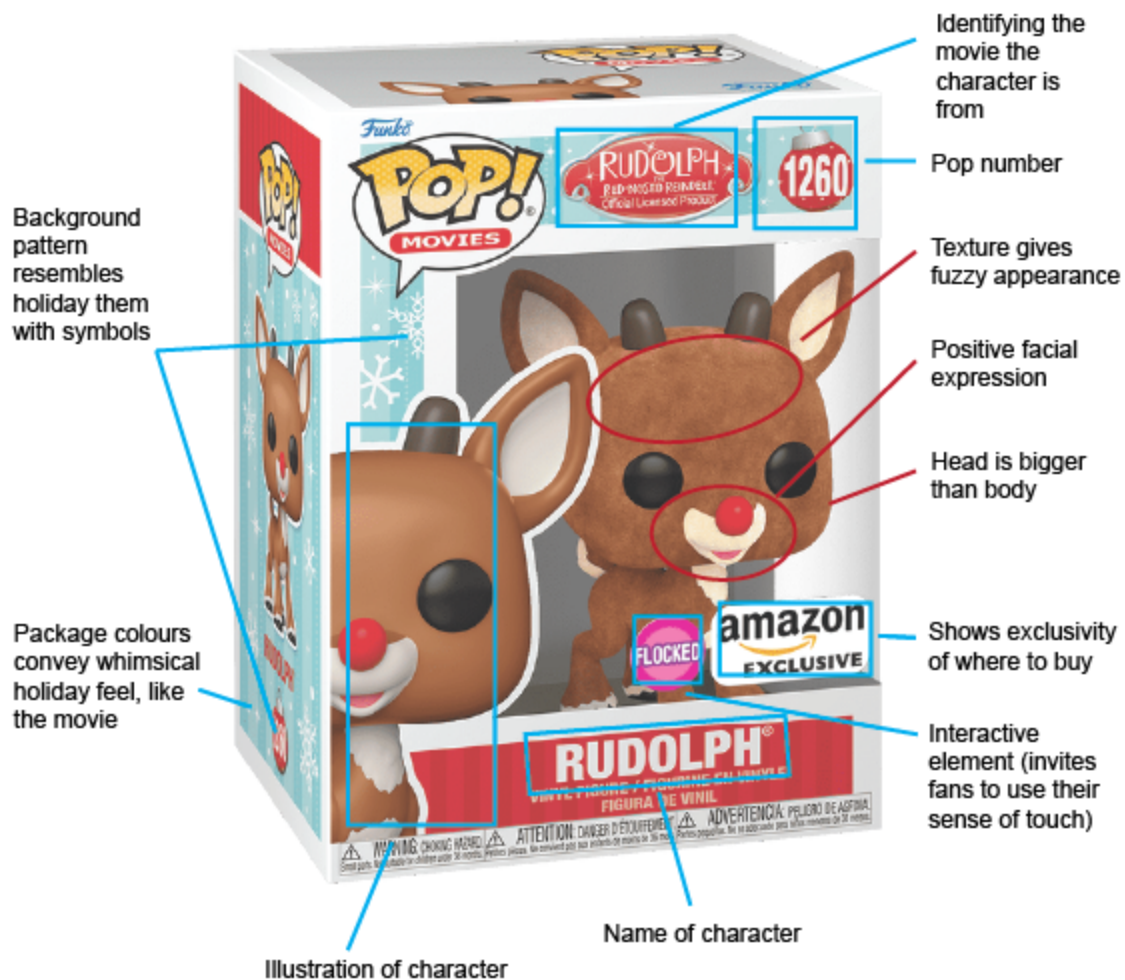
Pumpkin King (Sented) #1357



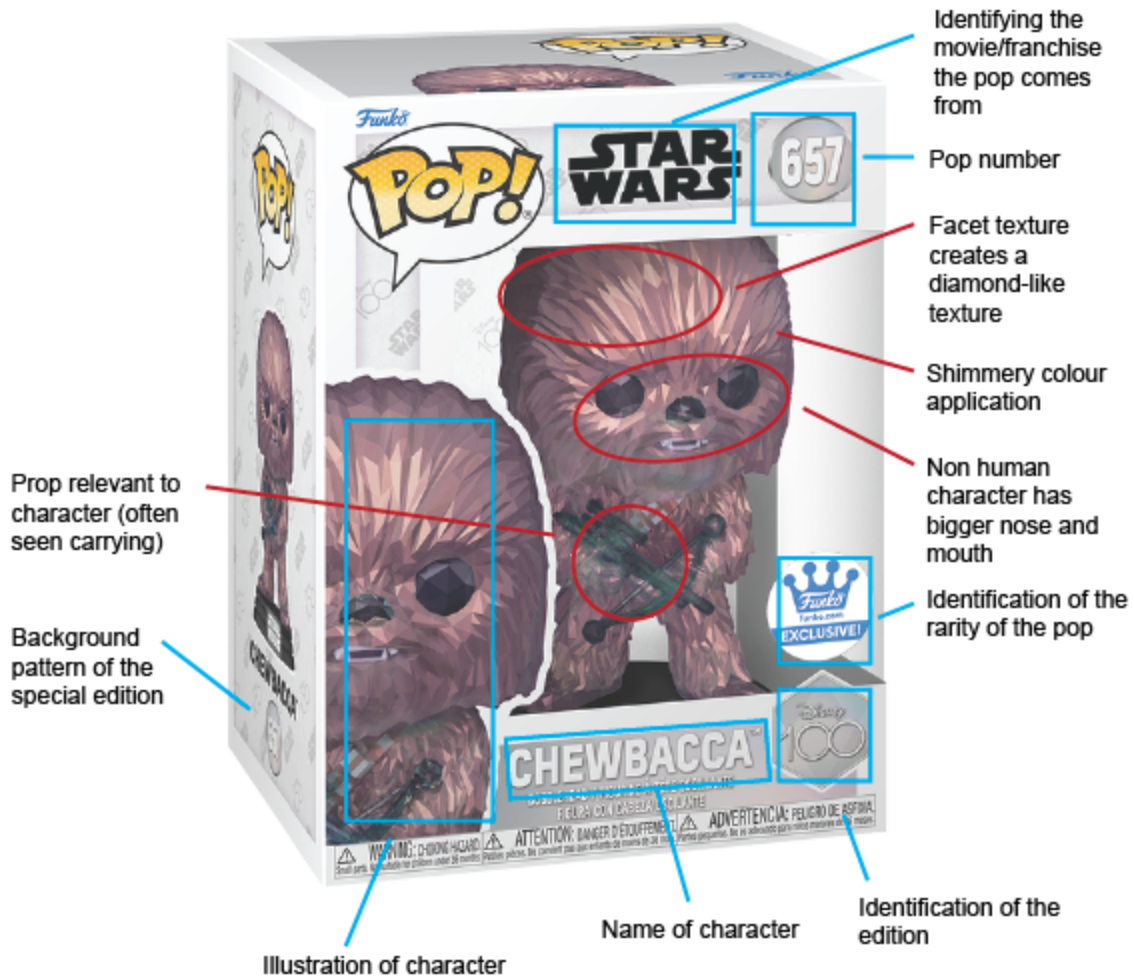
Aang with Momo #534



Rudolph (Flocked) #1260



Chewbacca (Facet) #657



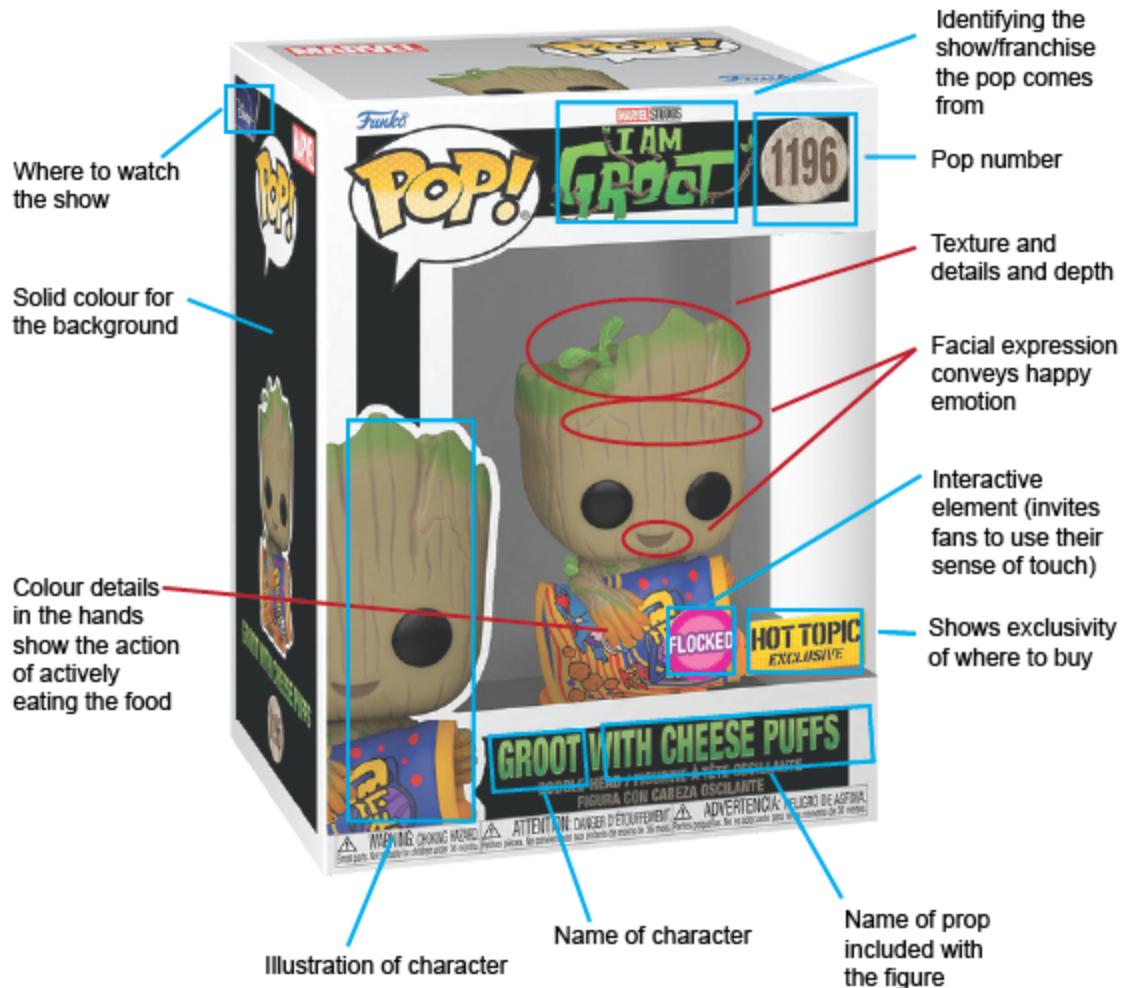
BB-8 (Rainbow) #640



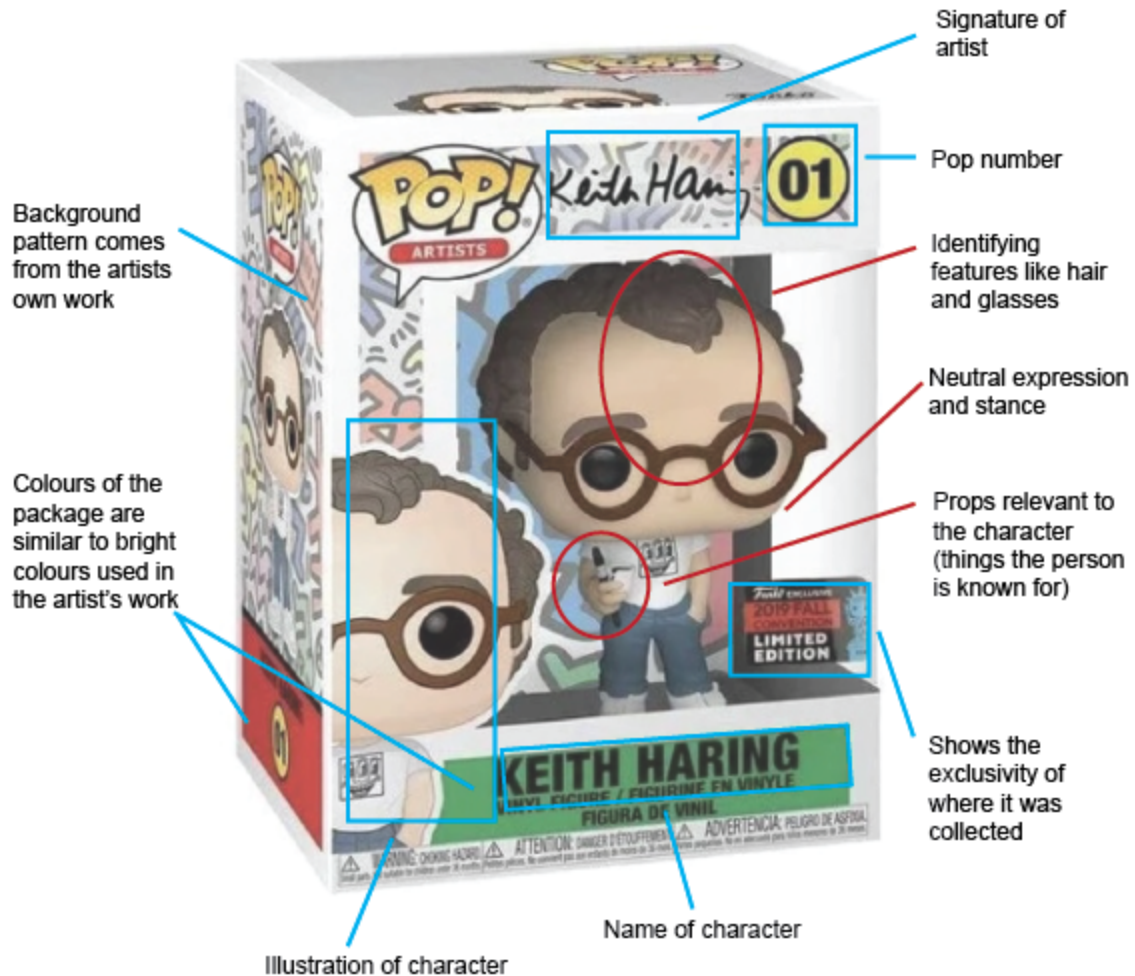
Hello Kitty with Basket #66



Groot with Cheese Puffs (Flocked) #1196



Keith Haring (Artists) #01

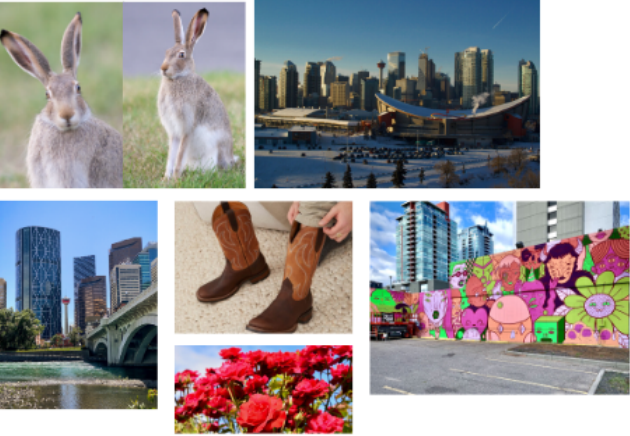


Soda Cup #200



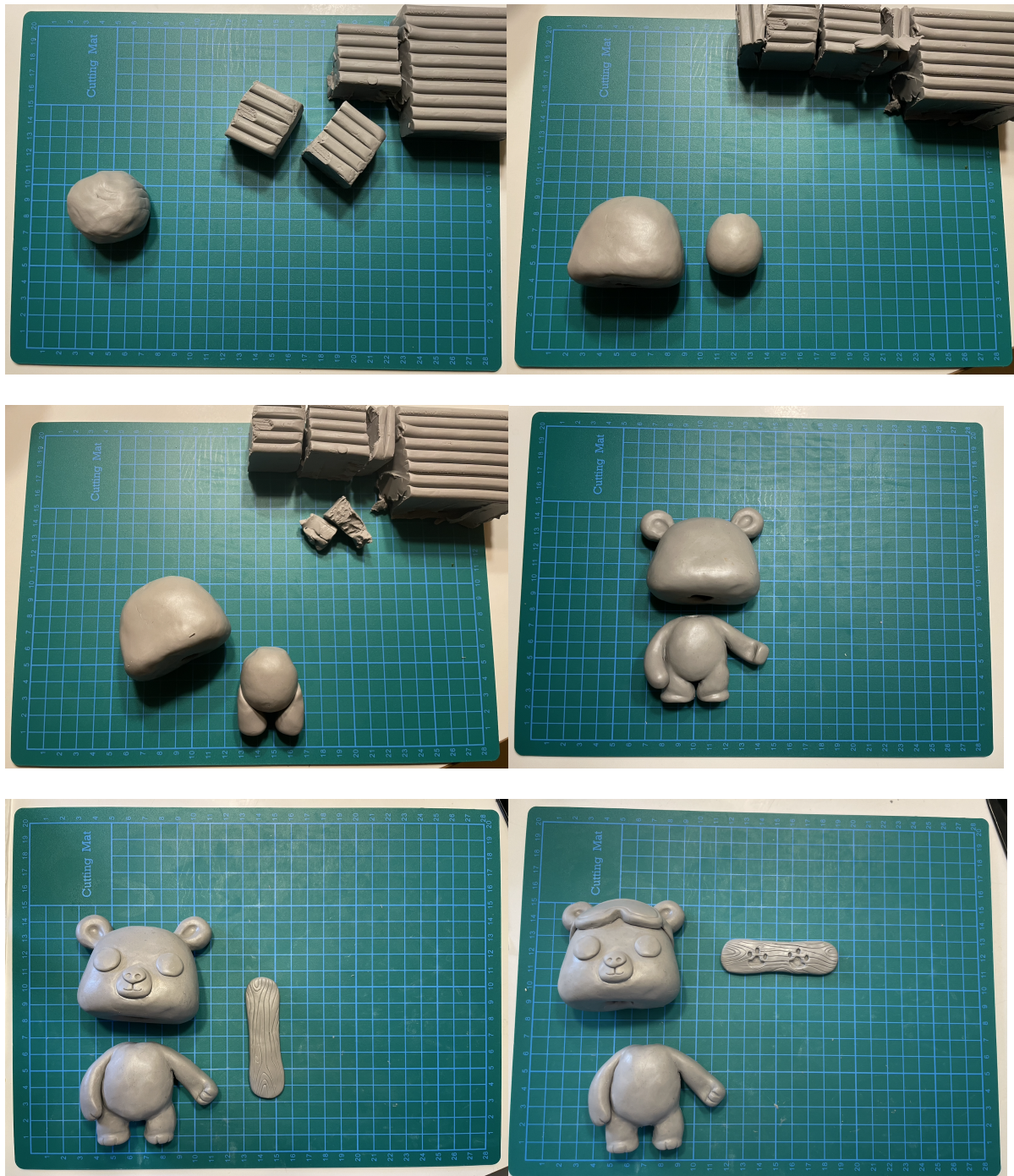
Appendix B

Visual reference table for Stage 4: Imagetic Research.

	Imagetic Research	References
Character 1: Ash		Richmond, Ashley. <i>Identity on Display</i>. 2020. Acrylic on canvas. 24 in. x 30 in. Conor Samuel. (n.d.). <i>The Toronto Lights</i>. Unsplash. Retrieved 2024. Getty. (2009). <i>Toronto In Autumn</i>. Retrieved 2024. Lautens, R. (2023). <i>Toronto Neighbourhoods</i>. Toronto Star. Retrieved 2024. Royal Ontario Museum. (n.d.). <i>Royal Ontario Museum. About Us</i>. Retrieved 2024. Schwartz, M. (2019). <i>Toronto Skyline</i>. Unsplash. Retrieved 2024. Smith, D. (2017). <i>Maple leaf</i>. Unsplash.
Character 2: Cypress		Blanchet, C. (2024). <i>Cypress Mountain Viewpoint of West Vancouver</i>. Wander Vancouver. Retrieved 2024. Cypress Mountain. (n.d.). <i>Black Bears</i>. Bear Safety. Retrieved 2024. Duncan, H. (2018). <i>Person Holding Snowboard</i>. Unsplash. Retrieved 2024. Luengo, A. (2019). <i>Vancouver Skyline</i>. Unsplash. Retrieved 2024. Ndn, E. (2021). <i>Dombay. 3200 meters</i>. Unsplash. Retrieved 2024. Ordinary Adventures. (2021). <i>Snowy forest on Cypress Mountain</i>. Ordinary Adventures. Retrieved 2024. Winegeart, K. (2021). <i>Winter Wonderland</i>. Unsplash. Retrieved 2024.
Character 3: Bow		Alberta Boot Company Inc. (n.d.). <i>Boots</i>. Alberta Boot. Retrieved 2024. BUMP (Beltline Urban Mural Project) Mural at Hotel Arts by Mono Sourcil. (2020). Field, D. J. (2017). <i>White-tailed Jackrabbit (Lepus townsendii)</i>. Calgary, Alberta. Flickr. Retrieved 2024. Froberg, D. (2019). <i>Calgary skyline</i>. Unsplash. Retrieved 2024. Kvitovska, N. (2022). <i>Calgary street</i>. Unsplash. Retrieved 2024. Mirage Landscaping Inc. (2015). <i>Growing Roses in Calgary</i>. Retrieved 2024.

Appendix C

The design exploration of the clay models and the paint application. These photos show some of the process behind the creation of the final models.

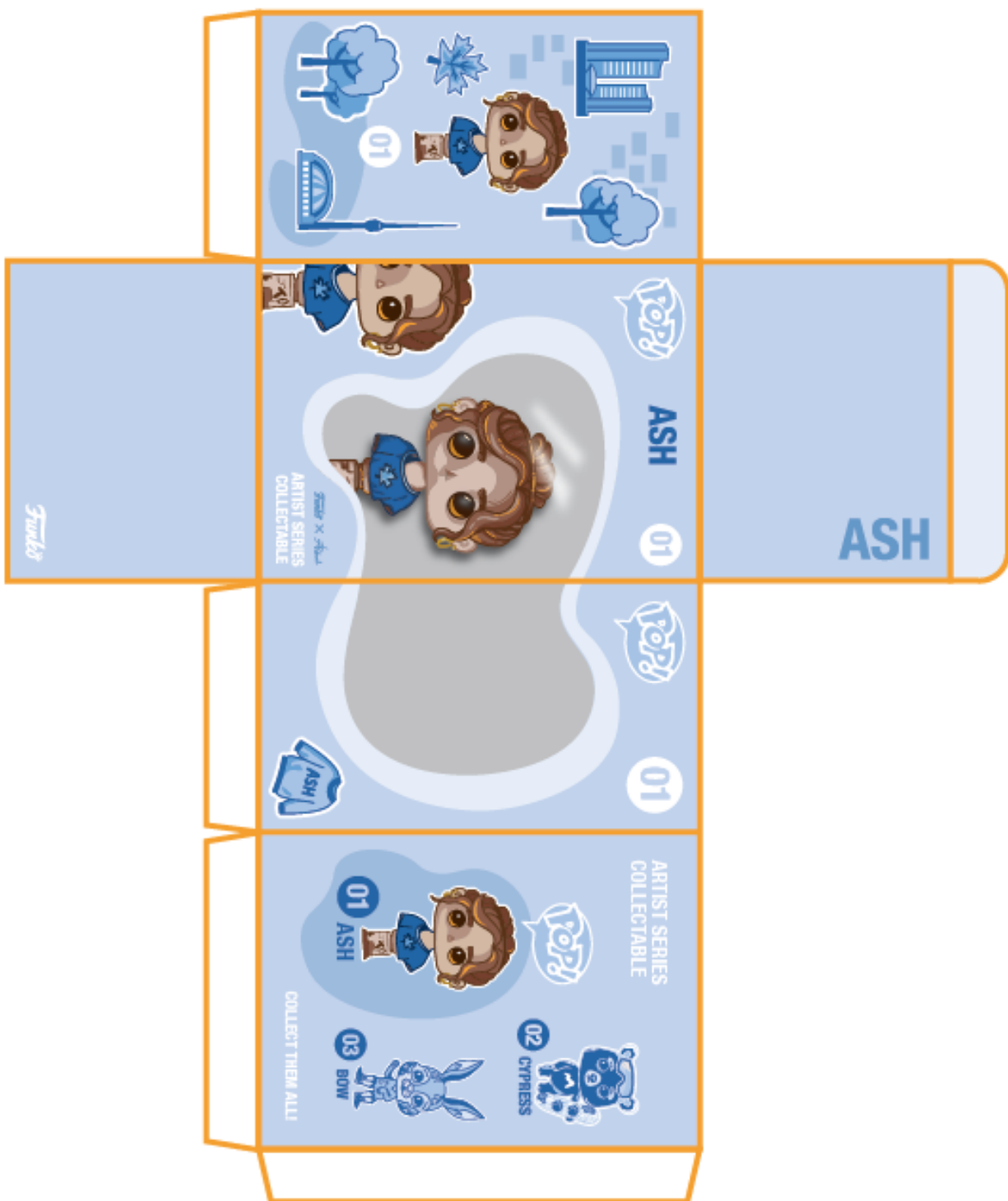


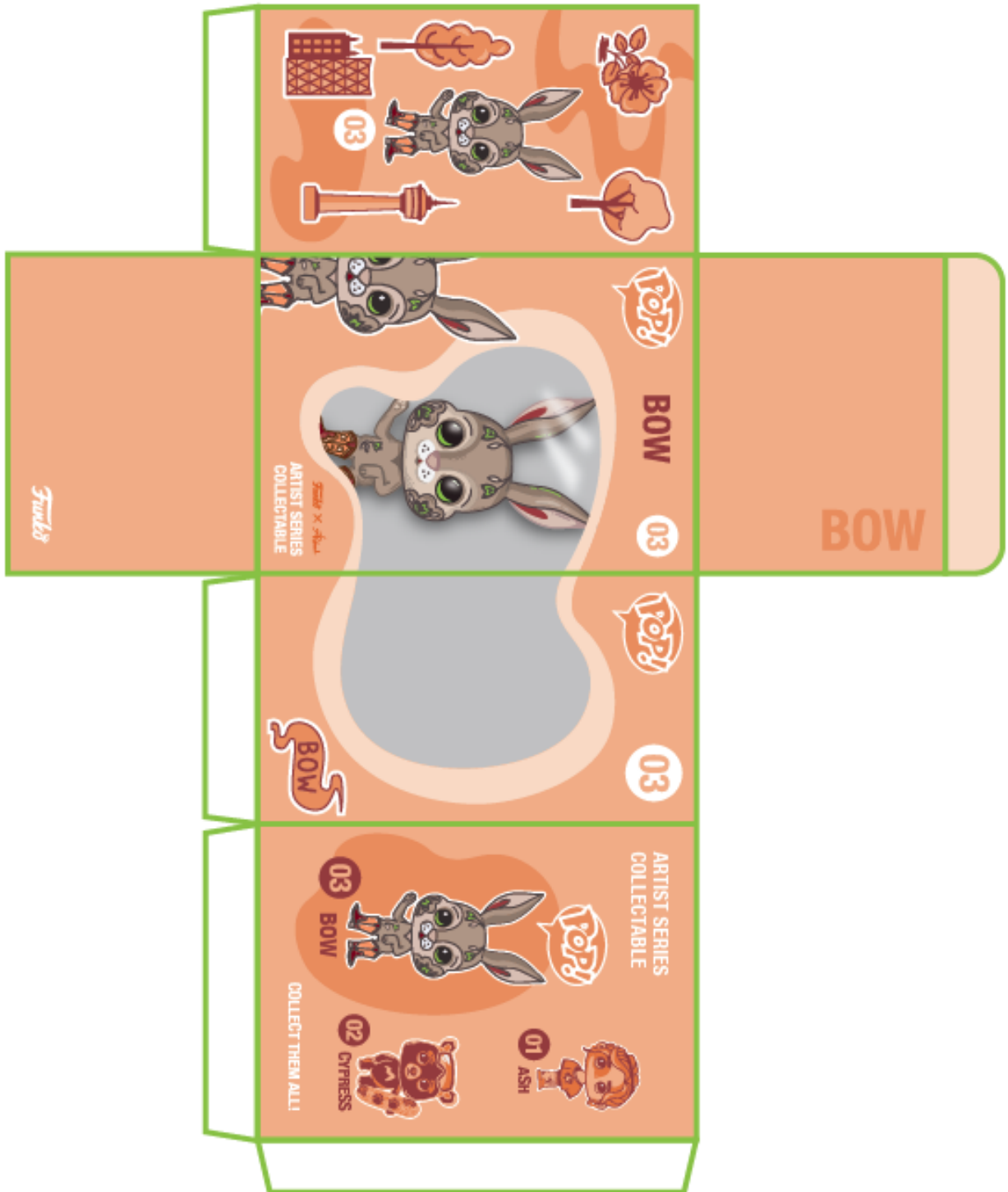


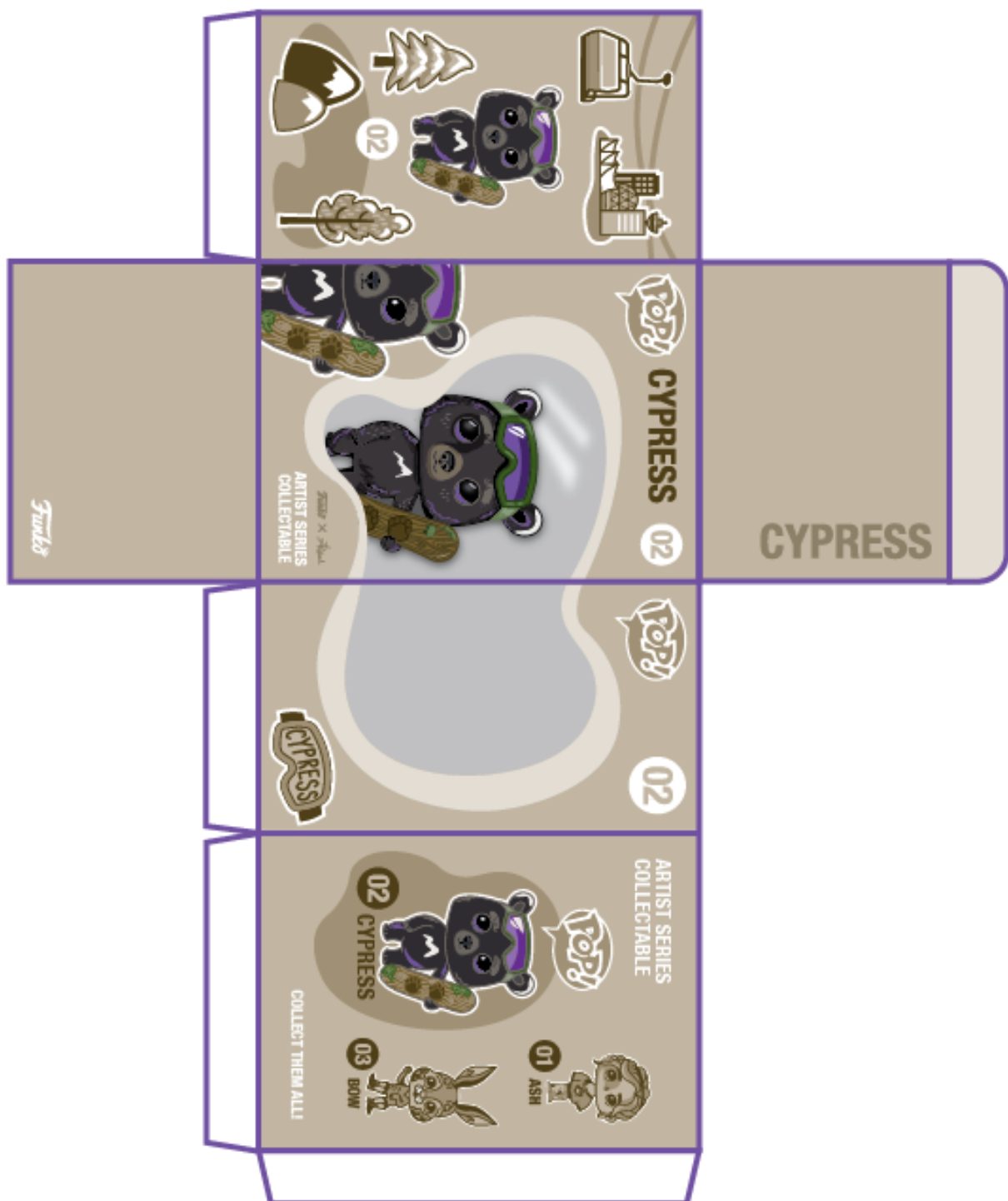
Appendix D

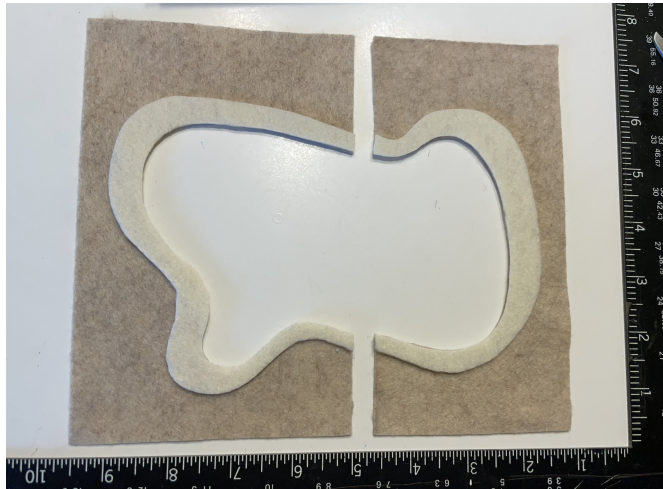
Process behind the digital mockups and the final creation of the unconventional material packaging.











The packaging is made from layers of felt and sewn together using a blanket stitch method and the window cutouts were created with acetate sheets.

Appendix E

Final design of the physical models including the figures and their packaging.







Example of customization with the velcro patches on the side of the packaging.





The foam insert that houses the character and adds stability to the packaging.

The back of the packaging which identifies the type of series and displays the rest of the series to collect.



