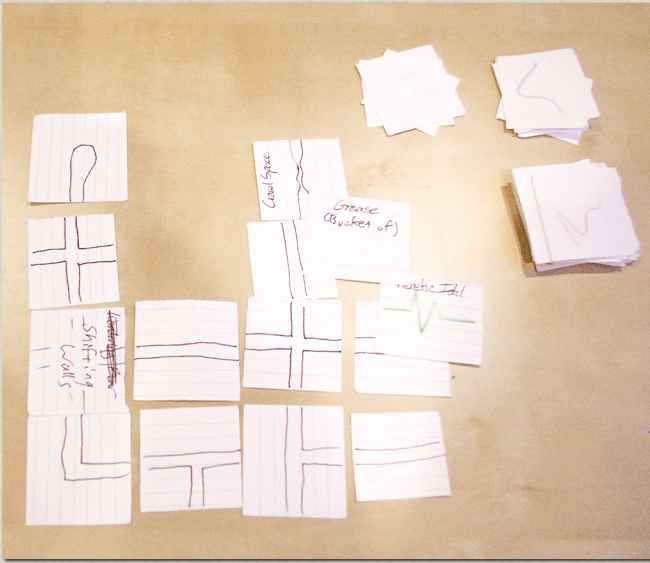# The Design & Artwork

of

Skulldug!

In The Beginning

Skulldug! was conceived at UC Santa Cruz during the 2013 Global Game Jam as *Excavation Escalation* (names are hard). Game jams are events where people gather and make small games based on the same theme in a short period of time. We had been hard at work on our mobile game *Asterogue* in the lead-up to the jam, and we decided that we would rather make a board game than spend our weekend programming another digital game.

The jam's theme that year was (rather enigmatically) the "sound of a heartbeat", which we felt suggested the tension of gingerly exploring a treacherous cave, unsure whether the next step will bring untold riches or ignoble death. We sought to capture that sensation of discovery while keeping the game surprising by filling it with cards that combine to create surprising narrative moments. As the genre-loving geeks we are, we knew that one theme would fit these goals better than any other: pulp adventure!

Our first prototype was made of cut-up index cards nothing but the names of each card on them — players had to reference a spreadsheet whenever they drew one to find out what it actually did. This let us rapidly churn through multiple iterations of the game, with these early versions veering back and forth between various design problems: too random; too long; too confusing; just plain broken.

Still, we kept playtesting the game and tweaking the design. By the second night of the jam, no one wanted to stop playing, despite how tired they were from jamming on their own games. We knew we were on to something special.

The next day was spent refining the rules and creating the first set of pixel art for the cards. We brainstormed a new name, found a company to print a boxed copy, and thought we were done. Little did we know, the game now known as *Skulldug!* had other plans, and our own journey was just beginning…
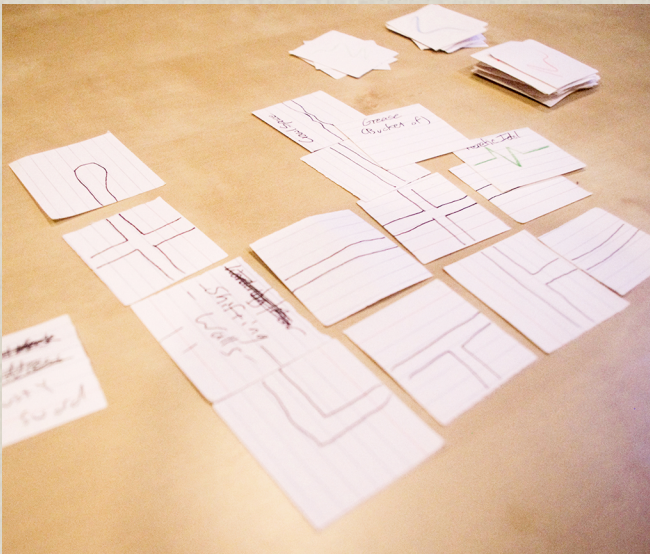
Early Design Iterations

Skulldug! v.1

The first versions of the game were based around a 'tension' mechanic designed for its game jam origins. All of the cards in the game were separated into 3 decks, corresponding to low, medium, and high tension values. Which deck you drew from when exploring depended on how much treasure you were carrying. Players with no treasure would draw from the relatively safe low tension deck, filled with useful items designed to prepare them for the trials ahead, whereas players who were close to winning would draw from the deadly high tension deck instead.

While this system was designed to add some pacing to the game, it ultimately made each round feel too predictable due to the limited number of cards in each deck.
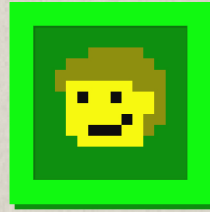
Low Tension
(Draw from when holding 0 Treasure)
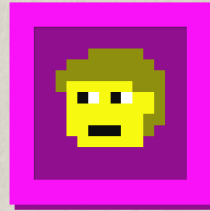
Medium Tension
(1 Treasure)

High Tension
(2+ Treasure)

Skulldug! v.2

Eventually, we realized that the tension system had to go, and we consolidated the cards into separate decks of Fortunes, Hazards, and passages.

Previously, every type of card had been shuffled together into the tension decks. Whenever you discovered a new passage, you would simply draw cards until you drew a passage card, and every card you drew before it would go inside the passage as its contents. This meant there was no limit to how many traps or treasures could fit in a single passage, making your success or failure determined almost purely by chance.

To fix this, we had every passage card specify exactly how many Fortunes or Hazards you needed to draw to fill it. This allowed us to limit how much luck could swing the game back and forth, while still keeping the element of chance that makes discovering passages so exciting to begin with.

Cut Mechanics

We experimented with many cards and mechanics throughout *Skulldug!*'s development. Some of them did not make the cut because they were overpowered, unfair, or confusing, while others became incorporated into other parts of the game. Here is a small selection of some of the more interesting cards that didn't make it into the final game:

TREASURE

HERETIC IDOL

CURSE: ALWAYS DRAW FROM THE HIGH TENSION DECK WHEN DISCOVERING PASSAGES.

"IT LOOKS SAFE ENOUGH, BUT SOMETHING ABOUT IT GIVES ME THE HEEBIE JEEBIES!"

Heretic Idol was one of our earliest treasure cards, designed to let players directly influence the tension system that governed discovery in our earliest prototypes. This card forced players to draw from the high tension deck, which was an interesting trade in theory — the high tension deck was the most dangerous, but also contained some of the best treasures. However, the tension mechanic was eventually discarded entirely, rendering Heretic Idol's design moot.

TANGLING VINES

YOU MAY NOT MOVE OUT OF THIS PASSAGE. WHEN IN THIS PASSAGE, YOU MAY:

1 AP: ROLL A DIE. IF YOU ROLL A 4 OR HIGHER, IMMEDIATELY PLACE YOURSELF IN A CONNECTED PASSAGE.

One thing we slowly realized over the course of developing *Skulldug!* was the difference between tense, fun luck (such as discovering new passages) and arbitrary, frustrating luck. This early version of Tangling Vines fell into the latter camp: enter this passage, and you can't leave until you roll a high enough value.

In the end, we removed the element of chance and made Tangling Vines cost extra AP to leave. This still made the passage feel like an obstacle, while avoiding the potential for bad luck

EQUIPMENT

HEAVY BOOT

1 AP: PLACE ANOTHER PLAYER IN YOUR CURRENT PASSAGE INTO A CONNECTED PASSAGE.

"STOP KICKING ME!"

We've always tried to limit the amount of direct player confrontation in *Skulldug!*, opting to keep the focus on exploring rather than letting the game devolve into a bloody deathmatch for the treasure. However, we felt that the ability to push other players one space would still be in the spirit of the game, as it would require making use of the map to do any real damage.

We came back to this idea several times throughout development, but it always felt unfair to let one player push another around with no danger of reprisal. The solution was simple: we allowed everyone to do this with the Shove action, rendering the Heavy Boot obsolete.

TREASURE

FOOL'S GOLD

CURSE: FOOL'S GOLD COUNTS FOR 0 TREASURE. THIS CARD MUST BE PICKED UP WHENEVER POSSIBLE AND CANNOT BE VOLUNTARILY DROPPED.

"ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD... BUT I WANT IT ANYWAY!"

Fool's Gold was a fun idea that never quite coalesced mechanically. As a piece of treasure that you had to pick up but was worth no points, it fit the theme of greedy explorers perfectly.
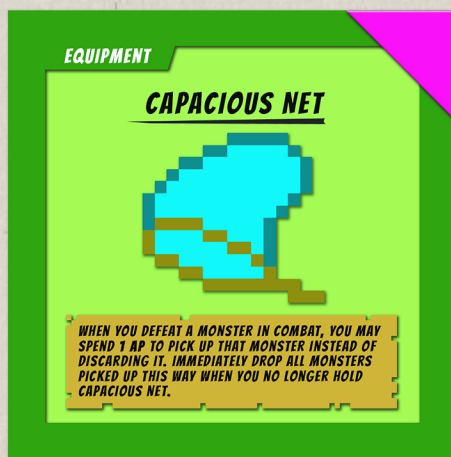
However, so much about it, from its lack of value to the rule that it 'must be picked up whenever possible', meant that it was confusing to ever use properly in a match, and it ended up cut early in development.

CONSUMABLE

SMELLING SALTS

DISCARD: YOU ARE NO LONGER DRUGGED.

"CORR, 'AVE A WHIFF OF THIS..."
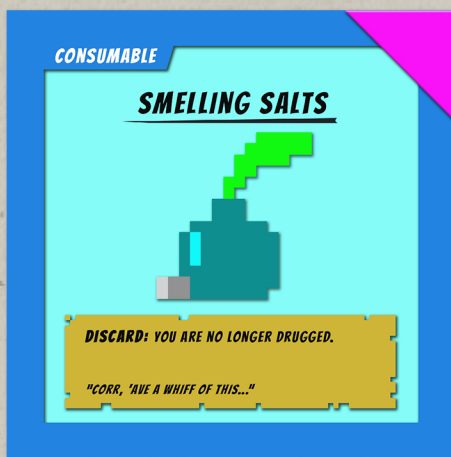
Smelling Salts performed a very simple purpose. We had a status effect called Drugged (renamed to Dazed in the final game), and we wanted a card that cured it.

This was because Drugged was fiendishly difficult to cure on your own. At the start of your turn, you'd roll a die. Roll high enough, and you'd be cured. Fail, and you'd have to deal with the condition for another turn.

We eventually realized that, like Tangling Vines, this kind of roll wasn't fun, and we simplified curing Drugged to a simple AP cost, making Smelling Salts obsolete.

EQUIPMENT

CAPACIOUS NET

WHEN YOU DEFEAT A MONSTER IN COMBAT, YOU MAY SPEND 1 AP TO PICK UP THAT MONSTER INSTEAD OF DISCARDING IT. IMMEDIATELY DROP ALL MONSTERS PICKED UP THIS WAY WHEN YOU NO LONGER HOLD CAPACIOUS NET.

Capacious Net was one of several cards created during a brainstorm to try and increase player interaction during games. In theory, the ability to pick up and throw monsters at your opponents was fun, thematic, and petty in all the best ways.

In practice, it was frustrating, confusing, and broken in all the worst ways, and Capacious Net went the way of the dinosaurs.

TIMID ARMADILLO

2   0

This monster costs 0 AP to pick up and is not discarded when defeated.

Timid Armadillo was another variant on the Capacious Net idea — a single monster that could be picked up and thrown when beaten. This was supposed to encourage players to use the throw action more, since the Armadillo served no other purpose while in their hands.

Ultimately, the Armadillo didn't add enough to the game to warrant its inclusion in the final product. Still, it was bloody adorable, regardless.

Pixel Art

Before we hired Ghia to bring *Skulldug!* to life with her artwork, we were making all of the assets ourselves. Try to see how many cards you can recognize from the final game!

Consumables

Equipment

Treasure
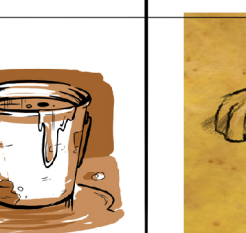
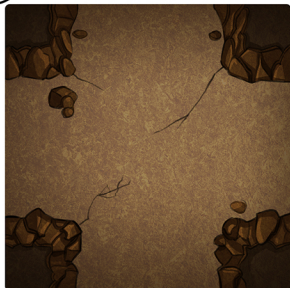
Traps
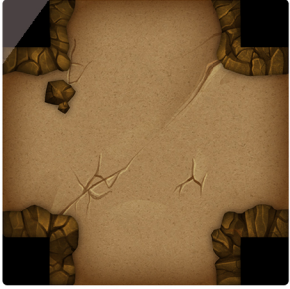
Monsters

SKULLDUG — STYLE VARIATIONS

	"ORIGINAL" STYLE	MORE "REALISTIC"	"ANIMATED INDY" STYLE	"CARD HUNTER" STYLE	"ADVENTURERS' SKETCHBOOK" STYLE
① CHARACTER ART					
② ITEM ART					
③ MONSTER ART					

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

PASSAGEWAY STYLE IDEAS
10/26/2014

STYLE EXPERIMENTS

"I DID A FEW TESTS on styles before jumping in on doing the actual art. A lot of it was looking at games and other things (general aesthetics, cartoons, etc) that we thought were appropriate (read: cool), and I tried them all out on the same pieces of game art so that we could compare and contrast and see what we liked.

"There was an initial idea of everything looking like it was scribbled into an adventurer's notebook, which I thought was kind of clever, but that ended up taking some of the color out of everything. We did keep some of that thought in the minicard layout, though, with the information being written on a little book.

"The final art ended up being a mixture of my own style and what we called "Animated Indy," referencing a series of pictures drawn by Patrick Schoenmaker. He'd done a few things depicting cartoon Indiana Jones characters that had this really appealing Saturday morning aesthetic that was fun without being too childish. And anyway, bits and pieces of Skulldug! are quite like an animated adventure cartoon, you could say. I think it works great for a lighthearted rat race type of game, and I'm glad we went this route."

— *Ghia Mercado*

EXPLORER - IDEAS - USE AS POTENTIAL "STYLE" BASE FOR 3 CHARACTER GROUP

① ② ③

- Straight up Indiana Jones

- More the Researcher/ archaeologist type. Shorts & khakis

L KIND OF BIG GAME HUNTER TYPE?
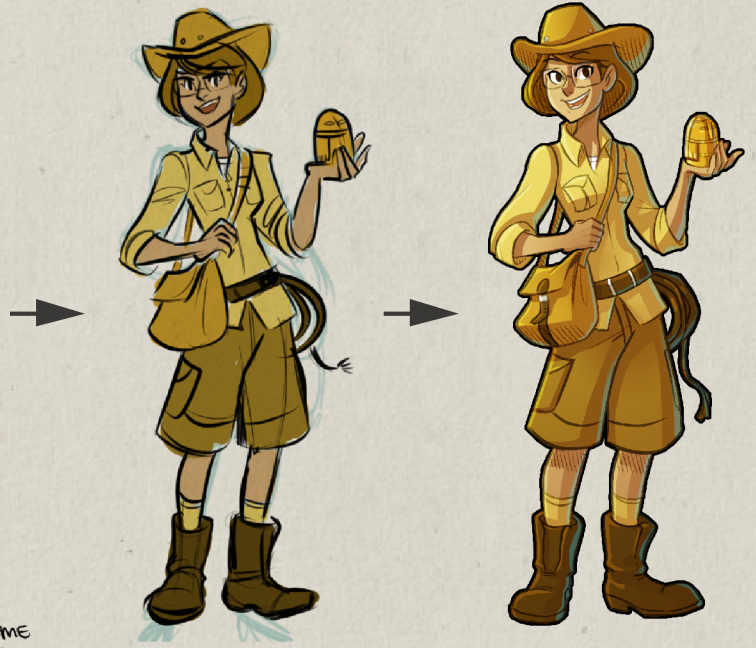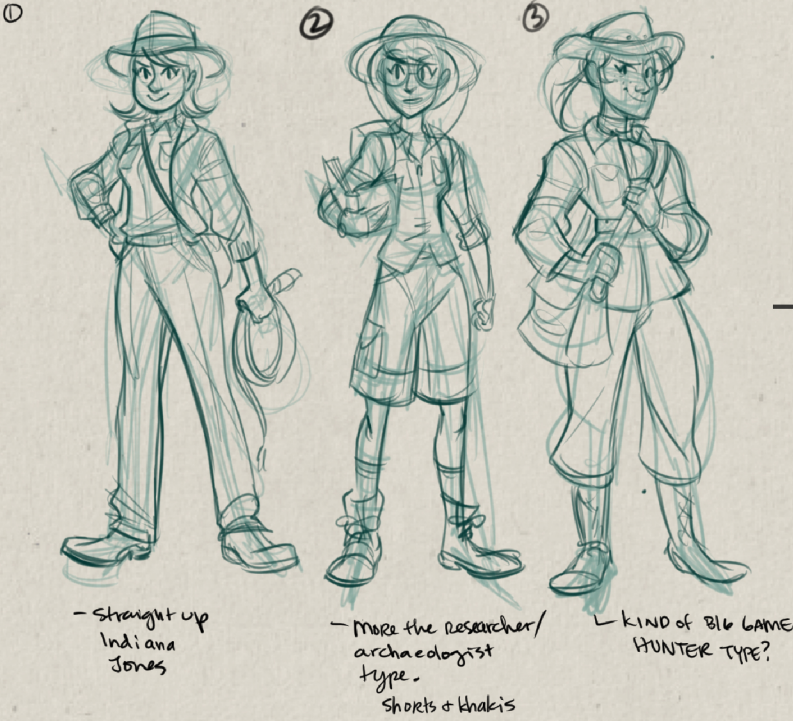
— Character Design —

WE TRIED TO CAPTURE as many different aspects of pulp adventure as we could with our faction designs, with brave Adventurers, dastardly Henchmen, mysterious government Suits, and so on. We also tried to craft a diverse selection of characters from the start, so that every player might have a character with whom they identified that might become their favorite.

Once Ghia joined the project, she turned our crude pixel drawings into a series of sketches, from which we could refine our vision of each character into their final versions.

HENCHMEN IDEAS

① ② ③

OFFICER

SCARRED FACE NAZI SOLDIER. JODHPURS for the win

CHIEF - GAUNTER MORE "EVILLY"

The Cultists

I'LL DRAW ACTUAL SYMBOLS LATER :-P

CRAZY HAIR

more like glasgow owls

missing a tooth?

holes in the shoes

maybe quiltworm patchwork cloak

candy skull mask

elf-ery?

old Nov 5 celebration costume?

painted face

skullcandy dog mask

embroidered hood/cloak

The Adventurers

PITH

PAPERS & BOOKS

SCROLLS & THINGS

Jodhpurs trying to look a little more adventurous & failing

F JUST FOLDED HIS SLACKS UP

The Rogues

ALL SCRIBBLES ARE ROSES

HENNA

lasso? rope?

ORIGINAL DESIGN

BIG OL' SAC

BRAID

The Henchmen

BRAWLERS
←SCAR?
CLASSIER?

tentacle
←Denim

The Suits

showing her badge

↑ practical shoes
→ more heely
→ heels

Minicard Art

Skulldug! contains more than 60 unique minicards, featuring a wide array of equipment, treasures, traps, and monsters. Each of these needed a piece of art that was distinct, dynamic, and conveyed the game's sly sense of humor all at once.

As with the character portraits, Ghia created three sketches for each minicard, which we used to hone in on our favorite elements to include in the polished artwork.

While we had a good idea of what we were aiming for with most of the designs, the more abstract concepts (such as Mimic Stone) often had dramatically different sketches than what ended up in the final card art.

MAGUS SPADE

lol wizard hat dirt & stars
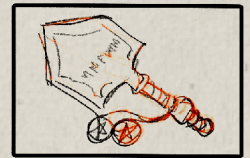
SPADE wielded like a wand — wand like handle w/ charms?

BRITTLE SHIELD
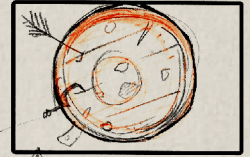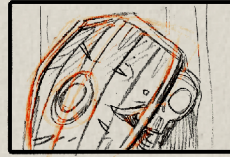
straight w/ stuff coming off of it

wooden fishook?, buckler

CROOKED FISHOOK

+ fly for fly fishing
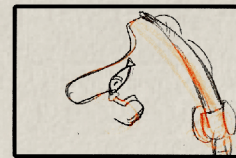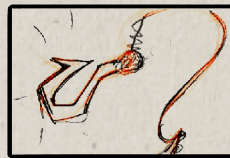
a string going off screen

SUMMONER'S CHALK
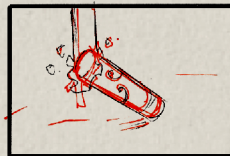
PENTAGRAMMY/ DRAWN MAGIC CHALK LINES?

RABBIT'S FOOT
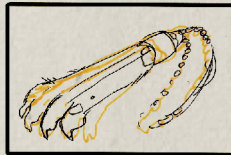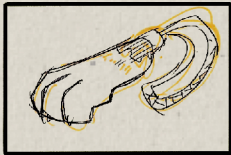
GROSS MANGY AND MUMMIFIED

PURE ADRENALINE

A PEN INJECTION

SOULBOND CHARM

QUESTIONABLE RATIONS
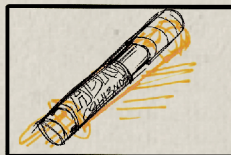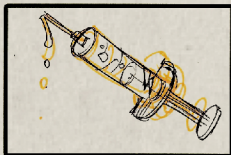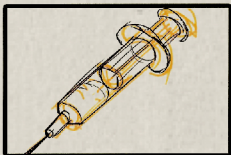
COLOR IT GREEN

MIMIC STONE
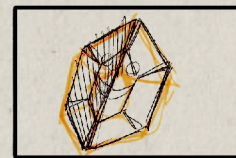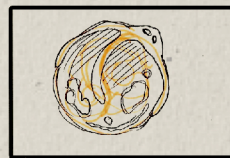
SWIRLY GLOBBY BITS INSIDE

symmetry/ half + half dark

WITCHING WINDOW

FLAK JACKET
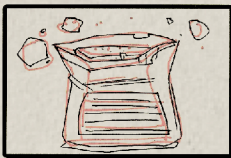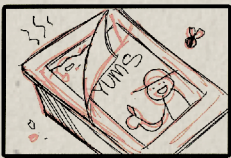
FLARE GUN
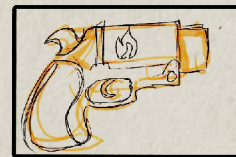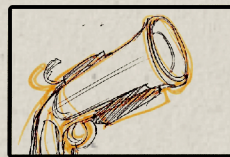
more exaggerated lip?

HOLY RELIC
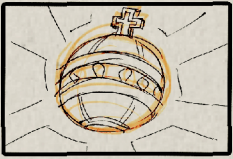
HOLY HANDGRENADE
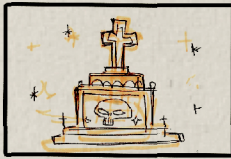
sort of an icon box

CEREMONIAL ARMOR

CEREMONIAL SWORD

COULD DO TO MAKE THEM
SUPER-ORIENTAL & SLIGHTLY
USELESS LOOKING
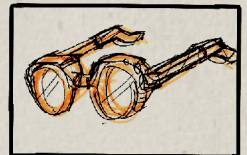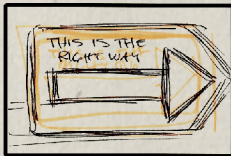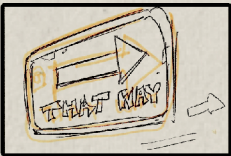
CLOAK OF THORNS

CONVINCING SIGN

THAT WAY

THIS IS THE
RIGHT WAY

HUNGRY BEAR

SHRIEKING BATS

DAMNED SPIRIT

TRIBAL HEADDRESS

Ram Skull

BLOODSTONE AMULET

Most ornamental

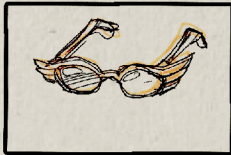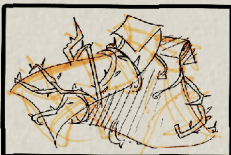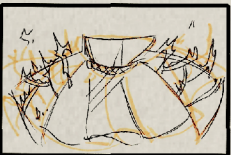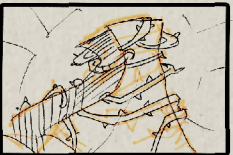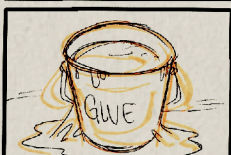Skull?

Like a face?

SAMAEL'S SPECTACLES

BUCKET OF GLUE

GLUE

GLUE

SWINDLING JESTER

PUTRID HORROR
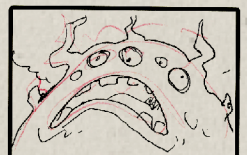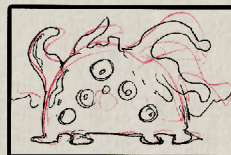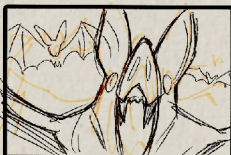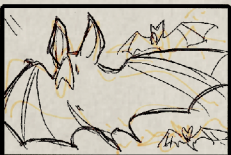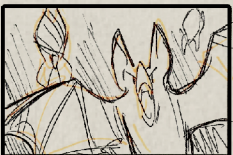
GORGEOUS ADONIS
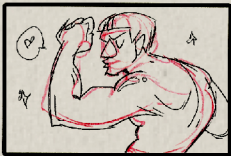
SPEEDO BULGE

this is kind of
Rocky Horror

JEWELED CONSTRUCT
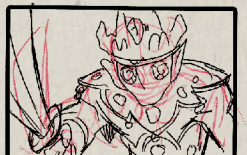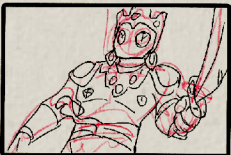

kind of Hindu/Thai statue.

Box Art

We knew early on that we wanted the box to look like a classic pulp adventure novel. Those stories usually touted action-packed images of the protagonists performing various acts of derring do, always rendererd in the same dramatically lit, somewhat overwrought style of painting.

We knew Alix Branwyn could deliver the pulpy pop art sensibility we were looking for, so we brought her on to work on the box art while Ghia focused on the gameplay assets.

Brian

Jon

We wanted the cover to capture some of the major emotional beats of the game, such as the rush of dashing towards the exit while clutching a treasure, the thrill of snaring an opponent in a cunning trap, and the sinister presence of the many dangers that lurk in the cave. We drew a couple of rough layouts to indicate what we were looking for and gave them to Alix, who wisely cut out all the extraneous details to focus on the elements that sell those key emotional beats.

The logo was designed concurrently with the box art, and was also meant to be reminiscent of the bold letterwork that tended to grace the cover of pulp comics and novels. We also wanted to incorporate a slight iconographic element to the logo to make it feel a little more unique. Some of the early attempts (such as the skull-shaped U in the far-left sketch below) distracted too much from the name of the game (which is already quite hard to read and remember), but the stylized exclamation point we ended up on fit the bill perfectly — simple, stylish, and 100% pulp adventure.
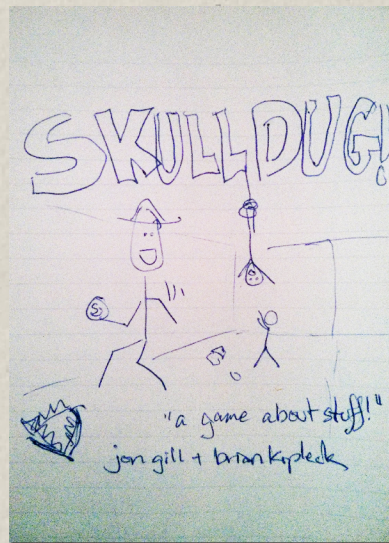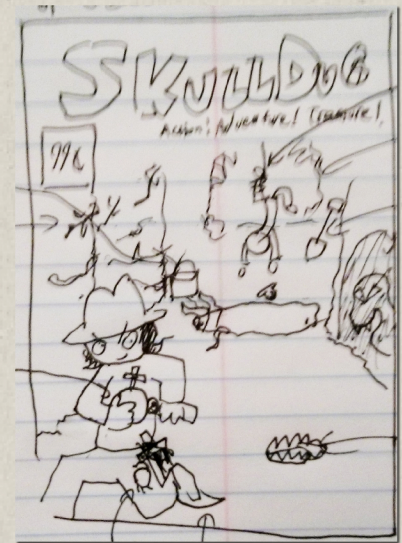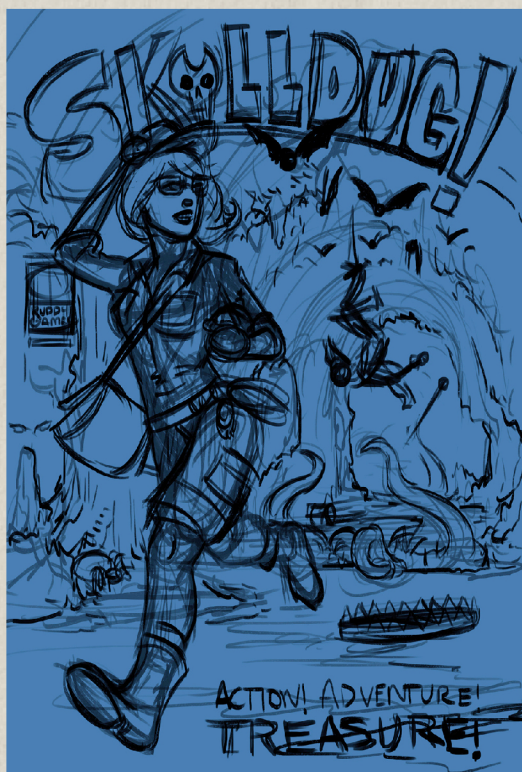
Thank You!

The creation of *Skulldug!* has been a hectic, three year gauntlet of design challenges, business lessons, and personal growth. We've learned so much from so many people along the way, and we never could have even started on this crazy journey without the help of so many other people. From our closest friends and coworkers to you, the Kickstarter backers who made all this possible — you are the real reason that this game exists today. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you.

We love you! (Seriously.)
- Jon and Brian
Ruddy Games

R

RUDDY GAMES