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A second-year undergraduate student at the Department of Design, Delhi Technological University (DTU). His academic interests lie in visual communication, brand identity, and experiential documentation, with a particular focus on how cultural, social, and spatial contexts influence design outcomes. Through field-based exploration and visual storytelling, he engages with urban environments to study informal systems, vernacular aesthetics, and human-centered narratives.

He has worked on multiple design projects involving photography, branding, and narrative-driven documentation, and actively explores the use of film and visual media as tools for capturing experiential and sensory dimensions of space. His approach to design emphasizes observation, contextual understanding, and the translation of lived experiences into structured visual and conceptual frameworks.

Spider Webs Entangling the Steel Souls: An Evening in Old Delhi's Labyrinth

Devaashnabh Hazarika

Abstract

This article documents an evening field exploration of the Chandni Chowk area, focusing on the sensory experiences of navigating Old Delhi's metal market district near Jama Masjid. Through photographic documentation and direct observation, the study examines how urban infrastructure, commercial activity, and cultural practices coexist in densely populated traditional markets. The exploration reveals the contrast between the serene interior of Jama Masjid and the chaotic energy of surrounding commercial zones. Key findings include observations on informal spatial organization, the role of light and shadow in defining spatial character, and moments of human connection within commercial environments. The methodology employed photography as the primary tool, supplemented by interactions with local vendors. This approach highlights the value of night-time exploration in understanding how spaces transform across different times of day.

Keywords

Urban exploration, Old Delhi, Chandni Chowk, sensory mapping, cultural documentation, spatial contrast, metal markets, Jama Masjid, photographic ethnography

Introduction

Old Delhi remains one of the most complex urban fabrics in contemporary India, where centuries of history compress into narrow lanes. While the field trip was scheduled for morning hours, heavy rainfall during the day presented an opportunity to reconsider timing. Accompanied by a friend visiting from CEPT, the decision was made to venture into Chandni Chowk during evening hours, when the area transforms completely. This shift in timing proved significant, as the absence of harsh daylight and the presence of artificial illumination created an illusion which are often overlooked during daytime visits. The journey began at a metro station and proceeded through the metal workshop district, eventually reaching Jama Masjid. What emerged was not merely documentation but immersion into a sensory landscape where rust and incense, noise and silence, hunger and hospitality coexist.

Figure 1: Lanes of Chandni Chowk, showing activity within narrow passages.

The Metal District and Overhead Infrastructure

The entry point was the metal workshop area locally known as "Metal," situated near Jama Masjid. The visual impact was immediate. Large metal components, industrial machinery parts, and fabricated structures occupied every available surface, barringunexpected resemblance to cyberpunk aesthetics rendered in rust rather than neon. This space existed outside conventional design narratives, where functionality dictated form with brutal honesty. When photographing this environment, a shop owner inquired about the documentation purpose. Upon learning it was for academic purposes, his response was mild curiosity rather than suspicion, suggesting students documenting these spaces is not uncommon.

Figure 2,3: Metal workshop lanes near Chandni Chowk, showing large fabricated components and dense industrial activity within narrow passages.

The lanes are characterized by constricted width, forcing constant negotiation between pedestrians and occasional motorcycles. What particularly caught attention was the overhead electrical wiring

crisscrossing above the pathways. These wires formed an intricate web connecting buildings and shops in configurations defying apparent logic. This became a visual metaphor for the area itself, representing how connections form in spaces where formal planning has limited reach. Each wire represented not just electrical connection but thread in the larger fabric of community interdependence.
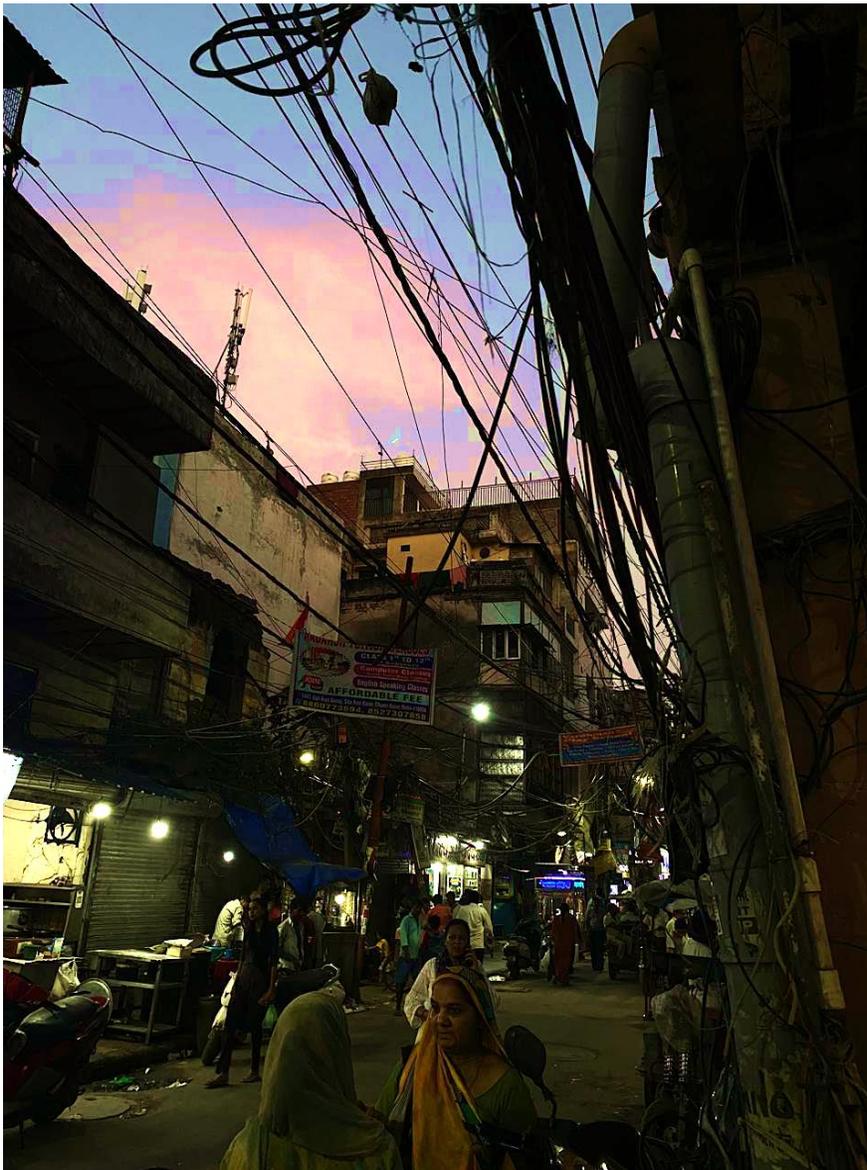

Figure 4: Overhead electrical wiring forming an intricate network above the metal market, visually reflecting informal infrastructural organization.

Encounters and Commercial Vernacular

Upon emerging onto the main road fronting Jama Masjid, the experience shifted to intensely human. A child approached requesting food rather than money, a distinction suggesting pragmatic hierarchy of needs. The response of purchasing badam milk from a nearby vendor was perhaps inadequate but represented direct assistance. This interaction served as reminder that these spaces are not merely picturesque settings but home to individuals navigating various degrees of precarity. Meanwhile, the olfactory landscape asserted itself through pervasive butter smell emanating from nearly every food establishment.

Figure 5: Sketches made during the exploration

The naming conventions of commercial establishments demonstrate playful relationship with language. One clothing shop catering to male customers bore the name "Welcome Girls," a deliberate inversion functioning as both humor and marketing. Another establishment called "Googlie" employed color schemes remarkably similar to the technology company's branding.

Figure 6: Local Branding, demonstrating playful conventions and informal branding practices.

A sweet shop displayed a mascot bearing striking resemblance to the Amul girl. These observations raise questions about cultural influence direction. Perhaps some corporate visual identity elements have roots in vernacular commercial aesthetics existing for decades in spaces like these, suggesting the relationship between formal and informal design languages may be more dialogic than typically acknowledged.

Figure 7: Vernacular shop signage in Chandni Chowk
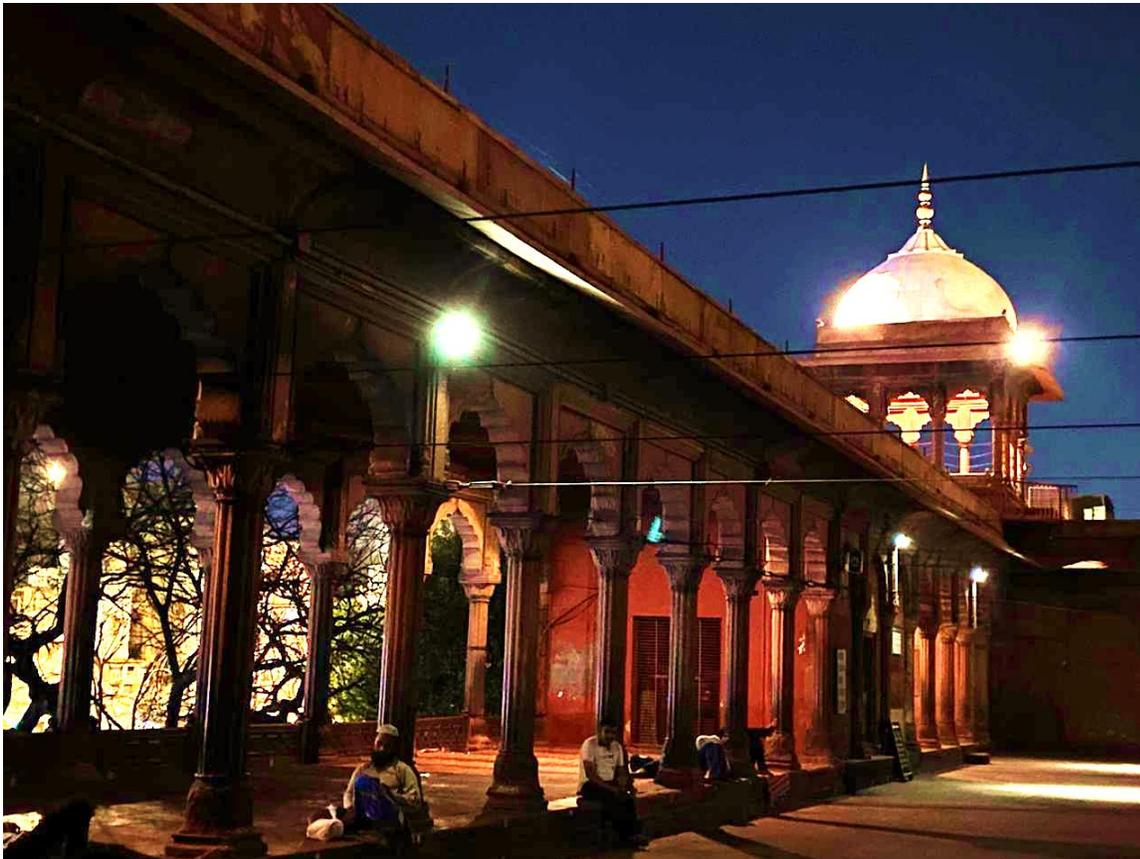
Spatial Contrasts: The Threshold of Jama Masjid

Figure 8: Interior courtyard of Jama Masjid during evening hours, characterized by subdued lighting and contemplative silence.

The most dramatic shift occurred at Jama Masjid's boundary. The contrast was absolute rather than gradual. Inside the mosque compound, silence prevailed, punctuated only by occasional footsteps. Lighting was subdued, creating atmosphere conducive to contemplation. The architecture imposed behavioural codes on occupants through its scaled proportions and symmetry.

Figure 9: Illuminated streets outside Jama Masjid

Stepping back outside reversed this entirely. Sound returned overwhelmingly: vehicle horns, vendor calls, music from shops, conversations. Lighting shifted from subtle to aggressive, with every establishment competing through maximum illumination. This juxtaposition revealed how architecture creates experiential territories gaining meaning from each other. The peace inside gains meaning from chaos outside; the chaos gains intensity from the available sanctuary. This suggests contrast itself functions as design principle, emerging organically in dense urban environments where diverse activities occupy adjacent spaces.

Documentation Methodology and Reflection

Photography was chosen for its immediacy and ability to capture visual information that might be forgotten. However, photographic approach has inherent limitations. Images flatten three-dimensional experience, eliminate sound, neutralize smell, and reduce temperature and texture. What photographs excel at is capturing light relationships and compositional arrangements, making them particularly suited to documenting visual complexity. The decision to explore during evening hours proved significant, as artificial lighting created dramatic contrasts diminished in daylight.

Figure 10: Collage of photographs

The overall approach might be characterized as purposeful wandering, allowing the environment to dictate path rather than following predetermined route. This methodology has strengths in remaining open to unexpected discoveries but weakness in systematic coverage. A more structured approach might have yielded different insights, though perhaps at cost of spontaneous encounters.

Conclusion

This evening exploration of Chandni Chowk, particularly the metal market district and Jama Masjid surroundings, revealed multiple layers of spatial experience operating simultaneously within compressed urban territory. The findings suggest these traditional commercial zones possess informal organizational logic that, while appearing chaotic from outside perspectives, functions effectively for participants. The overhead wire networks, shop naming conventions, food vendor distribution, and behavioral codes shifting at architectural thresholds all represent systems evolved through practice rather than planning.

From a design education perspective, such spaces offer valuable lessons about adaptation and resilience. They challenge assumptions about optimal organization and suggest efficiency and aesthetics are culturally contingent rather than universal standards. The experience also highlighted importance of temporal factors in understanding urban spaces. The same location visited during morning hours would have presented differently in terms of activity patterns, lighting conditions, and atmospheric qualities.

Future explorations might benefit from extended duration allowing deeper engagement with individual vendors and residents, and comparative study with other traditional market areas. The central insight remains that spaces like these, often dismissed as anachronistic by modernist planning paradigms, contain sophisticated informal systems worthy of serious study and potentially selective preservation as urbanization pressures intensify across Indian cities.

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Arnav Kumar

Arnav Kumar is a second-year design student at Delhi Technological University (DTU), specializing in visual design and conceptual character design. Currently pursuing his degree, he is a published children book illustrator also having worked on various visual design projects. Their research article highlights their interest in children literature and visual media.

Character Design Appeal: Methodological Framework for Children Literature

Arnav Kumar

Abstract

The article depicts the methodological process of character design within the theme of children literature, building on the evolution of illustrated concept-driven narratives and personas throughout the development of printed media. The article aims to develop a chronological workflow that aide illustrators in processes like – Character Silhouettes, Iterative refinement and initial shape exploration. The text also encourages the reader to empathise with their target audience and develop stylistic choices suitable for them. Furthermore, to be able to focus on character details that adds "value and richness" to the design. Finally, the article explores the transition towards a more advanced outlook towards character designing, that is to go beyond words and to leave a lasting impression on the viewer.

Keywords

Character Designing, Silhouette, Visual Clarity, Shape Language, Children Literature.

Introduction

In contemporary children's literature, characters can be identified as those visual anchors that supports the story through reader engagement and visual storytelling. As young audience today are more and more exposed to digital media and digital overstimulation, picture books offer a tactile and a simpler visual ground for socio-moral development. Therefore, character conceptualisation is one of the first tasks when illustrating for any kind of story driven media, and it is the designer's ability to craft such appealing personas through the iterative process of character design.
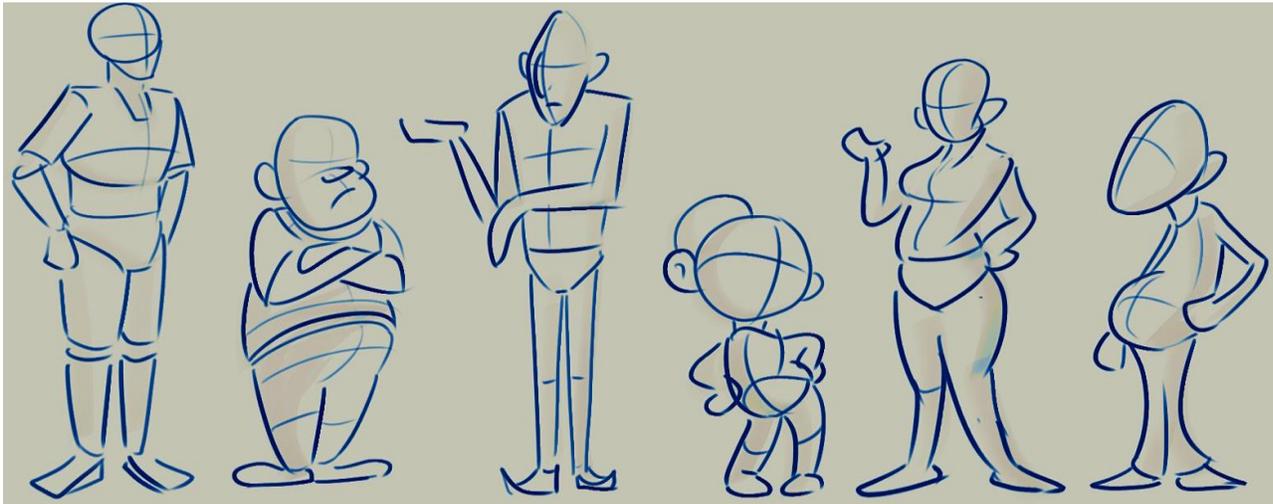
Figure 1. Reshaping the Human Form

The article centres around the application of various character design elements and fundamentals in a chronological methodology, documenting the transition through each stage of character development and conceptualisation.

Historical Evolution of Illustrated Literature

Illustrated narrative date back to the very starting of the era of composed visuals such as manuscripts of murals of old texts. Therefore, designing characters have been a very old concept that has evolved over time from the tales of 'Panchatantra' to modern classics like 'The tales of Peter Rabbit'. With most modern-day stories having a diverse list of characters both human and animals, the main source of inspiration have always been nature.

Figure 2: Characters.

While in traditional stories, characters have been used as a means of instilling foundational values as in the case of the andromorphic animal tales of the Panchatantra. Whereas, modern literature can be identified more as a means of cognitive development through appealing and pleasurable visual narratives.Furthermore, through the means of digital tools stylistic choices have also widened from simple ink or watercolours that were the primary tools for children themed narratives.
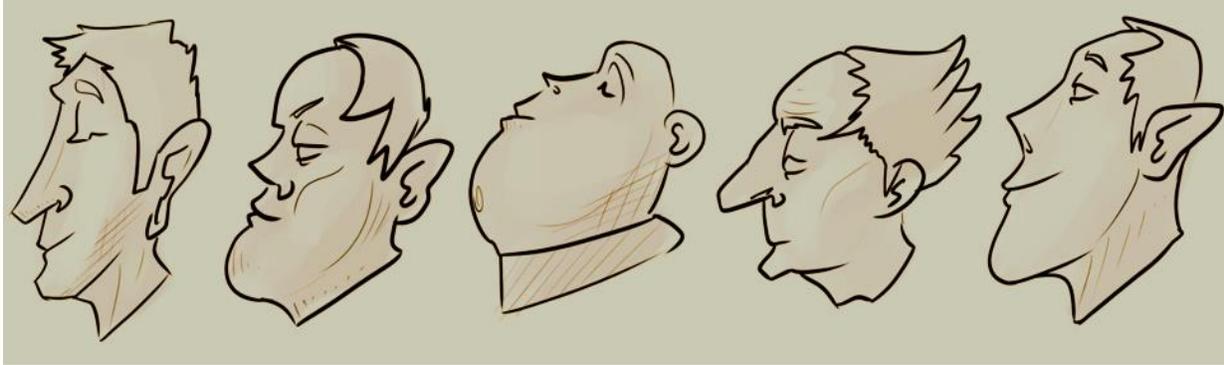
Figure 3. Exaggerating Shapes

A Methodological Workflow for Designing Characters

The character design workflow is not just a means of creative expression but a structured process based on varied workflows of countless designers. Being a subjective task, following a chronological sequence of development, allows the designer to develop visually appealing narratives.
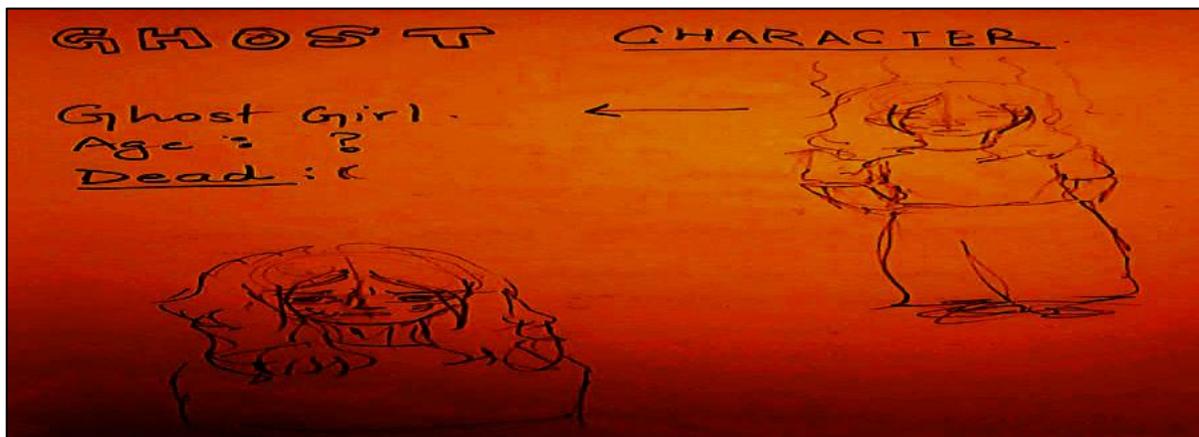

Figure 4. Sketching a Storyboard

I. Narrative Foundation

The Manuscript and Story Brief – The initial documented brief that serves as the primary character brief for design exploration and referencing. During this stage, the illustrator understands the

character background and story arc, which sets the base for detailing and the first impression of the character.

II. Visual Research: Mood boarding

After identifying the key character traits and developing the brief, now the designer begins with collecting numerous visual references that aligns with his or her stylistic choice and setting the mood and tone. References serve not as solutions to the problem rather helps developing one's own artistic solution to the character design problem.
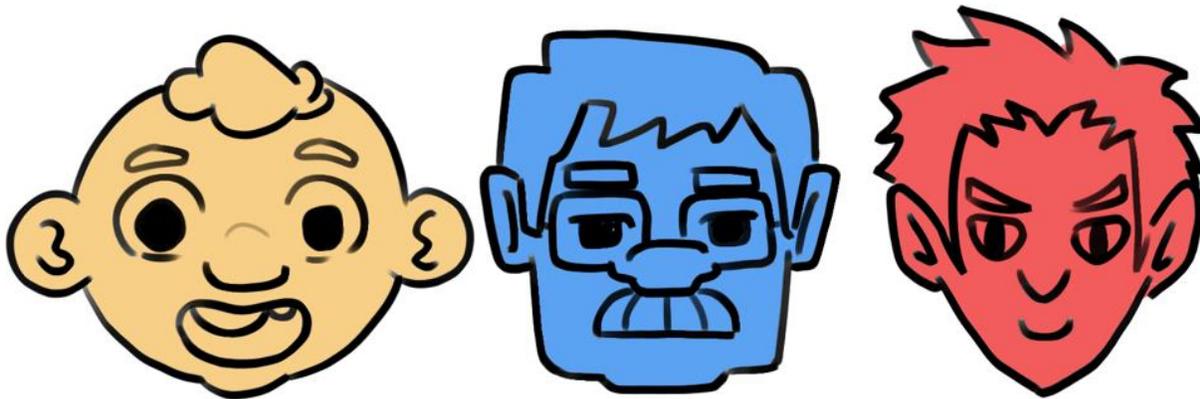

Figure 5. Shape Language

III. Building Character Appeal

Shape Exploration and Silhouette– Following data collection, utilizing Shape language the illustrator explores various design solutions to convey the character's personality traits. An important element at this stage is "Character Silhouette", that marks the readability and uniqueness of the character. Furthermore, shape and proportion too play an important role in conveying the character's personality. For example, a circular form may suggest amiableness whereas a squarish one may suggest stability or rigidness.
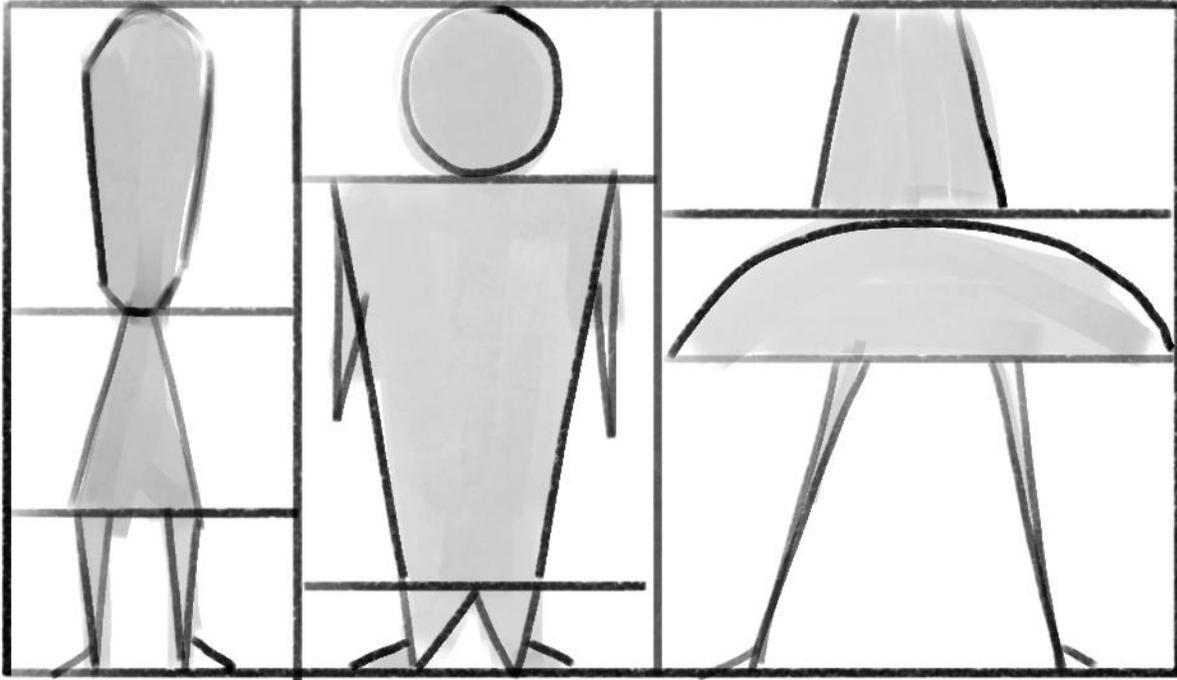
Figure 6. Head to Body Ratio

IV. Iterative Process: Thumbnail Sketches

Drawn as small possible character designs, thumbnailing allows the designer to express all their ideas in a creative manner. The transition from 'Novice' to 'Advanced' is based on the designer's ability to identify the most suitable design and to further draw it for refinement and development

V. Finalisation: Expressions, Colour and Compositions

The final stage involves the illustrator ability to place these characters in composed narratives. Expressions are developed to portray the key moments of the narrative. Colour schemes are developed to align with the shifting mood of the story. Finally, contrast ensures visual attention and appeal.

Conclusion: Artistic Ability to Story-driven Narratives

The process of documenting the character design process and developing design solutions for story-briefs, has yielded critical

insight into the distinction of a 'Novice' and an 'Advanced' character designer. While a novice may focus more on the aesthetic appeal of the designed character, they often lack the "uniqueness and visual clarity" that advanced methodologies such as rigorous silhouette testing and feedback driven iterations can produce.
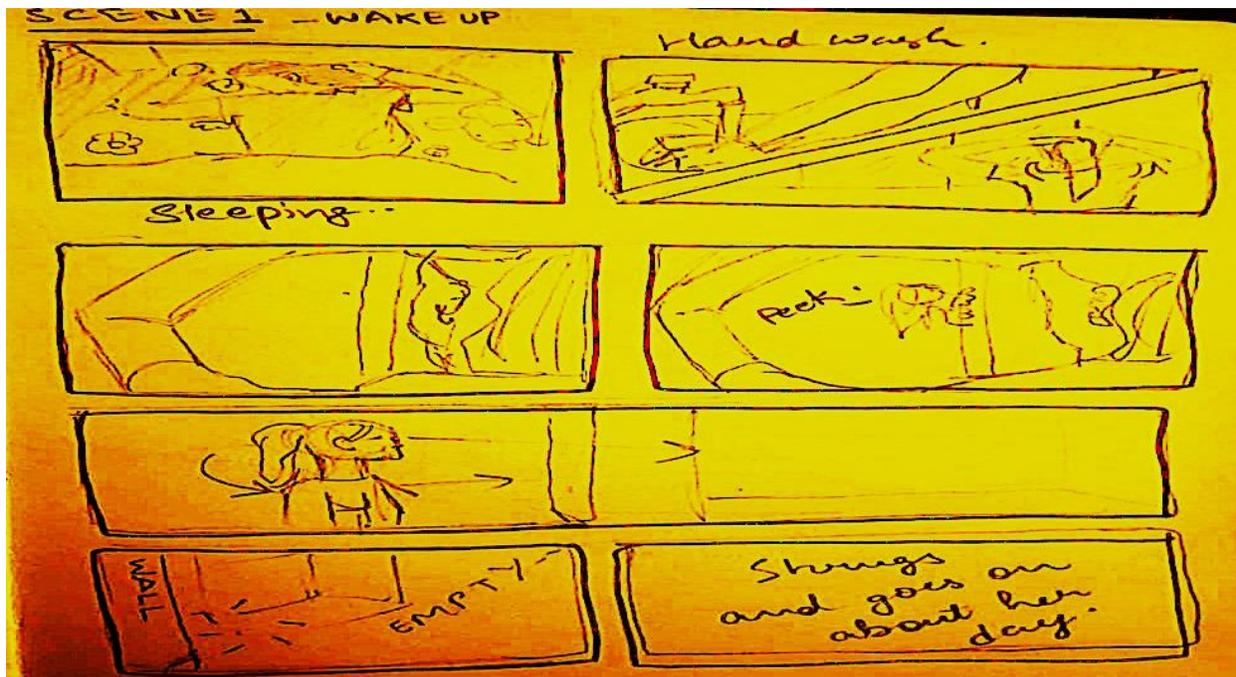

Figure 7. Shape based Design Iterations

To be able to emotionally connect with the reader regardless of their age, the designer must move beyond artistic ability following a set of design fundamentals that visually portray story-driven narratives. Therefore, the study reveals the importance of undergoing a guided process for designing characters in this process of "Self-Discovery".

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